

1: Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Park Here

The equation proves what is about to happen is impossible. George checks it again: *New Lexus + first one here = VIP*. At a locked door in underground parking he turns his back to a security camera and picks up a phone mounted above an ashtray. Ten rings. Twenty. Fifty. Seventy. He stares at his watch. Is the minute hand speeding up or are its measurements askew in this concrete cave?

“Lodestar securitah,” says a voice in mock Southern drawl.

“Good morning. Could you please unlock the lower level?”

“Kindly turn and face the camera, sir.”

Window to an infernal soul, evil orb of black acrylic, the all-seeing eye examines George. If only he could clarify the matter by pointing to his car, the way a teacher knocks on the board for emphasis.

“I am not supposed to open it this early, sir.”

“I have work to do.”

“Very well, but I must request a slight favor in return. I could never permit another man to remain beholden to me.”

George leans against the door. His distorted reflection on the dark globe looks back like some doomed foretold bidding him to take any path but this. “What kind of favor?”

“On third shift a man starts to think he’s wandering this vale of tears all by his lonesome. That is a heavy burden to bear. This cruel isolation has robbed me of life’s simplest pleasures. A vicarious taste of your joy would nourish my soul. If you could be so kind, a festive dance will raise my spirits and reconcile me to my duties.”

The parking lot grows hazy. An evil wizard appears and demonstrates to George how two drops of mercury plus two more equals one. But he’s only warming up. Another fundamental truth is questioned: “VIP? Are you sure?”

“I am particularly fond of that Travolta gentleman in *Saturday Night Fever*.”

“I don’t have to put up with this.”

“Kind sir,” says the voice in perfect semblance of wounded hospitality, “I offer to do you a favor and you insult me. Where I come from one kind deed begets another. Yours will be the pappy to mine, which makes us cousins. Do you see how we are all connected? Your dance will serve a greater good.”

“Travis, unlock this door.”

“Do I have to come down there again?” says a voice devoid of Southern gentility, posing an issue not covered in Dealing with Difficult People seminars.

George braves an inner storm. A smokestack of lightning reveals distant shapes on the horizon of Time. Long ago mankind began a game by filling the roles of king of the jungle, beast of burden, and everything in between. Now a lowly watchdog refuses to play make-believe. Unlike the strength of a wild animal, George’s power is dependent on the acquiescence of others. Their consent creates it. And in its absence ...

He points to the ceiling with his left hand and brings it down to his right pocket while performing squats. Endorphins percolate. Explanations vie for dominion. Maybe his car resembles a Toyota on the monitors. Maybe these cruel rites are endured by VIPs everywhere. Maybe this world is the discarded draft of one that eventually turned out better or at least no worse.

“Sir, I regret to inform you that my spirit remains earthbound. I feel forsaken as ever, orphaned from the human family.”

To the routine George adds a move from the Hokey Pokey, incorporating his calfskin briefcase. As though awaiting judgment from the cyclopean ruler of this underworld, he stops and looks up at the globe.

The *click* of the parking door, is it not the whispered *yes* of a reluctant lover? He drops the phone and seizes the knob before Travis can lock it, avoiding a scenario that could involve something even less desirable than a festive dance — assuming the predictive veracity of events from last week.

In the elevator, the tireless optimist perched on his left shoulder puts everything into perspective. “Be grateful he’s just a guard. A simple twist of history could have made him an emperor, or a conquering general, or a gym teacher.” The pessimist who once mounted the other shoulder but jumped to his death during the dance offers no counterpoint.

George peels a sweaty strand of hair off his forehead and enters the throne room of Travis the Terrible. A massive boom box broadcasts the roar of demons and the grinding of machines. Clown-sized sneakers tower over the sign-in log atop the desk. George scribbles his name and ID number like some vanquished statesman signing a treaty of unconditional surrender. A ring of cigar smoke halos his head. And another. And another. He coughs and waves them away and looks at four monitors inside the desk. Three are split-screen. One provides a full view of the parking door, his Gethsemane.

On a leather throne suspiciously similar to the CEO's sits Travis Olkeshevski. Behind Ben Franklin glasses, ravenous green eyes devour all assumptions about the corporate pecking order. "Good morning Mr. Merkel," he says, stretching. The seams of his shirt threaten to burst in protest. A layer of baby fat rests on a foundation of bone and muscle that makes the Neanderthal appear ectomorphic. "Have a nice day, sir."

George enters one of the elevators behind the desk and inspects his reflection on the shiny panel above the buttons. His eyes watch his eyes watching his eyes. The regress spirals through a brier maze where gargoyles shield their faces from territory they guard but cannot bear to glimpse. With a world-weary disgust most men need sixty years to develop he kicks the faux gold paneling. "Life doesn't change after grade school," he says, as though past, present, and future aren't descriptions of the same stinking beast from blind men. When the doors open he shuffles down a long bright corridor, immersed in the very important thoughts of a VIP.

2: Fall of the Mantis

Crisp leaves enshroud Milwaukee, never as beautiful in life as they are in death. All rejoice in the tomb of summer, frolicking in the burial ground of a time that is no more. This remorseless decomposition, land of nostalgia and déjà vu, idyllic for football and hunting and lakefront bonfires at night, it calls from a place beyond instinct, one primal or mystical and ineptly mapped by our concepts. If Nature speaks through her patterns, what are we to make of this delirious paean to necrophilia, this hypnotic Ode to Mortality?

Restless ghost of the sea that once covered downtown, wind rustles the trees lining Schneckedorf Avenue. Their leaves fall to the sidewalk where a man in green flannel underwear totters through the fog. Saturated with the perfume of summer's remains, they blow across Lodestar's plaza and whirl through empty flower beds and a diamond-shaped fountain where dancing waters dance no more. With the aid of a railing he climbs ten steps and approaches the building. Its slender white body bespeaks an architect who cut his teeth designing lighthouses. The oversized lobby window is best explained by the unconscious influence of childhood afternoons at a public aquarium.

Cast by floodlights and created in the image of its maker, the green man's shadow slides across a planter. He points a trembling finger at the security desk until a car horn summons him. One ill-chosen placement of his galoshes sends him tumbling down the stairs, a drum roll to a crash of laughter erupting from a station wagon parked across the street.

"Kid, the Mantis is bombed again," says the driver.

The passenger collapses a telescope and scribbles Lodestar's address on a gyro wrapper. "Long as he gets the job done."

Like some giant amoeba recently divided, any difference between them is a function of their positions relative to each other. Bushy sideburns frame congenital scowls. Wraparound sunglasses reflect the silhouettes of Sherman tanks cast by plastic forks protruding from cans of

SPAM on the dash. The driver retrieves a black tube from the backseat. “He’s lost the call. Look at him.”

“Kid, the Mantis is a dividin’ rod for findin’ security guards,” says the passenger. He attaches a cluster of wires from the tube to a cassette deck. “I heard Lodestar ain’t long for this world.”

“Givin’ mortgages to people with no money, who woulda thunk that’s a bad idea?”

“Kid, they shoulda set up a booth outside Walmart.”

Under a tree bleeding a trickle of crimson leaves, three couples return from the Performing Arts Center, chatting about the fresh Brazilian air *A Long Day’s Samba into Night* breathed into O’Neill’s old play. To avoid anything incongruous with the delicacies of the evening, they mince their steps at the sight of the wobbling green man and navigate a bell-shaped path around him. Like some dragon spraying fire on a village and missing, he vomits on his galoshes. The terrified villagers scatter, memories of their evening ablaze.

“He’s attractin’ attention to the proceedin’s,” says the driver. “That’s a bad buzz. We gotta tell the Kangaroo.”

“You might wanna break the news to him about the sky being blue. Kid, the Mantis is his pride and joy.”

Bracing it against a doughy cheek and atop the side mirror, the driver aims the tube at the lobby. In the scope appears the buzzcut and Lombrosian forehead of Travis. When the passenger pushes a button on the stereo, red and blue lights bounce across an equalizer. They fade, reappear, and die.

“We ain’t gettin’ nothin’.”

“Adjust it. I got a perfect shot.”

The passenger pounds on the dash. A red dot appears and vanishes. “Kid, start the car and give it some gas.”

“This tube ain’t good for shit. I liked the old method better. LSD has charms to soothe a savage’s breasts.”

“Kid, the Kangaroo still thinks he’s in the NSA. Them igits would spend a billion bucks on a bucket of earwax.”

Unaware or unconcerned by events transpiring in Lodestar’s lobby, the Mantis lays on the sidewalk in a purple puddle until *honks* from the wagon charm him through fitful evolutionary

stages culminating in an upright stance. Beneath a maple tree gold like a mosque in the sun, the car discharges black globes of smoke orbited by white rings and follows him up the street.

3: Zelda

Zelda Alpizar's confrontation with the mirror reveals that her collarbone is diminishing like a treasure abandoned to sandstorms. She has one stick of celery instead of three and pops two Provigil. In her room an army of PEZ dispensers overlooks piles of clothes discarded like shed snakeskin. On two framed pictures she stands beside the stone altar at Monte Albán with her father. His Summerfest shirt and her gap-toothed grin neutralize the morbid ambience. Would those butchered there have found comfort or despair from knowing it would become a tourist spot?

She sits on the floor and powers up an old laptop. On a website filled with pictures of stick-figure models and celebrities she checks her latest blog entry:

they say u hav a disees. Maybe its cuz THERE AFRADE OF UR
POWER AND WANT 2 CONTROL U!! ur ability 2 eat how much u
want gives u TOTAL POWER and they hate u 4 it. they want 2 keep u
trappd in a JAIL of FAT! Are u sik or R THEY JELLUS? stay strong
thru Ana!

• • •

Covered with shingles instead of vinyl siding, her house would not have appeared out of place in an ancient time. She locks the door and runs to avoid intermittent downpours. Thunder growls like some deity provoked and silver veins pump life to the gray hide wrapping the world. Under a bus stop canopy she savors a head-rush complete with tingly feet from the first Newport of the day. Then it's all downhill. She runs through alleys and across a field and with the precision of an insect climbs a fence where a section of barbwire is missing. Through puddles reflecting the

bright garages of a U-haul storage facility she splashes like some urchin traversing a blood-soaked battlefield. She pokes her head around a corner and looks both ways and pounds on a door.

“Agent Alpizar, you’re late,” says Rolando. If his greasy pompadour isn’t the result of a genetic snafu, surely the faculty that chose it is. “Don’t wait for it to open all the way. Dive under.”

“Maybe tomorrow. Tell me again why I have to get up this early. Those slobs don’t get up before noon.”

“What happened to your eye? Who did that?”

“Who do you think? One of the fat fucks.”

Illuminating walls where the main event, Rust vs. Metal, was decided long ago, portable lights dangle from plastic shelves crammed with files held in place by cement blocks and cans of soup. From the roof water drips into three buckets, a coffee can, and two Tupperware bowls. A beanbag-shaped woman with gray and auburn hair pecks at a word processor. The motion sends waves rolling across the subcutaneous seas covering her arms. Zelda stares at the tidal pattern and rubs her triceps as though dispelling goose bumps.

“It’s not because they suspect you, is it honey?” the typist says. “You can’t stay there if they suspect you.”

A sheen of rain and sweat glistens on Zelda’s face. “They don’t suspect nothing. I kinda kneed one in the balls.”

Rolando straddles a folding chair and rests his hands on the back and his chin on his thumbs.

“It was an accident,” says Zelda.

He waits for her to look at him. She doesn’t. “What kind of recruits do they have?” he says, picking at a mole that bisects his thin mustache like a cow blocking a railroad track.

“Losers.”

“Third shift security guards?”

“I said they were losers. When do I get paid?”

He wraps his knuckles on the chair. “Are they third shift guards?”

She lights a cigarette and inhales deeply, chasing the dragon of the first one. “Look, they’re gonna show them to me, okay? I only know what I hear.”

“Why is it always watchmen? Why couldn’t a delivery man be a secret container, or a retired senior citizen?”

“They need someone with special mental conditioning, like in a trance or something. Most of these dipshits are half-asleep. And they’re the easiest to sneak up on. And you can always find them again.”

Wild with yearning, Rolando’s eyes harvest light from the halogen lanterns. “Is that your theory or is that what they say?”

“What they say? You wanna know what they say?” She drops an octave and talks out the side of her mouth. “Kid, Omega gyros ain’t half as good as Aristotle’s gyros. Kid, let’s score some doses. Kid, smell this fart. Kid, kid, kid, *all day long*. They’re total fucktards.”

“Do not underestimate them. And you’re not there to judge. You’re there to observe and report.”

“Judging from the shit they say that isn’t about food or acid, the secrecy of who’s a container is important. The containers don’t even know they’re containers.”

“I, too, read their pamphlet.”

“Then why do you keep asking me?”

“What about the man in charge, the Kangaroo?” whispers Rolando, as if saying it too loud would cast a spell or summon forces he dare not provoke.

“He did something for the government. They fired him for being an arsonist.”

“You mean *isolationist*?”

“Something like that.”

With the reservation of a man inquiring about his wife’s fidelity, Rolando says, “And the big guys, the terrible twins, Remus and Romulus?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Are they mantises?”

“More like *mana-tees*.”

“Agent Alpizar, you need to learn everything about the hierarchies within their agency. What is the significance of a mantis? According to the Greeks it resembles someone who is praying.”

“This one should be praying for a clue. He’s so out there. A mantis hunts guards. That’s what they’re training me for.”

“What technique is used?”

“He goes from building to building and looks in the window. If anyone in a uniform is passed out in the lobby he’s found his man. Then Remus and Romulus make a note of it.”

“They haven’t made any uploads yet, have they? It’s essential that you’re there when they do them.”

“We still have to get profiles of the containers. It ain’t easy. We can’t just walk up and do a survey.”

“The most important thing is to get the key to the containers. It should be a phrase or a sentence.” Rolando stands and scratches his chin and watches crystal drops fall from the ceiling. “It could be a single word. I suppose a number would work, or a tune they hum. It could even be a noise they make.”

“Thanks for narrowing it down. Is there anything it couldn’t be?”

“You need to turn your memory into a magnet. Ask lots of questions. Tell them you want to be the best mantis you can be.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t *whatever* me. Why can’t you be nicer? It’s easier to infiltrate if you’re friendly. They probably wouldn’t have hit you if you weren’t sulking all the time.”

“Are you saying I deserved this, you bumblefuck.”

“*Shhh*, there’s families living in some of these garages. You were smarting off again, weren’t you?”

Her glare emits waves of sullen hostility that threaten to melt the feeble metal structure.

“Following cheating husbands was easier.”

“There’s too much competition.”

“Why don’t you start your own agency? Why are you copying these dorks?”

The typist chuckles. Her pointer finger circles before landing on the letter G. “Honey, if I had a nickel for every time I told him that.”

“I don’t pay either of you to tell me how to run things. I know nothing about uploads or scrambling. They make it look easy. Don’t be fooled. And how do I get their clients? Those are some of the most dangerous men on earth. Agent Alpizar, you need to remember what you learned from your training films. Always ask WWPGD.”

“I know,” she groans. “What would Pussy Galore do?”

“Also study the example of Anya Amasova.”

“I’ve watched all those stupid movies. The guys after Sean Connery are wussies.”

“James Bond is not your role model. After you observe an upload and get the key to the containers we’ll run them out of business. But it’s all up to you.”

Zelda practices letting smoke float out of her mouth and into her nose. She feels her eyebrows for signs of asymmetry. She examines her chest for signs of its appearance.

“Agent Alpizar.”

“I heard you. Get the key to the containers.”

“And you need to keep sabotaging the Mantis. Once he’s gone you’ll be the only replacement. Then you can divert their clients to us. What is his current status?”

“I gave him the secret message that the only way to protect his thoughts from being intercepted is to stay drunk all the time.”

“Good work, agent Alpizar.”

“Whatever.”

4: “Alex”

If a zoologist from another planet studied Alex Jitney, the milky pallor and nondescript features might instigate regrets that humans aren't reptilian. Despite acknowledging that hair once enabled our drab but vicious species to exert pheromonal influences by trapping body scents, it would soon focus on the rich tapestries of the Rainbow Boa-constrictor and Peninsular Rock Agama. The field guide would recommend visiting the deserts and rainforests while proceeding with extreme caution on this woebegone planet of apes.

If Alex shared his shift with other workers, the uniform dangling from his angular frame might initiate questions about his ability to defend Lodestar's Shipping and Receiving Center in the dead of night. “He can't be here for deterrence,” they'd whisper. “What could he deter? This can't be safe. He's by himself, a mile away from the main building with that giant security guard.” His engrossment in a chess book would put their concerns to rest. “This part of town must be as safe as milk,” they'd conclude with relief. “He's here for insurance purposes.”

At 2:11 A.M. Alex steps over the red beam of a motion detector and walks down rows of brown boxes in a cavernous room, lost in thoughts of Security, pondering its essence: Why did Petrosian lose to Bobby Fischer? How could Karpov lose to Kasparov? Defense is superior to offense. A state of equilibrium smiles upon those who work to maintain it, not those who rupture its static pattern with aggression. Added to Alex's disdain for the staccato *tick* of a fluorescent light in its death throes is the awareness that sixty rows of fifteen pallets with 1,000 reams of 500 sheets equals an unsecure number unless seven sheets are added. How is he supposed to concentrate in such a place?

He removes the pineapple from two pieces of chicken pizza before eating them. Love the sin, hate the sinner. After lunch he clasps his hands behind his head and props his feet on the windowsill to enjoy the harmony of silence. But there is no such thing. The illogical pattern of the herringbone wall across the street is louder than any stereo, more offensive than swastikas.

He closes his eyes and a parade barges across the space between his ears: a list of prime numbers separated by two, the sweet aftertaste of fruit, the sound of a car backfiring, the stretch of a full bladder.

Unknown is whether “Alex” is the sum of these impressions or the remainder when they’re subtracted. Time spent alone, rare and awkward moments when he’s not thinking about chess send him searching for a mysterious being called *the self*. It’s like looking for a shadow with a spotlight. The commotion and chitchat must hide this from first and second shift. Are they lucky or deluded or both?

While Alex turns an abstract painting on the wall around so only its non-chaotic backside is visible, a green silhouette like Nosferatu with a beer gut appears in the window and points a trembling finger at him. Alex checks his watch. Contrary to the trite expression, there is no *crack* of dawn. A dirty yellow growth will soon spread across the horizon like fungus on chocolate cake, devouring the delicate textures of the night.

He removes a silver pendant from his neck. *You don’t need to check it again. You’ve checked it twelve times since the start of your shift.* He opens it anyway and extracts a tiny scroll of paper. Such elegant and simple premises. So harmoniously the conclusion flows from them like a river filled by lesser tributaries. No wonder they never find it. They expect something dense and convoluted.

He puts the pendant back and begins an online game of speed chess. For reasons unfathomable, second place is worse than ten-thousandth. While a grid covered with bouncing pieces annexes the territory of his mind, he doesn’t hear voices in the street. For all their rage and urgency they could just as well be the croaks of bullfrogs, differing only by degree.

“Kid, this tube will be the death of me.”

5: Delores

Positive thinking spoiled Napoleon’s analysis of his Russian campaign. Fortune favors the bold, but the line between optimism and hubris is drawn in dust. Some plans are destined to succeed with epochal magnificence or fail with apocalyptic devastation, creating diametric black holes on the spectrum of possibility that engulf all intermediates. Walking in the lonely footsteps of great schemers throughout history, Travis paces the lobby, hands clasped behind his back. The future sits before him like some cosmic egg that can’t be cracked. He can only wait for it to hatch.

The voice of Reason speaks to men in different tongues. Travis goes to the men’s room and stands on a toilet and blows six hits of AK-47 into an air vent. Described by aficionados as inducing an “alert but mellow cerebral effect,” it provides a placebo of objective detachment. Little known outside of the medical community is how effective placebos can be. Back at the desk he stares at the emptiness of the cathedral ceiling, forsaking the voice inside for external guidance. Fools call it paranoia. He knows it’s prudence. He returns to Delores Locascio’s cubicle and removes the teddy bears he placed on her desk in a sixty-nine position. If only Napoleon had conferred with AK-47.

• • •

The door to underground parking locks behind Delores, making an audible *click*, ensuring her safety. When she enters the lobby, Travis’ cheerful voice greets her before she can turn the corner and approach the security desk. “Good morning Miss Locascio.”

“Good morning Travis — I mean *Mr. Olkeshevski*.”

Utilizing a hybrid of the eyes of faith and fledgling powers of X-ray vision, he attempts to peer through the layers of her jacket dress. Like a fence around a swimming pool on a hot summer night, it seems less a barrier than an enticement.

“And how are you today?” she says.

He peeks over his glasses, grins, and watches her hand as she signs in. A Roman candle flash in his mind’s eye illuminates it clutching her ankle. “All secure, ma’am.”

A smile spreads so quickly her cheeks don’t have time to move out of the way. “I caught the other guard sleeping last night.”

Travis sends the astral body of his imagination on a covert security mission. It floats above the desk, twirls 180 degrees, and lands behind her. “I’m sure he was just resting his eyes, ma’am.”

“The parking door was unlocked. I signed in and went upstairs without him even knowing. He was snoring.”

“Robert works a swing shift,” he says, basking in the wisdom that in the land of the incompetent the semi-competent man is king. “And he has health problems. But don’t you worry, Miss Locascio, I’ll bring it up to him.” The eyes of faith see lacteous drops pooling on her clavicle.

“Thank you Travis.”

“Will you be making a trip to the Shipping and Receiving Center this morning?”

“Probably not until the end of the month. You have a nice day.”

His mental security camera takes a few snapshots of the short hair bouncing on the back of her head. She doesn’t turn and catch him looking, which might end a grueling game and commence a different one, a game bearing not even family resemblances to the desperate sallies of hitting on someone at work.

•••

Delores peers into a hexagonal aquarium and performs a head count for her snails. Three cruise gravel dunes like Volkswagens in low gear. One snoozes on the dome of the Taj Mahal. She checks her email and clicks a bookmark to her blog. If the IT geeks haven’t complained by now they never will.

The top of the page reads, “The Mary Weatherworth Meme. Its Origins, History, Means of Reproduction, and Offspring.” Beneath it glows a Bosch-like painting of an old woman with a dagger plunged in each eye. She appears to be laughing, as though lost in the throes of some

nameless debauchery. Blood drips down her forearms, creating strange maps on leathery parchment, filling chalices beneath her elbows. The ABOUT ME section describes how Snail_Chick converted an undergrad paper about an urban legend into a blog:

This is a way of keeping my feet wet in Sociology. I'm NOT interested in Mary Weatherworth as a supernatural phenomenon but as a meme, a compact chunk of information. I'm studying how it gets passed on, how it competes in the meme pool (the pool of ideas or units of culture) and how it mutates and evolves. Please send me occult lore involving mirror-inhabiting entities who are blind. (I've reached my limit for conspiracy-related hokum about the Sentinels of the Chandelier. Please remember that "a secret group did it in secret secretly" IS NOT an explanation.)

She cleanses her comment section from its latest defilement, more requests for "hot fuk pix" of Mary Weatherworth. Maybe one of IT geeks? Pigs. She starts a new entry:

I discovered the following on an Ana blog, a site devoted to unhealthy tips for losing weight. The meme was the least creepy thing I found there. Ana, as best I can tell, is the animistic force of anorexia. According to the hostess of this site it's a positive lifestyle choice rather than an illness. I've emailed Zelda for more details about the following story (posted without permission).

there was a aynshent rituel 2 defeet evil beings. a princess named Nica had her eyes gowjed out by hi preests. I wore a cote of black fethers. I wore a giant fish head. they chanted Ave de Pico Ancho, Ave de Pico Ancho, Ave de Pico Ancho. BY REEDING THIS SPELL U JUST OPENED THE WINDOW TO THE OTHER SIDE! ITS UR MIRROR!! the only way 2 close it is by sending this email to 97 people. if U dont

Nica will appear in ur mirror all covered with rotting skin and glowing eyes and PULL U THRU 2 B with her 4 EVER!!

Notice how the summons “ave de pico ancho” has to be repeated three times just like “Mary Weatherworth come forth.” This meme spreads itself virus-like by using the same mechanism as mainstream religions and cults (as I’ve argued elsewhere, the difference between these is arbitrary). 1) You are cursed. 2) To break the curse you have to spread the meme. My evidence that this story evolved from the Weatherworth meme as opposed to sharing a common ancestor is based on three considerations. The first involves the transformation of Nica’s eyes. Similar to the legend of Mary Weatherworth, the mutilation of her eyes had supernatural consequences. Hopefully Zelda will respond to my email and clarify the scope of Nica’s powers.

This leaves us with the question: What do mirrors have to do with it? In the ancient world it was widely believed they were passageways to other realms. The most famous example is Detritus, a Gnostic philosopher, self-styled “prophet of the reflections,” possible author of the *Gospel of Detritus*, which was condemned by the early church fathers. (More about him in my next entry. I just started Dr. Aloysius Schwankmeyer’s new biography.)

The simplest explanation is that scary stories conjoined with mirror stories. As they became more intriguing they were repeated more often, making them the fittest in the meme pool, ensuring their survival. Let’s stick with that until something better comes along. Why are people so resistant to explanations in terms of chance mutation and layers of happenstance?

• • •

Delores watches a snail glide through the haze of an algae veil. Despite all she's read about the nature of their propulsion it remains inexplicable, forever tantalizing a part of her that needs to understand, the least gratified of all our drives. A chime on her desktop announces the arrival of a new email, another one from need2bangu. She smiles. These standards are subjective of course, but perverted secret admirers are preferable to guys who are too nice for their own good, guys like Travis.

6: Maestoso

Cudahy is the kind of town those old blues songs warned about. Some folks say it's a blue-collar addendum to Milwaukee. And some folks believed the brain's function was to cool the blood.

You stagger out of Straight Flush tavern into a valley where factories and rendering plants flank a slaughterhouse, breathing through your mouth to evade thoughts about the nefarious process that turns a pig into a pork chop. Gunshots herald a station wagon's approach. What gang of sane young men would vie for this territory, or were they forced to accept it as a humiliation?

Repeated backfires dispel your concern, but a despairing conviction that science has contravened lines not drawn but sacred nonetheless accompanies the sight of the driver and passenger. The conjunction of their pallor, sunglasses, and girth bespeaks a fiendish experiment involving albino dung beetles and growth hormone. Each hangs an arm out the window and spans the side in time to a saxophone yawping from the stereo like some wild mating cry. Blotches of rust with orange halos compete with blue for the car's predominant color.

"Hey kid, is life rough?" says the passenger. Half his face remains immobile. The other side fluctuates polygraph-style between a sneer and a grin. "How was breakfast?"

"Hey kid, git yourself somethin' nice," says the driver. A penny bounces off your forehead and lands on the sidewalk. The car shakes with laughter.

"Don't spend it all on booze," says the passenger. The car turns left at the neon orange of a Clark station, abandoning the desolation of this forsaken gorge.

"Back so soon?" says the bartender. "This place is a magnet."

"The gravity's stronger here," you tell him. "There are some real assholes in this world."

"You figured that out since I last saw you? I don't know if I should congratulate you or offer my condolences. This one's on the house." Forming a glossy sheen, wispy tangles of black and

white hair stay greased in place. How many times has his nose been broken? Who drinks brandy at this hour? Who are you to judge?

“Just because I had a few beers in the morning is no reason to make fun of me. These creeps threw a penny at me.”

“What’d they look like?” he says, the wheeze of his breath percolating.

“Like two giant snowballs with sunglasses.”

He leans over the bar and grabs your wrist. “You be careful round here. Them big boys is up to no good. You don’t wanna know what they’re doin’. Don’t even look ’em in the eye. They’d go outta their way to run you down, like a dog or paper sack.”

• • •

Gingerly you walk across slimy rocks in a cold stream. The bumpy transition from intoxication to hangover can only be smoothed by Nature. When a station wagon drives across the narrow bridge behind you, a can whose weight feels disproportionate to its size bounces off your head. Hundreds of bubbles evacuate the little container, which amalgamates with its fluid surroundings while retaining something of its solid essence. Like a mirage over a desert road or a flag swept by lunar gusts, the promise of SPAM shimmers and beckons from the bottom. A shiny green fish darts in and gobbles pieces clinging to the sides.

“Maybe he’s thanking the fish god,” says a pudgy man on the bank of the stream. He holds an open book in one hand. The dog beside him, long and dark like a Doberman drawn by Dali, sniffs the water. Brown spots over his eyes conspire with lips upturned at the corners of his snout to cast a countenance of cruel mirth. A tie-dyed bandana does nothing to mitigate this impression.

“Maybe he’s hungry,” you say, rubbing your head, discovering gelatinous shrapnel in your hair.

“Are you asserting that only man has thoughts?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

“And why is that? What grand inquiries occupy your time? According to Detritus all beings share a common mind.” He shakes his book at you. “To think is to think about causes. How else would he explain the sudden arrival of a treasure chest of SPAM? Do you suppose he’s

postulating some grand unified theory involving automobiles, littering, processed food, and probability? To deny his religious yearnings is to embroil yourself in absurdities.” A scowl kneads a tragic mask across his features. “We are witnessing the dawn of a new horizon of study, the uncharted territory beyond the intersection of metaphysics and ichthyology.”

A larger fish waits outside the can. Instead of sharing the manna from above, he eats the little fish.

“That’s not the fish god’s fault,” says the man. He kneels and whispers something in one of the dog’s floppy ears, then tosses a pebble in the water. Reflections of its ripples scroll down his mirrored granny glasses. “According to Detritus, imperfection and evil come from matter. Only through reunification with the transcendent mind can we be free.”

Before he can address the question of how these defective tinkering can be returned to the Cosmic Underachiever who made them, you slip on a slimy rock. The icy water wrings the breath out of you. Muck like quicksand absorbs your legs up to the knees. A disquieting thought nucleates, the foundational structure to which all future inquiries and observations will cling regardless of any pretense of neutrality: the shortcomings of matter will be of dubious comfort to the little fishes’ mom.

• • •

The Yellow Warbler can’t hide forever. Surrounded by a sweet-scented auburn cloud, you perch on a branch high above a blacktopped road, basking in the heavens of this idyllic season. Summer, is it not a lowly transitional phase, an impetuous adolescent, a brutish prototype from which evolves the exemplar of fall?

Remove the top from your half-pint of Old Crow. Recovery from hypothermia is not an excuse to drink; a bracing tonic is a medical necessity. From the east a raucous trumpet grows louder, its tone increasing as the source approaches. A blue station wagon flashes past below and a purple can flies from the passenger’s window and *clunks* against the tree.

The man and dog appear from shadows across the street. “Listen to the trumpet’s pitch decrease as the sound waves are stretched further apart. This is how we know the universe is expanding, the Doppler Effect.”

“I didn’t climb up here to have a conversation. You’ll scare the birds away.” To what planet must a man travel for an afternoon of quiet solitude?

“If it’s getting bigger, you’re smaller today than yesterday, less meaningful now than a moment ago. The extrapolation is simple yet no one performs it. What happens when something keeps shrinking?”

“I’ll disappear?”

Slender and muscular like some Olympian ferret, the dog howls and wags his tail as though delighted by the news. “And don’t forget there are countless universes,” says the man. “They’re part of the multiverse. There will be a billion more by the time you take another breath. They have the fecundity of aphids. Isn’t it interesting how modern physics adds new dimensions to the vanity of life lamented by the ancients? Solomon didn’t know the half of it.”

Let go of the branch. What difference does it make? You were already falling.

Though initially deterred by your moans and writhing, two crows land next to the can beside the tree and peck at the fatty chunks inside. The man and dog approach. “These magnificent birds,” he says, “so intelligent they place walnuts on the road to be opened by traffic, can there be any doubt they’re acknowledging this as a blessing from their crow god, a deity characterized not only by shadows, but wisdom?”

“It was an accident. The can just plopped there. It could have landed anywhere, or not at all. This universe isn’t about them. It isn’t about any of us.”

The man towers over you. “Incorrect. It is about my Dachshund. Come along Maestoso.” They depart, the dog gliding away like some sausage hovercraft.

• • •

Seated on foam padding bursting through blue upholstery, you recoil from a moldering mass grave of soda cans, candy wrappers, and strata upon strata of Styrofoam fast-food containers. Like anguished spirits unable to enter the next realm, fierce vapors linger, the ghosts of these mortal remains. A black tube lies across your lap; another half-pint fills your hand. Accepting a ride from these littering marauders seemed like madness until a free beverage entered the equation. To the relief of your longsuffering ears, the passenger ejects a cassette.

“Kid, I was gonna rewind that. Buddy Rich is a gem.”

“Kid, Buddy Rich is the emperor of ice cream, but we been listenin’ to him all day.”

Toothpicks impale the loaves of flesh protruding between their shoulders. The change from concrete to gravel levitates the three of you along with the moveable burial ground. Beneath a cloud whose tentacles dissolve into membranous nubs, broken glass glitters on the hills and recesses of a serpentine road. Even at five mph it’s clear the wagon’s suspension is in the same state of dilapidation as its upholstery.

Two boys wearing black and gold hockey jerseys throw rocks at beer bottles lined atop a doorless refrigerator. They stop and stare as though frightened on your behalf. One runs a finger across his throat. The side-burned blobs sneer in unison. “What the hell you lookin’ at?” says the driver.

“Go ask your ma where babies come from,” says the passenger.

“Tell her to show you,” says the driver. “It stinks worse than any stork.” The boys dutifully trudge inside a trailer.

Disassembled cars suggest a village of aspiring mechanics. A black cat peers through reeds of long-neglected grass before darting in front of the wagon. You lean back and smile. *Right to left means good luck*. Then the cat risks its life to run back, double cursing you. Just as Bob Weir and Jerry Garcia played the same songs differently night after night, Chaos and Entropy are doing a wild jam with the trailer cars. Any individuality stems from unique states of disrepair. Tiny and sparsely allocated windows look like the holes a child pokes on a box before confining a frog in it. Partaking of the knowledge that it’s five o’clock somewhere, men uniformed in flannel pretend to ignore the wagon.

After rounding a sharp turn, the homage to corrosion stops in front of the last trailer on the road. Sprawling vines of poison ivy almost hide a barbwire fence in back. Which design is crueler? The driver pulls a cassette off the dash. Like a genie trapped in a plugged bottle he writhes his way out of the car. The silver chain connecting his wallet to his jeans could constrain King Kong. The car rises two feet after the passenger emerges. While comparing them you remember a principle regarding the identity of indiscernibles. Or was it the indiscernibility of identicals? Their grace on land suggests the front seat is their natural habitat.

“Kid, where’s the other tape?”

“It was right here, kid. If you lost it again the Kangaroo will go berserk.”

While four mitts turn the car inside out you pretend to sift through layers in the landfill.

“Kid, this igit was sittin’ on it.”

“Thanks a lot, cockbreath. Here, you carry ’em.”

In loose-fitting clothes they would look intimidating, retired power-lifters enjoying *la dolce vita*. In tight undershirts the show’s over. Meaty inner-tubes jiggle and jangle beneath the flimsy cotton medium. One runs his knuckles across a homemade wind chime made out of five lacquered cans of Olde Frothingslosh ale. They wait. Rotund shadows pool at their feet like pits of tar swallowing prehistoric beasts.

A girl with cinnamon skin and one black eye opens the door and steps out, ferociously beautiful, skinny like a famine survivor medevaced in the nick of time. The breeze lashes long dark hair against her shoulders. Wildly arching eyebrows send a lupine fury cascading down her face to break on pouty lips. She takes a drag off a cigarette, revealing scars like disorganized crop circles on her stringy forearm, and blows smoke at your escorts as they enter. Thimbles threaten to pop through the planar surface of her green tank-top.

The queasy shame of a man denying the allure of Balthus’ nymphs compels you to look away, to peek around the corner where a satellite dish points at the ground. Behind it stands a gaunt man in his third trimester. “You got business here?” he says, clutching the wrong end of a .454 magnum like some deranged judge preparing to declare order for the last time.

You hop back to the cinnamon girl, who shuts the door behind you. Cardboard shades banish all rumors of the sun. The lambent glow from a TV illumines a pyramid of milk crates jammed with walkie-talkies and assorted gadgetry. Handcuffs and a cattle prod are not the most conspicuous. Empty popcorn bags litter a kitchenette counter like conches washed up on a murky shore.

Standing in front of a narrow door one of the twins clears his throat. “What is the difference between an orange?”

“Just go in,” says the cinnamon girl.

“What is the difference between an orange.”

“This is so lame.”

“If I have to say it again.”

In one long groan she says, “A bicycle because a vest has no sleeves.” She stands beside him and they both put a key in the door.

“Turn it,” he says.

“I am, you fucktard.”

“Try it again. Turn now.”

Nothing. He takes a step back and lands a savage kick, opening it. You join the brothers inside a closet lined with Pabst tall boys. Next to a dangling bulb their faces look like freshly-waxed cars on a drizzly day. One turns around. His flabby arm pushes you into the absorbent mass of his cohort. He selects a beer at eye-level and carefully pulls it to a ninety degree angle.

“It ain’t that one, kid.”

He tries the one next to it, and the next. “This’ll be the death of me.”

“What the hell, kid. Any day now.”

“Kid, it’s one of these.” And for the next ten minutes he pulls cans in the general area until the closet makes a terrible grinding noise like buckshot in a blender and begins to descend. A whiff of burnt oil acts as a desperately needed air freshener.

“Kid, don’t forget which one it is.”

“You ain’t no better at findin’ it, kid.”

After a prelude to eternity the closet jerks to a stop, rises a few feet, and squeals with a pitch and volume that has to be audible to every pooch in the Northern Hemisphere. The door opens to what looks like an old submarine. You follow them into a dank room and take a seat at a picnic table. Along a wall nourishing barnacles of rust, silver keyholes fail to correspond to lines, recesses, or anything indicating the presence of doors or compartments.

You place the tapes on the table. Carved between your arms is the legend REMUS IS GAY. A jagged gouge runs through it, exposing yellow wood. Above it is the inscription ROMULUS IS FAG, also censored by a thick scratch. A long but finite regress of these apparently antithetical sentiments winds up and down the table, a war that will have to be resolved on another battlefield. One of your hosts taps the table with both hands, doing a percussion version of “Kilimanjaro Cookout.” His twin joins him and they deliver an interesting version of an old favorite before veering off into tribal drumming.

A walking affront to the proportional standards of the ideal masculine physique enters the room. Atop shoulders too narrow for everything beneath them, an oily leather face droops off a cylindrical head tucked into a Packers cap. Observe the mighty gray tumbleweeds covering his cheeks.

“This week on the Home Remodeling Show, the house that Pabst built,” says one of your hosts, pointing to a bulge taxing the seams of the Kangaroo’s bib overalls.

“Shut your pie hole, Remus,” he responds in a quavering voice.

“Yeah, *Remus*,” says his brother, doing a pitch-perfect impression.

“I’ll bitch slap you, Romulus.”

“Sorry boss.”

The Kangaroo pulls a key from his overalls and turns it in one of the shiny holes. A section of the wall ascends like a door sliding open on a concession stand, revealing a red panel where silver knobs descend incrementally in size from a softball to a penny. Above them a yellow grid subdivides a green screen. Four speakers descend from the ceiling. “You fellas get anything on tape?”

“Signed, sealed, and delivered, chief,” says Remus.

“You fellas sure you know how to use the tube?”

“Piece of cake, boss,” says Romulus, handing him one of the tapes.

The Kangaroo inserts it in a slot. Scraggly white lines dance across the screen and static explodes from the speakers. You and the brothers cover your ears. “Mother of God,” cries one before the Kangaroo fixes the volume. He adjusts knobs like he’s playing Tetris. The lines on the grid become less jagged, almost parabolic. “That boy is a natural born scrambler.”

“Scramblin’ like a cook at George Webb,” says Remus, drumming his fingers on the table.

“Whose tape is this?” says the Kangaroo.

Like some inquisitive beast discovering a mirror in the ruins of an abandoned town, the twins eye each other amid a pantomime of shrugs and grimaces. Though capable of one basic expression they make the most of it with virtuosic skill. Romulus hunches his shoulders and throws up his hands. “The big fella?”

“Travis something,” says Remus. “Something Polish.”

“Kid, what’s the difference between a Polack security guard and a bucket of shit?”

“A bucket of shit can feed a Polish family?”

“No, the only difference is the bucket.”

The Kangaroo puts the other tape in the slot. “Looky here, looky here. This boy is one king-hell scramblin’ man.”

“That’s from the chess doofus,” says Remus.

“Chief, are you sure you’re usin’ this new shit right?” says Romulus. “They’re always scramblin’.”

“The likes of you two will not be tellin’ me how to do my job. These are the fellas the Mantis led you to?”

“His job performance needs improvement.”

“He was failing to accomplish tasks with a sufficient degree of sufficiency.”

“In English,” says the Kangaroo.

“He was barfin’ like Linda Blair.”

“Has he been drinkin’ again?”

He’s been drinkin’ all the time. Somethin’ purple.”

The Kangaroo strokes a cumulonimbus sideburn. “What’s up with him? He’s been actin’ weird lately. You’d think he’d consider boozin’ to be a dereliction of his sacred duties.”

“He no longer demonstrates a proficient sense of pride in the organization.”

“Long as he gets the job done a little hootch ain’t gonna hurt. Good thing we’re trainin’ another, just in case.”

“I don’t think Zelda’s got the right stuff, chief.”

“She got a mouth on her, boss. Her cussin’ could take the paint off a wall.”

“Her cussin’ could knock flies off a turd. She uses swear words I never heard of. It ain’t right for a girl to talk like that. She’s violent too. Knead me in the balls just for lookin’ at her.

Romulus was thinkin’ this guy here might have what it takes.”

“It was Remus’ idea.”

The Kangaroo looks in your general direction and cringes. “Quit bringin’ rummies down here. Does this look like a flophouse? Stop fartin’ around. This location is secret and your jobs are serious. You ain’t workin’ for the DEA or FBI no more. Give Zelda a chance.” He ejects the tape and sits beside you. Suppressing your gag reflex you watch him roll a wad of syrupy chaw juice over his bulging lip while adjusting a huge black mound of snuff. “You boys sure these fellas are full-time third shift?”

“These guys are hardcore third. Drunk or not, you gotta trust the Mantis. He’s like a dividin’ rod for findin’ guards.”

“These fellas ain’t rent-a-cops, are they?”

“No way. Lodestar’s a classy joint. These guys are in-house.”

“Classy? You boys shoulda picked up a few mortgages while you were there. You coulda used an empty keg for a down payment.”

“If the drive-thru wasn’t closed we woulda got a book of gift certificates.”

“It’s still too classy for rent-a-dorks, chief. And they both work there. The Shippin’ and Receivin’ Center is a part of Lodestar.”

“Keepin’ tabs on rent-a-cops is like tryin’ to keep track of migratin’ deer,” says the Kangaroo.

“It’s like trackin’ meth sluts.”

“Kid, you could implant a chip in their ear while they’re knobbin’ you.”

“I got us a *hee*-uge contract lined up,” says the Kangaroo. “We take good care of this client and we’ll be *eau de bologna*.”

“Are these two gonna be the containers?”

“They’ll make top notch containers. They both got some serious aptitude for scramblin’, specially the first fella. Now it’s a matter of matchin’ the initiation process to each one’s specific profile.” The Kangaroo spits a dark stream over your head. Some of it lands in a puddle on the floor where many have preceded it. Most of it does not. He pounds his fist and points between the stout twins. “A few of our other clients is less than satisfied with the services provided. You fellas can’t be blabbin’ about the secret key.”

“I never said nothin’,” says Remus.

“Am I supposed to believe the containers heard it on the news?”

“It wasn’t me,” says Romulus.

“Well it’s gotta stop. Word of mouth is our only means of advertisin’. I don’t think the brochure was one of Duane Callahan’s finer ideas.”

“Pretty boy Duane,” laughs Remus.

“Sweet *Jane* Duane,” says Romulus.

“What in tarnation is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothin’ chief. Your cousin’s a good guy.”

“Duane’s fine by me, boss.”

The Kangaroo cracks his knuckles and stares at the table. “I regret to inform you that due to the new technology we have acquired and successfully utilized we will no longer be needin’ the doses of William Werzinski.”

The brothers bellow like tenors in some ungodly opera. “He’s practically family,” pleads Romulus. “Nobody gets better acid than William.”

“You can’t replace William with a tube,” says Remus. “He’ll take it hard. He ain’t exactly stable.”

“He’s a sensitive genius, chief. You know how they are. He was a physics major. They’re as smart as they come.”

“The LSD method wasn’t workin’ for shit and you fellas know it,” says the Kangaroo. “He ain’t gonna starve. If I ain’t mistaken, him and his wiener dog still live at home.”

“William says Maestoso is a quantum mechanic.”

“Kid, how could it fix anything with them little hands?”

“Let’s make sure things go smoothly,” says the Kangaroo. “Good containers is hard to come by. I’ll need all the usual details about both the guards. Then, I swear, if their uploads don’t go right there’ll be hell to pay. We never had a Jawa for a client before.”

“Ain’t they those grubby little critters from *Star Wars*?”

“Even worse. Now give this dirty rummy some free drink chips and get him the hell out of here.”

• • •

On your back in the alley behind Straight Flush you stare at the speckled canopy above, no more lost than anything else up there. Visions of Zelda dance through your mind: reflections on the contradictory conjunction of her frailty and fierce demeanor; 1,001 inferences based on several seconds of observation, the notorious first impression to which everything else is an appendix; longings that feel awkward even here, as though some prohibitions are not the excrescence of bureaucratic fiat but etched in the tablet of existence. Maybe you’re tasting the bitter fruit harvested by recluses and misfits throughout the ages, the discovery that we remain attached to the fabric of humanity simply by being alive. An invisible strand keeps us connected to this web, which has no statute of spatial limitations.

The stars, are they not confetti? There is a direct relation between the number of them and the triviality of you. Squint your eyes. The constellation of a long slender hound appears, marking

the heavens more objectively than dippers or crabs or bowmen. Trace it with your finger. The dog glares as if perturbed by your discovery.

Perhaps the ancients didn't name him for a reason, or only spoke the name during ceremonies where his guidance was sought, his wrath placated. They looked to the stars and the stars looked back. What became of them? Survival was not among the blessings from this deity. Close your eyes and seize the earth. So solid. So flat and stationary. Your senses are liars and fools.

"What about those other universes William was talking about?" you whisper, assuming the fetal position. It worked once. "Screw it. All politics is local. As long as they aren't connected they don't dilute the significance of this one."

The hound in the sky continues to scowl, as he did before you were born, before all men were born.