



Probability Angels

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by

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*For Michele, Laura, and Tammoye:
Three people who kept Matthew and Epp alive long after they were dead*

Part 1: Second Choice

The patterned wallpaper, the waist high molding, the chandeliers every ten feet, the glass covered wooden tables with overly ornate vases stuffed with flowers, everything in sight screamed out that this was a place designed to look nice with no thought given to whether or not someone would want to live there. Matthew walked along as quickly as he could in his tuxedo, wondering why hotels always had to look like this.

Matthew was a short man but not so short that people noticed that about him, his thinning hair made him look in his thirties while the glint in his blue eyes put him closer to twenty. A pair of thin rimmed glasses sat on his face like a statement of health. His tuxedo was well cut and lacked the rumped shininess of a rental.

He passed an intersection of hallways, glancing to his right and seeing the elevator bank he continued on. Then he passed the vending machines. Then he made it to the bathroom.

Entering the bathroom he slowed down, the door eased shut on its spring behind him and Matthew stood there listening. He could hear him, softly, somewhere past the row of sinks. As Matthew trod through the bathroom, which itself was an orgy of overly ornate decorating, he glanced in the corner at the gold mesh wastebasket. There was something there that shouldn't be, or at least he saw something there that shouldn't be, and for the first time since he had walked out of the grand ballroom Matthew broke stride, his casual cool bounce faltering as he closed his eyes hard and shook his head. When he opened them again the wastebasket was empty.

He turned to face forward and picked up his stride again, turning the corner to where there was a row of stalls with beautifully stained wooden doors. Matthew walked down the row, glaring at the doors one after another. He finally crept around one and looked in to see a man sitting on the toilet with the lid down, the door open, his face in his hands as he sobbed.

"Excuse me?" Matthew said gingerly. The man looked up. "I was just looking for the cigar bar when I got lost and wandered in here and then I heard you from over by the sinks and I... well... I mean what's wrong, pal?"

The man looked up, all elbows and knees from how he was folded onto the toilet seat. Matthew caught his eyes and smiled. "Come on," Matthew said, "let's go over by the sink, you can splash a little water on your face, talk it out, maybe I can help. At the very least," Matthew looked around and smiled a good-natured smile that oh so delicately pointed out the absurdity of a grown man sitting alone in a toilet stall crying by himself, "I can definitely listen."

Matthew coaxed the man out, led him to one of the sinks, turned on the tap for him, patiently listened as the man told his story, which Matthew already knew. Matthew nodded, one ear open in case there was anything new he should know, he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and withdrew a cigar, spent time enjoying its aroma while he waited for the man to finish his tale of heartbreak and fear and unrequited love.

Matthew hopped up onto the counter, using only his legs, his hands never getting involved. He landed between sinks in what he somehow made look like a comfortable position. Through the whole leap the only

thing he seemed intent on protecting was his cigar, which he held between thumb and forefinger of one hand. As he sat listening to the man's speech wind down he rolled the freshly cut cigar gently, feeling the moist tobacco leaves giving slightly under the pressure of his fingers.

Matthew glanced over and saw that the man had finished and was looking at him with a face that was still damp from a few splashes of cold water. Matthew knew he was ready.

"Look," Matthew started, leaning back into a position that should have been ten times more awkward but that he managed to make look ten times more comfortable. "I'm no expert on these things. I'm just here for this wedding as a distant uncle. Just wanted to find the cigar bar is all. But I see a fellow man sobbing himself to pieces in a toilet stall over a girl, and there isn't any question in my mind as to what I should think. You, my friend," and Matthew stared hard at the man, "need to go after this girl."

"But she's married," the man said.

Matthew continued to stare, the man's eyes drawn to his like something deeper was passing between them. "Doesn't matter," Matthew said. "A love that can make a man sob in a toilet... that's a love that you've got to at least give a chance to, isn't it? You said yourself; you knew she was having doubts about her marriage." Matthew stared.

Finally the man broke eye contact and turned to face himself in the mirror. "Yeah," he said, "she has doubts."

"Okay then," Matthew said, smiling like a high-school football coach after a particularly good pep talk. "Then go get her."

The man looked at himself in the mirror for a few more seconds; doing something to his face that Matthew could only assume was some form of courage gathering. Then he said, "Thanks," and turned and walked out of the bathroom.

Matthew continued sitting on the counter, his legs dangling like a little child's, kicking happily back and forth. There was a beep and he reached into his pocket and withdrew a cell phone. Flipping it open he glanced over a text message, surprise registering on his face. All thoughts of the man and the conversation were gone as he pondered the text message, gone until he looked down at the counter and saw a neat stack of twenty dollar bills sitting there. "Hm," he said, "quick work."

Hopping off the counter he grabbed the bills and placed them in his pocket then popped the cigar into his mouth. He looked at himself in the mirror, hands in his pockets, the cigar clenched between his teeth off to the side of his mouth, and took a pull, only sucking air through the unlit

end. He looked disappointed and concentrated harder. His cheeks formed small hollows in his face as he took a more determined draw, the unlit cigar bobbing between his teeth, once, twice, three times until, during the fourth pull, the end suddenly burst into bright red flames, catching the cigar alit before residing and leaving only a perfectly glowing red ember. Matthew smiled at himself, taking his hands out of his pocket he smoothed down his jacket as he took a few puffs, then he turned and walked out of the bathroom.

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Matthew walked down 72nd street underneath the modern-gothic windows of the looming apartment building on the corner. He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, taking a pull at his cigar, now mostly gone, enjoying the warm summer midnight. It had rained earlier and the streets were damp. He waited on the light, then crossed over Central Park West and followed the double-wide 72nd street into the park. He turned off the street about twenty yards in and followed a path up a gentle rise, a canopy of trees closing in around him.

Matthew walked further and further into the park, following path after path, cursing more than a few times as branches he hadn't noticed swatted at his face. Then, through the darkness, he saw a thin band of yellow hovering in the air. As he drew closer his eyes recognized it as a strip of tape, like the kind used to mark off crime scenes, only different, strung across the path. Matthew paused and looked around, looked at the darkness that was behind him, then looked at how the light on the other side of the tape was different somehow. He smiled, a little laugh coming out of his mouth, then with a touch of nervousness he ducked his torso and stepped onto the other side of the tape.

The first difference was as immediate as it was obvious. All noise ceased. As Matthew straightened himself up there was no more wind in the trees, no more muffled sounds of traffic from Central Park West, there was only silence. He continued walking down the path, the second change slowly sinking in as he realized he was no longer walking through a post-midnight darkness. The air was now mellower, lighter, like it was only a little past dusk. Then he stopped short and walked a slow circle around a single point of light, smiling as he recognized a firefly, its bottom flashing electric green, frozen in time, hovering in the air. He reached a finger up and slowly pointed it towards the glowing beetle,

was about to tap it to see what would happen when a voice spoke up behind him.

"Please don't."

Matthew jumped and turned, then smiled and shook his head. "Jesus, Epp, you scared the hell out of me."

Epp walked over, his face lit by the firefly's light. His skin was sable black, the color of an exotic hardwood, and he was a good head taller than Matthew, although due to a complete lack of anything but muscle on his body, he probably weighed the same.

"What happens if I touch it?" Matthew asked, looking back to the firefly.

"Just more work for me," Epp answered, the calm undertone of his voice making Matthew's easy confidence seem like a bad case of nerves. Epp looked Matthew up and down. "Nice tuxedo," he said.

There was honest appreciation for good tailoring in Epp's voice, but Matthew found himself unable to accept it as a straight compliment considering that Epp was wearing a suit that seemed more like a symphony composed of charcoal threads than mere clothing.

"I was working some adultery at a wedding," Matthew said to explain his clothes.

"Adultery?" Epp asked turning and walking away. Matthew started walking with him, the idea of not following never crossing his mind. "At a wedding? With your skill? Seems a little beneath you, Matthew. You might as well tailgate at the political conventions with the rest of the newbies."

"Well," Matthew said, not letting himself get rankled, "the woman in question *was* the bride."

A slow exhalation of breath through Epp's nose was all Matthew got, but he knew enough to know that this was as close to laughter as he was likely to get. "I suppose that does contain a certain amount of flair worthy of you, Matthew."

"Yeah?" Matthew said, a touch of haughtiness in his voice. "The guy involved was the priest."

A smile spread across Epp's dark features and as his eyes softened Matthew knew that he had redeemed himself.

"You know, it's been twenty-two years," Matthew said, "you think it might be time for you to give me a little credit?"

The smile disappeared from Epp's face. "Not a chance."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Matthew said, "so why'd you text me?"

"Come," Epp said, and Matthew followed him off the path into a patch of lawn, more trees popping up between them and the views of the city. Not much farther in, at a secluded area, they came upon a frozen couple. The woman was in the process of saying something with strong emotion to the man. The man was stuck with a panicked look on his face, his body lurching forward as if he was trying to break into a run. There was a large knife in his hands. Matthew bent down and examined the knife, saw the red sheen covering it, the blood frozen in the air spraying off the blade, could imagine the man's arm moving fast, the knife whipping around as he panicked. Matthew straightened up. The man was running... he turned... he saw a form lying on the grass not far away and gathered easily enough that this was the victim.

Matthew turned back to Epp. "I'm still not used to murders."

"I don't know that we ever get used to them." Epp was looking down at a clipboard.

"Still though," Matthew walked over to him, "I don't get it."

Epp looked up from his clipboard. "It's an insurance thing." He pointed to the couple, "These two need a body. Don't worry about that, it gets complicated."

"But," Matthew was looking around at the coverage, more trees than you'd normally get in Manhattan, that was for certain, but it was still awfully thin, "I mean, it's 2007, who the hell dies in Central Park anymore? And what time is it, actually?" He squinted, trying to read the frozen light level. "It barely looks like the sun has set."

Epp flipped a page, studying something, flipped another page. "We are here to test their spirits, Matthew. Their intelligence is out of our hands. This isn't even my work, to tell the truth. Someone else started it. It's not bad. A little sloppy, definitely not great, but not bad. I just took it over recently."

"Really? You can do that?"

"These are special circumstances."

"Well whoever set this up must have been pretty angry when you took over. You've got a knife murder, by a couple, in Central Park? How much is this worth?"

"For me? Nothing," Epp shook his head. "You don't get to jump in this late and gain any currency. And as for the guy who started this in motion, he'll be fine. He'll wind up making double what this is worth. We're sending him to Hollywood for a week."

"Yeah," Matthew said, his tone not fading, "but you've probably had a hand in a dozen of these types of headline cases. I've never wondered but how much are cases like this worth?"

Epp shrugged, cool eyes never leaving Matthew. "They keep me in Zegna." Epp extended a hand with the clipboard in it.

Matthew took it and glanced down. "*Plus* you get to use all the neat toys." He began flipping through the sheets. "These are probability photographs, aren't they?"

Matthew turned page after page, each one showing a possible outcome, most of them involving the couple being herded into a jail cell, or a police car or a courtroom. Each photo had a graph in the lower right-hand corner containing simple probability waves of varying heights. Matthew stopped at a photo of the couple sitting happily at home; he glanced at the graph in the corner and saw that the curve was barely more than a straight line. Matthew chuckled. Then he handed the clipboard back.

"I still don't get it. Why bother with the," he circled his finger in the air, looking around, "you know, the time tape stuff?"

"Special circumstances," Epp said, reaching a hand out to take the clipboard back.

"And what might these special circumstances be, Epp? And what am I doing here?"

Epp paused. Matthew was struck by the fact that Epp seemed unsure of how to continue. Epp took a deep breath, his lips pursing in thought. Then he pointed. Matthew turned and looked at the form on the ground. "She's a jogger. She wound up being their choice for victim. Like I said, it's complicated. It's also just awful bad luck."

"Why?" Matthew asked, taking tentative steps towards the form lying on the ground.

"Matthew," Epp paused again, the rarity of Epp being unsure was making Matthew's nerves start to sit on edge. "Matthew, she's yours."

"Yeah?" Matthew asked, curious. He was creeping around now, moving very low to the ground, the back of the woman's head the only thing visible. "I don't remember doing her," he said puzzled, "but it's been a long time. I guess she could be one of mine."

"She wasn't a case of yours, Matthew." Epp looked around, as if hoping for some help in saying what he had to say. When no help came he continued speaking. "She was your choice."

Matthew's body reacted before he did, his legs giving out as he leaned over the body so that he fell kneeling into the grass. "No," he said in a

whisper. He looked up at Epp, eyes stunned, his face showing nothing but denial. "NO," he said, his voice rising in a shout. Shaky hands reached out and rolled the body over with a thump, her hair falling off of her face. Matthew sucked in a stuttering breath and looked down at the blood covering her shirt. He ran hands over her body, smoothing out her shirt, trying to wipe away the blood; he looked up at Epp again. "Fix her."

"Matthew, that's not how this works. She-"

"Fix her!" Matthew yelled. He stumbled up and began walking towards Epp, who held up his hands, trying to calm Matthew down. "You fix her!" Matthew said, his finger jabbing out behind him at where she lay. "You fix her right now!" Epp lowered his hands as Matthew approached.

"*She doesn't die!*" Matthew yelled in Epp's face. One hand rose up and shoved Epp's shoulder hard, "*that was the deal,*" he screamed, his eyes stinging now. "The bullet changed paths and went into me and she gets to live and I die. *I die!*" Matthew shouted, slapping his own chest. "*Me! Not her!*" And he pointed another finger back at the body.

"You chose life for her, and she's had a decent one, as per the deal," Epp said, calm enveloping him, "but immortality for her was never part of it. Her time has come."

"Fix her," Matthew said. Epp remained impassive. "*Fuck you!*" Matthew screamed, and he stormed off past Epp.

"You go blow off steam, Matthew," Epp yelled out after him. "You walk this off and I'll clean up here and I'll meet you at the usual place."

Before Matthew disappeared into the dark Epp saw him walk past the firefly and with one angry hand reach up and swat it out of the air.

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Matthew fumed down the street. His hands were in his pockets, his bowtie unstrung and dangling from his collar. He wasn't sure where he was going; he barely recognized his surroundings. He was breathing heavily through his nose, the hot summer air pumping in and out of him like fuel. He spotted a couple walking towards him and he lowered his shoulder and walked into the girl, with a hush like a steam vent he wafed through her, eyebrows angry. "He's cheating on you," he thought, and then he was through her, past her, and two steps later he heard her turn and start cursing off the young man with her. A handful of coins appeared in his pocket and he ran his fingers through them.

Another pedestrian came into sight, a lone woman, and he never broke stride, just ducked his head and plowed through, baring his teeth as he went, and he heard the woman burst into sobs behind him and more change appeared in his pocket.

His cheeks were moist and with the flat of his hand he tried to wipe the tears away but they kept coming and he was walking through a group of street dwellers and drug dealers and behind him he heard a fist fight break out and the change in his pocket bulged then flattened into a couple of bills and he thumbed at the corners.

His eyes stung and his nose was running and now he tried the back of his hands but he couldn't keep his cheeks dry and he heard someone calling his name. He spotted a group of tourists and thrust both hands into his pockets, angling his walk so he'd catch all of them square on. His lip curled up and his teeth were bared and he was only a few steps away from them when an arm caught him across his chest and he was being restrained.

"Matthew!" someone was shouting in his ear and he turned and saw Benjamin with his jowly face and rough beard. Benjamin's clothes were burly, if not disheveled, and the belt of his trench coat never seemed to hang right. "Matthew, leave some for the rest of us, here," Benjamin was laughing.

"What do you care about them for?" Matthew was staring at the family of tourists.

"I don't care about them, I care about you."

"Lemme do 'em," Matthew said, his body practically going limp under Benjamin's restraining arm, as if he wasn't even able to hold himself up anymore. "I got a good one for 'em."

"Okay, but then we go get a drink at the place, right? Maybe get your head back together?"

Matthew nodded and Benjamin let down his arm and gave him a shove. Matthew teetered on one foot, hopping along, passing through the family of tourists who began pointing at a map and arguing. Matthew looked at Benjamin from over the father's shoulders. "Arguing over a map?" Benjamin said. "That was your big idea?"

"I don't..." Matthew stopped talking, looked around confused. "This isn't helping."

"Come on," Benjamin said, and they walked towards the street. "You have a fiver?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then."

Benjamin held up his hand with a five dollar bill in it and Matthew stood next to him doing the same. There was a whir and Matthew felt the wind in his hair as the five dollar bill vanished and then he was standing next to a statue of Ralph Kramden and looking up at steel girders painted aqua-green. Benjamin was over by a row of double glass doors holding one open. Matthew walked through into the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

They walked through the long hallway, mostly empty at this time of night, ugly brown brick walls rising up to the ceiling three stories above them, their feet stepping on tiling that looked like it had been decorated with a can of glue and the contents of a well used three-hole punch. They rode up an escalator and continued towards the back of the building until they reached another set of double glass doors. They walked through into the Port Authority bowling alley. On the right was the arcade, down the hall straight ahead were the lanes, Matthew and Benjamin turned left and walked into the bar.

"What do you think?" Benjamin asked, looking around at the bar half full of college students, bus drivers getting off their shift, bowlers, and anyone else sucked into drinking at the Port Authority. The bar was an island in the center of three walls of booths, most of which were full.

"I don't know," Matthew said, running the back of his hand over his forehead like he was testing to see if he had a fever. "You mind clearing a few seats? I think I'm through bumping skin tonight and I certainly don't feel like going visible."

"Sure thing, buddy," Benjamin said and he walked to the farthest corner of the bar where a man was sitting between two empty stools. Benjamin leaned towards him and whispered something in his ear and the guy stood up and stormed out, a half drunk pint glass still sitting on the bar.

"Cheating wife?" Matthew asked, watching the guy leave.

"Thieving brother," Benjamin said.

"Interesting," Matthew said, sitting down.

Benjamin was fishing in his pocket as he pulled back the barstool next to Matthew. He put a stack of twenties on the bar as he sat down and with a wave of his hand a couple of cheap rocks glasses appeared filled with flat ice cubes and pale scotch. They sat in silence, sipping their drinks, listening to the bar around them. One drink finished, Matthew threw a twenty on the bar and another round appeared.

"It was 1985," Matthew said, apropos of nothing. "We had married the year before when everyone said we weren't ready. We knew we were

ready. We thought we were ready, anyway. Who the hell is ever ready for marriage?" Benjamin nodded, sipping his drink, staring straight ahead, listening but not intruding. "Anyway," Matthew went on, "we were living in Brooklyn in some god-awful apartment complex where the noise of the train was a welcome distraction from the mice in the walls. But, you know, we loved it. And we weren't going to stay there forever of course. We had big plans." He took a gulp of scotch, holding it on his tongue before clenching his teeth and swallowing it down.

"We went to a Mets game one night. Neither of us were fans or anything, that was the funny part. It was sort of a, 'We've never done anything like this so why don't we give it a try,' kind of thing." He shook his head. "I mean we didn't know what the fuck we were doing and we left in the middle of the game and wandered down the wrong street and... well it was New York in the eighties." His glass came up and a couple of ice cubes went into his mouth, he chewed them awhile.

"Anyway, there he was... I can't even remember really what he looked like, but the gun I remember. And there were some words, it all gets a little jumbled and then the gun went off," Matthew mimicked a gun with his thumb and forefinger, his thumb dropping, his mouth making a little "pow" sound. "And all I really remember is this rush of thought chased with pure adrenaline and all that was going through my head, over and over was, 'Please be me not her, me not her, me not her, me not her...'" He sucked another ice cube into his mouth, got a good hold of it between his back teeth and crunched it down with a laugh.

"And then things get hazy," Benjamin said, recognizing the laugh.

"And then things get hazy," Matthew said with slightly drunken camaraderie and the two raised their glasses and clinked them together.

"Next thing I know," Matthew went on, "I'm standing at my own funeral and this preposterously well dressed black man is talking to me about things I in no way understand. And he says his name is Epp. And he takes me under his wing." Matthew breathed out a sad sigh and it came rushing back. He put his glass down on the bar with too much force and liquor splashed over his fingers. "And twenty-two years later she dies anyway."

"It's not Epp's fault you know."

"I know, I know," Matthew held his alcohol soaked fingers up and looked around, then settled on wiping them off on his pants. "But you can't really blame me for my reaction. I never gave this a whole lot of thought, I guess. It's all sort of jumbled in my head."

"Of course," Benjamin said as if Matthew was blaming himself for things that he shouldn't. "If you don't think things through, things stay jumbled. That should be our motto." Benjamin caught site of a friend on the other side of the bar and he gave a smile and a nod of his head. "Anyway, the deal was never for our choice's immortality, just that you'd go instead of them, and they'd have a shot at a decent life."

"Is yours gone yet?"

"Mine? No, forty years later and she's still puttering on, god bless her."

"Yeah. Well I still feel like Epp could have filled me in a little better."

"Ah. You can't blame him. That's just how he is, all impassive and what have you. You know why he's like that don't you?" Benjamin looked around like he was worried he was being watched. "It's because he was a slave."

"No shit? He's been doing this for more than a hundred years?"

"That's why he's got the rank."

"And we get cheap whisky."

"Amen," Benjamin raised his glass and held it towards Matthew who obligingly gave it another clink with his. "Anyway," Benjamin placed his glass down and looked past Matthew, "oh shit." There was a change in his demeanor, a straightening of his back and a quickening of his pulse. "He's *here*."

Matthew looked around and saw Epp coming through the bar towards them. "Yeah, he said he might drop by." They watched Epp walk the bar, those who could see him giving curt nods like they were afraid to display any emotion around him. He was courteous in turn, waving and greeting those who he passed, but there was an aloofness about him that kept him detached.

"Hello, sir," Benjamin said with a little nod of his large head as Epp came over to them.

"I don't outrank you, Benjamin," Epp said as he slid into the barstool on the other side of Matthew. "I keep telling you that."

"Yes, sir," Benjamin said. "Let me buy you a drink." He threw another twenty on the bar and watched as it broke into a ten and some singles and another rocks glass appeared in front of Epp.

Epp picked up the glass slowly, turning it in the light, he swirled it gently under his nose and breathed in. Then he took a sip, letting it slide on his tongue, and then swallowed. He put the glass back down. "I don't outrank you, Benjamin, but tonight I'm going to insist that you drink what I drink." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a crisp stack of bills held together by a paper band. Two of these dropped on the

bar and Benjamin stared at them from the corner of his eye, frozen in mid-drink. Matthew looked at Epp, then down at the two stacks of money.

The bands across the packets had "Five Thousand" written on them in orange letters and as Matthew watched they began to shake and shrink, depleting in size as three new crystal rocks glasses appeared on the bar in front of them. The glasses filled up with a new type of scotch. When Matthew looked back at the stacks of bills, there were only a few left.

"Sir, I can't let you..." Benjamin started, but Epp waved him silent.

"Even for the immortal, Benjamin, life is too short to drink bad scotch."

Matthew picked up his glass, amazed at how heavy it was and how cool the crystal felt. He smelled the liquor inside and just closed his eyes, enjoying it. Benjamin only stared down at the bar, afraid to go near it. Epp took a sip and smiled, then looked over and saw all of this. "Don't worry. Next round's on me as well." He threw another two stacks of bills onto the bar.

Matthew dared a sip and Benjamin dared to pick his glass up. Much the same as before, the three sat drinking in silence, letting the whisky do the talking. More rounds came, and the conversation started up again, nothing important being said, just words being exchanged over a shared drink or two. After a few more Benjamin pushed his chair out and stood up a little wobbly. "I think I'm done for the night," he said. "Want to come down to the East Village, Mattie? We'll fuck with the hipsters and scrounge for change. It'll be fun."

Matthew laughed. "No, thanks, I think I'm just going to sit tight for awhile."

"Suit yourself," Benjamin said, easing his weight off his barstool. He caught Epp's eye. "That's some good scotch," he said, stifling a burp, "I thank you for that, sir."

He gave a couple of slaps on the shoulder as he walked past them, then exited out of the bar. Epp watched him go. "That guy *will* not listen to me when I tell him I don't outrank him."

"Don't you?"

Epp turned to look at Matthew and Matthew instantly regretted what he had said Epp's look was so disappointed. "Don't tell me you think like him."

"Well you do get to do a lot of pretty neat things that we don't get to do."

"It isn't rank, Matthew. I can do those things because I have learned how to do them, not because some sanctioning body allows me to do

them. I don't get to use the tape because someone says I get to, I can use the tape because I've come to learn a few things about space-time. The elders meet together not to decide the rules for everyone else but because we like meeting together, we like exchanging ideas and lessons. But the pool of knowledge is open for anyone to drink from. We have no control over that. You should know that by now."

"I feel like there's a *lot* I should know by now."

"It takes time," Epp said, his voice soft and understanding after his small tirade. "You'll get there. But the first thing you should do is stop listening to people like Benjamin. I know, he's fun to share a drink with and I'll stand him a round anytime, but he's got a lot of things backwards. Like most newbies he seems to think that we're in control here. They make their first choice and they get a taste of this new world and they think the meat bags are somehow below them," Epp looked around at the regular people drinking in the bar all around.

"We do seem to hold a lot of the cards," Matthew said, and to illustrate his point he waved a hand through the head of a guy walking past his stool. The guy decided then and there to cheat on his taxes.

"But it's a lot more give and take than most newbies ever care to realize. They have their fun and then their choice straight-lines and then they're gone. But we share this world, and we use what the mortals come up with. I mean, take the tape again. Do you realize that when I first learned that trick the tape didn't even exist yet? I mean I had to pound wooden stakes into the ground, and then spool this spindly twine around them to mark off an area. But then tape comes along and I get to use tape. You know? Or take the money," Epp dropped another two blocks of cash down on the table. "We use money because a symbol for our currency is damned handy but it's only a symbol. Most newbies *never* bother to question that."

Epp looked over at Matthew, who was watching the cash shaking on the table, slowly depleting itself as his glass filled again with scotch. "Look at you," Epp said. "I forget sometimes how far along you aren't. You're picturing some lady at a desk somewhere tallying up what's been spent and what's been earned. You think the elders run the money, don't you?"

"Well," Matthew said, clearly thinking something along those lines but also not sure he was so crazy for thinking it.

"It's just the easiest way for us to visualize what is happening, but there is no bank of accountants somewhere that cuts your paycheck when you do a meat bag, Matthew. It's just how we come to express the

notion of how much you've pushed and how much they've pushed back. I mean, do you think there's an exchange rate?"

Matthew's face was a wrinkle of puzzlement that was part him staring at the money and part scotch. "It doesn't matter what it looks like, Matthew." Epp reached a hand out, he flexed his fingers a few times, then made a fist and pounded down on the bar. At first Matthew didn't notice what was happening, the sound that came out of the bar was so booming, so unnatural, that the sound was all he could focus on, but before Epp's fist came down again he caught a glimpse of the pile of money and saw that it was now some form of large silver coin he had never seen before. Epp banged the bar again and the coins jumped and Matthew was pretty sure he was looking at Spanish Doubloons. Epp pounded, the coins jumped and Matthew caught sight of something that must have been Chinese, then a coin that looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't place, then something he'd never seen before, then back to a stack of crisp \$100 bills.

"Neat trick," Matthew said.

"It's not a trick, and you will learn in time. If you want to that is. You might not. But tonight it's time for your second choice." Epp quieted down and went back to sipping his scotch.

"I don't get it," Matthew said, shaking his head, not even sure what it was he wasn't getting.

"It comes in time. And give yourself some credit, you're learning already. That trick with the cigar you're so fond of, that takes a fair amount of chemistry and thermodynamics. And you're doing rather well grasping," Epp's hand reached out and plucked at the bar a few times and three or four small waves sprang up, much like the kind Matthew had seen on the photographs in the park earlier, "probability waves."

Matthew groaned and laid his head on the bar behind his glass of scotch, but he could see the waves dancing through the crystal. "Please... no math."

Epp smiled, and one by one he pushed down the waves until one began to rise higher and higher until it was the only one left and it reached up to the ceiling. "You have plenty of math yet to learn. Again, assuming you come our way. You do have your second choice to make."

"That's the second time you've said that. I have no idea what it means."

Epp didn't answer, only turned back to his drink, took a delicate swallow, rolled it around in his mouth, then let it pass down his throat. He looked around after a few seconds, his eyes glancing to the speaker in the corner then over at the jukebox as he listened to the song that was

playing. Matthew realized he wasn't going to get an answer so he went back to his drink and the two remained silent for a few more minutes.

"I still don't think I get the part about them pushing back," Matthew said finally, something in the rushed form of the question giving away how rare he considered it to have Epp's mind to pick.

Epp shrugged. "That's one of the simplest concepts to grasp." He held his hands out in front of him so his palms were down and his fingertips were touching. "Some you test and they come out okay, they get a little stronger for it, but some you test and they push back," and Epp pushed in with both his hands, allowing his fingers to rise up like a mountain growing. "Some push back a little," and his fingertips rose up a little, "and some... well some push back a lot," and the mountain grew higher. "But, in the end, someone has to give," and Epp let one of his hands collapse under the other.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I've ever felt that."

"Of course not, you're not a tester yet. You haven't made your second choice. You're still a newbie. And, frankly, the only thing a newbie really amounts to is a bad idea on legs."

At the mention of a second choice Matthew looked at Epp, but Epp's face gave nothing away and he decided not to push it. Matthew returned to his drink, and slowly the events of the night flooded back to him, and he saw her hair tousled and her shirt bleeding red. "I can't believe she's gone," he said, confused.

Epp didn't say anything but there was a warmth in his silence.

"Why? Why did you put the tape up to start with?"

"To help you."

"How does that help me, to know she's out there dying and I can't do anything?"

Epp curled his fingers around his glass and smiled down at the bar.

"This have something to do with my second choice again?" Epp didn't answer and Matthew returned to staring at the rainbows forming in his crystal glass. Then he turned to Epp with a new question. "Do you remember when your choice died?"

"Of course, you never forget. It was a house fire. I woke up and could hear her screaming in the next room. That was when I made my choice. Twenty years after that I watched as my wife was buried." He took a drink. "That never fades, Matthew. Never."

"And you've been doing this for two hundred years?"

"Two hundred? You really *are* bad at math."

"Sorry, Benjamin said that you were a slave, so I figured-"

"This would be a wonderful time for you to take stock of everything that exists in your head, and to separate out the assumptions from the facts."

"So you weren't a slave?"

"Oh, I was a slave."

"So... "

"My slave name, which I kept, is Epictetus, not Chicken George. Epictetus. That is Greek, Matthew."

"Greek, but... " and then Matthew saw. "That first set of coins you turned the money into... "

Obligingly Epp pounded the bar again and the cash jumped up and landed as a set of crude silver discs. "Ancient Greek," Epp said. And he thumped the bar one last time, turning the silver back into a pile of hundreds.

"Jesus Christ," Matthew said under his breath, still staring at the bar.

"Never had the pleasure of meeting him, no. But he *was* my mentor's last great push. After him she retired. Not that I can blame her; the work does take something out of you." Epp looked down at his glass hollowly.

"She... she retired?"

Epp nodded. "She decided to cross over."

"So where is she now?"

"How the hell should I know? One world at a time, thank you very much."

"So," Matthew was having a hard time with this, "you've been doing this for... and she... how long did she test for?"

"Her first great push was to strike Homer blind, and she finished things out by chatting with Yehoshua in the desert. Not a bad pile of work by anyone's standards." Epp turned to his drink.

"Fuck me," Matthew said, and for lack of anything better to do he finished his drink.

"That's nothing," Epp said, as the cash on the table shook and Matthew's drink filled up. "What will really baffle you is the notion that she herself had a mentor. I mean, when you start thinking about what sorts of things came about because of *that* man's pushing... " Epp waved his fingers over the bar and the image of a small stone wheel rolled across it, then the image of a fire being lit. "It gets pretty interesting." Epp looked around the bar. He stood up. "But anyway, we old timers will go on if you let us. I'm going to leave you for now, Matthew. You have a choice to make."

"I made my choice," Matthew said glumly. "My life and not hers, and now hers is about to end out in the park when you take that tape down. That was my choice. It's made already."

"Oh no. That was your first choice. You still have-

"My second choice. So you keep telling me, although I have no idea what you mean."

"Who was it you were protecting, Matthew?"

"My wife."

"And what was it you saw in the wastebasket of the bathroom?"

Matthew turned on his stool, his face unsteady, his eyes trying to carve away Epp's calm. "How... how did you know about that?"

"You've been seeing it again, haven't you? That's a good thing." Epp nodded as if this confirmed a hunch of his.

"How did you know about that?"

"Our biggest lies are the ones we tell ourselves," Epp said, and then he was gone.

Matthew sat drinking, thinking about the wastebasket at the hotel earlier that evening. Only that didn't seem right, and there hadn't been anything in there, he had only thought he had seen something. But what had he thought was there? And why did it rattle him so much?

Matthew sat and drank his way through Epp's cash. Then he started working through his own. It was hours before he left the bar.

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Matthew walked through the park again. Ducking under the tape he made his way to where his wife lay dying and as he looked down the tears started again. It was strange, he felt so distant from her, but looking at her face the memories were able to reform. The way she had looked up at him after he kissed her, the way she always swung her arm when he took her hand as they walked, how she couldn't keep the bathroom in any sort of order to save her life. And now that the memories were forming again Matthew turned away from the body, grotesque in its frozen state. He started walking, remembering how they had been stupid and in love. He was out of the park and thinking about how they had made plans. And then he was thinking about what he had seen in the bathroom wastebasket. And suddenly he was on his knees for the second time that night, collapsing to the sidewalk with what he had seen, his sobs split by screams as his world cleaved neatly in two. When his scream stopped he only knelt and quietly breathed, hands shaking at his

sides. He saw a familiar pair of dress shoes walk in front of him and stop, the pants hovering above them forming a perfect break just above the cuff. Dawn began to spill over the sidewalk.

"Epp, what is going on?" he said quietly.

"What was in the wastebasket, Matthew?"

Matthew started to stand up, but thought better of it and wound up sitting down on the concrete. He wiped a stray tear away from the side of his nose with the tip of his finger. "A home pregnancy test. I saw a home pregnancy test in the wastebasket of my bathroom the morning before the Mets game. And it was positive."

"Very good, Matthew. Are you starting to understand now?"

Matthew looked up at him, bewildered. He shook his head. "I have a child?"

"You have a daughter," Epp said. "And it is time to make your second choice."

"What do you mean?"

"All those years ago, when you called out for that bullet to strike you... who was it you were protecting?"

"But I didn't know about my daughter, did I?"

"You knew enough," Epp said, and he plucked two curves up out of the sidewalk. He pointed at the larger one, "Your wife," and he pointed at the smaller one, smaller but still pronounced, "and your daughter."

"But it was my wife, I was protecting my wife."

"Were you? Then why did you spend so much time away from her? How come you didn't even know she was approaching her death? How come you can't even remember her name?"

"I know her name," Matthew said, angry, "it's..." and he stopped, frowning.

"I've mentioned before that you were tethered to your choice. Didn't you ever wonder why you never traveled the world? You have this rather strong new power and yet you never once saw any other lands, never walked through The Vatican at midnight or took a swan dive off of Angel Falls. You've been tied here. But what you didn't realize, some would argue *couldn't* realize, was that you've been splitting time between two lives. You've been following your own daughter."

"Oh god, whose wedding was I at?"

"Relax. This isn't a Greek tragedy. I believe she was in attendance as a guest of the bride."

"So what happens now?"

"I would think that would be obvious. You choose."

"I get the feeling that there's more at stake here than I think."

"How true. Stand up."

Matthew obliged, and Epp reached out to straighten his jacket, brushing a stray leaf from the park off of his shoulder. Then Epp spoke. "There exists for you now a small window of opportunity. Pick your daughter and you remain tethered, still on this world but permanently a newbie until your daughter's time comes and you both pass out of this world together. Choose your wife, however, and everything changes. Once she passes, you will be set free. Or cast loose, depending on how you look at it."

"Won't I cross over with her?"

Epp shook his head. "Your tether to your daughter will keep you in this world as your wife leaves, but once she is gone, the tether will snap and you will be," Epp waved a hand through the air absently, trying to think of the correct word, "free."

"You mean... "

"You'll be a newbie no longer."

"So I'll... I'll be an actual tester," Matthew said, starting to understand.

"Indeed. But I really have to warn you, once the tether snaps... once your tie to the ones you loved enough to die for breaks... everything changes." Epp stopped talking until Matthew finally looked up at him. Epp's eyes were specters and Matthew wished he could look away, but he only stared and listened as Epp spoke. "You will know for certain that you are entirely alone on this earth, and that you are loved by no one. You will be cast adrift with no compass and no oar. Your brain will expand in ways you never thought possible, but your heart will remain frozen in the same place forever containing nothing but the memories of your two choices. And those memories will haunt you, they will come upon you when you least expect them, when you least look for them, they will reappear to rip into you millennia after they should have vanished quietly into the night. You will not be able to stop the hurt, and your heart will well up, and your eyes will bleed hot tears. You won't own the memories. You won't be able to cherish them or enjoy them or call them up for company. The memories will own you. The pain stays with you always, and all you will have to look forward to is the work."

"And the work makes it worthwhile?" Matthew said, seeing hope.

"The work is horrible," Epp said bluntly, and he began to pace in front of Matthew as his speaking picked up pace and energy. "You will be known as the scourge of mankind. People will curse you, spit when they refer to you, hate you. You will be viewed as the biggest problem their

existence has. Nobody will understand, nobody will see what it is you do, none of them ever grasp that they become who they are in this world *because* of the obstacles in their lives, not in spite of them. The few you do get through to, the few who come to appreciate the strength you draw out of them, they will instantly be mocked by everyone else the minute they speak these thoughts. The ones who break too easily when you push will be nothing but disappointments, and the ones who make you proud will push back so hard that you will shatter and it will take centuries to put your head back together. The work is nothing but a heartache you chase to wash away the pain of your choice."

"Then, Epp," Matthew shook his head, clearly shaken, "I've got to ask. What is the upside?"

And Epp stopped short, seemingly frozen, head staring down at his foot. Then he snapped up and his words began rattling off in crisp, strong syllables and his eyes were so strong that Matthew felt a chill run down his spine. "The upside is that you can be greatness itself. You could be Shakespeare's broken heart, Beethoven's deaf ears, Van Gogh's madness. You could be Keller's scarlet fever, Roebing's crushed left foot, the color of Dr. King's skin. You could be the entry for light to pass into the soul. You could be the reason that anything worth doing on this rock ever gets done," and he stared at Matthew and repeated himself. "You could be greatness itself."

Matthew stared down at the curb, his eyes out of focus as he thought, one hand reached to rub the back of his neck.

"Do you understand what you need to do?"

He gave the back of his neck a squeeze, then looked up and his eyes met Epp's. He nodded and said a silent, "Yeah."

"Do you understand what I'm going to go do?"

Matthew thought for a few seconds. "Yes," he nodded, "you're going to go take the tape down."

"Are you ready?"

"How will I know what to do?"

"I can't answer that for you."

"You went through this too?"

Epp nodded with his eyes closed. "When I woke up in that house fire I heard her screaming. I heard *both* of them screaming. I made my first choice and twenty years after that I attended my wife's funeral. My wife was the strongest thing in my life. But it was twelve years after her death that the woman I truly loved was buried. We tell our biggest lies to ourselves."

"Shit."

"Well put." Epp raised his eyebrows. "Are you ready?"

Matthew realized his body was trembling. "I think so."

"Then, Matthew Huntington of Brooklyn, New York, I wish you luck."

"Thanks," Matthew said. He looked around, clearly unsure of what exactly to do next, but then his face cleared and he nodded one last time before stepping towards the curb. He held his hand up with a five dollar bill in it and with a blur he was gone.

Epp looked around at the 72nd street square as dawn reflected rosy pink off of the puddles in the street. Then he turned and walked towards the park.

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Matthew looked at the door, glancing about the frame as if it was going to offer up any number of clues as to what lay beyond. He ran a finger over the doorknob, and then stepped through.

In the park, Epp was standing at the tape, the sunlight growing brighter around him as he stared across the yellow line to the large square of darkness it contained. He reached a hand up and grabbed the strip of yellow, then gave a yank. It grew warmer in his hands as it stretched thinner and thinner, until finally it snapped, the end not in his hand recoiling and springing back whip-like and light towards the tree where it was tied. Inside the square the light began to change.

The hallway Matthew entered was dark, but he had the feel of high ceilings and dusty white walls. He walked, his feet noticing the occasional warped slat of wood under his feet. He walked past a semicircle arch that led to a cramped kitchen, past a closed door, then around a corner to a bedroom. There was a fluffy comforter, rumped and bright like starched snow, an end table with a clock radio and a lamp, a small desk cluttered with books and a laptop. He stared around; everything looked generic enough on its own, but combined there was a personality here.

Epp stood at a tree, his hands passing around and around it as he unwrapped loop after loop of tape until he finally reached the end. He walked around the tree, gathering handful after handful of tape as he went, the light on his left shifting from dusk into darkness now, and two figures ran towards him, one of them tossing a knife into the bushes before they reached the barrier where the tape had been and they disappeared to catch up with their present selves.

Matthew heard a door slam and he spun around to see a woman standing in the hallway, sleepy eyed, wearing a large t-shirt, reaching a hand through the doorway he had passed to flip off the bathroom light. He breathed in, and in, and in, seemingly unable to exhale any as his blood beat warm in his ears. "Christ, you look like your mother," he said as his daughter walked past him. And her face, on top of the resemblance to his wife, was somehow so familiar, and he remembered in rapid succession, a child's laugh at the corner of a room he was working, a little girl in pigtails who had watched as he caused a fight on a street corner, the glimpse he caught in the shop window of a teenager walking past as he looked over the clientele, her face at a thousand different moments in his past appearing again and again as he floated through his work and it was like an optical illusion that he had only seen one way until just this moment when it became so clear how close he had been to her this whole time, how much of her life he had witnessed.

Epp wound his way around the third corner of the square he had marked out, tugging the tape off a tree branch. Inside the square the light rain that had passed through earlier that night began to fall, the raindrops tapping soothingly against the treetops.

Matthew watched her climb into bed, roll around a few times trying to get the comforter right on her body. She settled down onto her back, her face up at the ceiling. He watched and could tell that she was debating whether she should go back to sleep or not. She reached a hand up, scratched her forehead, half rolled over and looked at the clock radio, then rolled back. She clasped her hands behind her head, wriggled back onto the pillow, and smiled as she looked up at the ceiling. One thought went through Matthew's head as he watched her and it shocked him with its certainty, but as a lifetime of watching his daughter grow up flooded through his memory he knew it was true.

"She'll be okay," he thought.

He lingered for a moment longer, each new breath he took seeming to drink in something from the content form lying under the comforter in front of him. Then he turned and walked to the bathroom. Not knowing if there was some sort of rule against this and not particularly caring if there was he focused on the mirror. With a little effort he managed to steam it up. Then with the tip of his finger, he began to write.

Epp reached the last tree, the mess of tape wrapped around his hand quite large now. He reached up and tugged at a loose end, the knot holding the last bit of tape coming undone. Behind him the uneven square of light was lurching its way towards the present. The knot came undone,

the last bit of tape collected in his hands, and behind him everything looked normal. He balled the tape up again and again, compressing it more and more each time until with a final brushing of his hands nothing was left.

He turned and saw Matthew standing in front of him. Epp's eyes picked him over carefully, starting at his feet and working his way to the top of Matthew's head. The smallest vibration of a smile wavered on Epp's lips. "Did you leave her a note?"

"Yeah."

"Hard to resist. Believe me I know."

Matthew smiled and then faltered, a puzzled look coming over his face, he stared aslant at the ground looking very much like someone who had walked into a room only to realize they forgot why they had gone into that room to begin with. "Wait, did I leave a note? Why can't I remember? That happened barely twenty seconds ago, didn't it?"

"I'm sorry," Epp said gravely, "the bond is broken. The memories own you now, not the other way around."

Matthew swallowed. "Why do I have a terrible feeling?" he looked up and winced as he pressed his palm to his chest. "This is awful. Does this go away?"

"You grow accustomed to it."

"That's not the same thing."

"No. It is not."

Matthew raised his hand and pointed beyond Epp. "Did my wife pass?" Epp nodded. "I'm going to go say goodbye. Maybe look at her one last time."

As he started to walk past Epp, Epp's hand came up and barred his passage. "I have to insist that you do not. That is an itch you can't scratch, Matthew. You have to trust me that a simple goodbye is very much for the best."

Matthew looked sick and not at all sure that he agreed with Epp.

"Does she get found soon? I don't want her just lying there," he said, not conceding anything to Epp just yet.

"It will be a matter of minutes."

"Then we should wait for that. Maybe wait and make sure she's taken care of okay, you know, just to make sure-"

"I think maybe we should occupy you with some simple drills... take your mind off of it."

Matthew breathed out shakily. "Yeah, okay. So you're my teacher now? Is that how this works?"

"You are free, Matthew. Anything and anyone you care to learn from you may call teacher. I'm more of a welcoming committee."

"Okay," Matthew said, not sure he was going to be okay with this, but wanting to start just to do something. "So where do we begin?"

"Some light travel. The choice you just made was difficult, you've earned a bit of currency from it. And you've never traveled freely before in your existence. I think we should go somewhere far away that you've never been." Epp turned and looked up at the sky, his eyes keen, his face observant, almost as if he were smelling something in the wind. Then he turned back. "Night is falling over the Himalayas. I think we should go view the sunset there. See what long shadows look like upon Mount Everest."

"Really?"

"It's as good a place to start as any. A better place to start than most."

"How the hell do I go about getting there? All I've done so far is-"

"Forget what you've done so far. And forget what's in your head right now. Just take a deep breath and give it a try."

Matthew clearly felt he deserved the right to object some more, but he couldn't bring himself to open his mouth with the way Epp's eyes were boring into him, so he gave a cockeyed smile and looked around. Then he closed his eyes. For a few moments nothing happened, but then his form began to waver and then ripple and then vanish. Epp was staring at nothing.

Epp tilted his head and his face took on a vacant look as if he were staring at something far in the distance. He had a look of high expectations growing steadily each second until finally he winced as if watching someone take a bad fall. "So close," Epp said. And with a quick glance around he began walking, his form rippling as he went, until he was gone and there was nothing but the damp grass of the park and the morning sun.

In an apartment downtown a rumpled white comforter was piled at the foot of a bed, its owner having just recently decided that it was time to get up. She was currently standing next to the shower, trying to adjust the water, leaning over the tub, gingerly running her hand under the spray that was far too hot. As she fiddled with the knobs and steam filled the little bathroom her eyes caught sight of her mirror. She walked over, slowly, head tilted to the side as she read what was written. She gave a glance behind her, as if someone was watching, then turned back. One of her friends must have written that there last night, she knew, while they were getting ready for the wedding. Only there was

something conveyed in the note that was so simple and so warming that she couldn't imagine which of her friends had written with such emotion. And it was the strangest damned thing. Suddenly all she wanted to do was cry but when she opened her mouth a soft laugh cascaded out, and, after reading the note one more time, she turned and hopped happily back over to the shower.

Part 2: Three Lessons

The wind blowing over the rocks kicked up a mist of white powdery snow that danced like liquid across the face of the mountain. At first there was nothing, then a form rippled and began to take shape. As it became more recognizable it began to fall, arms and legs firming up in the fragile light. The arms began flailing and the legs began kicking and the body fell in a drop so long it was possible to imagine that the body was flying. A leg caught an outcropping of rock and the body bounced before flipping over to land face first on a lower plateau. The force of impact caused the back to bend so much the heels of the man's feet almost touched the back of his head. It slipped along a few more inches, the sound of cloth rustling against ice mixing with the wind, and then it finally came to a stop.

The body remained face down, the rise and fall of its back as it continued to breathe was the only sign of motion.

"Get up, Matthew," Epp said.

Matthew closed his eyes tighter, rolled over, and curled up into a ball. He was dressed in a tuxedo and his dinner jacket was doing little to help against the cold.

"That was the worst try yet," Epp said.

Matthew gathered himself together enough to lift his head. As he raised his eyes a few inches off the snow he saw, a foot or so in front of him, an immaculate pair of dress shoes with charcoal pants hanging above them, a perfect break just above the cuff. Matthew wiped some blood off of his upper lip with the back of his hand.

"Epp? How long have you been standing there?"

"Since you started falling."

Matthew pulled himself up to a sitting position. He took off his glasses and examined them before resetting them on his round face. He drew his knees up, his stocky frame bundling up against itself. "So you knew I'd land here? You were able to tell that I would land *exactly*," and he slapped the snow covered rock with the flat of his palm, "here?"

"Of course not," Epp said. Matthew looked up at him. Epp's face was stern and showed no signs of feeling the bits of snow and ice that the wind was whipping against his dark black skin. He was tall but muscular and his entire frame was draped in a charcoal-knit suit that was tailored so perfectly it almost seemed to be making love to him.

"If I had known *exactly* where you'd land," Epp said, "I'd have been standing here." And he took one step forward, covering the foot-wide gap so that the very tips of his shoes were touching the spot on the snow Matthew's face had just occupied.

"It's the same thing," Matthew said, shaking his head and huddling his face in towards his knees.

"It is most certainly not," Epp said in a voice that caused Matthew's stomach to tense. "You have to learn, Matthew, that something being highly probable is very different from something having actualized into a definite occurrence. I didn't *know* where you'd land until you had actually landed."

"It's the same thing," Matthew repeated, managing to sound like Epp wasn't there.

"Not even close," Epp said, and there was a sudden savagery in his voice as he bent down and lifted Matthew up, gripping him by the front of his shirt and holding him up with one arm bent at the elbow.

"Oh come *on*, Epp," Matthew said, not even trying to struggle, just trying to hold onto Epp's fist and rearrange himself to be slightly more comfortable on his perch. "I've been up and down these mountains a thousand times. I can't do this anymore."

Epp drew his hand back as if to toss Matthew like a shot-put. "A thousand times," Epp said, "and yet you still fail to grasp the very basics. You still think probability is actuality. You still bleed, failing to remember that you are pure energy. You still fall instead of fly unable to shake the belief that you have a body. A thousand times and that hasn't sunk in yet."

Epp flexed his knees slightly and as Matthew watched him aiming into the sky at some far off point he closed his eyes and braced himself. "You were a lot nicer to me three months ago," Matthew said through his teeth.

"I had so much less to teach you then," Epp said, never taking his gaze away from the distance. With a last tensing of his knees, Epp threw Matthew's body, watching as Matthew flailed, his body hurtling off into the dark blue of the Himalayan sky.

Ten year old Sophie Loughton ran up the three stone steps in front of her house and opened the outer door. She let the lower storm window rest against her hyper-colored backpack as she fished in her pocket for her key. Finding it she unlocked the inner door and ran inside, shedding her backpack and boots and jacket in a trail of outerwear as she tottered through the kitchen in her white cotton stockings. She stopped at the refrigerator and stared up at the various notes taped to it, scanning over black magic-marker wording on yellow sticky-sheets to see if any of them were for her. Satisfied that she had nothing pressing to do she grasped the handle of the refrigerator door and opened it, bottles of salad dressing clanking as it slipped out of her grasp, opened too quickly, and slammed against the counter. She withdrew a saran-wrapped plate and then shut the door and resumed her tottering run through the den and over to the stairs. Short legs pumping quick steps she climbed to the second floor, ran down the hallway to her room, and slammed the door. Only then did her motion stop as she backed up against the door to make sure it was shut properly, the plate resting on her forearms and palms, fingers gripping around the edge and already feeling slick due to condensation on the saran-wrap.

There was a trembling on her face, a flicker of emotion before it froze up again in determination. When this passed she seemed, only then, to notice where she was, as if the entire trip from school to this room had been performed by someone else. She looked down at the plate now, for the first time seeing the slightly browned apple slices and the cream-white cheese stick. She set the plate on the floor and ran over to her bed, a pink cloud of overflowing comforters and pillows in colorful cases. Diving face first into the softness she then turned over and picked up a stuffed horse, holding it at arms length she made it run along the edge of the bed, but something internal seemed to reject this attempt at play and she quickly grew bored and turned to stare out the window instead.

"Epp, where are we?" Matthew asked from the corner, having watched this entire scene play out. The girl showed no signs of having heard him.

"The bedroom of Sophie Loughton." Epp answered. He was standing next to a little desk painted a dusty pale white.

"Why?" Matthew asked.

Epp turned a slow head, his perfectly at ease body allowing him to achieve a sense of absolute calm even as he gripped Matthew with his eyes. "Would you rather have been thrown past Everest again?"

"No," Matthew said emphatically, stepping forward towards the bed, brushing snow off his shoulders as he walked. The white dust floated towards the floor and disappeared in a shimmering dance of light before it ever touched the ground.

"She looks sad," Matthew said, leaning in to study Sophie's face.

"Not quite yet," Epp said. Matthew glanced back and saw that Epp was holding a clipboard in his hands. Running a thumb across his tongue Epp began to flip through the sheets.

"Probability photos?" Matthew asked.

Epp nodded.

"Can I see?" Matthew walked over towards Epp who was now engrossed in the contents of the clipboard. Epp would study a sheet, then flip through a few more, then glance around the room his eyes fixing on a specific object before returning to the clipboard. "Epp?" Matthew asked again, anxious about intruding. "May I see?"

Epp looked up and handed the clipboard to Matthew without a word, then walked over to the girl and began to examine her himself. Matthew looked down and glanced through some of the photos, each one depicting a different outcome, each one with a small graphed wave in the lower corner showing the probability of that outcome. He flipped through a couple of photos of Sophie before he stopped at a blurry picture of himself giving the camera a giant goofy thumbs-up.

"Epp?" Matthew asked. "Something's not right here. I'm in these pictures." Matthew glanced down at the corner of the photo of himself and saw that the curve was almost a straight line. "Epp?" Matthew looked up and saw, for the first time, how Epp was studying the little girl. Then Epp turned and a device appeared at the end of the bed that looked like a heart-monitor from a hospital.

"Epp, no. Absolutely not."

Epp ignored him and continued to take readings, at one point retrieving the clipboard from Matthew's hands before walking around the bed, glancing at almost everything in the room as he walked, the rustle of the papers on the clipboard the only thing to be heard. "Epp," Matthew said with much more insistence in his voice. "I'm not doing this."

"Yes you are," Epp said calmly, glancing over one last thing before lowering the clipboard to his side and looking up at Matthew. "It's been three months since you became a tester and we've been training you hard, but it's time to leave the training grounds behind and actually engage."

Matthew stood where he was, afraid that any motion on his part would acknowledge assent. He allowed himself to shake his head. "I can't do this."

"You'll learn."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because two-thousand years ago I couldn't do this either. Now step up and remember what we've gone over."

"Come on, Epp, seriously. I haven't even seen the top of Everest yet. I haven't even come close. You can't really think I'm ready, can you?"

Epp had wandered over to the monitoring device and was tuning some dials located on its front panel. "You were never going to make it to the top of Everest. Nobody ever does until their first push. That was just endurance training."

"What." Matthew said with no inflection in his voice, more as a robotic response to hearing something. "I fell past that thing I don't even know how many times. Are you telling me that you had me do that for no reason?"

"Not no reason. To toughen you up. To get you striving further than you were comfortable with. Trust me, this is going to seem easy to you now."

And in spite of the anger that was threatening to boil up as he remembered fall after face-first fall onto cold rock, Matthew stayed calm, too eager to believe that this was going to be easy. "Really? All of that is going to help make this easy?"

"Absolutely," Epp said, turning away from the control panel. "Besides, I'll be here monitoring your every second in case something goes wrong."

"Like what?" Matthew asked.

A storm was gathering outside and the darkening light of the room, the little girl still playing quietly by herself as they talked, the stillness of the house, all of it compiled to make nervousness creep across his back. "And how wrong could things go?"

"Nothing can really go wrong for her," Epp said, pointing at Sophie. "If she doesn't push back than she'll just return to her current state. It's only if they engage and you begin to build off each other that the meat bag can get hurt. And that won't be happening here. That sort of thing happens when someone pushes against a target for an extended period or multiple times. One push isn't going to do anything negative to her."

"And me?"

"You?" Epp paused where he was, the corners of his mouth rising. "You could be destroyed."

Matthew couldn't tell if Epp was joking.

Epp reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a thick roll of plastic tape that looked like the yellow tape police use to seal off crime scenes. "I'll also be using this," he said, wagging the tape. "With time slowed to a stop I'll be able to step in if something really starts to go wrong."

This made Matthew feel better and he felt himself able to breathe easier. There was also the joy of watching Epp use the time tape. With his usual slow, studious walk, Epp crossed over to one side of the room and, pulling a thumbtack from his suit pocket, pinned one end of the tape to the wall. He began to spool out the yellow band and Matthew watched as the area inside the boundary Epp was drawing began to warp and slow as space and time obeyed Epp's wishes. Epp walked past Matthew, spooling the tape out, and Matthew couldn't resist a light snort of wonder. "That is *such* a neat trick."

Epp sighed as he walked past. "So I see I get to do this one more time before your first engagement."

"Do wha-" Matthew started to say, then he started to yell the word "No" but before he could get anything out Epp had gripped his shoulder and pushed. Matthew flew back towards the wall by the door, the rush of speed making his clothes flap and his ears stand out and then he was a wavering shadow of himself and before he came into contact with the wall he disappeared.

There was a gap of a few seconds where Epp pinned another corner of tape up before Matthew came flying in backwards from the opposite wall. The heels of his shoes caught the rug and he fell onto his back, his legs straight out in front of him as he skipped backwards along the floor before crashing up against the wall. Immediately he jumped up and began swatting at himself, his hands flying all over his tuxedo, brushing against the fabric as roaches and spiders and tendrils of vine fell off of him. There were legs everywhere as they dropped onto the floor, some not even making it that far, before they began to disappear. Then Matthew was standing, his whole upper body tense, looking at the spot where the last cockroach had disappeared, his breath streaming in and out of his nose.

"If you continue to view these tools as *tricks*, Matthew, then you will never learn to use them yourself." Epp finished closing off a square with the tape. Sophie Loughton was inside, frozen in place on her bed.

"I simply," Matthew said, his voice containing abnormal volume and stresses as he struggled to get a hold of himself, "was saying how *interesting* I think the time-tape is. I have an *awful* lot to learn from you and some things are inherently going to be labeled in my mind as tricks, or magic, or voodoo until I get a firmer grasp on some of the more *basic* tools. So I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't give me a ride through the jungle underbrush every time I need to compartmentalize something away to be learned at a future point."

Epp stared at him, his eyes bright against his dark skin. "That was very well put, Matthew," he said, truth in his voice. "I'll keep that in mind for the future. You have my word."

"Thank you," Matthew said, calming down and losing some of his tension. He walked over to Epp. "So... what's going on here?"

"Little Sophie Loughton got dumped today."

"She has a boyfriend?" Matthew looked past the tape and stared at Sophie. "She's like two."

"Ten. And her boyfriend, who used to follow her around like a puppy, decided that he would now go around with Romey Laufen."

"That tramp."

Epp glared at Matthew.

"Hey, I'm just saying. Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free, right?"

"One would purchase the cow if the future value of all milk after deducting for risk was greater than the asking price plus the value of the amount of expected free milk, assuming a cow that provided no benefits other than milk," Epp said, walking past Matthew and adjusting part of the tape.

"Man, you must get invited to all the best parties."

Epp ducked under the tape and studied Sophie, his clipboard back in his hand. "That was my way of telling you that your joke didn't make any sense and that being coy is not going to get you out of this. It is time to engage."

Matthew ducked under the tape as well and stood next to Epp. He stared at the little girl on the bed. "You really think I can do this?"

"If you think you can, than you can," Epp said. "What I know for sure is that it is time for you to try."

"Seriously, how badly can this go? What's the worst thing that can happen to me?"

Matthew expected a quick comment from Epp, or a long grave sermon, or even another trip through the jungle, but instead Epp avoided

his eyes as if there was something about that question that he didn't feel like contemplating. "You're ready," was all Epp said.

"And what... uh... I mean how do I... "

"To start with it's the same drill as when you were a newbie. Once you engage you'll notice the differences and you'll understand what to do. You obviously won't need to take form here; it's all been set up. Sophie talked over her break-up with her best friend and is perfectly ready to toss her boyfriend aside in an All-Boys-Are-Stupid sort of manner. Your job is simply to make her take a second look. Your job is to rattle her enough so she has some self doubt. Make her question things a little deeper."

"Come on, though, she's ten. I feel weird pushing a ten year old girl."

"Think of it as necessary surgery. If you don't push her here, she'll just continue through life as a meat bag."

Matthew leaned back, ducking his head, taking a wider view of the bed and girl. "And you'll be right here waiting?" he said.

"I'll be right here. I have some people dropping by, but I'll be right here."

"People?"

"Former students. Stop stalling Matthew."

"Yeah but if-"

"Now, Matthew." Epp's voice was warm, full of feeling, but commanding just the same.

Matthew glanced back at Epp and then took a few steps forward. He reached an arm out and halted, his hand poised in the air, his fingers in varying states of relaxed tension. "So it's just like when I was a newbie?" Matthew waited for a response but nothing came. When he turned around Epp was still standing there but his face was impassive and Matthew realized that Epp wasn't answering any more questions.

Matthew drew closer. Sophie was still holding her stuffed horse where she was frozen and as Matthew approached he felt the familiar ache in his heart begin to throb. His daughter and his wife, the two people he had loved enough to commit himself to an eternity without them, remained always in some deep pit in his chest. But now the pain of leaving them came upon him stronger than he had felt it in months. It was so deep and so internal it might as well have been physical pain and he grunted and faltered as tears welled up in his eyes and the ravenous loss of love clawed at his chest.

He passed his finger against Sophie's hair, and then vapor-like through her head, at which point his body lurched forward. The pain of

loss intensified to a degree he had never felt before, the longing to see his daughter ripping into him, and he engaged in his first test.

Epp watched as Matthew's body spasmed then froze, Matthew's connection with Sophie causing him to halt in time as well. Epp rifled through his clipboard, the rustling of paper loud in the still room. He checked the monitor then nodded and walked to the window, ducking under the tape as he went. He sat down against the sill and watched, glancing at the clipboard and monitor every few minutes.

There was a vibrating in his pocket and he withdrew a cell phone and flipped it open to read an incoming text message. He put the clipboard down and held the phone in both hands and the rattling of his thumbs across the keypad clacked in the air as he wrote back. A few seconds later the phone buzzed again, and again he wrote back. "Nobody talks on the phone anymore," he muttered under his breath. Then, satisfied that the conversation was over he flipped the phone shut and returned it to his pocket.

Behind him on the road out past the front yard of Sophie's house a car drove by playing its bass loud enough to hear, the deep beat warbling higher and lower as the car passed. This was followed by the soft patter of drops against leaves as the clouds outside finally began to rain.

Epp walked back over towards the bed and rotated between glancing through the clipboard, peering at Matthew, and tapping his fingers against the monitor.

"Hi, Epp," a soft woman's voice behind him said. Without taking his eyes from his clipboard Epp held up a hand with one finger raised requesting silence from the new person in the room. After a few seconds he rubbed a weary knuckle against one of his eyes and turned to greet the woman. "Hello, Mary."

Mary was standing in the corner. She was short in stature but with a body like a coiled spring she seemed capable of commanding an entire room. Her hair was thick, spilling down her shoulders like gold-spun hay, while her hands rested gently on hips that could easily have been holstering twin pistols. She walked forward, exiting the corner meekly, her head leading the way as if she was unsure about intruding.

She stepped around Epp and took a good look at Matthew and, while his pain had been real enough when it was happening, his freezing in time had turned him into a comical statue causing Mary to burst out laughing. "Do we look that stupid when we test?"

"Most likely, yes. Pain doesn't freeze well."

"Boy, he looks like he's going through quite a bit of pain. And it's only a little girl. It hardly seems worth it."

"It was a rookie's first push that caused Miss Frank to start keeping a diary," Epp said. "Don't judge."

The admonishment struck Mary completely, her role as student to his teacher instantly coming to the forefront as her shoulders shrank slightly. "I'm having problems, Epp."

Outside there was a rumble. The room had grown quite dark with most of the late afternoon sunlight being filtered out by the clouds. This was contrasted by the square around Sophie's bed, which still contained some pre-storm light.

"What problems?" Epp asked, and as another rumble of thunder distantly echoed outside he tilted his head and squinted as if trying to hear something unspoken in the sound.

"Well with my specialty for one. And also I seem to be at a point where I've grasped space-time and should be capable of using the tape but I keep thinking about what you've taught me and I just know I'm missing something. You always told me that I would know, I mean *really* know when I was ready and somehow I just don't feel that yet. And-"

Epp raised his hand again and again his finger called for silence. "We'll start with your specialty. What is your problem there?"

"Three hundred years ago I was a nun. A *nun*, Epp."

The dark parts of the room flickered with light and a rumble of thunder, much closer now, seeped in through the window panes. Epp's head cocked again and he listened to every last note of the thunder's dying sound. "And I'm assuming that would be Bartleby."

In the corner, next to the little desk, a figure began to form out of mist and nothing. Slowly a sound filled the room until it was distinguishable as a low yell, growing in volume. The figure solidified into a young man, fists clenched at his sides, head tilted back, screaming at the top of his lungs. The head lowered and the scream faded and pin-straight black hair bobbed around Bartleby's head as he cackled into a loud joyous laugh and walked forward in a strut. "This is fucking *amazing*," he shouted, his fists still clenched at his sides, his enthusiasm catching on enough to make Mary smile. "It was just like you said it would be, Epp. Just like you taught me. And I can *feel* it, man. I really can. You know? If I concentrate, and really, I mean really deep down at the base of my testicles concentrate, I can *feel* it. If I focus and concentrate on the separate particles of moisture that compose the storm cloud and notice, sort of out the corner of my eye like you said, the electric charge start to build

then I can *control* it. Actually control it. But you *really* have to focus with your body. I mean really tense all your muscles." And he tensed his whole body in demonstration, his face set in harsh angles of concentration before he seemed to build up something within himself and then release it at exactly the same moment a bolt of lightning struck outside.

"You aren't using your body," Epp said, facing the monitor once again, clipboard in his hand, his voice barely raised in volume when compared to Bartleby's shouting. "You exist merely as the sum of all energy you have received from the universe in exchange for steering that energy along certain channels and while you are capable of forming that energy into a mass shaped in your once human form you do not have a body."

"No, Epp. I really think I have to feel it all the way down my body. It doesn't work if I don't have every muscle-"

"Mary," Epp said, and although he again had no extra volume in his voice he easily interrupted Bartleby. "Mary, please demonstrate a lightning strike for Bartleby."

Mary turned to face Bartleby, her hands resting on her low slung waistline. Her whole body was casual, her hips tilted to one side, with no effort to speak of she reached an arm out and held her hand palm up. Her fingers curled and her thumb rested against the tip of her middle finger. Then she snapped, her fingers creating a beautiful sound as lightning struck outside.

"You don't have a body, Bartleby," Epp said, turning back around. "You do seem to have problems listening, however."

"Who's this?" Bartleby asked staring at Mary.

"This is Mary; she's been having some problems with the time-tape as well as with her specialty."

"What's your specialty?"

"Sex," Mary answered.

"Lady, from where I'm standing you don't got *no* problems," Bartleby said, walking past her and stopping at the strip of yellow tape. "And who's that guy?"

"His name is Matthew. He's a new student of mine."

Bartleby grinned. "Been kicking his ass up and down the Himalayas?" Epp didn't respond. "You know I've been meaning to ask you, Epp. I've been thinking over all that toughening up and all you like to do at the beginning, trying to force us to engage faster. Wouldn't it just be easier to take us to a well populated graveyard? That would've gotten me motivated, I can tell you that."

Mary walked forward quietly so she was standing next to Bartleby on the border of the tape. Lighting flashed outside and the dark areas of the room were illuminated, Mary and Bartleby's figures coming into sharp relief while inside the tape, where the day's light still existed, things remained the same.

"I don't care to teach through fear," Epp answered.

"Not teach through fear?" Bartleby said. "Fucking hell, Epp, you threw me off the top of the Eiffel Tower."

"Necessity and fear are different," Epp said, his back still turned. Mary had ducked under the tape while this conversation was taking place and she came around to Epp's front only to have him turn away from her. "Had I shown you the consequences of what a fall from the Eiffel Tower might do to you that would have been fear. Throwing you off the top was merely condensing the amount of time you were allowed to figure things out. I never show new students a graveyard until they've engaged at least once."

"I just find it amazing that with all you do you still find time to take on new students," Mary said. There was a reaction in Epp as she said this, a barely perceptible sagging of his shoulders and Mary had the notion that she had said something wrong. She had the notion, in fact, that she and Bartleby had done nothing but say incorrect things since they had each first shown up.

Epp turned around to face them. His whole body looked weary. "When I was a slave," he said, "I used to hang around the kitchen. I enjoyed learning new things and cooking always interested me. And one day I opted to cook for some of the other house slaves," he paused. "I'm assuming that if I tell this story with dormice stuffed with rose petals as the finished dish I'll only lose you further, so I'll switch it over to something more accessible, like potatoes. So let's say I opted to cook a potato dish for some of the other slaves, and one of them stayed in the kitchen with me the whole time. When I washed the potatoes he laughed this off, saying they were clean enough from the kitchen slaves and this wasn't needed. When I chopped the potatoes I took the time to make sure they were all cut into as uniform a cube as I could make them so they would cook evenly. He laughed this off as not needed and too much attention to detail. When I soaked the potatoes in water to remove some of their starch, he told me this wasn't needed and was a waste of time. When I parboiled them first he told me he never bothered to do that. When I tested the oil temperature, when I seasoned them on both sides while frying, when I drained them carefully after cooking, when I did all

of these things he told me that he never bothered with such steps and that they weren't needed. And then we ate. And he thought the potatoes were the best dish served that night. And do you know what he asked me? Honestly asked me?"

Epp looked at Mary and Bartleby each in turn, his eyes running over them carefully. "He said the potatoes were amazing and he asked me what my secret was."

"I don't get it," Bartleby said.

"He means that taking care of rookies like this guy," Mary pointed at Matthew, "is all part of it. He didn't get to where he is and then start doing this stuff on top of all his work. This *is* his work." Mary nervously slid her fingers along a golden ringlet of hair that was hanging off to the side of her face. "Is that right?"

At those words something inside of Epp seemed to unhinge, some set of internal wires and supports sagged at its foundation and he turned, once again to look at Matthew and Sophie. "If you have to ask if you're right, Mary, then you're not."

"I get it," Bartleby said, picking up Sophie's stuffed horse. "So you're saying I should take on a student? You really think I'm ready for that?"

"I don't think you are anywhere close."

"So what then? You just tell me what to do, Epp, and I'll do it."

"That is precisely the problem." Epp was staring at Matthew now.

"Seriously, Epp," Bartleby said, trying to catch Epp's attention. "Just give me another challenge. Anything. Let me have it. Whatever you want."

Epp froze, his charcoal suit highlighting his eyes squinted in thought. "I've failed you," he said, dropping the statement like a weight into the conversation.

"What?!" Mary shouted. "Epp don't say that."

"Yeah, Epp. Do you know how much I've learned under you? How can you say you've failed us?"

"Because you are *still* under me. Because if you really wanted to make me proud as students you would seek to surpass me, but I've let you down. I've kept you too sheltered or led you too strictly. You've come to view learning the tricks I teach you as a replacement for actual experience, you've come to regard accomplishing what I set out for you as more important than the work.

"You," he glanced at Mary, "you're upset because your specialty doesn't seem to fit you. Well that is how it goes. You are what you are and you don't get to choose every step of your path. You're not the first

tester to find themselves blundering into a specialty that seems all wrong for them. It happens quite often. Poets find themselves pushing mathematicians, thieves pushing saints. Hell, Ricardo was pushed to his theory of comparative advantage by a *lute* player. You are here to learn, not to continue with the illusion of who you once were. You can't move forward with your skills if you continue to fight them. You want to use the time tape? Then use it *just* as you are.

"And you," he turned to Bartleby. "You are so caught up in whether you're outperforming your contemporaries that you haven't done an honest day's work in centuries. The test is not the lesson, Bartleby.

"And you both seek to avoid the real challenges of the outside world by residing as my students forever. You aren't making sure I approve of your steps because you need teaching; you're doing it to avoid having to take steps of your own.

"I've let you down. Reality is far more rewarding than anything I can show you. And reality is far more dangerous than anything I can prepare you for. Reality will not pull its punches."

He looked from Mary to Bartleby, his eyes scratching across their faces, before turning around and looking at Matthew. "School is out," he said, and he reached a hand up and grabbed the yellow tape. With a tug he popped it loose from the wall and the square of light inside the room became a jumble of yells and shifting shades and lightning flashes. Epp ripped the tape off of all four corners and everything finally synched up to where it was in the present.

Matthew fell to the floor, screaming in pain as Sophie reappeared seated at her desk. She was frantically scribbling in a notebook, her mood matching Matthew's yells although she showed no signs of hearing him.

Matthew's screams turned into individual words: "Let me see my daughter!" Then he was on all fours, crying and begging, "Let me see my daughter," over and over, "let me see my daughter."

Epp walked over to Bartleby and gripped his shoulder. Without a word he shoved and Bartleby flew towards the window disappearing after a few feet.

Then Epp traced a loose rectangle in the air with his fingers and a few seconds later a door appeared out of a shimmering blend of colors. He opened it. "Through here. Both of you. *Now.*"

Mary knelt down to give Matthew a hand and half led half carried him through the door. Once they were through Epp slammed it shut, then walked over to Sophie's desk. He reached a hand out and gripped the

corner of the sheet she was writing on. Sophie's hand continued on through his arm as she wrote. Epp waited a few more seconds then yanked at the corner, the sheet duplicating and splitting into two copies, one remaining exactly in place, the other forming in Epp's hand. He folded the sheet and slipped it into his suit pocket. He walked through the door and slammed it shut behind him. In a blink it shrank into oblivion and nothing remained in the room but the sound of the rain outside and Sophie's pen scratching across the page.

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Matthew sat up. After walking through the door he had lost track of things. The door had done something strange and he had separated from the woman who had helped him through. And he really was very tired. He realized the ground he was sitting on was muddy and the seat of his pants was soaking through. He started to scramble back to try and stop the seeping water from drenching his pants but he found himself lacking in energy and when his back came up against something solid he settled for leaning back against it in a sitting position. Everything smelled like rotting leaves.

It was dark but street lamps from somewhere close by made vision possible and he figured he was close by to where he had just been because the weather seemed to match. It wasn't currently raining but a storm was moving through. He looked to the ground at his right and breathed in slowly. Then he groaned and leaned his head back, clunking it against his support a few times. "This just keeps getting better," he said.

He looked back at the corpse lying on the ground at his right. "Hey," he said, nudging it with one hand. This was a reflex; he did it without thinking, and even as he did it he knew it was a stupid gesture. The man's clothes were soaked through and covered with moss, his skin was rotting away in parts and he was lying face down in the soft dirt deep enough to obstruct any breathing he might have been doing. He was dead. But, not knowing how to process anything that had happened to him in the last hour not to mention the last three months, Matthew adjusted the glasses on his face and once again nudged the corpse. "Come on," he pleaded, "come on, wake up."

When this again accomplished nothing Matthew leaned back against his support and closed his eyes. He felt the need to be alone with his exhaustion if only for a few seconds.

Rain started to fall.

He heard a rustling close by.

He opened his eyes.

"My god I've raised the dead," he thought stupidly as he watched the corpse next to him begin to move. A shower of dirt dribbled across his leg as the corpse's arm lifted and moved sluggishly toward his leg. The hand lowered onto his leg at the same instant that the head raised up and Matthew felt cold shock spread through him as he saw that the thing's half-rotted face was staring at him; dead eyes glossy with rainwater were locked onto his face as a hungry grin spread across the thing's yellowed teeth. He looked down at the hand clamped onto his knee and he saw the thing's fingers, two of them nothing but bare bone, sink into his flesh. He felt his skin tearing, his muscles tensing and ripping, his body seizing with pain. His mouth was open to try and scream but nothing came out the pain was so intense and then he felt the bony fingertips scrape against the underside of his kneecap before giving a yank and he screamed. The thing was dragging itself closer to him and he could hear it breathing, a soft repetitive rasp almost like a laugh and the fingers squeezed harder and he heard his own bones breaking. One of his hands flailed up to push against the thing's face but his fingers only slipped right through the soft waxy skin and into the thing's mouth. He felt teeth on either side of his knuckles grinding through to his bones and all Matthew could do was try to wriggle away but every motion seemed to hurt and every movement he made only served to let the thing get more leverage against him and he realized that either he was losing strength or it was gaining strength or both and then he heard a woman's voice shouting, "*He's over here,*" and there was the sound of a struggle and then it was off of him and he was doubled over holding his bleeding hand against his stomach, his knee a faraway throb of pain.

When he looked up he saw the woman who had helped him through the doorway earlier standing next to Epp who seemed to have control of the thing in some sort of wrestling hold. Epp was staring at him, looking into his eyes. "Matthew, meet Mary," Epp said. "Mary, meet Matthew."

Epp was staring up at Mary now and there was something mean in his face. When Mary looked back down at him and Epp was sure he had her attention, he let go of his grip on the thing.

At first it flopped to the ground, its muscles in their current condition unable to support its frame. But then Epp had a hold of it again and instead of subduing it he was helping it turn around and face him. Then

Epp took a hold of one of its arms by the wrist, got a good grip on it, and plunged the thing's hand against his own chest.

The smile on the thing's face was orgasmic. And it wasn't the sight of blood on Epp's chest that sent Matthew into a panic. It wasn't the gluttonous smile of the thing feasting on Epp's energy nor the sound of its hands, both of them now, clawing into Epp's ribs. These things were too overwhelming, too far beyond Matthew's realm of possibility to even register.

Instead it was the sight of Epp's suit ripping, buttons popping off to fly in all directions as the thing's two bony fingers raked down his shirt, it was the tearing sound of fabric that set Matthew off and he dove forward to try and help. Only when he tried to get a grip on one of the thing's arms his own pain flared up again and he collapsed to the ground.

He felt paralyzed. Lying on his side he saw Epp on the ground, wounds all over his body, the thing straddling his stomach. It raised one hand high overhead. For a second the hand remained poised in the air, rainwater dripping off of the fingers and bones, and then it plunged down into Epp's chest as the thing gave a shrieking porcine yell. The hand disappeared up to the forearm into Epp's body as he spasmed, deep red blood spouting out of his mouth, and Matthew heard Mary screaming and his eyes lost focus and then it was over.

Matthew felt himself gaining strength, not quickly, but gaining strength instead of losing it and he was able to get into a sitting position. Mary was on her knees over Epp, sobbing uncontrollably, her hands at her face and then she was screaming at Epp, shrieking, calling him a bastard, throwing punches at him even as he sat up. Epp only sat there, a happy smile on his blood covered face.

"I told you that you could do it," Epp said, looking over at the thing, now tied up and covered all over with yellow time-tape.

Mary was still sobbing, no effort at controlling herself apparent as she screamed right through her tears, "You *bastard* don't you *ever* do something like that again." She gave Epp's arm another flurry of hits.

As Mary slowly calmed down, and her tears became less, and as the thing tied up in tape continued not to move, Matthew began to let himself register other things. Like how tired he was. And how the thing he had leaned back on for support upon first arriving was a gravestone. And how next to it was another gravestone. And how he was in a graveyard. "Epp? Where are we? And what is *that*?"

"It's you," Epp said. Matthew watched as Epp's suit began to knit itself together, the red stains receding.

"He doesn't look like me," Matthew said.

"He was being figurative," Mary said, the edge on her voice subsiding like the stains on Epp's shirt.

"You wanted to see your daughter? This is how that path ends," Epp said. "You see her once and then you want to see her twice. You see her twice and then you want to spend the day, then a month, then a year. And, well, where do you think she'll end up?" Epp held his arms out indicating the graveyard all around them. "Those who try to avoid the work find themselves chasing their loved ones into the ground. They hover over their graves, their energy fading, slowly rotting and crumbling. Eventually they're completely consumed by a desire to follow their second choice on the one hand and a constant hunger for juice on the other."

"Epp," Matthew pointed at the thing on the ground, "that is a fucking *zombie*."

Epp nodded. "Yes. Yes it is. They pop skin every once and awhile, especially after they've fed on someone with decent juice. But it takes a lot to get them anywhere close to functional. Take a look around, most of them don't go anywhere."

Again Epp waved his arms and Matthew this time let his eyes follow, and he saw them. Twenty or thirty of them spread about the graveyard, clothes rotting and flesh sagging. Some of the closer ones were awkwardly trying to crawl their way over to where the three of them were grouped. There was one a few rows away who had managed to bury his head in the dirt at the foot of a gravestone.

Epp stretched his legs out gingerly then rested his head against the gravestone. The stains and tears in his clothes and skin continued to reform as a placid smile spread across his face.

"That was it, by the way," he said to Mary. "I'm no longer your teacher. *You* are now the only one responsible for you."

Mary only stared. "Epp, where is Bartleby?"

Epp didn't answer.

"What did you do with him, Epp? Is he at the bottom of some sea somewhere? Or... buried in a pyramid? Where is he?"

"The far side of Mercury," Epp said, his eyes shut.

"Mother of god," Mary whispered.

"But he can get back, right?" Matthew asked.

"I think so," Epp said, standing up slowly.

"You *think* so? You mean once he learns his lesson he'll be able to get back, right? And these things," Matthew pointed at the thing wrapped up in time tape, "you knew that these things couldn't really hurt us right? And you knew Mary could definitely... do whatever it was that she did and you *knew*, right? There's no real danger, here?"

"With hunger that strong," Epp said, "there is always a chance of danger." He looked down as the last ragged threads of his suit sewed themselves together. He began to walk. "But-

Epp stumbled forward in quick stuttering steps, barely catching himself on another gravestone. He turned around to look at Matthew and Mary over his shoulder, disbelief on his face. Mary gasped and her hands went to her mouth. Matthew tried his hardest to understand.

Epp slowly let go of the gravestone and tried to walk back normally, but it was clear he had to favor one leg. "This," he said, looking down at himself, "is certainly going to take some getting used to." He tried hobbling forward again, then stopped. With a twirl of his fingers a handsome wooden cane appeared in one of his hands and he started walking again, using the cane for support. Mary, pity overcoming anger, stepped up and took Epp's arm, trying to help him get a feel for the cane.

Matthew wanted to ask a number of questions but he was too tired. "Epp? I'm exhausted."

"I know," Epp said, shaking Mary off. "No more detours, you can lead us now."

Matthew looked around dumbly. "Lead you?"

"We can't lead, we have to follow you. We're not the ones who pushed recently."

"But where?" Matthew asked.

"You know where," Epp said.

And to Matthew's surprise, he did.

—

The summit of Mount Everest had held a lot of different images in Matthew's imagination. Most of them concerned wind battered people struggling to make the last few steps over a knife ridge of rock and snow. Danger was always involved and death was always a risk.

At no point in either of his lives had Matthew contemplated what the summit of Mount Everest might be like if death was not an option, gravity not a factor, and the weather obeyed your command.

He had closed his eyes while leaving the graveyard; the sensation of wind rippling across his skin as he traveled was still enjoyable to him. With his eyes closed he felt his feet touch ground but the wind was still blowing. He stood like this for a few moments, then opened his eyes to see a sky as blue as the color of his wife's eyes framing an uneven triangle of rock. He turned around and saw the world spread out at his feet, wave after wave of mountain peak flowing out like a sea. He heard footsteps crunching over the snow and saw Mary walking up a slope with an impossibly steep angle. Epp followed behind her, still limping, but also doing his share of disobeying gravity.

And then Matthew realized that they weren't alone. There were forms all around them, people all over lying down in various states of repose.

Mary stopped behind him, Epp behind her. Epp winced, putting too much weight on his bad leg to lean around and look at Matthew. "You have to lead," he said. "We can only follow. This is all you."

Matthew turned and started walking up the peak of Mount Everest. To his left was a woman lying on her back, her fingers laced behind her head, her feet were facing up towards the summit on a slope of at least eighty degrees. He passed a man on his right sitting with a smile on his face, leaning back against the rock face, supported by nothing.

He stopped at a young woman who was lying with her palms down, as if her hands were lovingly feeling the softest mattress in the world. Her entire body was suspended out over a drop of a thousand feet with only the heels of her shoes resting on rock.

"This is where they come who need rest," Epp said behind him. "This is where those who have pushed the world further on come to regain their strength."

Matthew continued walking, looking at the figures all around him, at the path in front, at the sky above that was so far off the earth it grew black overhead.

"How long have they been here?" Matthew asked, passing a man splayed out happily on a rock wearing a style of clothes that Matthew didn't recognize.

"Depends on their push," Mary answered from right behind him, her voice warm in his ear. "Anywhere from a few days to a few centuries."

"And these are all here for one specific person?"

"It varies," Mary said.

"It's really more art than science," Epp said from behind him. "Sometimes a tester will bind with a specific person throughout a lifetime, constantly pushing, drawing what they can out of that person."

Mary pointed off to a ledge where an old woman sat. "Gandhi," she said.

"Sometimes a person will burn through more than one tester in a lifetime so that specific testers only wind up bringing about specific parts of that persons work."

Mary pointed to a young boy dreamily curled up on his side in the snow. "E = mc squared."

"And sometimes a tester will find themselves able to push more than one person together into collaboration."

Mary's fingers brushed the hair of a bristly man sleeping deeply under an outcropping. "Abbey Road," she said.

"Why here?"

"Not just here," Epp said, "but most mountaintops."

"Yeah but, why here?"

"That I can't answer."

"I always figured," Mary said, "that if you were going to spend a century resting up in one spot, you might as well make it one with this view," and she spread her arms out, her fingertips seeming to brush across the entire earth.

"That's a better reason than most I've heard," Epp said, looking around as well.

"Does it matter how high up the person is?"

"Altitude signifies nothing. You just fall where you will."

"Now what?"

Epp poked at the ice and snow with his cane.

"I'm going to stick around for awhile," Mary said. "Enjoy the view. See if anyone wakes up."

"What do I do?" Matthew asked.

"You've got some reading ahead of you," Epp said. He reached into his suit and handed Matthew a piece of paper folded into squares.

Matthew unfolded it and stared. Across the top of the sheet was printed: "From the desk of Sophie Loughton." Matthew squinted. "She wrote a poem?" he asked.

"You *both* wrote a poem," Mary said, but Matthew wasn't listening.

With the paper unfolded in front of him he started walking forward as he read. "It's not bad really," he said, his feet carrying him further away.

Without taking his eyes from the page he reached his free hand out and felt out for a seat, his fingers finding a piece of rock. He began to sit down, changed his mind halfway through and stretched out instead, lying down with half his body dangling off of the edge of a precipice. He

fidgited just a little, crossing his ankles and wriggling his hips deeper into the snow for comfort, once and then twice. Then he became perfectly still, the poem in his hands, the Himalayan morning spread out behind him.

Part 3: Sunrise Over the Dakota

Matthew looked out over the darkness blanketing Central Park. The patina green copper eave underneath his feet was barely lit from below by the street lamps lining Central Park West. He held a nub of a cigar between the fingers of his right hand. It was well chewed and, if someone did manage to get it lit again, could barely have been expected to provide one more puff before the embers at the end began to burn the smoker's lips. As it was, though, it was unlit and Matthew only toyed with it between his fingers.

He turned to Epp, who was standing a few feet away where the roof sloped down. Even in the darkness barely pierced by halogen lamps the cut of Epp's suit stood out as perfection in charcoal threads. His right hand held a fashionable cane, the dark exotic hardwood complimenting Epp's skin as he tapped it idly against the rooftop, his face peering out over the trees of the park.

"I just don't get it," Matthew said.

"What's not to get?"

"You're friends with him?"

"Absolutely."

"But he wants to destroy you."

Epp laughed, softly, conceding Matthew's point. "Yes. If you put it like that it does sound rather confusing."

"I just... I just don't get it."

"It's complicated, although not nearly as confusing as you're making it."

—

Matthew tried to walk quietly into the large hall, but as he was the only person making any noise this was impossible. He settled for walking as quickly as he could and trying to minimize the disturbance he made.

The rear of the room was filled with benches, which were split down the middle by the aisle leading away from the doors in the back. The ceiling was low and the windows were high up on the walls, a clear

indication that it was a basement space. Matthew walked along, trying desperately to keep the sound of his tuxedo shoes on the tile from making any noise when he spotted a familiar face waving him to an empty seat.

He sat down next to an attractive girl, small with a pert nose. Her dark blond hair bobbed in curls as she turned to chastise Matthew.

"You're late," she said.

"Thank you, Mary," Matthew said, "I'm well aware of that." Matthew took a cigar out of his pocket. The tip was bit off and the end was dark black but it looked like there had only been one or two puffs taken out of it before it had been put out, apparently by being submerged in water. Matthew rolled the wet cigar between his fingers. Then he wriggled his toes and felt that his sock was soaking wet. Then he looked between the two people seated on the bench in front of him so he could see the front of the room.

Despite the surreal aspect of where he was and who was in the audience, the scene in front of him was recognizable as a trial. There were currently three principal players. A pale, gaunt man presiding over everything, seated high up and looking out over the room, was clearly the judge. A man in a dingy suit standing before the room who was pontificating loudly was clearly arguing for punishment. And, seated off to the right hand side of the judge, was Epp, the man being charged with a crime.

"This man, Epictetus," the man in the ratty suit was saying, "has been charged with endangering at least three of his fellow testers. We have gone over and over testimony from witnesses *and* heard a confession from the defendant himself that he had gone out of his way to make sure other witnesses weren't available."

Mary leaned over and whispered to Matthew. "Where *were* you?"

"I didn't know," Matthew said. "I don't know anything about what's going on."

"And it is my belief," the man with the ratty suit continued, and as Matthew stared at him he got a sense of Asian heritage from his face, possibly Japanese if the cheekbones were to be trusted, "that Epictetus has been proven before this court to be a danger to our people, our way of life, and our future. And I move that he be given the harshest punishment the Council is able to give out for the crime that he is on trial for here today, the murder of Bartleby Kneller."

Matthew's mind began racing at the sound of these words. There was minimal reaction in the crowd and Matthew knew that this was old news

to everyone there but himself. He leaned over to whisper something to Mary but just as he did so Mary, who was a soft-spoken girl and, despite the sexuality of the clothes she wore, was rather timid, suddenly shouted, "Holy shit!"

—

"He wanted you dead," Matthew said, looking out across the darkness at Central Park.

Epp sighed. "It's complicated. Besides, the Council's powers are somewhat dubious. Even if they had found me guilty they'd have a hell of a hard time punishing me. The courts they hold are mock-ups, they just want to feel like there's order in our world."

"You seem to be the only one who doesn't take them seriously."

"What can they do?"

Matthew was silent. He rolled the burnt out nub of cigar between his fingers. He had asked this very question to a number of people and, while he had received a number of answers, he had only heard one that made much sense to him. "They can turn people against you."

Epp tapped his cane on the gutter, then turned and began to walk slowly across the rooftop, heading for the northeast tower. He moved slowly, the angles of the eaves and the slipperiness of the roof forcing him to pick his way while using a cane he did not seem to be getting used to. Matthew walked with him. "They can do that, yes," Epp said, "but so can anyone. My point is that they have no special power granted to them simply because they can get an audience together for a trial."

The cane and the darkness made it easy to see him as an old man walking along, but when he reached the corner he turned back and Matthew saw he was smiling. This had the effect of replacing the image of an old man with that of a man who was young and strong in every way except for one leg that hurt when he walked. "You should have seen your face when you walked into the bar to see Kyo sitting with us."

—

Matthew walked up Broadway, thoughtful as he moved. The night was fresh but cold as the winter was making its first inroads into the island of Manhattan. As he walked he puffed on a half smoked cigar, alternating between holding it between two fingers and clenching it between his teeth.

He stopped below 76th street and looked around, confused if he had the right address. There was a bar in front of him with a big wooden bear standing out front like he had been told, and there was a neon sign above the door that said "BAR."

He walked past the bouncer unseen and into a narrow space crowded with people. The lighting was bright, that was the first thing he noticed. Most bars he had been in seemed steeped in dark but this one was lit all the way up to the ceiling high overhead. Matthew walked along the bar, passing through people, running his hand over the warped, unfinished surface.

The bar stools on his left were all full, and on his right there were people up against the wall. There was barely enough room for someone to make their way through the space between and Matthew smiled as he walked along, drifting through people like fog.

The bar ended on his left and there was space for a few tables. A song he recognized as one of Johnny Cash's began to play on the jukebox. There were two steps up on his right leading to a second space where there were booths and dart boards. He climbed the steps and saw Epp and before he could say hi he saw the man in the ratty suit sitting next to him. Up close Matthew decided he was definitely Japanese and his suit, especially when viewed right next to Epp's, was beyond cheap looking. The jacket barely fit over the man's rather large body, and there were stains and rips in it. The man's face had a small mustache and beard, coarse black hair that didn't seem to grow so much as sprout.

"The fuck is *he* doing here?" Matthew asked before anyone even saw him.

"Matthew," Epp said, "this is Kyokutei. But we just call him Kyo."

Kyo was holding a beer can in his hand, his palm curled all the way around it, and he was laughing a smug laugh as he took a sip.

—

"You might have warned me," Matthew said.

Epp took another step towards the edge of the roof and then stopped walking. "Well I *tried* to introduce you, but you spoke up before I could do anything."

"Yeah. That and everyone there was completely drunk."

"I don't know about *completely* drunk."

—

"Wow," Epp said, leaning back from the booth and looking at the collection of empty beer cans scattered on the table in front of him. "I'm *completely* drunk."

"Me too," Mary said, perched on a high stool at the end of the table, and she gave a little giggle into her glass of wine.

—

"It was a celebration," Epp said. "I was freed from all charges."

"So the man said."

—

Matthew watched as the gaunt man presiding over the trial rapped his gavel again and again to regain order.

He eventually calmed everyone down, but it took quite a bit of work. He waved the man in the ratty suit forward and the two exchanged words, the gaunt man clearly not happy with the man in the ratty suit. After trying to plead some argument or another the man in the ratty suit finally gave in and the gaunt man gave a few more raps of the gavel to command complete silence. "The charges," he said with little fanfare, "are dropped." He turned to Epp. "You're free to go."

—

Matthew watched as the street lights on Central Park West below him changed from green to red. "There's just a lot I don't understand."

"So ask," Epp said.

"I did. You answered me with riddles."

"Really?" Epp asked, smiling. "That doesn't sound like me."

—

"How can you sit and have a drink with that guy?" Matthew asked as Kyo walked off to go to the bathroom.

"Ah," Epp said a little slurred. "You've got to understand," and he reached a hand up to place it on Matthew's shoulder only to find that his hand fell through Matthew's body.

"Wait a minute," Matthew said, looking around the table, "you guys are visible?"

"Of course," Epp said. "How else are we going to get served here?"

"But," Matthew was astonished, his face working itself up for any number of reasons. "We're practically *immortals*. We don't need to come to this shit hole of a dive bar on the Upper West Side to drink cheap beer. Hell, if you all want I can buy a round of something really nice. I can definitely handle some champagne," and he started to move his hands without thinking, willing a bottle to appear when Epp's hand slammed down on his own.

"No." Epp said forcefully. "We don't do that. Not tonight. Tonight we drink as they do," and he looked down towards the main bar where it was more crowded.

"You can touch me," Matthew said. "Did you just go invisible? And do you all realize that you've been basically talking to empty air this entire time?"

At the bar a pitcher of beer was toppled over by a woman in a halter top dancing across it.

"No one here cares," Epp said.

"Fair enough. But why am I drinking PBR?"

"Cause it's cheap," Epp said.

"I meant-"

"I know what you meant. And I answered. When we drink with Kyo, we drink what is cheap. He's a warrior. It's a riddle for you. When is a samurai not a samurai?"

—

"Okay, so that probably sounded like a riddle to you."

"Yes. Especially the part where you told me it was a riddle."

Epp smiled, and Matthew realized that the sky was growing lighter towards the east and that the night was fading.

"To be fair," Epp said, "it *is* a pretty simple riddle. When is a samurai not a samurai?"

"Haven't a clue," Matthew held his hands out in front of him. "I know nothing about samurai."

"Oh. Then it's not so simple. The answer is, when he doesn't have a master. Which actually makes him a ronin, not a samurai. So when is a samurai not a samurai? When he serves nobody."

"And that's what this guy, this Kyo, does?"

"On a much deeper level than you understand."

"What's that mean?"

"We travel through this world taking energy from it by pushing it farther along. And it is, like most existences, deeply flawed. There are a few flaws we could go into here, but the biggest is what happens to a tester when they push. They disappear from the world. You've seen small pushes up till now, where the pusher will doze for a week or so, but you have to imagine spending a lifetime putting someone to the test, and then collapsing from pain and exhaustion for a century or two. You wake up after pushing a centurion and the entire Roman Empire has crumbled.

"So that is where Kyo comes in. Through no prodding from anyone, because of no calling from any higher authority, simply because he came to know our ways and decided that the pushers needed someone to retain continuity for us, to keep track of what happened when we were gone, to make sure there was always some sort of solid ground waiting for us, he became what he is. Kyo has never, since he became a rookie, actually pushed. Since he has never pushed, he has never gained energy. He has remained poor for our sakes. And it has become tradition that when one drinks with Kyo, one drinks cheap."

"That would explain the suit," Matthew said. "So he has no power?"

"No energy of his own," Epp said, "does not mean that he can't control the energy of others."

"Well then you should be scared of him. I keep telling you, he wanted to destroy you."

"Don't worry about Kyo and me. We're old friends. He was only doing what I asked of him."

"You asked him to come after you like that?"

"Yes, a few hundred years ago. Somebody has to keep me in shape. Believe me, if anyone is going to be testing the testers, my vote would be for Kyo."

"And not the Council."

"No. Not the Council. It has no power."

"How do you know?"

"I'm the one that broke it."

"How?"

"Well, I was the one that created it. It was easy enough to break it. Keeping it broken is tougher. That's why I stand trial every now and then. It helps to publicly prove them wrong."

"So you really don't think that, what's his name, Gregor, has any power over you?"

"I think he barely has power over himself anymore."

"I still don't understand why everyone laughed at me."

—

"I got it," Matthew said. The table was littered with empty beer cans and Epp was wobbling in the booth, both hands on the table, staring down Kyo across the way. The two seemed locked in some titanic struggle, then Kyo's hands moved and the quarter he was holding bounced across the table and into a shot glass sitting in front of Epp.

"Ha!" Kyo yelled.

Epp glowered at him, then picked up his mug of beer and finished it off.

"Okay," Epp said, and he plucked the quarter up and started aiming.

"Dracula," Matthew said. "That guy, Gregor. I've been trying to figure out why he looks familiar. It's Dracula. The guy looks just like Dracula. Not the movies. Well. Sort of the movies. But if you ever read the book. He reminds me completely of that."

Epp turned, drunkenly, the top button of his shirt was undone, a tiny detail that, on Epp, made him seem like he was the king of all hobos. Then the table burst out laughing as a whole.

"Why that's absolutely adorable," Kyo said. "Where did you find him?" he asked Epp.

Mary just giggled and teetered on her stool, her nose buried in a glass of cheap wine. Then she looked at the far corner of the booth. "Oh my," she said, "the man on fire seems rather drunk."

—

"I still don't know what they were laughing about," Matthew sulked, staring down at the rooftop.

"If it's any consolation, we were laughing because you were so close, not because you were so far off."

"That doesn't help me."

"Well, your analysis was sound, but your initial assumptions were a little backwards."

"That also doesn't help me."

"What if it's not that Gregor looks like Dracula, what if it's that Dracula looks like Gregor?"

"Oh," Matthew said, slowly getting it. "But how... oh!" he said, really getting it. "He pushed Bram Stoker?"

"No, Matthew. He didn't technically push anyone, or maybe he pushed an entire village at once. It is, quite frankly, one of the largest ongoing debates we have. It's at the root of why I let the Council put me on trial every now and then.

"Six centuries ago, Gregor decided to act like what we now would recognize as a vampire. He terrified an entire village. Taking forms, disappearing, even the occasional little push would look like him taking a victim. It was his first great act as a tester. At the time I couldn't decide, but I was leaning toward thinking it was genius.

"I mean, the things he was doing aren't easy. You disappear directly in front of a meat bag, their mind is going to opt to believe that they saw you get up and leave the room for no reason. But he got them to actually *see* him as he really was.

"The man's legend is still reverberating to this day. The Council, however, thought it was an outrage. And taking down Gregor became the Council's first great act. Which was when I resigned. Pity, too, we had only started up a decade before."

"But how did they go after him? You said they had no power."

"They were curious, which carries great power with it. All of these great testers in one room wondering what they could do combined. I really began to think that they wanted to punish Gregor only because they could, not because they felt they should. They were like a child with a new toy."

"So, what did they do?"

"They starved him. Any push he tried to do would be taken in advance. Any time he was about to engage he found that his target was already occupied. Slowly he began to dwindle and wane. They drove him, essentially, into the graveyards. And when they stopped, Gregor was beaten. He's completely different. No interest, no spark, no ingenuity. This was a pusher who created one of the greatest iconic symbols known without even engaging. People still feed off his creation. And now he's nothing. His spirit is completely broken. Things eventually came full circle and he now rides a desk as one of the Council heads. Everything else slowly faded into the past."

Epp's voice was distant and he stared out at the night with a thoughtful look on his face. Then he turned and nodded at Matthew. "I'm sorry.

You're right. It would have been best if we could have walked you through some of these answers earlier tonight."

"Well," Matthew accepted the apology, "you *were* celebrating."

"Yes, and you did eventually catch up to us if I remember correctly."

—

"What am I buying?" Matthew slurred unevenly at the bar.

"Cans," Kyo answered. "Lots of 'em."

Matthew watched as the bartender walked past. "Mary, did you do something to her breasts?"

"I knew they'd be open very late tonight," Mary said unapologetically. "I wanted them to get good tips."

Matthew laughed and looked back at Mary. Her little body was wobbly and she was rocking back on her heels. For a moment he thought she was actually going to fall over before she righted herself.

"You," Matthew said, "are going to have a wonderful time tomorrow morning. Be hungover as anything." He thought about this. "Hey, Epp!" he yelled at Epp standing three people over. "Am I going to be hungover tomorrow?"

"You? Yes."

"But I don't have a body."

"Is your sock still wet?"

Matthew wriggled his toes and, to his discouragement, felt that the toes of his sock were indeed still damp. "Yeah," Matthew said, the disappointment barely edging its way through his drunkenness. He turned to Mary again. "Epp says we'll have hangovers."

Mary shook her head blearily. "Not me."

"No?"

"You think I'm going to be awake tomorrow morning?"

"I'm not sure what else you'll be."

She smiled and stepped forward from the back wall. Everyone else from their group was a little ways down the bar chatting with strangers while Matthew, trying to put in his order, was edged in next to a solitary man on a bar stool. The man was dressed nicely, his button down shirt juxtaposing with the overall dinginess of the bar, although there were so many different types of drinkers present his juxtaposing fell short of making him stand out.

Mary sidled forward and stood right up against him. Matthew thought she was coming to help get the bartender's attention. He turned to thank her but stopped before saying anything and simply watched.

She was crying, the pert skin on her face shining with wet tears, and as she gave a shuddering sob Matthew felt some part of his insides plummet while he watched one of the most beautiful women he had ever met exhibit signs of pain. Her face was resting on the nicely dressed man's shoulder, her hand ran up the back of his head, her fingernails disappeared under his hair. She tilted her head and, as she wept, delivered a kiss with soft lips on his neck just under his ear.

A bartender finally came over and asked Matthew what he wanted. He only stared for a few seconds, and as the bartender waited, and as the nicely dressed man gave him a glance then returned to his glass of whiskey, Matthew knew that neither of them could see Mary.

He managed to put in an order and the waitress smiled at him as she popped open can after can of Pabst Blue Ribbon on the bar, and Matthew smiled back, and tipped nicely. Then Mary was leaning up against him, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Didn't think he had it in him," she said sleepily. "Night," and she stood up on tiptoe and kissed Matthew on the cheek.

Matthew watched as the nicely dressed man looked at his watch, then his drink, then around the room, then at his watch again, then finally reached into his pocket and placed his wedding ring on the warped wooden surface of the bar. He rapped it a few times, then slipped it back onto his finger before turning around on his stool and hopping to the floor. "Thought for sure he was going to cheat," Mary said, rubbing her eyes. The man left.

Then Mary yawned and tried to shout towards the others at the bar. It came out weakly and Matthew got their attention for her. "Mary's off to Everest for a day or so," he yelled.

Epp shook his head, "She never could handle the hangovers."

Kyo nodded and lifted a can of beer as a farewell toast.

Mary nodded at both of them, then glanced past them and laughed. "He's like some strange variation of Popeye."

—

"You might have gotten answers earlier if you had been there with us from the start," Epp said. "It's never easy to walk in on the middle of a party."

Matthew sighed and looked out over the pink of dawn just beginning to glow behind the buildings across the park. "I thought it'd be nice to see some old friends."

"Thought?"

"Turns out I was wrong."

—

Matthew rolled his cigar in his fingers, concentrating on it. It was still soaking wet but he was making progress in getting it dried out.

"Whaddya say there, Matty?" Benjamin called out. They were in the Port Authority bowling alley, the usual group of customers scattered about. Matthew hadn't seen Benjamin since making his second choice and he managed a smile as he looked at him, perpetually rumpled in his trench coat. "Another round?" Benjamin shouted.

There were a few of them gathered at the alley, the newbies that Matthew had spent over twenty years banging around New York City with. Matthew was about to stand another round but he stopped. With the hand not holding his cigar he reached into his jacket pocket, puzzled. It had been awhile since he had used cash to purchase anything. He remembered throwing twenties down on this very bar plenty of nights, but now that seemed a strange thing to do. It had started to seem like cash was an unnecessary middleman for most transactions. Why convert energy into cash, then that cash into what you were trying for when you could just convert energy into what you wanted? Matthew reached inside of his tuxedo coat pocket and felt a packet of money appear there. He wasn't sure exactly how much it was, and he was about to pull it out to buy the next round, but he stopped himself.

He wasn't having much fun. He felt disjointed from these people, and as he watched an old friend of his spark a bar fight in the far corner he forced himself to smile, converted the packet of money in his pocket into what he knew was only a few twenties, then pulled that out instead. "Here you go," he said, forced smile still on his face, "another round on me."

The twenties shimmered then disappeared as drinks appeared in the hands of people all around the bar. Matthew went back to drying out his cigar. A few minutes later he felt he had it and he popped it into his mouth and gave a few hard drags. It took more than the usual three or four but after awhile he managed to get the end to burst into a perfect red ember and he, truly smiling for the first time since he had come into

this bar, finally resumed smoking his cigar. His sock, on the other hand, was still sopping wet.

—

"They seemed so," Matthew stepped out onto the rooftop ledge and leaned back against a high gable, "cruel somehow. There was no point to anything they did. It was just pranks at best. At worst they were tearing into people's lives."

"They were newbies," Epp said, simply.

"Was I like that?"

"All newbies are. Although it seems like a lot more fun until you hit your second choice. Once you become a rookie you gain some perspective. You can only see how clear the line is while looking back."

"So when will they hit their second choices? Some of them I used to enjoy hanging out with. Benjamin in particular."

Epp smiled and closed his eyes as a bit of winter wind rustled across the trees of the park before sweeping up onto the roof. "Benjamin already made his second choice."

"But then... oh."

"He chose the life, not the work. Once his wife dies he'll pass out of this world along with her. He doesn't even remember who his first choice was anymore. You shouldn't fault him. His probabilities were very low for going the other way."

"It just seemed," Matthew pushed off of the gable so he was standing straight up again, "it seemed so cruel. Without purpose. Nothing like what we do."

"You're forgetting," Epp said, "that they came first. That they came out of the meat bags, but we came out of them." Now it was Epp's turn to lean and with a tired sigh he propped his cane up against the opposite gable and then settled down against it as well. "At least, that's the current theory. Makes sense to me. You have to look at it this way, Matthew. If they didn't exist, we couldn't either."

"Because we came out of them. I get it."

"Because of that, but more because we'd have nothing to grab a hold of. Think about little Sophie, your first push. Did you ever wonder why she was having such a bad day? You ever think about what set up those circumstances, how the pain entered into her life for you to push against in the first place?"

"No, I just thought. I mean. It's just life I figured."

"Yes, and there are other forces that bring it out, but the newbies are a large one and an important one. Every little trick they pull echoes and reverberates and sets off more and more ripples. Like tossing a stone into a pond. Their energy travels as it dissipates." To make his point Epp picked up his cane and thumped it down on the roof. Matthew jumped back as a small circular wave rippled its way out from where his cane had landed, the circle expanding as the wave shrank in height until it fizzled out a few feet from Epp. "They cause a breakup that causes a fight that causes someone to think about revenge that causes someone to think about cheating and so on and so on, always getting a little less as it spreads until eventually it fades out entirely, but without all of those nicks and cuts on the surface of life it'd be hard if not impossible for us to find anywhere to grab a hold. Could you imagine if you had had to work every single person involved in little Sophie's breakup? If you had to bring about every little nuance in her boyfriend, had to work every person that influenced him, work every person that influenced them? It would be endless."

Matthew didn't say anything for awhile. Only watched the deep pink sky start to lighten its shade.

"Would you be able to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Work everyone like that."

Epp didn't say anything.

"Did you know?"

Again, Epp didn't answer.

"My sock just finished drying off. Did you know it would take exactly this long?"

Epp turned and looked at Matthew.

—

Matthew kicked his legs and tried to swim upwards. His tuxedo jacket was billowing up into his face and his mouth and throat burned from too much salt. His clothes were heavy with water and all he could manage was to get to within a few feet of the surface of the ocean before he lagged and drifted deeper again. He could see Epp's shoes, or the soles of them anyway, standing atop the water.

When he looked down things only became worse. The water was too deep to fathom and light itself seemed to be sucked away as everything faded in the distance into blackness. There was the awful feeling of

vertigo as the sea floor, hidden miles below his feet, seemed to want to rush up at him and with a frantic push Matthew managed to burst his head above the surface, take a half breath before swallowing more salty water, catch a glimpse of the impeccable break in Epp's pants just above his shoe line, then flounder and sink under again.

He was panicking and his kicking feet drifted through bands of colder and colder water as he sank lower and deeper into the hungry darkness. He felt something swimming near him and heard, somehow perfectly clear, Epp's voice. "Oh my goodness, Matthew! What *is* that?!"

Matthew opened his eyes and screamed an underwater scream of bubbles and strangled gurgling noises that resounded inside his head as he stared eye to eye with a huge eel. Its mouth opened, glasslike teeth sharp and pointy sticking out at all angles, and then it spoke. "Matthew," the eel said in a strange falsetto. "You must learn to stop panicking," it said in a voice that Matthew was on the verge of recognizing. "You must learn," the eel said, and now Matthew placed it as Epp's voice, only higher pitched, "to-"

"You know you have a very strange sense of humor," Matthew said, looking up at Epp.

Epp peered down at him. With a casual wave of his hand Epp made the eel disappear. He shifted his cane so it was planted on the surface of the ocean right between his shoes and leaned on it gently with both hands. "And you," Epp said, "have ceased struggling."

Matthew looked at his hands, then around, then back up and realized that Epp was right. He was completely dry and felt no signs of being four feet beneath the surface of the water in the middle of the ocean. He smiled and then really began to look around, enjoying the change. He took a fresh cigar out of his jacket pocket and put it into his mouth. With a few long tugs on it he caused it to burst into flames and light up under the ocean. Then he laughed, the cigar off to the side of his mouth, as he floated himself up until he, like Epp, was standing on the surface of the water.

"This is fantastic," he said, the cigar now held between two fingers as he looked around at the infinite view.

"Mm." Epp said, noncommittally. "Although, I think your shoe is leaking. Does it feel like your sock is getting wet?"

And as Epp said that Matthew looked down and suddenly it *did* sort of feel like his sock was getting wet. Getting soaked, actually, and then his feet broke the surface of the water and he plunged back down again, the cigar extinguishing in a hiss as he tried to flounder to the surface.

Epp leaned over, both hands planted in front of him on his cane. "Well, Matthew," he shouted down. "This is getting a little boring for me. And," Epp lifted one arm up and shook it until his wristwatch was visible, "I've got to go stand trial. So, when you figure all this out," and he twirled the tip of his cane over the surface of the water, "maybe you come see me, no? It's in the basement of the Council building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan." Epp's body began to ripple and then it vanished.

Matthew saw the soles of Epp's shoes disappear as he struggled to get his head above water.

—

"I feel like you're slowly zeroing in on the one real question you're dying to ask," Epp said.

"Did you know?" Matthew turned and with energy tossed his cigar stub across his body, over the rooftop, out over the air above Central Park West. "*Could* you have known that he'd come back right then?"

—

"And I move," the man in the ratty suit was saying, standing in front of the hall, "that he be given the harshest punishment our people are able to give out for the crime that he is on trial for here today, the murder of Bartleby Kneller."

Matthew's mind began racing at the sound of these words. There was minimal reaction in the crowd and Matthew knew that this was old news to everyone there but himself. He leaned over to whisper something to Mary but just as he did so Mary, who was a soft-spoken girl and, despite the sexuality of the clothes she wore, was rather timid, suddenly shouted, "Holy shit!"

People turned, people shouted, then more people turned, then more people shouted. Standing at the rear of the room, dressed in a black on white suit, pin straight black hair slicked back on his head, a black trench coat folded neatly across his arm, was Bartleby.

"I'm not dead," Bartleby said, and although Matthew had only barely met him, had actually only caught a glimpse of him in Sophie Laughton's bedroom, he had the distinct feeling that a lot of the boyishness had dropped from Bartleby's demeanor, and when he walked down the aisle towards the man in the ratty suit, the pale gaunt man and Epp, he carried himself with an enviable assurance.

—

"Did you know he wouldn't be angry?" Matthew asked.

—

Matthew watched with confusion as everyone laughed loudly just because he had thought Gregor looked a little like Dracula. Everyone was laughing loudly except Mary, who just giggled and teetered on her stool, then buried her nose in her glass of cheap wine. Then she looked at the far corner of the booth. "Oh my," she said. "The man on fire appears to be drunk."

Bartleby was laughing so hard that when he reached a hand out to steady himself he knocked his beer onto Kyo's lap.

—

"Did you know he'd be," Matthew wrapped an arm across himself and rubbed his shoulder, as if unsure of his words. "Did you know he'd be changed like that?"

—

Epp shook his head with mock disgust, "She never could handle the hangovers."

Kyo nodded and lifted a can of beer as a farewell toast.

Mary nodded at both of them, then glanced past them and laughed. "He's like some strange variation of Popeye."

Matthew turned to where she was looking and saw Bartleby, his long black trench coat brushing against the floor as he stood with his whole body tilted back, his arms over his head, a can of Red Bull in each hand. He was steaming, actual water vapor was billowing up out of his body and he squeezed first one can, then the other, their tops bursting and the cold liquid shooting into his open mouth, the sound of the aluminum crackling in his hands as loud as the sound of his mouth filling up with splashing liquid.

Matthew laughed. "He really does look like Popeye."

Bartleby finished and stood upright, tossing the crushed and empty cans onto the bar. His steaming seemed to be under control. The people

around were looking on with interest, although clearly they had only seen a man drinking too much Red Bull, not a man about to light on fire.

—

"Well," Epp said. "I knew it was very hot on Mercury."

"The man bursts into flames constantly."

"Yes," Epp said. "It's bizarre isn't it? Did you notice how it didn't seem to affect anyone else? I wonder if he can learn to control that."

"Did you know!" Matthew yelled suddenly. "Did you know that," Matthew waved his hands in the air as if swatting at the numerous things he wanted to ask, "that my sock would dry at exactly this instant? That Bartleby would show up right as you were about to be judged? That he would actually appreciate what you did for him? Did you know?"

"The boy inside of him begged for a challenge. The man inside of him accepted," Epp said, barely moving.

"Did you *know*!" Matthew shouted.

"I know enough to know that opening my mouth now could only serve to make me seem less impressive. Besides, these all sound like variations on the same question."

"You've got your best friend trying to destroy you. You've got your students in mortal danger. You cause grave injury to your own body. You feel sorry for a head of the Council, the only symbol of power our society seems to have, because you think he's powerless. You are running an unholy amount of risks with your life."

"Why don't you just ask your question?"

"Epp," Matthew said, the volume of his voice dying, leaving only edge and wonder, "just how powerful *are* you?"

Epp was holding his cane loosely in his hands, which were clasped at his waist. He smiled, but it was sad, and he stared out at the dawn slowly seeping over the buildings across the trees. "How can you measure something that you are unable to test?"

"Are you doing all this to challenge yourself?"

"No," Epp answered immediately, dispelling any possible doubt as to the answer. "I'm doing all this because I think I have more to teach than most. I have a duty to this world to impart as much of what I've learned as possible."

"But you... " Matthew trailed off, exhausted. "How can you throw so many things up in the air? Aren't you worried that you'll drop one?"

You've already got so much power under your belt, aren't you afraid that you'll lose instead of gain?"

Epp only tapped the tip of his cane a few times against the gutter and continued to stare out over the park. "Power is like life. You'll learn that if you cherish it too tightly you strangle out of it everything you're trying to protect." Another gust of wind kicked over the roof and Epp's jacket flapped behind him. "It's only life."

Matthew turned to follow Epp's stare. He watched as the red disc of the sun finally arced over the top of one of the distant buildings. He heard Epp breathe happily. "It's a new day, Matthew. What would you like to do with it?"

Matthew stared at the sunrise along with Epp and he felt something lingering in the back of his mind. Some sense of power, some sense of wonder at the spinning earth beneath his feet, and a thousand ideas raced through his head of adventures and tasks and lessons he might want to undertake. But none would solidify and he tried to lock at least one image down, to pin down the feelings into one distinct thought, but they only drifted away and he began to get worked up, to chase harder, to want more, until Epp's words, spoken only a few moments ago, sounded again in his head. And even though it was only seconds ago Matthew knew that those words would be in his head with the same clarity a thousand years from now, the way that only the words of the best of teachers can stay with you. "It's only life," Epp had said, and Matthew deflated, and ceased trying to pin down the dreams and wonders and grandiose plans and he simply let them be. And for the moment he was at peace.

He reached up and scratched the back of his head. "You think there's a diner around here that serves scrapple?"

"A noble pursuit; I think we might be able to dig one up," Epp said. "Follow." Epp turned and stepped off the edge of the roof, his body hovering, wavering, in mid air before disappearing.

Matthew took one last look at the sun, a whole disc in the sky now, already having cleared the edge of the building. He heard the traffic light beneath his feet clunking as it changed from red to green. Then he turned and walked after Epp, his body disappearing as well.

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The Letter (2000)

Naming your main character Tom means something in American literature. The Ghosts' of Sawyer and Joad haunt that character from page one. But in *The Letter*, instead of hiding behind the memorable characterizations of past 'literary Toms,' Joseph Devon attacks this notion of the proud, stoic, and resourceful hero in modern times. After an unspeakable accident leaves Tom Quint without a shred of hope, he must reluctantly explore not only the world he passes in his ragtop, but the life that has passed him by. And like his literary predecessors, Quint's reluctance to adapt is what makes his struggle to survive so compelling.

Black Eyed Susan (2007)

True love can develop in a number of ways. Sometimes it happens at first sight. Sometimes it takes warm beer, teenage nights at the beach, misunderstood conversations and a lot of persistence. A little luck never hurt either.

He'll Always Have Paris (2007)

Dorian is the head of a lab researching a breakthrough technology for the treatment of those suffering emotional trauma. But one night he decides that this not-quite-ready-yet treatment would be the perfect thing to fix his failing marriage. Mix *The Matrix* with the set from the original *Frankenstein* movie, add a dash of couples therapy, stir, then pour into a tall glass made out of old *Twilight Zone* episodes and you'll have a sense of some of the flavors this story calls to mind.

New York City Marathon (2007)

The day of the New York City Marathon brings vast crowds to Manhattan. Some come to run the race. Some come to watch the race. Some come to get drunk and watch the race. And some come knowing full well that there is more than one way to run a marathon.

Liquid Calling (2007)

This story examines the obvious connection between aluminum foil, a Manhattan real estate broker approaching his seventies, and

the Cold War. Follow Micheal Morzeny on the last sales call he'll ever make.

The Rags (2007)

It's not often that you get to see what happens when a modern day writer attempts to rewrite a literary masterpiece using a laundromat as his setting and talking clothes as his characters. This is probably a good thing. But for those of you who ever wondered what that might look like, this is your story.

Private Showing (2007)

A simple story about a man struggling to deal with loss. This is one of the shortest pieces I've ever written. This description will be equally short.

Jacob Checks Out (2007)

A confused narrator tries to piece together the life of one of his oldest friends, Jacob. Various parts of Jacob's life are held up to the light, from childhood through present day, as friends try to find the cracks that eventually led to Jacob's unconventional exit.

Scarface's Burden (2007)

A reworking of one of Jonathan Coulton's songs. Explore the various inner workings of a mad genius's compound through the eyes of his most loyal assistant, Scarface. Between maintenance on the golden submarine, keeping the various departments happy, and getting his boss back on his feet, Scarface has plenty to keep him busy during a long winter day.

Light-Years Ahead of His Time (2007)

This story was published out of sequence because I got somewhat derailed during the Holidays by family and then I got sick and blah blah blah. At some point leading up to this story I decided that I wanted to write something about "worm-holes and mor-ons." This is the result of that wish.

You're Allowed to Order Takeout (2008)

This was a strange story in a lot of ways. I had to carve this out of very little. It's short and it's minimal, but for some reason I can't stop thinking about it. Basically we visit with Neil, who has just

welcomed his second child into the world, and watch as he tries to find his emotional footing again.

Continental Drift (2008)

Two people visiting Europe under some not very ideal circumstances wind up brushing up against each other's lives ever so softly on the moonlit beach of Cannes.

Knots (2008)

In the course of my job I've given a lot of baths to little girls. There aren't a lot of jobs where this can be considered a normal thing, but as a nanny that's how it goes. Over the past few years there are few things I've come to dread more than having to comb out my girls' hair once bath time is done. I put myself in their shoes one day and the idea for this story came about. Simple and touching.

The Donkey of Vincento (2008)

I have absolutely no idea how to describe this story. I read a lot. And I've read a lot of translations. And they always strike me as being just a little off and missing just a little something. Somehow, with this story, I wound up trying to capture that odd sense of not quite understanding what is happening while reading a classic story from another language. A donkey, a village, a festival, and a simple stupid story of love.

Uneven Shading (2008)

Marshal finds himself unable to concentrate at work, and what's worse, he's come to realize that he's disappearing from view entirely. When his boss takes note Marshal is sent home to try and figure out where the rest of him is.

The Pea Pod Gambit (2008)

Atticus and Seth have the perfect setup: a three bedroom apartment with a third roommate who is never around because he is always over at his girlfriend's house. But when their roommate's relationship ends Seth and Atticus decide to take matters into their own hands in order to get things back to just the way they were.



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