

A misty, atmospheric landscape with a series of utility poles stretching into the distance. In the middle ground, there is a dark, skeletal structure that looks like a collapsed or partially constructed building. The overall tone is muted and somber.

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“Weather” from *The Devil’s Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce (1911).

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“You guys ever been to Disneyland?”

There’s no answer. Stevie’s a spring, the headwaters of a wild and indivertible river of words. There are signs, however, that the river has crested. His pauses have been getting longer. “You know those little rides they got for the little kids, like Mister Toad’s Wild Ride—”

“Dude, you are Mister Toad,” Keith says. “You’re fucking clucking like him.”

Stevie ignores this, and continues:

“—how they got those black lights or whatever they are and they make like your white t-shirts glow?” He spins around and looks across the expanse of lakebed they’ve already crossed. The almost-full moon is starting to settle toward a long, steep bank of mountains to the west behind them.

“Disneyland,” Lee grumbles.

“Look at how the lake is, the way the moon is hitting it makes it totally look, it totally looks like how it looks in—it’s like the moon is a black light or some shit. See? Doesn’t that look—”

“Fuck the lake. Fuck your fucking...wild ride, Stevie.” Keith takes a swig from the bottle of Baileys they pooled their money for earlier that night. He laughs, sort of.

Keith's getting a little anxious. They're an hour's walk from Cartago. Up ahead is just big, dark and empty clear past the Talc City Hills; a hundred miles of nothing just to get to the Death Valley road. "I didn't know it was this far. Fucking Toad. This is all probably just some fucked up dream you had. Oh, wait. I forgot. Your lurpy ass don't sleep."

Keith and Stevie have known each other since grade school, and have spent a fair amount of time together, there being few companionship options to choose from for either of them. 'Lurpy' goes back to a time when Keith could only comfortably attack at Stevie's physical characteristics. Stevie for his part never made the counter-assault. Not directly. He didn't have to. But Keith never stopped waiting for it.

"I gotta say, just... just for the record... toads don't cluck. That's chickens. Hens." Stevie half-sings, half honks: "Clucking hens/cluck all day—"

Lately Stevie's lifestyle choices have led him to adopt a sort of 'reach into the grab bag' approach to thinking, and Keith relishes his new advantage.

"Man? You're shot out. When are you gonna shut the fuck up?"

Dena laughs.

It's past midnight.

"Toads... croak—"

"Shit. All right, croak then. That works."

“–and hens cluck. But roosters... they crow. That’s trippy isn’t it... seems like crows should crow, but what... what do crows do again?”

“They sit on telephone poles and watch your sorry ass, fucking wander around talking to yourself.”

“Nah... that’s not it...” Stevie says casually, dismissively.

“Caw?” Dena suggests.

“Caw.” Like he’s trying it on. “Caw... I think you’re right. Caw...”

After a spell of silent trudging wherein the only sound is the low hiss of a breeze none of them can feel:

“...Crow, cluck, croak, caw...”

Silently, gradually they descend. Eventually they hit a sort of atmospheric boundary and the air around them abruptly drops in temperature. They step through it as if wading out beyond an invisible shoreline. They’re in the ghost of deep water now.

“We’re getting warmer. I swear.”

“Bull shit we are,” Lee says, rubbing his arms for emphasis.

“You ever wonder? How come if there’s such a thing as warm, like between cold and hot–”

“Ahh shit. Here we go–”

“–and if you start with something cold and add heat you say you’re making it warmer, like closer to quote unquote warm... but if you start with something hot and add cold

to get it closer to quote unquote warm, you know? You can't say you're—"

"Hey quote unquote dingleberry! Who quote unquote fucking cares," Keith barks. Not yet finished savoring his wit, he adds: "quote unquote douchebag."

The grunts of general concurrence compel Stevie back to bargaining.

"I'm telling you, you're going to trip. All you guys. You'll see."

"Motherfucker you're already tripping. Serious, you probably just hallucinated this shit. Then I'm gonna have to fuck you up. Watch."

Stevie isn't listening. He's watching his feet as they crunch over the salty crust of the dry lakebed. They are making their way around a small promontory and into a large bay. Because of the way the peninsula curls around its mouth, the bay can't be seen from the 395, or from Carthago for that matter. Likewise, the lights from the road and town are completely hidden from their view. They're alone.

"Okay, turn on the flashlight now."

Dena hands the flashlight to Stevie, who starts sweeping the spot of light around chaotically. It darts around on the surface like a particle.

"Give me that fucking thing!" Keith says, getting loud. "What the fuck you doing?"

"Hold on. I'm looking for the end of it. I don't want us to step on it."

Dena, sensing that the scene could use a note of hysteria:

“Step on it?! Step on what?”

“Look.” Stevie brings the light down to the area around their feet. The spot shakes in place, insect-like.

“See how the ground is so smooth here? No cracks or big pieces? See how it’s like paper almost? Come on this way.” He stomps over to where the shore once was, taking the light with him. The others follow. Dena takes a swig from the bottle.

“What were you doing here in the first place, Stevie?” she asks.

“You don’t– I don’t even want to go into that. Let me just find it first.” They follow the old shoreline, keeping the volcanic, sage-covered hills a few feet to their right. Stevie sweeps the light back and forth—from just in front of them out toward the middle of the bay—with a sort of fly-fishing motion. The moon falls out of sight as they walk, and the flash-lit spot grows brighter in contrast. After ten more minutes of hypnotizing and thoroughly frustrating the party with his spastic illuminating (while half-singing snippets of ‘The Seeker’ and just starting on ‘I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For’) Stevie finally yells:

“There it is. I see it.”

Keith exhales sharply.

“Uh... you better fucking see it,” he says.

“Hey I told you. You guys are the ones who didn’t believe me—”

“Chssshhh!” Lee puffs. “What am I looking at, dickweed?”

“Well? Look at it! You tell me.” Stevie twists the neck of the flashlight. The spot dims and spreads.

“I don’t see... no, yeah, I do see it!” Keith shouts.

“What did I tell you?” Stevie shouts back.

Soon they all start discharging in audible sparks the nervous energy they’d gathered during the trek.

“No. Fucking way...” Dena shouts.

“Way! Fucking A, right?”

“Who the...? What the?” Dena stammers; speechless-on-purpose. “Man-o Jeez-o...”

“Did you do this?” Lee shouts as he walks into the dry bay toward the oval of light, “on one of your speed binges?”

“Not even! I told you– Dude, you’re fucking stepping all over it! Look at your footprints!”

“So what? I don’t give a shit.” Lee keeps walking. But no one joins him, and Stevie takes the light away, so he gradually works his way back to the edge.

“All right, then. Well let’s, fucking... see how far this goes. It’s huge, huh? It looks like.”

“I bet it goes all the way to the end,” Stevie points the flashlight straight ahead of them, then attempts to focus on the spot in space where the beam gets digested by the darkness.

“I’ll take that bottle now, Dena.” Lee says. “All right

then!” he repeats, taking a hearty swig, “who’s got the weed?”

“My guy’s out.”

Keith spits.

“Fuck your guy. He ain’t ever out of crystal though, huh Stevie.” Keith allows a few seconds to pass, then slowly sighs, playing up the reluctant hero routine. “All right. You fucking leeches. I got something. Good a time as any I guess.” Keith unzips his jacket pocket and takes out a heavy-duty brass and steel pipe. “Flash that light over here, Mister fucking Toad.” Keith’s the man now. He unscrews the pipe, bisecting its abdomen, tears at something he finds inside, shoves that into the bowl, reassembles the pipe and hands it to Lee. “I’ve had this bud in my chamber for like, a month. It’s gotta be sick by now. But we’re walking and smoking, cause I got shit I got to do tomorrow. Shit. Today, I mean.”

“Me too.” Stevie adds.

“Shit... What are you worried about? Your ass don’t sleep, remember?”

Lee takes a hit and, without exhaling, says: “What do you got to do tomorrow, Keith? Watch the Price is Right?”

“Bitch, shut the fuck up! I got your Price is Right right here.” Keith grabs his crotch. “I’m talking about making some ducats.”

“Yeah right.”

“Yeah right.” Keith studies Lee for a second. Stevie came

through after all; time to lay off him and back into his usual foil.

“Maybe I’m thinking about getting with Esther—”

“All right Keith. Now you’re just being stupid.”

“—she’s got this fucking freeloader, living in her garage—”

“Shit.”

“—that she’s got to support. Buy him cereal, and fucking pop tarts—”

“Damn dude why do you got to get all personal. Shit’s twisted—”

“Oh right! Woops. That’s you, huh!”

“Man that’s cold blooded. Even you saying that is—”

“What? I’m just saying your mom’s fucking got it going on.”

“Whatever, Dude.”

Lee lives in his mother’s garage and, to Lee at least, there has always been a mystery surrounding how her (and, by extension, his) bills get paid. There’s the long sequence of ‘relationships’ she’s had; the interchangeable succession of truckers; the ‘visits’ of a few days, every few weeks or so, for a few months or so. Thought-wise, Lee keeps his mom’s situation in a perpetually unformed state. It’s an approach he takes with most things. Two years older than the others, Lee boasts a premature potbelly that he leads with when he gets riled up, like a sea elephant. When they’re together (which is most of the time), he generally prefers to let Keith

do the thinking.

Stevie winces as he takes a hit. Crude shit talking makes him uncomfortable, especially with a girl around. Even Dena. He passes her the pipe and watches her say, pipe in mouth: “You guys are retards. You know that, right?” cough, then choke “—oh my god this shit is strong, huh...”

Stevie has settled the light; as they walk it floats along next to them like a spectral tour guide. As they talk, they stare; as line after line of print tumble from the diffused, parabolic frontier of the light field to clarify themselves—briefly, at just perpendicular, into a neat, regular script—before peeling away and dissolving again behind them.

Stevie shoots for changing the subject. “I know man; you got to clean your pipe. There’s like a tar pit in there—”

“Dude. Let me clean it for you,” Lee says.

“Why? For the resin? You probably would, too. Fucking sponge.”

“What?” In the tone of someone defending a deeply held conviction, “Fuck yeah I would. I love resin. You know that.”

“You, motherfucker— ” Keith, exasperated, starts to say, before dismissing the subject, and Lee.

“Hey Stevie how’d you get that fucking gig washing cop cars or whatever the fuck you do over there? They got you mowing their lawn and shit?”

“I don’t know, it kind of fell in my lap—”

“Shit. Fell in your lap... you mean you fucking fell in Sergeant fucking Slaughter’s lap. Is that what I got to do, Stevie? Service Officer Dale’s fucking unit?”

“You’re such a fag, Keith. I swear to God,” Dena says.

“Maybe. Shit, I fucked you didn’t I?”

“Damn, dude.” Lee says quietly, gazing at Dena and hoping Keith doesn’t notice.

After an ugly little pause, Dena mumbles, “That what you call it?”

There’s another, longer silence as the pot takes hold. The black-on-black silhouette of the ridge line more and more noticeably closes in, nudging them with something like a gentle gravity in a radial arc toward what now feels to all of them like the top; or the beginning. But the words are upside down, and the end is their destination.

The bay has narrowed into a broad box canyon. The lines of print have gotten shorter, the letters smaller. After a few more minutes the words stop coming. They’ve reached the end. They stand still there, rapt in the visual silence. The backstop of black hills looms directly in front of them. They’re standing at what would be—if the bay were a giant printed page—its lower-right-hand corner. Stevie follows the last line with the flashlight. The print is only recognizable as such for a few feet before dissolving, but Stevie keeps following the line before settling the light on a dark form near what should be its middle.

“What the fuck is that?” Keith says, stressing ‘that’.

“What the fuck is that?” Stevie replies, stressing ‘is’.

“Is that a animal?” Dena asks.

“Maybe it’s a cougar.”

“Your mom—”

“Not that,” Stevie pleads. “Please. Besides, looks like it’s too dark to be a cougar.”

They head towards the form while Stevie keeps the light on it. The last line of print drifts by on their left, too dark to read.

“I know what that is! Holy shit.”

The form clarifies itself to them all, more or less simultaneously.

“What the heck, Stevie?” Dena says angrily.

“Is that a human?”

“Dude that’s a fucking body,” Keith says, stepping up a register. “Looks like it’s burnt or some shit.” Everyone looks at Stevie.

“Don’t look at me. Swear to God I never seen that before right now.”

“Let’s bail,” Keith says as he scans the huge, black piles of volcanic debris that box them in quickly, blindly, as if he’s expecting an ambush at any second. He spins.

“Yeah, fuck this noise. I’m out of here.” Lee chips in—

“You don’t want to check it out? We’re right here. We should—”

“Are you fucking crazy, Stevie?” Dena grabs the flashlight and points it at Stevie. Stevie tightens up like a worm that just got his rock pulled out from over him. He closes his eyes to slits. Dena shouts at him.

“We’re out in the middle of nowhere... in the middle of the night... with a dead body—”

“How do you know—”

“—and no idea who else is out here, I might add. And how’d you find this again?”

“He hasn’t said—”

“I know. He ain’t said shit.”

Stevie would like to tell them something; only he doesn’t know what to say. He can’t tell them how he just had a feeling. He would have to tell them how he spent all those hours—so many hours speeding while they slept. He’d have to admit to his thievery. Stolen time spent pacing around in that concrete bunker out where Lake Street dissolves into the trona, frantically staring through that blown-out window toward the lakebed, staring at that framed-like-a-projection-screen view that invariably conjured images of atomic test site buildings from the old military footage—of that split-second sucking pause, that freakish emptying between the brutal blur of the initial shock wave and the obliterating, transplanted-from-the-surface-of-the-sun tsunami, moving so insanely fast—of the blast... all the while scribbling his thoughts into a spiral notebook. He’d have to explain about how the parallel headlands that enclose or, maybe, embrace this bay are perfectly framed by that

rectangular hole-in-the-wall, and how if you stare at it long enough (kind of like those posters he'd seen at the mall in Tehachapi that just look like a design until, right when he'd get ready to give up on it, another image would emerge) it sort of reveals the space it is harboring, and how from that space he could have sworn he heard people, and lots of them? Now, would he believe that if he heard it?

Stevie ease the machine around the large rocky outcropping.

“You should get your camera ready, Candy. We’re coming in to it now.” Candy peers out at the moonlit bay; what she sees is acres of parallel lines tilled into the trona. She’s more confused than overwhelmed.

“You planted something out here?” she asks.

“Not me, but yeah. Somebody did. I’m more like harvesting.”

“What can you plant in salt?”

“Check it out.” They’ve reached Stevie’s ‘bookmark’: an orange peel marking his last night’s parking spot. He takes a hard left turn and cuts into the bay. The ATV rides the edge between read and unread as Candy points, films the rush of oncoming words. Stevie cuts the engine and they coast to where he left off earlier. Candy lights a cigarette and starts fiddling with the still camera.

“I don’t know what to say,” she says. “What is this?”

“Honestly? You got me. I found it the other night. They got me reading it into this here.” He pats himself on the back. He plugs in the mike cord. “With this.” He reaches for the mask, but it’s snug in Candy’s lap. He just points at it. “My invention. During the day it gets pretty nasty out

here.”

“Okay...” Candy responds. Suspecting she’s coming across as more narrow-minded than she intends, she almost chirps: “so this is the big secret.” She peers up and toward Cartago. She can’t see the town; only unread words that spread out wide and merge in the distance. Beyond that, the heavy clouds fingering their way through the peaks and ridges look just like a giant phosphorescent squid.

“Check that out,” she says, pointing with the mask that’s still connected to Stevie.

“Here. Let me see that real quick?” Stevie pulls the microphone from the mask. It makes a popping sound. “We don’t need this.” He addresses the clouds. They look to him like a wave crashing against a seawall, or opposing wave. Staring, he attempts to mimic the apparatus’ popping sound with his thumb and cheek.

“Whoah...” he replies at last. He turns to Candy. “Well, I could try to tell you about it or we could just start reading... or here... I could read and you could take pictures, or film or whatever. What do you want to do?”

“Yeah, let’s just start, I guess. I’ll just follow you with the camera. But wait. First,” she points at the mask, “think you can put that back together for a minute just so I can get some shots of you wearing it? It ought to look amazing out here.”

“Sure.” He does, and pretends to start reading as Candy figures out the lighting. Amazing, she said. After a minute he yells:

“Does it look amazing?”

“Yeah, that’s good.” Stevie dismantles the apparatus again and turns on the machine to start reading in earnest. Candy walks close behind him so she can listen while she shoots, and see what he’s reading as he reads it. The moon shines crisp in the clear eastern sky as Stevie begins:

...No one appeared to notice any of this, of course. I couldn't say how long we'd been standing there when finally the voice said, "Let's move on then. Ms. Donner?" Ms. Donner moved on. I was having a hard time paying attention to her. It was almost as if her volume had been turned down. She was saying something about editing songs for cheerleader competitions. Something about her days being broken up into two-minute, thirty-seconds-long episodes. Not a second more or less...

Someone had been staring at me ever since I finished my bullshit spiel. They wouldn't take their eyes off me; or, my eyes, rather. I decided to stare back, give them a taste of their own medicine. While I did that I started thinking about what I had just done. My mind seemed to have put itself back together. While not actually hearing my voice coming from the helmet it was a lot easier to imagine it all as some kind of trick. The exercise was obviously part of some sort of experiment, and God knows what they could be measuring. I hoped that I had put a wrench in their works. What did they expect, anyway? You got to be clear about your parameters. If you allow for a possibility then you got to accept it when it happens. So stick that in your equation! But then I wondered about the money.

I decided that, starting that evening, every day I would withdraw the daily maximum, figuring that if the whole thing goes up in smoke the smoke is likely to include my new bank balance.

At some point during Ms. Donner's ordeal I stopped listening. It was getting harder and harder to hear through the helmet, so I really had to strain to follow along. The stories ran together. I fell into a sort of narcotic trance, not feeling my head or back, not thinking anymore about how long I had been or was going to have to stand there on the stone floor. Not thinking anything, really. I was startled when the host voice broke through the drone.

"When I call your name, please exit by way of the escalator. You are free to go for the day. Any arrangements we have previously made concerning further communication should be adhered to. When you reach the exterior door you will find your shoes, bags, and so forth in an alcove marked to correspond with your position here. For example, if you are standing at A5, yours is alcove A5. Please place your helmet, as well as your slippers, into your designated alcove. Now then. We will do this alphabetically. Vroyer Arcasian..."

The dismissals were spaced a couple minutes apart, presumably to give the person leaving time enough to get out of their getup and back on the street without being recognized. I was grateful for my name being toward the front of the alphabet. I couldn't say what time it was, but I would have guessed around two-thirty. Everything else aside, the schedule was shaping up as one I could live with. I had forgotten how tense

I was, even in my stupor; I was only reminded of it by the sheer elation I felt as I descended the escalator. I could feel the dopamine permeate my nervous system. It felt (and almost tasted) like my brain was a thick pancake being drenched in warm, amber syrup. My gloves seemed to notice it too. They got warm and slightly tingly. I left them on as I made my way out of the compound. I was a little optimistic in my estimate of the time, but not by much. I had been instructed at some point to keep my phone turned off while 'at work', though I couldn't remember when that directive was given. It was three-thirty when I turned my cell phone back on. I was starving. The best time for whiskey, I thought. Close as you could get to slamming liquor. Then I thought: No. Let's not take that ride today. Let's get some carbohydrates in our system before we change our mind. And get that three hundred dollars out of the ATM before they change theirs. If they haven't already, that is. A nervous spasm hit my empty stomach. Time to find out if I screwed myself with that avocet business. It occurred to me that there was bound to have been someone in that room with enough related knowledge to know I was full of shit. And certainly he—'he!' knew. 'Now what did you have to do that for?' I scolded myself. 'You could have told them anything!' Then: 'now now, we don't know anything yet.' My gloves had gotten cold. I took them off and put them in my bag. I took my time walking down the hill, framing imaginary photographs as I went. No one else was on the road. No fat guy further down, no one coming up behind me as I loitered in spots along the way. I hoped that Hope would be in a 'take what you can get' mood towards me, and I could finally tell her about

what weird shit I'd been up to. And the money I was making. That meant no drinking. I reached the bottom of the hill. The idea of a civil, shameless conversation put a spring in my step. The spring lasted for a few blocks, but by time I reached the ATM I had myself worked up again; again convinced that there would be nothing there. Once again I let my anxiety fester for a minute before putting in my card, and savored it. What fucked-up games I play with myself! I even wondered, while standing there: Is there something I'm actually getting out of these games, this self-administered psychic harassment? A weapon for killing time, is that it? Is that all? I wondered: did these games even have a winner? And if they did, was it ever—ever!—me? I couldn't see how. Why, then...? And: couldn't a definition of a 'loser' be someone whose most private mental scenarios tend to play out as unwinnable? And: is that our core identity? Those private loops? Like some melody that gets played out, like so many cover songs, in our actions? Like some thought/action-equivalent to a genetic stamp?—... —that thought train was derailed the instant I saw my balance. The money was there. Okay. Back in the saddle. Now, time to get some grub. Maybe I'll buy a present for Hope, I thought; give her a pleasant surprise. Hmmm... What would she like? I couldn't think of anything. I decided to find a Chinese place that had sizzling rice soup and think it over while eating. Soup is good thinking food, I told myself. And who knows; maybe we'll end up going out to dinner or something. So keep some appetite, just in case. As of now, though, it's hard to think when you're running on fumes...

Just as that thought crossed my mind a cloud of exhaust

rolled up my torso to linger at my face. It came from a derelict onetime school bus, downshifting as it ground its way to a stop at the light. Barely blue in color, with a long stripe of house primer where the school's, or could've been a church's, name used to be. It rattled there in front of me like a neglected steam boiler. I took a look at the driver as I passed the accordion doors. The driver was a large, bald black man. I stared at him, wondering. He looked back at me, and we locked eyes for a few seconds until the light turned green and his right arm, with the surety of muscle memory, swung the gearshift into low. I stood and watched as the bus dragged itself through the intersection and shuddered to a stop across the street, bleating like a distorted tuba. A head and arm appeared out of one of the windows. It yelled at me, "Hey! You!" I pointed to myself. "Come here a second!" The arm made an exaggerated motion toward the bus. The voice was a woman's, and it was no squeal either. I jogged toward the bus. It dripped raw fuel from its tailpipe. I reached the window where the woman was. She had thick, tightly curled copper hair and large, glistening eyes. She squinted slightly, smiling, and said "Hey did you come from—" She turned around and asked someone I couldn't see something I couldn't hear. Then, back to me: "—up there?" She pointed in a random direction.

"I did..." I said.

"We're going to go get something to eat. You want to come with?"

The doors opened with a loud 'pssshhhh' and the bus bowed down slightly, camel-like.

“You guys came from up there, too?” She nodded. “What were you thinking? ...about food, that is?”

“Well Curtis said he knows a good barbecue place down by the Coliseum.”

“Hmmm...” I rarely ate meat, and most barbecue places didn’t have many other options. Even the vegetables usually had meat in them. “Aww, what the hey. Why not?”

I climbed onto the bus. Curtis nodded at me. He still had his gloves on.

“Hey. How you doin’?” I said, nodding back.

“I’m doing. Hop abuh-board.”

“Thanks.”

I turned to take a seat. Most of the seats had been removed. There was a set where the curly-haired woman sat, and another set opposite those. A young woman occupied both seats of the opposite set. She had her feet up on the inside seat, and she stared out the window like she’d been on the bus for days. At the very back of the bus was a vinyl-upholstered bench. It was empty. There was brown carpet covering the floor; on the carpet two men sat cross-legged. One of them was the guy with the earlobes from the day before, and the other was the smart-ass in the turban. I said “howdy” as I took a seat on the floor, not looking at anyone in particular but rather taking in the overall scene. The paneling had also been removed from the interior of the bus, leaving all the support bracing exposed on the upper walls and ceiling, and making the bus look even older than it actually was, like something from the industrial

revolution. The smell, a mix of pressboard and gear oil, added to that effect. “So,” I said, leaning against a diamond-plated wheel well, “I’m Dave.” The two male passengers looked at me, deliberating whether or not to speak. The girl continued to stare out the window.

The curly-haired woman broke the short silence. “I’m Sophie. And that over there is, um, June.” June moved her head slightly in our direction. And, Amin—”

“Amen,” the turbaned guy said. “Not Ay-men. Abhmen.”

“And, Deiter, right? I got that right; right?”

“Hey hey.”

“Hey.”

“Deiter.” Sophie repeated. “Deiter. Even I couldn’t forget a name like that. That’s cool! That, is that German?”

“What about Amen?” Deiter asked, deflecting the question. “Is that like the prayer? No offense, but do Muslims say Amen?”

“I believe Muslims say Ameen, if I remember right. You should ask a Muslim. But to answer your other question: No. Not like the prayer. Amen’s not my full name. It’s an abridgement.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry dude. Duh. Muslims don’t wear turbans. I knew that. But abridgement for what, if I might ask?”

“Amenhotep.”

“Whoa. Right... Like the Pharaoh. That’s pretty intense.”

“Yep.”

“He was just over at the De Young, you know. The museum. I—”

Stevie turns back toward Candy. She smiles and says: “Weird.” Stevie smiles back. He should really be writing this down, but how’s he going to—? And what would happen if he told her about the body? Not now. Maybe later. He turns back around and continues:

Arriving to mingle with the pressboard and oil came the smell of patchouli. It crept up my nose. Patchouli was funny to me. When some people wore it it smelled gamey, like animal sweat. And it always smelled like dirt. And gamey dirt is close enough to a description of shit; so I generally considered myself not a fan of patchouli. But sometimes, when certain people wore it, it could smell like a meadow, basking in the sun. Sophie was one of those people. She said:

“So what do you think?”

“Oh, Jesus. I think I ought to get some food in my system before I start thinking.”

“I hear you Dave,” coming from Curtis. “You like ’cue, Dave? You like ribs?”

Actually I’m kind of a, well, I don’t really eat meat, but that’s all right—”

“Well, you like catfish?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure, catfish—?”

This place we going they got catfish; whooo, Dave! ...gonna knock you right out of your skips...

“Is that right?” Drawn out, maybe more than I normally would. “Dynamite!”

The bus had no suspension to speak of, and we rattled around in it as it groaned and clattered through the Oakland streets. Curtis’ big, bulbous AM radio was transmitting ‘I Want to Make It With You’ through what looked like drive-in movie speakers. He didn’t have the volume up enough to pick up whatever bass might have been in the original signal, and a lot of the mid range remained trapped within the metal speaker boxes. That left only a foil-y sizzle of high end to buzz around the bus’s hull. No one seemed to know where to take the conversation. More small talk suddenly felt inappropriate, even rude, somehow; and as far as a serious discussion was concerned there was no easy or even sensible place from which to launch that. So we all sat and listened to those mildly sleazy whisperings in silence, mostly avoiding each other’s gazes. We made our way out of a residential area and into the industrial part of town. We weaved around and under various off ramps, overpasses, and freight trestles. Curtis described tiny conductor-baton motions with the first two fingers of his left hand—his left thumb hooked at high noon over the wheel—as he drove. We bucked our way over dead railroad tracks and rattled through reverberating corridors of corrugated steel, and inched our way along alleys lined with semi trailers. Finally we stopped in front of a worn-out, asbestos-shingle-covered Victorian duplex. It was tucked between a scrap yard and a day-old bakery outlet. The house was set back from the

street and was surrounded by a chain link fence. The fence was woven with fiberglass strips so you couldn't easily see through it. Curtis led us through the gate.

"Ayyy! There he is!" A man in overalls smiled from behind a wall of rising smoke—it looked like an inverted waterfall—pouring from the bank of oil drum grills that surrounded him. He gave a friendly wave with his huge, sharpened fork. A few weathered picnic tables were scattered around on the gravel in front of him. The only plant life I could see came from a tub of corn sitting just outside the door to the house.

"How you been Bubba! How those hands of yours?" Curtis walked up to the man. The rest of us followed, more or less in single file.

"This here's Mr. Daniels," Curtis said. "He's the pitmaster. You just tell him what you want. Dave, you go in that door there. She's gonna set you up with some fish. Three different bu-bu-batters to choose from, Dave. You like snapper?"

I told him I did, but I'd probably go for the catfish.

"Don't tell me. Tell Mrs. Watkins, inside there. Do it up, Dave. I'm a rib-b man myself."

"Gotcha." I went to the door and peeked inside. An old woman was sitting at a little chrome dining table playing clock solitaire. She looked up at me. "What can I get for you, baby?" she asked. I inched forward.

"Umm..."

"Step on in here where I can see you!" she scolded me, "don't be shy." I did as she told me.

"This is where I get catfish?"

"What kind of mud you want him in?" she asked, pointing to the big white bowls next to the fryer.

"I'm sorry?"

"You want him nice and juicy on the inside, don't you?"

I told her I did.

"Okay then. You want the cornmeal batter. Keeps it nice and juicy on the inside. You outside?"

"As far as I know. No; yeah I am."

"Go on and sit down then. He'll bring it out to you. You gonna want something to drink? A beer or a Coke?"

"I think I'll have a...beer."

"Tell him outside then that you want a beer."

"You mind if I wash my hands?"

"Go right ahead! Use that sink right there. Just don't touch nothing."

After scouring the gasoline residue from my palms, I walked outside with an eye out for 'him.' The rest of my party was sitting at a table with styrofoam plates of ribs and sliced wheat bread already spread out in front of them. A man was orbiting the table, dropping off cans of beer. Each can wore a flimsy plastic cup like a comedy-drunk wears a lampshade. As I walked up to the table I heard Deiter say to the man:

"Could you not call me boss, please?"

I sat down and asked if I could get one of those beers as

Deiter glowered at his food. "Damn," he told it. Deiter seemed to have a hard time relaxing. I'd noticed that about him the day before. One of those guys who's always out to prove something to the world, but can never quite pull it off. I put him at about twenty-five. He looked up at me; suspicious. That's cool, I thought. There's plenty to be suspicious about. Just pick your battles, though...

"You asked about my name." I was in the middle of asking the beer guy for a beer, so I held up my finger as if to say 'hold on a sec...'. He narrowed his eyes. I let him wait.

"Wasn't me." I said, finally. Then, deciding it'd be best not to encourage his persecution complex, I added: "I think she did." I pointed at Sophie, who looked up at us.

"It means 'army of the people,'" he yelled.

"What does?" Sophie asked through a rib.

"Deiter."

"Oh yeah? Deiter does, really? Huh..."

"Yup. I—"

"The Germans?" June asked.

"Huh? Naw, It's just 'the People', you know? Like—" he held up his fist, palm-side out, "power to—"

"German, right?"

"And that has to do with anything...how?"

"Take it easy, Deitruh." Curtis said. "Buh-buh-be a gentleman, now. She's just asking you a question."

"You don't like Germans?" the girl asked.

“I don’t—” Deiter stopped himself, looked up at the sky and smiled a frustrated smile.

My fish arrived on a slice of wheat with a side of cole slaw and a squirt bottle of hot sauce. I took a bite and looked over at Curtis. He had taken off his gloves to eat, and I could finally see his hands. I was half-expecting them to be strange and delicate, somehow out of proportion. They weren’t. They were substantial. However, they did seem to possess a certain sensitivity. They had presence; maybe you could even say they emoted. I looked around at the rest of the party. Everyone but me had gotten ribs, and their hands were all covered in sauce. But Curtis kept his hands clean. He ate with skill and casual concentration, yet he dispatched his plateful of ribs faster than anyone else at the table. My fish was very good, particularly when I added the hot sauce. It was juicy. After a few minutes of our slurping, punctuated with regularly spaced “mmm”s and “oh, this is soo good”s, Amen spoke.

“So what do we say about this interview thing.”

“What, you mean the little experiment they’re doing on us?” June said, her words looping spookily in the air. She looked up as she spoke, and as she did I got my first good look at her. Her face was framed by a perfectly symmetrical, perfectly black bob hairdo complete with bangs she must’ve used a ruler to cut, and her already pallid skin was complemented by white eye shadow and lipstick to produce an almost solarized effect. While she wasn’t unattractive, she was repellent in a studied sort of way; her decision, in other words. Her nose and ears were almost translucently pink.

“You think that’s all it is?” Sophie asked, dipping her sleeve into her sauce as she leaned forward. “Let me ask you guys are you getting paid already? Cause I got like, money, put straight into my bank account. And that was for...?” In her body language “I don’t know” looked like an imitation of a rising muffin.

“Yeah... how much?” Deiter asked. She looked at him. We all looked at her.

She raised her eyebrows and kept them there. “All right, you guys. Let’s do this. If you got... Why don’t we on the count of three let’s all say the amount of money we all got yesterday. You want to? Just to get it out of the way?” I nodded ‘sure’ uncertainly. She continued, “I haven’t checked today so just for yesterday, okay?” She looked around again. “Yeah? On three. One. Two. Not on three, but after. Onetwothree then GO... Okay? One?... twooo?... three—” Sophie, along with Curtis, June, Deiter and myself, croaked “thousand” or “a thousand”; although Deiter waited an extra beat before chiming in and added “dollars” at the end. “Dollars” hung in the air. Amen remained silent.

“Oh, no!” Sophie laughed. “You’re not going to say how much you got, Amen?”

“I didn’t say I got anything.”

“Well... okay. But did you?”

“I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to say. Anyway what’s the point? I was specifically warned about...talking about this stuff, as I’m sure you all were too, am I right?”

“By who?” June grimaced at him. “The guy up there? Dude, maybe you’re into freaky authority trips or whatever, but that’s on you. Fuck that guy. I’m sorry, but we’re not in his little lair right now. Maybe you—”

“Well look,” I said diplomatically. “You obviously got paid something.”

“So you’re really not going to say?” asked Sophie again.

“Now, that’s you asking us do we want to talk,” Curtis mused. “And here you don’t want to say anything to us at all. Come on, now?”

“I didn’t know we were going to start out talking about THAT,” Amen said defensively. “See? And now here you all are, pressuring me. Just like...but you know what? Fiiine. I got a thousand dollars too. Everybody happy now? Like it matters? We all could be lying. Who’s to say?” He corkscrewed, looking for the beer man.

“You’re right. But honestly why would it make any difference to me what you guys got,” I said. “What’s that going to change for me? If you think about it, none of us got any reason to lie.”

Amen leaned back in his chair and looked at me. “And you’re the ‘avian veterinarian’, right? Wasn’t that you?” I stared at him. I could feel my eyelid twitching. “Uh huh,” he said sarcastically. “I know you—”

I made a quick decision. “That’s not right,” I said, struggling not to break eye contact. “I’m a substitute teacher.” He winced.

“YOU are?” Sophie asked, shaking her head. “Didn’t you say your name was—”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said with a big hint of desperation. “But that’s the truth. I am a, or maybe I should say I was a sub—”

“You know what.” June said. It wasn’t a question. “Who really gives a shit. I mean, seriously. What about all the weird shit they got us doing in there? Like those masks, for instance. What? The. Fuck! And that creepshow doing his fucking psychoanalyzing...ucchh. Psycho is right! I’m assuming you guys had your own little chats last night?” I nodded. “I mean, I’m almost like ‘is it even worth it?’!”

“Almost, right?” I said. I smiled.

“Hey, Guy,” she said in a chilly mock-laid-back sort of way, “maybe for you it’s different—”

Candy laughs.

“Stevie, I think it’s ‘guy,’” rhyming guy with eye.

“Oh right,” he replies sheepishly. “You getting bored yet?” He turns around. “How are you doing; you getting bored yet?”

“I’m good. I was just looking at those clouds.”

“I know, huh?”

“You want to take a break soon?”

“Yeah. Five minutes?”

“That’s fine.”

“I mean in five minutes...” She gives him a thumbs-up and takes his picture. He smiles.

“Okay cool. So yeah. Right. Guy.”

“Hey, Guy.” she said in a chilly mock-laid-back sort of way, “maybe for you it’s different. Well,” assessing me, “maybe for you it’s not. But still, for a young person? Sorry, but a thousand bucks a day is a lot of fucking money.” I had made my comment in the spirit of camaraderie, or at least of complicity, but she chose to—and intentionally, it seemed to me—misconstrue my meaning. I shrunk back into my beer. It was my own fault, I reminded myself. Forgetting who I was and was no longer. I spent more thoughts than I cared to think about in peering back at the purpling shoreline of my youth, trying not to lose its contours. It was easy to lose perspective doing that, and forget how small I must look from that shore. I stared down at the table as she continued: “Seriously, though; could it get any weirder?”

“It can always get weirder,” Curtis said mysteriously. “But I hear you. Makes no difference if Dave here’s full of you-know-what.”

“I’m not, though,” I said. “I really am—”

“Anyways,” Deiter playing catch-up, addressing Amen, “didn’t you say you were a—”

“I have a degree in veterinary medicine,” Amen, wide-eyed, cut him off, “if that’s what you’re going to say. A real one.” He looked at me quizzically, a little wetly. “And I actually DO

specialize in birds. How's about that? But not in, what was it you said? Avocets?" He grunted an abortive laugh. "Vaccinations!" Then, still looking at me, "I would like to know where you pulled that out of—"

I grunted too. "You... you guys really want to know? I'll tell you. I just totally made it up! But you know what, man?" I looked back at Amen. "Total coincidence. I don't know you from Adam. I don't know what to tell you. Anyways, you guys were in that room! I mean, come on! Was that supposed to matter to me? Who was I even talking to in there?" I stopped to catch my breath and draw the last foamy remains of my beer. When I resumed speaking it was in a less desperate, more conversational tone: "Can I tell you why?"

"Be my guest," Amen said dryly, wetly.

"Remember the teacher by any chance? He spoke just before me? Like just before? Well his story was pretty much identical to what mine would've been. I swear to God. I felt like it would have sounded like, I don't know... it would've sounded like I was copying him if I tried to tell the truth—"

"And you think he was telling the truth?" Deiter asked with rhetorical flourish.

"Hub? Hell if I know. But why do you ask?"

"Nothing. I don't know. It's just that... well it's kind of obvious isn't it? What do you think was going on with those helmets we were wearing?"

"Okay?" boomed Curtis, "That was hands down the most—" raising his hands for emphasis, "—you go on, Deiter. I think I

got a feeling what you're driving at."

"Really? Wow." Deiter went on, "Well, you can probably tell by looking at me, I mean, I've seen my share of weird shit. No offense, but you guys really have no idea." He took his head in his hands and twisted it with a sudden violent jerk. His neck crackled. June rolled her eyes. "But nothing even close to that shit for just straight like 'is that even possible?' kind of thing, right? Where was I going with this...? Oh, right. Okay, you know how we saw our own face whenever we looked at somebody else?" Grunts of assent all around. "And all that other stuff? Could that have been all that was going on? Like what... like just a super elaborate parlor game? Maybe so. I don't know..."

"Don't stop now," Curtis urged him. "I feel you."

"Yeah," June added. "But please; hit the bullseye."



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