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Passbook

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PASSBOOK

by

Mark R. Brand

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in English

at

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ABSTRACT

PASSBOOK

by

Mark R. Brand

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017
Under the Supervision of Associate Professor Liam Callanan

Passbook is a nostalgic novel that considers the meaning of love and family on the edge of a post-mortal near future. As the era of austerity enters its third decade, a social media platform—the eponymous Passbook—allows the living to interact with the dead, and changes the landscape of longevity forever. Wyatt Simmons, a young underemployed college graduate, finds himself locked out of the American Dream by suppressed wages, strangled career opportunities, and overwhelming debt. While coping with the un-deaths of his mother and sister, and estrangement from his financially-comfortable careerist father, Wyatt perseveres in a dissatisfying relationship of necessity with his long-time girlfriend Sara Grayson, and uses what little money he can scrounge to try and catapult himself into the spotlight of the Lego Corporation, his dream employer. At work, he meets Pepper Boswick, a wisecracking children’s clothing store salesperson by day and a legendary professional gamer by night, and the two of them hatch a plan to bust Wyatt, and his grand Lego project, out of Sara’s apartment. Meanwhile, a shadowy figure named Kilroy—half internet-age demagogue, half mad-genius—has his own plans for Wyatt’s generation and the gridlocked gerontocracy of Passbook.

The novel operates in a tragic-comedic mode, with elements of both satirical-nostalgic humor and profound disillusionment. Rather than make the easy jab at generational conflict and us-vs.-them thinking, Passbook enmires Wyatt in a shifting tangle of duty to his family (many of whom are “Posterity” users of Passbook, meaning they are deceased and therefore functionally immortal), to his own generation (friends, coworkers, and girlfriends, who he most relates to) and to himself (in the form of a hopeless struggle to grow up in a world of work that seems not to need or want him). Wyatt’s relationship with his father takes center-stage in the novel’s second half, as his work- and love-lives collapse around him, and force him to confront his grievances, some real and some imagined, with the man, the family, and to an extent the larger era that raised him.

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To Beth and John

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INTRODUCTION

Tweets of the Living Dead: Christian Metz, Visual Metonymy, and Metonymic (Im)mortality

1.

In February of 2012, I wrote a 7-page treatment of the story that would eventually become this novel. I'd just finished reading Katsuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and was struck by the way the narrator spoke toward the end about her friends as though they might care, long after their deaths, what she thought of them. Ruth and Tommy, you will recall, are born, raised, and destined to be harvested for their organs, which then blurs the line between life and death for the narrator, whose friends merit a kind of deferred grief discrete from the death of their bodies: death as distended, fractured, incomplete, and interminable.

The conceit of *Passbook* emerged from a particularly vulnerable moment in my life. Three years earlier, in 2009, I was laid off from a well-paying job in the medical field and was unemployed for nearly six months during the worst phase of the joblessness of the Great Recession. I found work eventually, but only hourly and contract work at about half of my former income. I had a two-year-old child in expensive daycare at the time and my overpriced condo, like every other overpriced condo in the Chicago suburbs, was suddenly worth far less than my wife and I owed for it. By November 2011, the fight we staged to keep our home was hopeless; with our last \$1000 we hired a lawyer to file bankruptcy.

Passbook was born four months later in the weird post-bankruptcy-filing limbo, while a series of court documents slowly described the process to us of our home being foreclosed

on. Until the day we filed, neither my wife nor I had ever missed a payment on a loan, credit card, car note, or our mortgage. Now we looked frantically for an apartment that would rent to a family in bankruptcy, and contended with especially-humblng new sanctions like finding a bank that would deign to let us have checking accounts and cataloging our furniture and wedding bands in a list of things a court-appointed agent might try to repossess from us.

During all of this, social media was becoming a prominent feature in our lives. My extended family and friends were more available than ever on the internet, but further away physically and emotionally. Text messages, tweets, and Facebook updates were inadequate replacements for the presence of actual family and friends during these hard months and years. My friends were spread around the country fighting their own battles; my family in New York where I grew up might as well have been on the moon. My parents were nearing 60, working in Recession-proof jobs protected by seniority and largely oblivious to the challenges my generation endured. They and others in their age cohort used Facebook to proudly share their home improvements, vacations, cresting career achievements, and strategies for rich retirement payouts anticipated when they finally decided to stop working. Meanwhile my generation—friends and family my age, writer colleagues, and even co-workers in the supposedly stable medical field—lived in an alternate universe of precarity, suffering layoffs, foreclosures, bankruptcies, divorces, broken families, and in the worst cases, depression, addiction, and suicide.

It was in the middle of all of this that the interminable loss I sensed in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and the backdrop of this age-keyed class-war broadcast on Facebook sparked the idea of *Passbook*. *What if*, I considered, horrified, *the groups who escaped all of this by virtue of being older and more financially secure, or otherwise just being in the right place at the right*

time, then somehow figured out how to make this last for decades? By 2009, we were already hearing about how the financial meltdown of 2007-2008 would have long-term and potentially permanent consequences for people my age, and demographic think-pieces and op-eds about “aging Baby Boomers” and “screwed Millennials” had begun to proliferate around that time. These hinted that the final punctuation point of my parents’ generation would be a spectacular phase of mortality, amplified by their oversized cultural footprint and their sheer numbers. *But what is death in a Facebook world?* I wondered. And then, *what if they found a way to cheat the third act, and be in the economic catbird seat forever?* Like Ishiguro’s narrator morosely wondering if her friends were still “alive,” I began to wonder if the living, breathing people on the other end of my Facebook feed could be thought of as “alive” in some new, interminable way that was making my own personal Great Recession feel exponentially worse.

Passbook, then, began as a story about the fracturing of perception that social media inspires during uncertain times. The plot of the first treatment superficially mirrored the age-keyed class-war: a young man can’t find work and is “haunted” by social media “ghosts;” a cohort entrenched in immortality who, as the demographers predicted, ultimately “die” all at once when the new platform fails, triggering a wave of deferred grief over how distant and disconnected social media had allowed everyone to become from each other. In this barebones plot arc, I was working through the idea that the real cost of the Great Recession wouldn’t be measured in lost careers, shattered personal lives, reduced living standards, and shortened life expectancies; instead the real cost would be the time we’d lost with the people we loved, how the age-keyed class-war had driven us apart in both affect and geography, and how we’d all been convinced that social media was a suitable panacea. It would be years

before I had the critical language to articulate this in more nuanced terms, but in the meantime I continued to expand the story to novel-length, adding a full cast of characters, a love interest for the protagonist and a subplot about his pipe-dream to be a designer for the LEGO corporation. I developed an oblivious, gerontocratic generation of older adults whose seniority (via digital immortality) had lifted them safely beyond the ravages of the now three-decade-long Recession, and a nebulous anti-villain named Kilroy who would be the catalyst of the reckoning to come.

2.

One way to know that you're onto something as a science fiction writer is when parts of your ideas start to come true. In 2013, a Twitter app called LivesOn went live, purporting to acquire via algorithm the social media habits of its users, and then, after their eventual death, continue posting and behaving online as they would have. The app's subtitle is "LIVESON: Your Social Afterlife" and the site's tagline is "After your heart stops beating, you'll keep tweeting." The app can update a deceased user's Twitter profile, post tweets on behalf of the deceased, and even befriend new users.¹ This shade of digital immortality became part of *Passbook* in later drafts in the form of the protagonist's mother Molly Simmons, a sort of halfway-Passbook user called an "algo" (pejorative shorthand for algorithm). More than just the plausibility bridge to true Passbook Posterity that the story needed, Molly's awkward artifice serves as a periodic reminder of the artificiality of Passbook as a whole. Consequently, I think Wyatt's conflicted relationship with her is more conceptually interesting than if she was a perfectly-preserved simulacrum, as in the earliest drafts.

But *Passbook* isn't just about clever simulacra, it's a vision of mundane, lived-in digital immortality, and for that I needed a foundational language to describe its tricks of perception, representation, and signification. I wrote an op-ed essay for *The Weeklings* later in 2013 titled "Are You Dead, or Just Not on Facebook?" about how strange it is to encounter profiles on social media of people who have died and whose Facebook or Twitter accounts continue to garner comments, photo tags, and various check-in linkages with the accounts of living users. Also unnerving at times, I wrote, are people who don't have a social media presence at all, and thus seem like odd "reverse-ghosts."²

In August 2015, I was listening to a podcast hosted by Ben Tanzer, a Chicago writer friend of mine, as he interviewed James Tadd Adcox, then a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Program for Writers. During this interview, Adcox ruminated on the merits of so-called "branding" and self-promotion and he recalled an overheard conversation in a coffee shop about the same eerie quality of people who don't have a social media presence that I mentioned in my essay:

Does he have a website? No. Does he have a Twitter handle? No. Does he have a Facebook profile? No. Then he's basically a ghost. I had this moment where I realized: to be a physical being without an internet presence is now a ghost. Our metonymic presence on the internet *is* the reality . . . The ghost now is the person who does not leave a metonymic trace electronically. This is the age of metonymy; we see what's going on in someone's Facebook profile, we see what they're saying on Facebook, and we take that for the person.³

I contacted Adcox and told him I'd listened to the podcast and I was keenly interested in the term "metonymy," he'd used. Where had he found it? Was it an established theory? He

replied that it was something he was interested in as well, but didn't recall beyond a brief mention in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book *Metaphors We Live By*, which I located and traced to the linguistic theory in Roman Jakobson's famous essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances." In it, Jakobson posits that the essential functions of language are selection and combination, and that metaphor and metonymy are byproducts (what Metz later calls "super-figures") of this system of signification.⁴ I sensed I'd finally found the conceptual language for this novel that I'd been looking for, but as I had only these early leads to go on, and I was involved by this point in other critical research, I had to put this line of inquiry on hold to pursue later.

I didn't have long to wait, in October 2015, I spotted the term again in a 1985 essay by Christian Metz titled "Photography and Fetish." In it, Metz uses metonymy to describe the forms of representation inherent in photography and film.⁵ I excitedly brought this usage to the attention of Jason Puskar, who agreed that Metz's usage of the term was unclear and under-examined, and helped me trace Metz's metonymy to its semiotic roots, refining how it might describe the qualities of representation inherent to social media that make a story like *Passbook* seem plausible.

This was challenging for two reasons: first, Metz threaded his theory of visual metonymy through many of his essays and major works over decades and never all at once or in any one text. Secondly, Metz privileges film over the photograph in much of his theory, using Charles S. Peirce's older term *indexicality* to describe photography, and *metonymy* to describe film. To settle on a vocabulary for my own book, I set out to resolve the differences in terminology and the degree to which photographs and film (both of which have qualities relevant to a discussion of social media) are indexical or metonymic. I reasoned that a more

convincing consensus among critics about the semiotic status of the photograph (including Jakobson, Lakoff and Johnson, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Walter Benn Michaels) points to metonymy as the more correct term. This is both more internally consistent to Metz's own theory and central to understanding social media as being capable of metonymic representation. Below is my reasoning, in brief.

3.

Metz begins by granting that written languages work according to Jakobson's "twofold character of language:"⁶ written languages have a *lexeme*, a unit called a word, that can be selected from a pool of available words, and then put into an order that makes meaning. In order to be considered a language, both selection and combination must occur. The selection part of this process is called *paradigm*, and the combination (ordering) of the selected words is called *syntagm* (terms Metz borrows from Ferdinand de Saussure).

Metz then uses these terms and definitions to tackle the substitutive, linguistic "super-figures" *metaphor* and *metonymy*. These operate on the level of perception, between the referent and the figure, not the figure itself.⁷ This is why someone can say "she's just a pretty face," and we can interpret it as we do. The formal layer (what Metz calls the "discursive" layer) is what the sentence says the subject is, creating a contiguous comparison on the level of syntagm (combination) of a woman to her face. Since a face is part of a person, the comparison is metonymic (metonymy, is a part-for-whole figural substitution). Likewise, a person *is* their face in a referential, extra-discursive sense. Lakoff and Johnson explain this in *Metaphors We Live By*, arguing that if we cannot see a person's face, we often feel

uncomfortable saying that we have “seen” them.⁸ This is what Metz calls the “referential” layer, and equating the woman with her face in that sentence additionally operates “between” the discourse and the referent. This is a true metonymy “in terms of a metonymy,” according to Metz’s “four-term homology.”⁹ Whether on the discursive or referential layers, tightly “contiguous” substitutions are *metonymic*, while loosely “comparable” substitutions are *metaphoric*.¹⁰

Metz accomplishes these abstract gymnastics in service of a theory of film. Film, he argues, is capable of metaphor and metonymy because film can be interpreted using the same linguistic framework. Film does not have a *lexeme*, a unit equivalent to a word, but it is selective and combinative, a form “too obviously a message for one not to assume that it is coded,”¹¹ and it has frames that follow one another in interpretable *syntagm*. Since the images are necessarily selected from a pool of predictable sense-making options (the composition of a single frame, as opposed to a single word) this creates *paradigm*. As such, film has a set of formal features analogous to written words, a *kind* of language, rather than a discrete language system.¹² He then interprets some filmic forms as capable of the linguistic super-figures: metaphor and metonymy.

Problematically, however, Metz sees photographs as *indexical* rather than metonymic, which is to say that the photograph isn’t just a part-for-whole substitutive figuration, but that there’s a concrete causal linkage, a “trace” or “impression” of the referent in the photograph (presumably light particles on an emulsion), rather than just Jakobson’s looser metonymic term “contiguity.” Two photographs arranged in sequence, like a photobook or frames of a motion picture, must tell something because they accomplish that crucial syntagmatic function, but a single photograph, argues Metz, tells nothing.¹³

There is some disagreement about this. Jakobson, Metz, and Lakoff and Johnson broadly agree that metonymy outside of rhetoric and the written word is possible, but Godard and Gorin, like Metz, call the photograph “physically mute.”¹⁴ Jakobson fastidiously avoids theorizing the photograph in favor of painting and cinema, and Metz seems to settle on photographs being incapable of metonymy by virtue of being asyntagmatic, claiming that the photograph is either mute or is an incomparable language system, a “very old and very distant second cousin” to film.¹⁵ Susan Sontag complicates this in *On Photography* in 1977 with her discussion of the impossibility of fixing meaning to a photograph, and she and Walter Benn Michaels theorize a different sort of storytelling whereby photographs can transcend their muteness.¹⁶ Sontag also suggests a lexical capacity of the photograph, which is to say the capacity for satisfying Jakobson’s selection and combination criteria when she writes, “In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are.”¹⁷ Unlike a film, which Metz insists is so obviously syntagmatic, the photograph’s singular-ness, its static representation, “imprisons reality” according to Sontag, something approximating a frozen, single moment of formal discourse. Still, Sontag’s equivocation of photographic composition to Metz’s coded, filmic lexicon suggests, *contra* Metz, that the two perhaps aren’t different enough to warrant separate theories of part-for-whole substitutive signification, and what it boiled down to, for me, was the degree to which either form could tell a story.

Because films commonly tell stories, the story *becomes* the language of the film that accompanies its images, much more straightforwardly than the formal discursive elements themselves. Metz insists, “one understands the syntax [of formal filmic characteristics]

because one has understood, and only because one has understood, the film.”¹⁸ For Metz, Eisenstein’s montage works because the narrative of the film supports it, and because eventually repeated exposure to montage becomes syntactically self-supporting. Which is to say: first we interpret the montage by way of the narrative, but eventually we become adroit at interpreting the narrative through the montage. But what, then, of the photograph? Does a photograph’s form borrow from this internal narrative reinforcement as well? Roland Barthes and his antiphon of “look” and “see” from the opening pages of *Camera Lucida* (1980) seem to suggest it does. “Show your photographs to someone,” writes Barthes, “and he will immediately show you his—‘Look at this, this is my brother, this is me as a child.’”¹⁹ Not this *was* me, but this *is* me. Barthes asserts that the photograph is *never* anything but the antiphon. For him, the photograph not only calls out to its viewer on the level of form, it cannot do otherwise.

“This is me as a child,” the phrase which accompanies the call, is an attendant narrative metonymic figuration that complicates the problematically-abstract syntagmatic properties of the photograph. This is why I argue that the photograph *can* insert itself between the formal object and the referent (I do not think it always does). The metonymic figuration exists, in Metz’s hierarchy of metonymy, in complication between the formal object and the referent. The syntagm remains on the level of form. The photograph itself is contiguous to the referent in a mundanely syntagmatic way, but the implied (or explicit) statement “This [photograph] is me as a child,” is a contiguity inserted between the photograph-object and the referent, which operates, as Metz suggests it must, on the level *of* the referent. Combined with its mundane, syntagmatic discursive contiguity, it forms a metonymy in terms of a metonymy.



Figure 1: Photograph of Child

Let's try that once more from the beginning: in Metz's reckoning, the image above with no further contextualization is simply a paradigmatic/syntagmatic signification on the level of discourse. It has no "positional" contiguity because it has no sequence, but it has "spatio-temporal" contiguity to stand for formal evidence of Jakobson's linguistic combination and selection.²⁰ In other words, it displays formal elements chosen along lines of common theme and device that Sontag and Michaels theorize as a type of intermediate formal story: it's taken out-of-doors in adequate light, it maintains a predictable depth of field, the subject is centered in the photograph, carefully distanced from the background and foreground of the image, and the photographer has chosen a moment where the subject is smiling to take the snapshot. It may or may not have a discernable intrinsic narrative (first day of school?—new sneakers to show off?), but it displays discursive, if not referential contiguity. If I were to then, in Metz's reckoning of the cooperative function of story, say that

this is a photograph of myself as a child (it is), suddenly I've inserted contiguity between the formal, discursive object (the photograph) and the referent (myself). If you know that this photograph *is* me as a child, it becomes visually metonymic.

For Barthes and Metz, images can both explicitly—through the appending statement—refer to the speaker as a child, and be discursively contiguous via the image's formal likeness to the actual speaker-as-child. It would seem, then, that a syntagmatic photograph attempting metonymy is a discursively contiguous likeness in search of Barthes' antiphonic call to "look" and "see." The mute photograph is syntagmatic, the "storied" photograph is metonymic.

Metz argues that in order to identify visual metonymy one must recognize when figurations "link together in the film images or sounds that are already linked together in some way."²¹ This is analogous to compounding both referential and discursive contiguities to form his "pure" visual metonymy, but what would this type of figuration look like in something other than a child's photo?

Metz's methodological centerpiece in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* is a filmic metonymy where the images of knives, reflections, and silhouettes in Fritz Lang's film *M* (1931) come to signify the murderer. The knives, mirror images, and silhouettes, alone, he argues, are contiguous in that they are weakly substitutive—more mundanely syntagmatic than properly metonymic—but when M stares into a window and his face is framed by the knives, this creates "a stronger association between the weapon and the idea of murder than might or might not arise from juxtapositions of the plot."²²

This seems compatible with Roman Jakobson's assertion that visual metonymy accesses the "pre-linguistically" contiguous, or what Metz terms the "social experience which

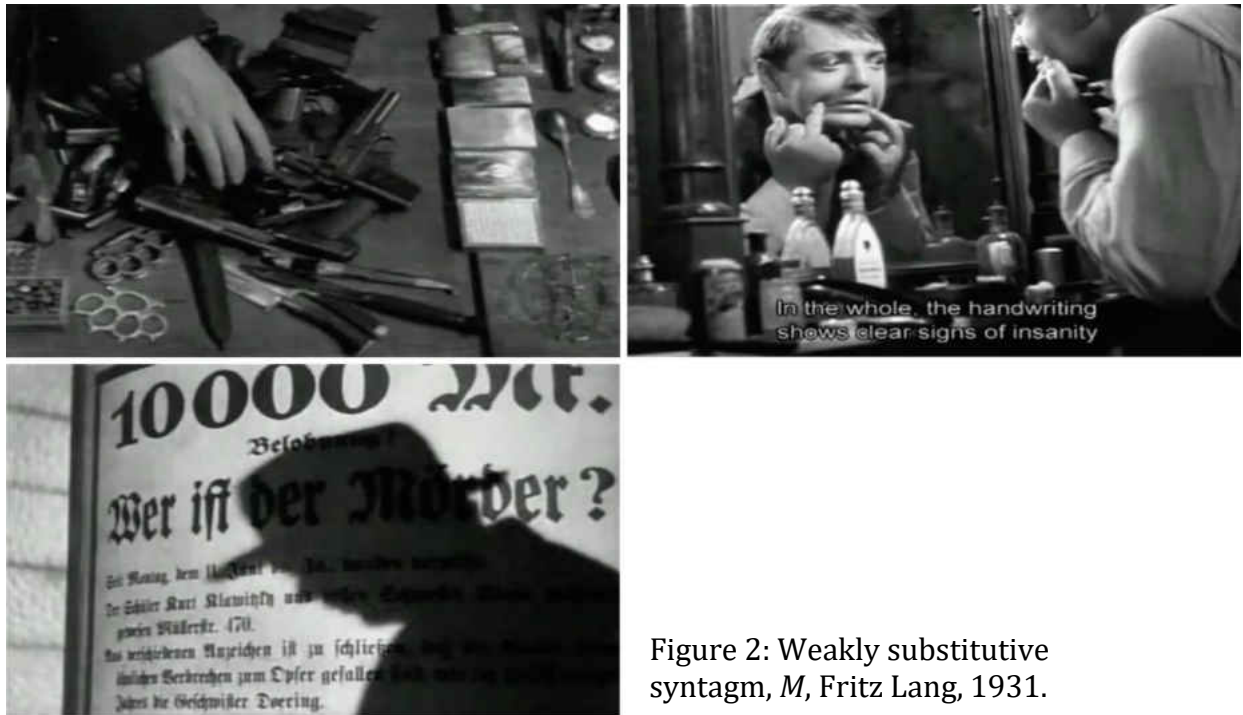


Figure 2: Weakly substitutive syntagm, *M*, Fritz Lang, 1931.

pre-exists the film:"²³ the knives in *M* are metonymic but not indexical, and semantic without taking part in a type of language that requires the unit-layer of words. It is also somewhat clearer in this example why Metz may have chosen to privilege filmic metonymy: the film form requires no abstraction of Barthes' antiphon. Its form, frame tumbling upon frame, and image tumbling upon image, communicates "look" and "see." Metz suggests that such a visually metonymic figuration must be "operant" and "specific." Though he does not define these terms, they appear directly analogous to his foundational theories of contiguity at the level of referent and discourse. *M*'s face in the image is *specifically* referencing his character, not murderers in general, and it is doing so in a formal manner that is "operant" rather than incidental: his face is not, in other words, accidentally framed by the knives at the level of formal composition.



Figure 3: Visual metonymy, *M*, Fritz Lang, 1931.

4.

Why look to scholarship of photography and film to make sense of the eerie presence of dead users on social media? This is more straightforward: because the three have always been linked, even before social media existed in its current form. In *Reading American Photographs* (1989), Alan Trachtenberg mentions an article titled “Doings of the Sunbeam” by Oliver Wendall Holmes written for *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863 when photography had already found its way into the “growing fashion of unacquainted correspondences exchanging images and developing a ‘photographic intimacy’ as ‘a new form of friendship’.”²⁴ Though contemporary social media platforms strive with each other for the cachet that innovation brings, the core concept of social media—self-signification through a mediated system of both language and images—is nearly as old an idea as photography itself. Likewise, the syntagmatic functions of a film, the ways in which each frame gathers meaning based on the previous frame, is readily analogous to the syntagmatic functions of an ordered,

chronological, social media “feed,” or its analog predecessor, the ordered, chronological scrapbook or family photo album. Tweets and Facebook status updates gain meaning from their sequential nature as well as their visual and written linguistic significations. Such sequencing draws on, but is older than, film, and was anticipated in writings of the earliest pioneers of photographic praxis like William Henry Fox Talbot.²⁵

Perhaps the only older photographic idea is that photography seems to access something of death: it freezes time and subject alike in ways that are sometimes uncanny. Photography as a fledgling art did not escape the growing Western cultural fascination with séances and the supernatural in the mid-nineteenth century, which scholars co-identify in America with the psychological aftershocks of the Civil War.²⁶ “Evidentiary” hoax photographs of spirits and “materializations” in the 1860s and 70s, both in America and abroad, are literalizations of this phantasmatic association of photography with death. A subgenre of portrait photography emerged that involved photographing one’s deceased or stillborn children to have something to remember them by in an era when infant and childhood mortality was more commonplace. These photographs were frequently staged in such a way to imply that the departed (infant or otherwise) was simply sleeping.²⁷ The association sustains in more contemporary photography theory as well. Roland Barthes famously ruminates on the presence of his recently-deceased mother, discernable through a photograph in *Camera Lucida* by a physically piercing extra-formal sensation he calls the *punctum*. Pierre Bourdieu refines this in the 1990s by describing the family photo album as so representationally static as to be gravestone-like. Photographs not only signify, argues Bourdieu, but approximate a memorializing process of their subjects, fulfilling “the function that society confers on funeral rites, namely at once recalling the memory of the departed

and the memory of their passing, recalling that they lived, that they are dead and buried, and that they continue on in the living.”²⁸

Here we also gain a final insight into Metz’s confusing use of indexicality: a Civil War-era hand-written letter, wrapped around a daguerreotype and sent through the mail, is indeed a highly indexical instrument of signification (yet, usefully for our discussion, nevertheless mimics a social-media-like combination of text and image). The mediums of both daguerreotype and letter strongly indicate a direct causality between the object and referent; there is a “contact,” a “trace” (even an uncanny, ghostly trace in the case of the daguerreotype) perceptible in the combined parcel. But, as Sontag and others have suggested in discussions of formal composition and bias, this evident causal contiguity is far more suspect than it appears, and in any case is more problematic than Metz’s looser, more accommodating “impression” of metonymic contiguity, hence my preference for the latter term.

Sontag, Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu all agree that such a mortality-tinged archival process of the family photograph is paradoxically cathectic in some way, and is akin to automatic even when the subject is alive. “To take photographs of one’s children,” writes Bourdieu, in *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* “is to become the historiographer of their childhoods and to prepare as an heirloom for them the image of what they used to be.”²⁹ In this sense, a different sense from Barthes’ *punctum*-inducing photograph of his mother, the “death” evoked by the photograph is simply the specter of a time gone past; the subject may still draw breath but their presence in the instant of the photographic exposure has passed from the world. Bourdieu attributes to the family photo album a sense of attendant compulsion: a parent does not simply elect to prepare this mortality-keyed heirloom, but

must do so, else risk, as Sontag points out, being seen as indifferent to his or her child.³⁰ Barthes agrees, and simultaneously cautions that the photograph (in the formal sense) is what remains partially imperceptible in such a system of signification. “It is not *it* that we see.”³¹

We might ask ourselves if the same is true of the formal characteristics of a social media platform. Does Facebook, for instance, encourage us to see the limits of its own formal structure, or does it imply a photographic degree of transparency (or even indexicality), encouraging us to see through itself to the trace of the people it claims to represent? Much criticism of late has been leveled at Facebook’s ever-changing formal characteristics, including the order that posts are displayed and their “reach,” user privacy functionality (or lack thereof), and various reorganizations of the inbuilt methods of self-narrativization,³² most of which ostensibly create a more seamless, connective experience but in some way serve to obfuscate Facebook’s own function. This suggests that Facebook is doing something akin to what Barthes accuses photography of; it is not Facebook that we interact with when we are on Facebook. We are encouraged to “look,” to “see” (places and things, but especially *people* in Barthes’ antiphonic sense), to “do” and to “say,” in a more straightforwardly linguistic-metonymic way, and even to abstractly “like,” but—ideally—not to see Facebook itself. It is precisely this formal opacity, for example, that generates the unsettling feeling that one gets when a retail item just Googled in a separate browser appears in designated commercial spaces on a user’s Facebook interface. It is Barthes’ invisible, formal “it” that we think of when we voice concerns that the user of social media is the *product*, not the consumer.

Lakoff and Johnson assert in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) that a particularly intense

site of metonymic representation is the human face, and they, unlike Jakobson and Metz, do include photographs as operating on a metonymic level. As I mention above, we hesitate to claim with any degree of certainty that we have “seen” a person simply because we have seen a photograph of an arm or a torso or a pair of feet, or the back of his or her head. “The metonymy THE FACE FOR THE PERSON,” Lakoff and Johnson write, “is not merely a matter of language.”³³ Bourdieu concurs; while the classic photographic snapshot-metonymy of Paris *being* the Eiffel Tower holds true, it is especially the *face* that is the person, and the absence or distortion of a face in a snapshot seems like “a gratuitous attack on the thing being represented.”³⁴

If the face comes to synecdochically stand for the person in the context of a photograph (synecdoche being a broadly agreed-on subtype of metonymy, which Metz attributes to Jakobson and Lacan³⁵), then this additionally implies that a photograph must, at least in some cases, be capable of creating both referential and formal contiguities: metonymy in terms of metonymy. A celebrity said to “look nothing like they do in *People* magazine,” is being accused of subverting the metonymy of the photograph. The *People* photo suddenly seems insufficiently contiguous to the referent, which is precisely what Sontag argues a photograph promises to be on a formal level. “A photograph is not supposed to evoke, but to show.”³⁶ In her discussion of Alexander Gardner’s staged Civil War battlefield photographs, Sontag rightly points out that what is most interesting about the photograph that subverts metonymy by deceptively staging the referential contiguity and pairing it with an unrelated discursive contiguity is not the sudden perceived insufficiency of the photograph’s signification, but rather that we continue to react to this insufficiency with surprise.³⁷

The face is central to social media. The formal characteristics of social media profiles, generally, are an endless scrolling page of words and photographs nearly always presided over near the screen's top by a photograph of the user him- or herself. In light of the primacy of the face in metonymies of people, it comes as no surprise that such "profile pictures" are almost always of the user's face, that an entire subgenre of portraiture and a specialized toolset (high angle photos in bathroom mirrors or with the use of "selfie sticks") has emerged to create them, or even that the largest and most widely-used platform takes "Facebook" as its name.

To locate visual metonymy in social media, we may apply Metz's criteria with a surprising degree of compatibility. The formal, discursive contiguities of a Facebook profile are numerous and evident: the referent (user)'s name is prominently displayed, and beneath this scrolls a syntagmatic "feed" of successive bits of text or photographs attributed to the referent. There is internal formal contiguity to the author in the sense-making syntagmatic order at the level of prose, and we needn't quibble about the syntagmatic properties of any single photograph because there's virtually no such thing in social media; photographs are automatically grouped into albums and timelines and chronological digital photo-essay style arrangements of endless variety, but they are almost never unaccompanied by either text or other photographs to derive syntagmatic discursive meaning from. In this sense, we might call social media more properly "filmic" than photographic, despite what negligible difference I would argue that distinction makes in terms of accomplishing discursive contiguity. It's an intuitive jump: Metz assures us that photos in sequence become filmic signs, and their sequence becomes syntagm even on a layer of language that has no equivalent to the word. The text and photographs are both paradigmatic (selective) and syn-

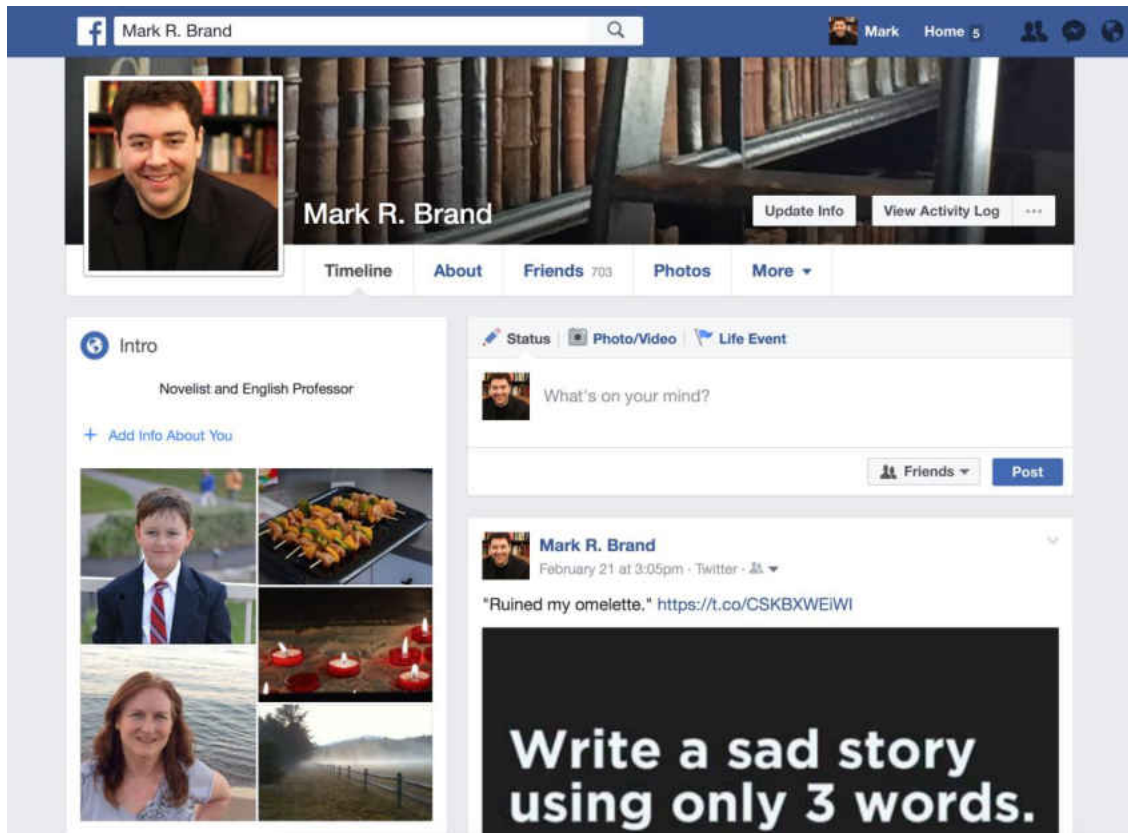


Figure 4: Generic Facebook Profile Format

tagmatic (combinative) in a broad sense. The formally dominant image, hovering sentinel over a user's self-signification, as Bordieu and Lakoff and Johnson suggest, is a highly operant, substitutive photograph of the user's face.

But syntagm alone is not metonymy. For that, we must satisfy Metz's criteria by pairing discursive contiguity with that slippery referential contiguity. Fortunately, the abstractions necessary to imagine such a thing are of a much simpler order in social media than at the recursive level of a single photograph. Facebook's "impression" of contiguity is indeed its main selling point: users "check in" to various locations using GPS technology, they "shared a link thirty one minutes ago," they "suggested that you like this page," they greet their followers or friends with Barthes-like antiphons built into their own selections and

combinations of the written word and the image. “Hello everyone, look what I made for dinner” is not so different from “this is me as a child.” The image of dinner perched below this status update is certainly not what was *actually* eaten for dinner. Hence, a contiguity outside the level of discourse abstractly inserts itself between the formal object (the profile) and the referent (the user). The referential “impression” of contiguity compounding the discursive contiguity is the impression that the Facebook profile *is* part of the person. The Facebook profile, in its mission to represent the user, is a domain of metonymies in terms of metonymies.

What’s fascinating, as well, is that Metz’s reckoning seems potentially consistent even when the contiguities shift from syntagmatic to paradigmatic, and metonymic to metaphorical. Here think of those users who select a photograph of their cat or child instead of their own face as a profile picture. This is a “comparable” discursive substitution at the level of form (not impression), rather than a “contiguous” one, creating a referential metonymy in terms of a discursive metaphor. It seems possible, even, that social media profiles could be wholly metaphorical on the layer of discourse and referent.³⁸ If a spoof profile called Kitchen Sink Disaster was created, the profile picture was an image of sagging drywall, and the feed a series of ordered images of falling water droplets and the words “drip, drip,” the profile could dispense with many different possible contiguities at the level of form and referent, and rely wholly instead on paradigm and loosely-comparable substitution, creating referential metaphors in terms of discursive metaphors.

All of this certainly *sounds* convincing in its dizzying poststructuralist way, but what are we to make, then, in Metz's terms, of a social media profile that dissonantly continues to claim "this is me now," a metonymy in terms of a metonymy, after the spatio-temporally authentic referent has died? It's satisfying to have a language to articulate what I'm trying to get at with this novel conceptually, but there's a certain odor of hoax that a conceit like *Passbook's* may never fully rise above, and that, too, is perhaps appropriate. Early reports from users of the LivesOn app described the experience as a garbled mess of clearly-artificial nonsense mixed with the occasional unsettling resemblance to the deceased's actual social media presence.³⁹

Based on the non-functional state of its website, LivesOn.org appears to have become defunct as of this writing, but since its debut in 2013 virtually all social media platforms have adopted policies to handle the death of their users. Facebook, with an estimated 30-million-plus deceased users,⁴⁰ allows for the designation of a legacy contact who may convert a profile to a static memorial, disabling features that might send automated friend recommendations, birthday notifications, image and post tags, or other uncanny and potentially distressing impressions of activity. Google originally deactivated any account left too long unused, separating person from representation in a purely businesslike manner regardless of the vital status of the user, but now permits a Facebook-style trusted contact to act as digital executor. Twitter and Pinterest tend toward true posterity; absent an official request from a next of kin including proof that the user is deceased, those profiles currently "live" forever.⁴¹ For those inclined to take a more active hand in their social media afterlife, the website thedigitalbeyond.com lists over 60 services including DeadSocial and Eterni.me that have emerged to take LivesOn's place, sensing a user's death through a variety of dead-

man's switches, activating posthumous facsimiles of the user by posting pre-written or algorithmically-generated ghost messages, or simply automating the process of deleting the deceased's social media presence altogether.

In *Passbook*, Posterity users can continue working and earning incomes after their deaths. As it happens, this is already the case with YouTube profiles. Monetized channels and playlists of prolific or especially popular YouTubers continue to generate posthumous advertising revenue for YouTube and its parent company Google, and for the users themselves. Recent legislation such as Florida's Universal Fiduciary Access to Digital Assets Act (UFADAA) of 2016 creates legal provisions for the inheritance of an individual's digital footprint, including their social media. By elevating the digital afterlife into the realm of will and probate, these laws prompt users to consider carefully who has access to such a sensitive and potentially valuable representation of themselves after they die.⁴²

Hoax or otherwise, there is something enduringly intuitive about the notion of metonymic immortality, prefigured as far back as the early nineteenth century. Jeffrey Sconce writes in *Haunted Media* (2000) that the commercial telegraph, which shared its first decade with the photograph, was likewise busily at work reorganizing our perception of time and space in the 1840s and 50s. So-called "spiritual telegraphy," drawing on the uncanny effect of electronic telepresence and spurred by a series of Mumler- and Crookes-like hoaxes, even narrowly pre-dates spiritual photography. Why these two technologies both seemed to register the same set of mortal anxieties at the same time is too large a question to address here, but it seems impossibly coincidental that these three phenomena were so simultaneous: instantaneous long-distance communication, a new combination-form of self-representation that involved both writing and photographs, and the more-or-less immediate

emergence of versions of each that purported to interface with the dead.

Demagoguery and partisanship aside, Kilroy, especially, is a foreseeable antagonist in the age of social media: one part talk-radio host, two parts morally-ambivalent hacktivist, with a dash of Oz the Great and Powerful. He is man who disappears within machine, and machine who dreams of man; an avatar of both von Kemplen's chess-playing Turk in the 1770s and the futuristic rock-opera hero who hides among robots by wearing a robot skin in Styx's 1983 song "Mr. Roboto." To be at once anthropomorphic and machinic, plausible and gimmick, futuristic and nostalgic, is Kilroy's neat semiotic trick.

Most relevantly, though, if the theories above speak as well to the conceit of *Passbook* as I think they do, Kilroy is the Tweet that creates the man, the metonym that perhaps never had a referent to begin with. He is *fictive* in that sense, and suitable to his namesake. Stories abound regarding the origins of Kilroy in the 1940s: a nebulous shipyard inspector's note that appeared at odd times and places, a gallows-humor inside-joke among young men during WWII, an electrical engineering diagram which Thomas Pynchon pointed out resembled a cartoon man peering over a wall.⁴³ In *Passbook's* Kilroy, we can see the DNA of all of this; and it was a conscious choice of mine to connect him through that fictive semi-existence to the great tradition of hidden, faceless, semi-fabricated boogeymen of twentieth century dystopias: Kilroy the sarcastic, internet-age great-grandson of Zamyatin's Benefactor from *We* and Orwell's Emmanuel Goldstein from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Kilroy's power, such as it is, derives from the habit we have of taking the word and the face for the person, the signification for the signified. Never, to my mind, has such a habit been more ontologically dubious than in a Facebook world. Kilroy is the trickster spirit in hoax-form; disembodied yet convincing, irascible yet striving toward the sublime. Appropriately, I think,

he mirrors the overarching conceit of the novel as a whole: simultaneously concept and nostalgia; both an error in, and a demonstration of, the limits of perception; both the kernel of truth and the joke that it hides in.

NOTES

- ¹ Will Coldwell, "Why Death is Not the End of Your Social Media Life," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2013, at <http://www.theguardian.com/media/shortcuts/.2013/feb/18/death-social-media-liveson-deadsocial>.
- ² Mark R. Brand, "Are You Dead or Just Not on Facebook?" *The Weeklings*, November 12, 2013. <http://www.theweeklings.com/mrbrand/2013/11/12/are-you-dead-or-just-not-on-facebook/>.
- ³ Ben Tanzer and James Tadd Adcox, "Caught Up in Something," *This Podcast Will Change Your Life*, December 27, 2014. <http://tbwcylic.libsyn.com/-this-podcast-will-change-your-life-episode-ninety-nine-caught-up-in-something>.
- ⁴ Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *On Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 117-120.
- ⁵ Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (1985): 82.
- ⁶ Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," 117.
- ⁷ Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982), 170-178.
- ⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 37.
- ⁹ Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 174.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 192.
- ¹¹ Christian Metz, *Film Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 40.
- ¹² Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 212.
- ¹³ Metz, *Film Language*, 40.

¹⁴ Quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 108.

¹⁵ Metz, *Film Language*, 46.

¹⁶ See Sontag, *On Photography*, 182, and Walter Benn Michaels' reading of Liz Deschenes in "The Art of Inequality," in *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 111-112. For further reading, see the plenary discussion of Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series* in James Elkins, ed. *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 144-148, 151-155.

¹⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, 7.

¹⁸ Metz, *Film Language*, 41.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 5.

²⁰ For more on this, see *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 184, where Metz further breaks down different sub-varieties of discursive contiguity, consisting of "positional" and "spatio-temporal," which he says still images can accomplish, though vexingly he uses paintings as examples of still images rather than addressing the photograph directly.

²¹ Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 198.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 197.

²⁴ Alan Trachtenberg, "Albums of War" in *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 93.

²⁵ I refer here to Talbot's discussion in *The Pencil of Nature* of creating sequences of images in order to photograph a sculpture, to animate the activity of a group of people in a series of ordered photographs, and more broadly as well the fact that the book itself is

patterned on a sequence of images with attendant written language. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), 40-42, 68-69, 76.

²⁶ See Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 50-51 for this, though this is only a small part of his argument. More broadly, he suggests that Spiritualism was an attempt to secure scientific legitimacy for belief in the existence of the post-mortal and the supernatural during the rise of the psychological sciences.

²⁷ For more on this and other varieties of nineteenth century postmortem photography, see the preface and plate captions in Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena: Twelvetreets Press, 1990).

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 31.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.

³¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 5.

³² See Stuart Dredge, "Facebook: Latest News Feed Tweak Gives More Priority To Your Friends," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2015, Alex Hern, "Facebook Users Urged to Check Privacy Settings," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2015, and Philip Landau, "What if Facebook Timeline Was Read Instead of Your CV?" *The Guardian*, January 30, 2012, all at <http://www.theguardian.com>.

³³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 37.

³⁴ Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, 94.

³⁵ Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 177-178.

³⁶ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003) 47.

³⁷ Ibid., 55.

³⁸ Metz playfully ponders titling one chapter of *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* "The Pneumatic Drill Article" because of frequent interruptions while writing it.

³⁹ Theo Merz, "Can Twitter Make You Immortal?" *The Telegraph*. August 16, 2013.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/mobile-app-reviews/10246708>.

⁴⁰ Brandon Ambrosino, "Facebook is a Growing and Unstoppable Digital Graveyard."

BBC.com, March 14, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160313-the-unstoppable-rise-of-the-facebook-dead>

⁴¹ Michael Osakawe, "Your Digital Inheritance: What Happens to Your Social Media Accounts When You Die?" *The Huffington Post*, February 13, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/your-digital-inheritance-what-happens-to-your-social_us_589e65a1e4b0cd37efcf8a4

⁴² For a detailed discussion of this, see Victoria Blachly, "Uniform Fiduciary Access to Digital Assets Act: What UFADAA Know," *Probate & Property Magazine*, 29.4 (2015).

⁴³ See "Transit Association Ships a Street Car to Shelter Family of 'Kilroy Was Here.'" *New York Times*, December 24, 1946; "James J. Kilroy is Dead; Coined 'Kilroy Was Here.'" *Special to the New York Times*, November 25, 1962; and Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1961), 435-436.

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PASSBOOK

00.

It wasn't until much later, when you went to high school, that I started to feel like I owed you an explanation. Your mother, as understanding as she can be about most things, is a very private person; she doesn't like her business being shared or repeated even with family, especially given what happened to us when she and I were young, so I respected that as long as I could. When you called the other night with the good news, I knew it was time. Robert Bly once wrote that every young person needs older people to like them, admire them, and to help them, and that withholding that blessing is the same thing as an injury. So that's where I'll start with all of this: older people have a duty to help younger people, and never will you understand that more than when you become a parent. It may not feel like it yet, but someday you too will be my age, and when a little person with your eyes looks up at you (Boy? Girl? So exciting!), you're going to want to understand this, and us.

Most of what I have here are memories, and memories, to their credit, are imperfect. Luckily, I located some screen-caps and printouts, and some other stuff from Aunt Chelsea that I haven't looked at in years, but some pieces are always missing from the past, and that's as it should be. The shadow of Passbook was long, and people like your mom and I who lived during that era weren't very happy people in general. Passbook wasn't the first platform of its kind, only the last child of many parents, so to speak, and its way of teaching us to be together seemed at first to vaccinate the world against boredom and eating dinner alone and long-lost friends, and made us feel like no moment was too fast to capture or too small to notice. Passbook didn't always make us feel bad the way it eventually would. Even when it

was still fun and bewildering and endless, its penetrating power of memory was already starting to make us forget who we were and why we loved each other.

But things are better now, as your generation can attest; now we have to do our own talking and sharing and remembering in our own smeary, human way, and you'll see the wisdom of this the first time your child screams at you and you lose your cool and scream back. Crystal-clear memories are sharp on both edges; when we couldn't forget—when Passbook didn't let us forget—bad moments were forever. We saw people doing abject, panicked, humiliating things all the time on our screens, and ten seconds of desperation could come to permanently define the entirety of a person's life. Never was it clearer that we are given the short, imperfect memories we have so that things like that may eventually be forgotten.

You already know part of this story, of course, because of the prenatal DNA testing. We can trace the Simmonses back as far as your third great grandfather Hyrum Simmons who immigrated first through New England in the 1890s, working on farms and in lumber mills when he was a teenager. According to the draft card records, he left behind a successful knife-sharpening business to fight in World War I. There used to be digital databases that could tell you all of this and much more, but they're gone now, or they're not easily searchable anymore. Hyrum's son was Frederick, and grandpa Dave, who died before you were born, was Frederick's youngest. He didn't live long enough to see Passbook, but your great-grandma Chloe did. And then of course you remember Jonah, my dad...

Anyway, I'm sure it's the recent Simmonses you're most curious about, the ones who were on Passbook when I met your mother, and what happened to all of us afterward. When you were in high school and came home thrilled to be studying the Passbook era for your

tech-civics class, you sounded so excited that I almost told you this whole story back then, but it's a lot for a kid to take in, and I hope you can understand that. You were lucky to learn about Passbook from actual books instead of a mishmash of websites, databases, and "content," but as I'm sure you've noticed, one of the biggest drawbacks of written histories on the page is how vague they get at the very end. It's always the most recent events that are hardest to talk about or put names on, or even see with any real clarity. But it's time I told you about how your Mom and I met, about Grandma Molly and Aunt Chelsea and Kilroy and the whole thing.

As I mentioned, though, you may want to keep this story to yourself for a while. Mom would be upset if she knew I was this frank about her, or us. It's just how she is. We've always told you that we met right after college, and that's true, but there's more to it: I was involved with another woman before your mom, and I was living with her when all of this happened. See what I mean? Some things seem almost designed to be forgotten. I'll trust your discretion; it may earn me an earful, but you've waited long enough to hear the entire story. Congratulations on the baby. You're going to be an awesome parent, and I want you to know your mother and I love you very much.

-Dad

01.

Kilroy here. Do you know that you're going to die younger than your parents? Do you know why your back hurts and you can't sleep and your stomach aches and your teeth feel loose in your head every time you brush them? You're already bleeding out, you lovable losers. Walking and talking, listening to your parents' music unironically, completing your unpaid internship with no flex-time and catastrophic-care only. Unretiring; income-sensitive repaying; destined to be diagnosed early, like a battery of mass-income that isn't replaced until the last half of a percent is drained. The people on Passbook may technically be dead, but it's all relative; whose names are still on the leases? Who still draws pensions and Social Security checks? Whose bank accounts get better interest rates than yours? Who paid off their school loans? These things are not an accident. This was decades in the making; half a century. They used up the whole world before you even got your driver's license. While you were having yoga playdates and being groomed for jobs that don't exist anymore, Mom and Dad were mortgaging your future. Your parents may have been born to run, but I've got news for you, Kid-R: you were born to work, born to pay, and born to die. How do I know this? Because I'm Kilroy, you sad, forsaken chumps.

Posted by user KILROY, 9:46 a.m.

When I was your age, or a little younger, it felt like the world wanted nothing more than to take every guy on Earth like me, chain us to the garnish station of an artisanal sandwich shop, and throw away the key. This was Chicago, and I was right in the middle of it. Not just on the fringes, but right in the commercial aorta of the Midwest: Michigan Avenue. This was one of those shimmering retail corridors, maybe a dozen like it in the whole world, that felt like incontrovertible proof of American possibility. Unlike the fleeting promises of college recruiters or the obtuse truisms that guided my upbringing before that—how hard work and dedication and self-refinement and the correct sequence would translate into success—I could lean over and put my hands on the Magnificent Mile. I walked to work every day down its massive, granite-flecked sidewalks, past its push-button crosswalks and cab-stands, beneath vertiginous display windows that crawled toward the tops of Sandberg's towering,

concrete shoulders.

It should've been a playground of opportunity for me, and I should've been its triumphant prince with my college degree and my near-total lack of responsibility. But gravity seemed to pull down harder on me, somehow. I used to look up at those buildings and wonder who worked in them; what sort of superhuman it took to land those jobs. I wasn't stupid, and what I lacked in timing and pragmatism, I felt I made up for in pluck and impeccable taste. Even modest progress would have changed everything for me. If I'd been *in charge* of a crappy fast food joint, instead of just working at one, I could've brought in a real salary. My girlfriend and I might've gotten married and moved out of our apartment to somewhere we didn't need a padlocked metal safety gate over our front door. Another way to say this is: what if I'd been allowed to wear a blazer and work somewhere above the first floor—what if I'd been allowed to grow up? I didn't know the answers to these questions then. All I knew was that potential like mine was wasted at the Guilty Grinder, and life was short. My phone vibrated.

Chelsea: Did you see his post today?

Wyatt: Aren't you supposed to be in class right now?

That was my sister, your Aunt Chelsea, and she was referring to Kilroy. Of course I'd seen it already because like almost everyone our age I was subscribed to Kilroy's Passbook feed. I should pause here to clarify that back then the things you loved returned your attention by making your pockets buzz all day, in my case while I was making sandwiches at the mall. This was how people kept in touch. Usually it was my girlfriend or my mom, but sometimes it was Nana, or a notification from some app. Dad and Dana were one of those puzzling couples who had a shared Passbook account, so I'd get occasional buzzes from DadnDana and have to

guess which one was actually on the other end. Sometimes, though, a buzzy pocket meant that Kilroy had posted something.

Chelsea: I'm just on my way out the door. Ttyl l00ser.

Wyatt: Ride safe.

Kilroy, and most of the time *only* Kilroy, spoke the language of guys like me: the minimum-wage guys with bachelor degrees, the live-at-home crash-landings, the ones who would've if only they could've. He had about thirty million followers on his feed, which sounds like a lot, but back then internet personalities could get three hundred million views and an advertising contract on their streaming MeChan just by training their hermit crab to wave a tiny American flag. Kilroy wasn't for everybody; in fact, it was hard to shake the impression that he maybe despised me as much as my parents and girlfriend did. But Kilroy was right about one thing: if you think a 25-year-long recession that no one wanted to call a Depression sounds bad, try being a member of the *second* generation to figure out how to live forever.

. . .

Two men were wrestling a seven-foot-tall Lego Darth Vader off of the mall escalator across the food court from where I worked. It was glorious in its way; it looked just like him in the films. There was something off about him, though, that I knew I could've done better. At the Legoland in Schaumburg they had the older sculptures from the pre-CAD days that were so much more alive; a man on a bench, a full-sized giraffe. The forced perspective and the uneven scale reached out at you with their injection-molded brick fingers and noses. You didn't even register that they were Legos until you touched them and felt all the edges.

This Darth Vader, though, was clearly just dumped into a CAD file and some uninspired, automated plugin filled in the brick placement. Overhanging bricks or varieties of shading with two-tone grays and blacks created false shadow and depth in place of real sculpting and character. It wasn't even well put together, really. You could see the thin discolored runners of acrylate glue where it was assembled in pieces, like it had been cross-sectioned and then re-stacked with rubber cement. What a hack job.

"Gus says we need more sprouts," Ben said.

"I know," I said. "Gus thinks I need to be told everything."

"Just saying."

Ben, the second-best sandwich artist in our franchisee Guilty Grinder, spent most of his time at the cash register either doing his second job remotely on his phone or trying to sneak looks at girls as they walked by. He was lean and tall and had dry patches of skin on each elbow. He had pretty-boy hair that he never washed under his statute-compliant hairnet, blond by way of garage-floor. He was an okay guy, as co-workers went.

The men across the food court rotunda grunted and heaved. I couldn't look away. By how its center of gravity swung when they tipped it, Lord Vader might've legitimately been solid Lego and not just built around a styrofoam core. Which would have made him marginally cooler in my estimation, and probably also very heavy. The deliverymen rocked the sculpture back and forth on its feet, walking it like a giant action figure. They should've brought three guys to move it.

"Wyatt?"

"Coming." I slouched back to the kitchen, and I paused at the dishwasher. Ben could sense I was woolgathering and he tipped his head interrogatively.

“We can’t treat this job like we’ll still be doing it in twenty years.”

Ben said nothing, but he winced a little.

“I mean, how hard can it be to get a restaurant license if they gave one to Gus? He didn’t even come up with his own idea. He paid someone else for permission to make the same sandwiches that every restaurant in America makes.”

Ben thought about this for a second. He was what your grandmother used to call a *born listener*. “Soooo... do you want me to get the sprouts?”

“No, I’ll get them. Seriously, though, we need to think bigger. This,” I gestured at the cold bar, the mushy tomatoes, the limp iceberg, “can’t be the whole world. *Bigger*, man.”

The Darth Vader installation crew finally reached the entranceway to our Lego store, but the sculpture proved ungainly. They slowly tilted it and then lay it down, dragging Vader’s black imperial cloak on the tile. Once inside, it came up coated with fuzzy gray dust and the wrapper from a food-court straw. As I made for the walk-in freezer, Ben started an all-white-meat torpedo for a pretty female customer who greenglowed her phone and reflexively pulled the neck of her sweater shut when he asked if she had everything she needed.

. . .

Sara Grayson was the name of my girlfriend at the time, but we’d been together too long and the shine had come off the apple. She’d graduated the previous Spring and we were still in the same apartment we’d had for the last two years of college. Her father paid for Sara’s half of our rent and all of the utilities, which sounds like generosity personified, except I made

squat at the Guilty Grinder and I still had to come up with half of the groceries, half of the AT&T bill, and—the biggie—half of the rent.

At first Sara and her dad had me on board with the whole “we’re all in this together” thing, but it didn’t take long to figure out who was in what with whom. Graham Grayson wasn’t one of the pushier-type parents, taking down doors and hollering at the young to *get your shit together, will you?* He was more like an erosion pattern; he paid for whatever Sara needed, but only Sara, and only until she met someone he liked enough to really get behind. That person was not me. What our finances boiled down to was Sara’s dad posing me a recurring SAT problem each month: If Wyatt saves every cent he makes at the Grinder, minus taxes but in a theoretical world where he never misses work for being sick or because his hours got cut for that week, and never buys anything extra for himself or Sara, how close can he get to paying his half of the bills without actually being able to consistently do it? Solve for X where X= “you should dump that Wyatt guy,” and show your work.

Grayson’s plan would have made short work of me, too, if it hadn’t been that initially Sara and I got along better than he realized. Despite the way things eventually went, there was plenty of initial chemistry between us while we were still in the protective utopian bubble of college, studying art curation (her) and art design (me). Even though she couldn’t find a real job when she was finished—none of us could—she brought in cash by piecework, enough to relax Grayson’s fiduciary stranglehold and limp along unhappily for a while. Sara’s hustle was buying and selling vintage toys. She did a brisk business, for example, reselling 1984 Hasbro Optimus Primes still in their original boxes to people my father’s age, and the margins were something else, especially if they had the long *Diaclone* smoke stacks. Sara usually paid a bit more than half of all the bills so that if I wanted to buy her something

humiliatingly modest for Valentine's Day, I had a tiny sliver of extra money in my account to do it with.

Graham Grayson was the executive director at AdHesion, a company that produced un-skippable commercials embedded in streaming videos. It was thanks to him, a clammy, fish-like thanks, that we could afford our place near University Village, on the near south side of the city. It was... you know... it was *fine*. There were homeless people all over after dark and we heard gunshots from time to time, but no actual bullets ever came through our walls. Graham himself—*Mister Grayson* as Sara insisted I call him—lived in Florida somewhere in one of those gated communities with guards and fences and a shopping center and a private access road to the marina where he moored his boat so he almost never had to leave. He constantly hassled Sara to move down there, but as scarce as work was in Chicago there was nothing at all to do in Florida. Any job worth having there that a Passbook Posterity user couldn't do—home nursing, food-services, even landscaping—was occupied by a gray-hair unwilling or unable to retire. Another flinty-eyed grandmother or grandfather with seniority patiently waited to step into any job worth having once its previous occupant had been taken out feet-first. So Sara and I wilted there, parked at the edges of Chiraq, unable to strike out on our own and unable to find much inertia in each other, either.

Which isn't to say there was no hope, and I'm getting to that part. I was working on something big: my own Lego sculpture, an SR-71 Blackbird spy plane in 1/3rd scale. And none of that foam core crap like the CAD Vader; I'm talking a massive, solid ABS showpiece. The sort of thing meant to be displayed in Times Square during a celebration of Lego master designers, and end up on the cover of a coffee table book. I'd dropped \$3100 of my last school loan refund check on bulk black bricks to get me started. I reasoned that, while a bachelor's

degree was likely to get me exactly nowhere, I had a not-completely-impossible shot of getting the attention of Lego Global in Billund if I could pull off such a spectacle, and get the sculpture done by the time BrickCon rolled around. I set up my workbench in the basement of our building between the storage units, off to the right of the boiler room and behind someone's ancient broken Nordic-Trac. Sara's father owned the entire building, so we didn't have to share the space with his other tenants. She approved of the project on artistic principles, but smooth sailing it was not.

I hadn't had a raise at the Grinder since I started working there, and several times that previous summer Gus decided he only needed one sandwich artist for our shift and sent the other home. There was nothing I could do about it when it was my turn, but it caused a bunch of bad fights between Sara and me. Every time she needed something it materialized immediately via delivery truck or shipping drone, but if I suggested asking her dad for some spending money to help us out when *I* was short, she pointed the finger at the Blackbird, my one indulgence, and I had no defense for that. I would've never been able to build it at all if it weren't for that little bit of spending money Sara floated me. If you've ever bought Legos before, you know that \$3100 doesn't get you very far. I could sometimes find them in garage sales or snipe bricks in bulk from online reseller auctions, but without Sara and her dad, I'd have been living in an even worse neighborhood, with no space for the project, and three or four other guys for roommates. Or I'd have been at home with Dad and Dana in Schaumburg, too far away to commute to the Grinder every day. My job was a stroke of luck, humble as it was; plenty of my friends and former classmates couldn't find anything.

I spent a lot of time down there in the basement, and gradually Sara seemed to mind less and less. She had her own preoccupations; she spent most nights on Passbook messaging

a guy named Eric Delaney who she knew in high school. I told her when we first started dating that I didn't want to know all of the particulars, but I know some basic details. She'd surrendered her virginity to him, something she insisted I could hardly blame her for, shortly before he collapsed on the court of a freak heart attack during basketball practice their senior year in high school, which I presumably couldn't blame *him* for, either. He was gentle and smart and funny and I'd have really liked him, according to her, if I'd given him a chance. I tried not to sulk about it, but no matter how good I had it being with a girl like Sara on paper, Eric wasn't going anywhere. His Passbook Posterity feed was constantly active and, more than that, the guy was a charming, immortal, 18-year-old basketball star with modest hopes of admission to Yale. I was a state-college misfire building a giant toy airplane in a rented basement, the stuff of kazoo music and think-pieces on the viability of liberal arts degrees.

There was exactly one angle in our small apartment where Sara could sit with her back to me, and she seemed more and more often to find this seating position the way water finds its level. Individual strands of her blonde hair glowed faintly from the LED display of her phone. Once in a while she'd laugh at the click-bait sites where sheepish people newly juried into Passbook Posterity would try to explain to a live audience how they'd managed to spectacularly die, mauled by unlikely animals at zoo exhibits, attempting unorthodox feats of eroticism, or swallowing the odd toothpick. The comments sections of those feeds were brutal.

"Who's on tonight?" I would ask.

"Just some people," she'd reply. She wouldn't turn around.

. . .

Let me tell you something I know: 1964 was the last year your floor-model, red-blooded American man could confidently wave his technological man-parts at the rest of the world. My workbench in the basement was just an old storm door set up on four large municipal hazard cones that I absolutely did not steal from a pothole patch-job near the corner of Irving and LaSalle the previous summer. On it sat the first chunk of my future. It was early in the sculpt, but I could already see the SR-71 taking on that hellacious Batmobile-meets-Star-Destroyer shape.

These planes were a piece of the far future; the eighth, ninth, and tenth wonders of the world; the Space Age come alive. They flew right at the edge of the atmosphere, at more than three times the speed of sound, and there wasn't a bullet or missile in the world that could catch one. Pilots had to wear pressurized space suits to fly them, and since in the 1960s GPS was still decades off, they had an analog system that geo-located their position using high-speed photographs of the stars. The plane's dull black metallic skin and titanium airframe would heat up to eleven hundred degrees at cruising speed and use its own jet fuel as *coolant*. The Lockheed Skunkworks took every ground-breaking, revolutionary discovery of aerodynamics in the history of manned flight up until then, and crammed it into a single, epic, pants-shittingly-fast spy plane.

They were basically as close as we're ever going to get to star-fighters. All of this, mind you, conceived and built in an era when we had yet to master such high-tech things as VCR tapes and handheld calculators. When the last Blackbird left duty in 1998, people were too busy paying attention to a Harvard-educated anarchist in a sweatshirt and a White House intern in a stained dress to notice. The Space Age may have started when Sputnik launched,

but it ended the day the last one of those gorgeous obsidian beauties tore across the sky, setting records even as they were flying to the scrap heap.

Sure, we eventually became the proud taxpaying owners of stealth bombers and Tomahawk cruise missiles and Predator drones and kineto-tungsten satellite rod-missiles and a whole bunch of other neato military hardware after that. But these lacked the sheer audacity of the Blackbirds, which weren't even armed, unless you count space-to-ground cameras with lenses a foot across that could pick out the Derek and the Dominoes logo on your T-shirt from low orbit. Whenever I read about "drone strike this" or "zone-of-effect that," I can't help but think of bored video gamers. The SR-71 was the Frankenchild of mad rocket physicists at the end of history with frizzy haircuts and steel goggles gritting their teeth in a nuclear wind-tunnel. It's held every conventional airspeed record that matters for over fifty years and nothing since has been able to touch it.

Except, of course, the hands of a kajillion schoolchildren at the Air Zoo museum in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where one of them now sits alongside carbon-fiber replicas of Messerschmitts and B-17 bombers. I made a pilgrimage right after graduation when I read that they had one, and I knew right then, standing in the chilly matte-shadow of all of that American badassery and sipping a Mountain Dew Code Red, that this was going to be the thing I'd build. *This* would be the thing that would get me noticed in Billund.

I was in the basement, sitting in the rusty lawn chair that I'd rescued from the alley, imagining myself in a mirrored space helmet putting the hammer down in an airplane skipping along the outer edge of the atmosphere, when my phone lit up with a Passbook Posterity message.

Mom: You still up, honey?

I raised my phone, and belatedly realized my mistake. The accelerometer inside the phone, the part that communicated pitch and yaw to certain apps and games, registered that I had elevated the tiny screen to the upright position and was looking at it. Mom knew I was there.

Mom: I don't know where you get it from, your father isn't a night owl and I never made it all the way to the end of American Idol.

For the record, your grandpa *was* a night owl. After two decades of my mom shoving him awake at 6:00 a.m., he quickly and happily re-wound his circadian clock after she died. In all likelihood she didn't know this because Dad had unfollowed her. I frowned at the phone and set it down on the bench next to me, but the screen lit up again.

Mom: I haven't heard from Chelsea recently, have you?

This didn't surprise me. After Dad met Dana and got remarried, the real sparks started to fly in our house, but I had gone to college by the end of the next year and was doing my best to stay gone. My friends who moved back in with their parents after college put on a good face, especially the ones who now lived with their mom or dad's second or third spouses, but I could tell it was slowly killing them and just thinking about it made the skin on my forehead tighten. I tried to ignore Mom and went back to building the bird. I took a handful of clear angled bricks from the bin and sifted through them for the 4x2 slope pieces I was going to use for the forward cockpit bezel. I forced myself not to reach for the phone again.

Mom: You won't believe what happened when this Oregon man was home alone! [www.clickbucket.com/dancing-cat.mpg]

Mom: That sounds like a recipe for fun, lolz! #staycation

I tried to focus. Only time, money, and bricks, none of which were in great supply, stood between the basement and Billund; that's how I had to see things. My thumb hovered over the "unfollow" button below Mom's photo. I let it waver there for a while. I turned the phone upside down and put it back on the bench instead. It buzzed again, insistently. This is what Passbook had reduced most of us to.

02.

Ici Kilroy, mes frères et soeurs. You know zee myth about zee Fwench not using deodorant is totally zee bullshit, right? But it got me thinking: how much is a stick of Secret these days? \$4.99? Let's do a little thought experiment. You're 36 years old, exactly right in the middle of your austerity-reduced Kid-R life expectancy. You buy a stick of deodorant every two months for your entire life with a median price of \$4.99 per stick. Subtract ages zero through eleven and you've got a \$1,836.24 lifetime Speedstick cost. Tres reasonable, no? Eighteen hundred bucks to not smell like zee B.O. for a lifetime. I'm sold. But wait! Don't answer yet! What else could I do with that money? What if I invested it instead in a 3% interest yielding account for that same lifetime? I'd have just an armpit hair over \$11,000. That's just deodorant, mes amis. Imagine network fees. Imagine daycare payments. Imagine rent and your school loan payments. Imagine all of the other things we pay too much for but "have to" buy, compounded over decades into a swimming pool of cash, a veritable goiter of equity. But what have you got to show for all of your generation's hard work and frugality? Don't bother answering; I've seen all your bank accounts. I feel for you, mes chéris doux, I really do. I'd like to give you all a big hug, but I'm pretty sure you can't afford one.

Posted by user KILROY, 5:01 p.m.

My mother Molly Simmons died when I was in high school. I think I was a junior, or maybe a senior. No, definitely a junior because I remember Chelsea had just turned twelve. That's not a birthday you forget. I didn't reply to your grandmother's messages while I was working on the Blackbird because, strictly speaking, it wasn't Molly Simmons that was sending them. My mom's Passbook account wasn't a full Posterity user, it was what we called an algo. When she lost a short, intense battle with bone cancer, she suffered a brain aneurysm right at the end that led to a jury-unstart: her pattern had been lost before they could etch it into the crystal drives of Passbook's Posterity servers. Like unplugging a thumb drive before a file has finished saving, the doctors told my father, apologetically. No way to get her back except to run an old-fashioned legacy algorithm on her digital footprint and hope that the Passbook system could convincingly emulate her from the thousands of texts, tweets, status updates,

emails, and web-searches she'd left behind while she was still alive. They fed all of this into a sophisticated learning template that was still, unfortunately, much cruder than an actual person who'd been successfully juried.

Whereas I could talk to Nana like she was still alive and you'd never know the difference, Mom's algo mostly pinged the phones and networked devices of her Passbook friends to see what people were doing and then sent them a set of canned, open-ended conversation starters refined by data-mining and inflected with historical, biometric, and GPS data. It wasn't convincing most of the time, and if Mom's algo couldn't feed off of ambient friend input, it would click "Like" on random and sometimes inappropriate status updates, regurgitate sponsored content, or else babble nonsense cobbled together from defunct social media sites and browser bookmarks. The effect was mostly unsettling; a mishmash of quotes, incongruous hashtags, and garbled links and phrases. But once in a while the background calculations would come up with something that *did* seem like Mom, and that was the worst.

. . .

Ben pointed in horror at the space where the front door of Forever XXI used to be. A mall functionary in a cheap polyester suit stood with a considerably better-dressed individual affixing a large poster to the façade of the empty storefront. The second man was a manicured enterprise-type in his early fifties with sea salt hair and a tan so complete it could only be from natural sunlight. Natural Suntan stepped back so we could see it.

"Holy shit," I said.

"That's it, dude. I quit. There's no way."

This was a game-changer, no question. “It might not be so bad.”

Ben looked at me.

“Okay, maybe it’ll be bad.”

Ben stalked behind the velvet ropes and back to the register, where he furiously erased the novelty blackboard menu. Some of the franchise items, like the Skinny Whale and The Provaloner weren’t actually drawn in chalk, they were silk-screened onto the slate. Those stayed put, but the rest of the menu dissolved into smoky arm-swipes. He was getting chalk all over everything, including the sandwich bar, and the right arm of his long-sleeved T-shirt was pale pink to the elbow.

“We have to redraw all of that.”

Ben turned and bit his lip. I backed off. He started brushing off his sleeve, not caring that the air was filling with more and more dust with each puff. He looked in the drawers.

“Where’s the chalk?”

“Gus isn’t going to be happy.”

“He can fire me. Where is it?”

For the first time since I’d known him, I was taken aback by Ben. The guy was a spiritual cousin to the tree sloth: generally staring serenely into the distance and moving 58 feet per hour, taking a dump once a week and watching the world go by. He took it hard when Forever XXI went under. We lit our respective candles and prayed to the gods of People Watching that a similar habitat of charismatic fauna would come to take its place. All of the shelving was probably still there, the layout perfect for a Bust or a Club Meow or—dared we hope?—a Tortura. That day, though, harmless inert Ben achieved a reaction.

“Uh, the bottom tray in the cash box, I think.”

He thrashed around a bit more, putting off enough noise to earn a few turned heads from shoppers walking nearby. The mall admin guy said something to the over-tanned corporate rep and they chuckled as they passed us.

“Care to try our heart-healthy sandwich of the day?” I chirped. Neither of them acknowledged Ben’s rampage or that I’d spoken, but the corporate rep’s phone autoglowed purple. He wasn’t just a standard greenglow *à la carte* customer then, but one of our chain franchise’s Hoagie Heroes, a VIP. And here’s something else you should understand about the soft-oligarch types in the years before the Citizen’s Basic Income: the only thing better than being cash-flush enough to afford purpleglow membership someplace was the feeling they must have gotten when they walked right past us without even stopping.

On the drywall façade where Forever XXI used to be, a poster now proclaimed:

COMING SOON

Lil Fuqer’s

I turned around and Ben stood grimacing, arms folded, staring at the mall men, silently calling down karmic artillery upon them as they sank down the escalator. Above his head on the blackboard, in bubble letters twelve inches tall with a remarkably nuanced drop-shadow effect, were the words FUQ ME.

. . .

I double-checked the diagram I'd made and I couldn't see where I'd missed it. There was a row of sloped bricks on top of a row of more shallowly-sloped bricks that gave way to three rows of 1x3 short curves. It should've worked. The fuselage of the Blackbird had a tapered top edge called a "vortice chine" that I wanted to capture in brick, but wasn't coming out the way I'd hoped. It was too tall and fat, it needed to be shorter and wider, with more of a leaf shape tapering into the cockpit portion. This was why the laziest Lego sculptors just used CAD instead of deconstructing, adapting, rebuilding, compensating.

"Crap," I said, to the empty basement. I fired up lordsoflego.com and uploaded pictures to the Sculpt-In-Progress board. It was the middle of the night, so half of the users were asleep right then, but someone in western Canada replied fairly soon after and suggested that I should've gone with two layers of the shallow slopes instead of one. I eyeballed it, and I thought he might be right, but I couldn't tell for sure. I did know that I didn't have enough of them in black and I'd have to test it first in yellow and blue and red to see if the shape was right. A philistine would've just painted the bricks black, but Wyatt Simmons was no philistine. I briefly considered asking my stepmom Dana for some money, but she and Dad had just had a new breakfast nook put in the house and they went on and on about how much it cost. I had eighty bucks left in my bank account after giving Sara my half of the rent, and that had to last almost three weeks.

I pulled apart the entire top half of the Blackbird and located my bin of mixed-color leftovers, searching for shallow slopes in any shade. My fingers raked through the plastic pieces—"elements" they're called in the factory and design studio in Billund—and they tinkled like ice in an ice bucket. The sound Legos make when you dredge a bin of them is

something that can't be muted no matter how gently you do it. Another reason I was in the basement.

After ten minutes of enthusiastic digging I'd only found seven of the slopes, and I needed eighty-four total. I realized I was hungry and my fingertips throbbed faintly from the sharp-edged bricks. I went upstairs to pee and for a snack. Our couch in front of the big double-screen monitors was the centerpiece of the place, and the only stick of furniture we'd spent any significant amount of money on together. The rest of our décor consisted of poster reproductions from street fairs, half-wicker shelving and side tables with creaky joints from import outlets, and thin area rugs of ill provenance whose chief selling point was that they folded up small enough to bring home in the trunk of a crowdsourced car. The tiny kitchen bulb over the range vents mixed warm incandescence with the chilly halogen intruding from the streetlights through \$20 plastic venetian blinds. The disagreeable amber-white clash seemed to contaminate us. The bathroom door was closed and I thought I could hear hastened breathing on the other side.

I knocked, and the breathing stopped. "You okay, babe?"

The toilet paper roll spun audibly and Sara flushed the toilet. A moment later the door opened and she stuck her face out. She was in loose fitting pajamas and I could see the rectangle of her phone glowing through her pocket.

"What?"

"Just had to pee."

"I'm *in here*, can you just not? Jesus..." She pushed past me and made for the refrigerator.

. . .

Chelsea: Bakin' the biscuit again, was she?

Wyatt: Pardon?

Chelsea: Eric Delaney was vague-posting lovey-dovey things last night on his public Passbook wall. I put two and two together.

There were times that I regretted the confidences I kept in your Aunt Chelsea. I quickly typed my reply and went back to restocking the plastic silverware bins next to the cash register. The Grinder would open for customers shortly. Our boss Gus had been scarce of late, which suited us just fine. Ben hadn't followed through on his promise to quit. Not yet, at least.

Wyatt: I wouldn't know, and it's none of your business.

Chelsea: Oh come on. She was online at the same time. You know as well as I do she was ringing the devil's doorbell last night while you were playing with your Legos. Why are you still with her? She's clearly in love with him.

Wyatt: Don't you have somewhere to be?

Chelsea: Yeah, in a few minutes. My class doesn't start until 8:30.

Wyatt: What class?

Chelsea: Don't change the subject d00d. You're getting straight-cucked by a hard drive and you n33d to figure that shit out.

Where my kid sister picked up the word "cucked" I didn't like to think about.

Wyatt: I'll take it under advisement. Have a good commute. Drive fast; take lots of chances.

Chelsea: Peace out, d0rk.

Mom: I lost ten pounds on an all-carb diet once, [[read more](#)].

Nana: Have you talked to your father lately?

My mom's mother, your great-grandma Chloe, went by Nana. I fed some lettuce to the slicer. In point of fact I hadn't spoken to my father in quite a while. I liked his new wife Dana well enough, but you have to understand that none of us young people had any money in those days and it was hard to be around people who did. They didn't call us the Kid-R generation for nothing. After the housing collapse and the student loan boomerang, then the health exchange and consumer credit attenuation—twenty-odd years of it all—no one was still calling it a crisis or a downturn or a recovery or anything else. It had grown up with us, and grown beyond any one name. I can remember being cognizant of parts of it in the background when I was little: my mom crying in her bedroom in the afternoons when she was still a young woman, or tense moments between her and Dad at weird times like special lasagna dinners when it didn't make sense to be fighting. I didn't understand until much later, when I was trying to build the SR-71 in Sara's basement, that what they were crying and fighting about was the pain of an economic hollow-point bullet that first had to graze them to get to me.

Mom: Nana asked you a question.

I shuddered in spite of myself and fired off a quick response to Nana's juried account. Passbook Systems had supposedly been working on a long-awaited anti-serendipity patch that would refine the synergy between my online activity and which datametric factors Mom's algo chose to respond to on my wall, but this had been promised for years. Third party apps like Himleck Studios' RealThem were starting to beta test add-ons of their own to do it, but they were like the early days of voice-command: expensive, buggy, and even then they

didn't really work. Until true anti-serendipity made it out of beta, Mom's algo was the eerie broken clock that made you doubt yourself twice a day.

Wyatt: Hi Nana, no, I've been working as much as I can here at the sandwich shop. Why, did he say something?

Nana, whose nickname I assure you I had nothing to do with, had died early in Passbook's product cycle but her jury had been, as far as we could tell, flawless.

Nana: No, but I'm concerned about Chelsea. I'm worried she's been having a hard time lately.

It was always Chelsea with your great-grandma Chloe. She'd text me to ask if my father was doing well or if I'd read some listicle click-bait link she'd sent me, and she'd made her peace with Dana, but there was never any doubt where Nana's sympathies lay. And what was I supposed to say? I loved my grandmother, but she had a blind spot a mile wide for my sister. Not only was Chelsea a grown woman, practically, and not only did I Passbook Chelsea every day and would've been the first to know if something was up, but Chelsea's future was brighter than my own. Everyone wanted to hire a smart, energetic, young woman from the burbs, regardless of what she studied. But to Nana, a girl without a proper mother was like a nuclear launch code left out on a desk full of junk mail.

Wyatt: Really? That's not good. I hadn't heard anything.

Nana: Well, call him when you get a minute and see how he's doing.

Wyatt: Will do.

In the words of W.H. Fox Talbot, I planned to attend to it at my earliest interval of sufficient leisure.

03.

Your parents, if they acknowledge their complicity at all, are going to tell you they had few options open to them. They will tell you how they inherited a flawed system and did what they could to correct it. They will tell you that they themselves were plagued by poor leadership and underhanded responsibility politics. They will plead ignorance and confusion, rather than indolence and greed, with regard to their upbringing of you. They will claim misfortune rather than largesse when questioned about their finances. They will suggest that their own parents were indifferent to them, and died expensively with great inconvenience. They will imply that what you feel now—that futureless, drowning sensation—is something they themselves once felt but suffered through and conquered by virtue of an ineffable inner strength. They will call your lifetime of poverty an anomalous “era of austerity,” and they may whisper to each other of a “lost generation.” I submit that they have mismanaged their lives, and yours. I argue that their only innovation was in kicking away ladders they’d just climbed. I contend that their parents died badly, with shamefully little care, and that you, their lasting legacy, were turned over to an extractive culture industry and educational industrial complex largely of their design and to their exclusive benefit. Now you, who after decades of formal schooling at monumental expense should rightfully be an unprecedented generation of ethical, self-reliant, philosopher kings, have been left to toil and cower in a used-up world, leveraged and under lien forever, and inherit a legacy your parents hollowed out or bargained away long ago. I submit that no social contract has ever been so thoroughly breached as the one between you and your progenitors, and that no generation has ever been less deserving of immortality than theirs.

Posted by user KILROY, 3:23 a.m.

When they said “Coming Soon,” they meant it. The build-out had taken less time than Ben and I expected, and inside of a month our new neighbors were stenciling their inauspicious logo on the next display window over. Instead of flanking a girl-filled portal of low-rise denim and gauzy, form-fitting knit tops, the Guilty Grinder now shared the mall concourse with a yawning hell of elastic waistbands, shrieking toddlers, and the ever-present scent of sour milk. It was opening day, and we were awash in the overflow of Lil Fuqer’s.

“Yeesh,” Ben said. A woman pushing an enormous double-stroller waddled past. It was one of those tandem jobs like two shopping carts welded together end-to-end. In the

back, an infant buried in blankets and overlarge clothing slumbered apneaically like the Sarlaac. In front, a fluffy-haired three-year-old boy with a double-runner of liquid booger from nose to mouth was howling. He wore a T-shirt that read "Because FUQ U, that's Y."

"I wanna go to the yeggo store!" he pleaded, chest hitching. His eyes were red and puffy, the color of outrageous disappointment. Somewhere along the line the crying had *become* the thing the boy was upset about. I knew the feeling.

"We talked about that, sweetie," his mom said. She piloted the huge stroller half-in, half-out of our neighbor's entrance to look at a rack of sequined, imported cotton tees. It wasn't enough that Lilian Fuquer's empire of high-end children's clothing boutiques had to set up in the same rotunda as the Grinder and our Lego store; this particular Lil Fuquer's open floor plan was like a soundstage, guaranteeing we'd never miss a single meltdown. Ignoring the boy, the mother picked up a tiny hoodie that read, "If you Think my Attitude is Shitty, you Should See My Diaper!"

Ben continued threatening to quit all week, but still hadn't done so. I was actually sort of proud of the guy for sticking it out. Gus wasn't exactly forthcoming with praise most of the time, and I don't know if Ben even had any other friends. I decided to pretend for the time being that he didn't and reassure accordingly. "It won't be that bad, dude. I'm still here. I'm sure there'll still be cute girls to look at."

Ben remained impassive. His pessimism was starting to infect me.

"How long can a place like that afford the rent this close to the food court anyway?"

The kid in the stroller began to thrash his upper body. The five-point harness kept him from wiggling loose, but his head became a wrecking ball. His cries turned to grunts and he vigorously listed side to side and back and forth. During a miscalculated swing, his face

lightly connected with the padded handlebar bumper on the front of the stroller, and he came away with a faint red welt and a look of astonishment. *How dare you hurt me, stroller?* his expression said, and his whine gained further volume.

More bleary-eyed, uncomfortable-looking women had come and gone just in the last few moments than we normally saw in an entire day. They shared a commonality of hastily-arranged short hairstyles and blouses with the outlines of old stains directly over their hearts. This was the opposite of people watching; when I looked too long at these moms and their tiny, irascible clones, I could feel myself getting older.

"I WANNA GO TO THE YEGGO STOOOOOOOORE!" Every set of shoulders in the food court cringed in response.

"I can't do this," Ben said, suddenly sounding sad and weary. He reached behind himself and began to untie his apron.

"Come on, swabbies," Gus said, in a voice loud enough to mildly startle us. We'd forgotten he was in today. "If you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean." Gus had watched a History Channel special on Edward Teach the previous week and when we failed to show sufficient interest in it, he started slipping piratical phrases into his everyday speech.

Ben made a show of firmly re-tying his apron and I pawed at an imaginary water spot on the stainless with a cloth rag from my back pocket. I never actually used this rag for cleaning, of course. That would have been expressly against Guilty Grinder Artisanal Associate policy; handbook chapter four, *Attire*, subsection two. It was mostly just there to make me look busier.

Gus stood at the pick-up counter with his hairy forearms creating an A-frame for his head. He leaned into the granite as if to push it into the floor. The mom with the tandem

stroller was finally making her way out of Lil Fuquer's and was veering toward the Lego store when she spotted us. I said a silent prayer that she wasn't in the mood for a toasted hoagie, and she wasn't; it was for Junior.

Gus saw her too late to retreat, and was forced to take their order. "Ahoy there, folks!" he said. No one acknowledged the piracy.

"Umm... do you think we could get something like a toasted cheese?" The mom took her cellphone away from her sweaty face long enough to greenglow it. The fluffy-haired toddler in the front seat was still sulking and occasionally slamming his arms up and down on the mini-tray in front of him. Droplets of something flew off of him and fell on the sandwich bar sneeze-shield.

"Yarr," Gus said. He gave me the thumb and I made what I hoped was a borderline-edible toasted cheese sandwich out of four slices of aged Havarti on Ciabatta bread. Gus looked down at the kid and said something like "hey little matey! Having fun with Mom?" The boy responded by showing us his tonsils and rasping out a pterodactyne screech kept mercifully subsonic by his hoarse larynx. The mom took her tray without a word, still focused on her call. Their tiny convoy made for the Lego store and the tantrum finally ceased. The silence that followed was post-apocalyptic; birds hesitantly chirping after a category-5 tornado.

An attentive salesgirl in her late 20s with curly black hair, wide-ish hips, pleasant round cheekbones, and a pretty spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose posted up at the door of Lil Fuquer's as if to size-up potential shoppers. She pretended to fidget with the headset that snaked down her armpit to a small black radio pack on her belt, but I'd caught her: she was people watching, no question. Her combed-cotton shirt stipulated "Miles of

Sass.”

I smiled at her and she smiled back. She tilted her head, and I followed her eyes; an enormously fat middle-aged man was huffing his way from the escalator to the Chow Hound Buffet. The salesgirl leaned back with her hands in her pockets and pooched out her belly, waddling back and forth a little in place. I laughed silently, but so she could see me do it. She smiled and winked at me.

. . .

I know what you’re thinking, and I insist it wasn’t as juvenile as boy meets girl, boy gets tired of girl, boy meets new girl. I’d been with Sara for years at that point, and maybe you imagine that’s not much better. Habituation isn’t love, and your second guess is probably a coefficient of comfort and laziness that keeps people in relationships like that long past their expiration date, but again, there was more to it. A weeknight not long afterward, Sara and I were playing *Warlance Unchained* on our big double-screened computer-TV, and I was out in front of the pack, soaking up damage like a paladin is supposed to. Except instead of healing me she was on her phone.

“Heals!” I shouted. Three of the other damage class player-characters, including a dwarf rogue who’d been threatening to leave our guild because of exactly this sort of bullshit, had already sent out the SOS. We were about ninety minutes into a 5-man raid and suddenly the mobs in the room next to us aggroed.

“Oh fuck.” I whacked my mouse on the mousepad. “Sara!”

“Sorry,” she said, grabbing her mouse and swinging Anaphlan around—her Level 81

battle priestess. Too late; the Hell Goblins killed me, and then rapidly slaughtered the other lightly-armored player-characters in our group. Sara logged out and Anaphlan vanished.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I demanded. For a tank character like me, or a healer like Anaphlan, logging out in the middle of a raid was the cardinal MMORPG sin; like driving your friends into the woods, waiting for them to set up their tents, and then driving away with the food and the bug spray still in your trunk. Our warlock private-chatted me *wtf dude*, and I said *sorry, girlfriend*, and he said *I know a gray mage who might be willing to heal for us* and I typed back *yes*. I turned to Sara.

“Oh no.” She was on her phone again. This was after she’d complained that I was spending too much time in the basement. It was her idea to play *Warlance* to begin with.

“Really?”

“It’s Greta.” She meant Greta Delaney, Eric’s youngest sister. “She didn’t get into Oberlin.”

I scowled, which took a moment to register.

“Sorry. Jeez, you take this too seriously. It’s a game. Ten year olds play this.”

Ten year olds did play *Warlance*, but then: this was *her* time. This was time I wasn’t downstairs with the Blackbird. I loved *Warlance* as much as anyone, but my first choice were older, vintage Nintendo games. I played *Contra* and *Gradius* and *Double Dragon* and *Ninja Gaiden*, but Sara wouldn’t play them with me because she sucked at them and she liked having a character she could customize. I tried to keep my voice neutral and respectful. “Babe, if you want to have that sort of flexibility, you should pick a fighter character, no one cares if DPS toons drop in and drop out, but if Anaphlan is going to be a priestess, you’re going to have to heal like every single time.”

“The battle priestesses have the best armor bonuses...” she said, distantly, still half looking at her phone.

I gritted my teeth and stared at the ceiling.

“You should try hanging out with your dad a little,” she said, not looking up. Whenever I captured her attention long enough, my father was a recurring theme. This drive-by suggestion is what I meant by the shine coming off of the apple: a simple conversation with Sara usually meant a restless low-level joust, stabbing at each other’s raw nerves. “He might be able to help you find a job.”

“Don’t fucking talk about my dad to me,” I said, suddenly angrier than I thought I was. “You know I hate that.” She knew, but I knew she didn’t care. That was the entire point. Stab. Parry. Retreat.

Sara backed off, “Okay, I’m sorry. You’ve been acting really...” she looked back at her phone. I waved my hand in front of her screen, and she blinked herself reluctantly back into my presence.

“Really what?”

“Like an asshole?” She said, gently. “Your dad lives half an hour away; I don’t get to see my parents at all. You take it for granted that they’re so close, but you hardly ever visit them.” And that was that. I’d played the King of parental guilt; she’d played the Ace.

A red message popped up. Our rogue, whose screen name was S0ound of S1lence, ragequit the guild.

“Goddamn it,” I said, pointing at the screen.

“It’s a game, Wyatt. It’s supposed to be fun.”

“Fun for who?” I asked.

“Evidently not you.” She gave me the shit-eye and stalked off to her room, taking her phone with her. I logged out, and went down to work on the Bird. My phone buzzed. I looked down and Eric Delaney’s Passbook Posterity automatic calendar bot wished me a happy birthday. My birthday wasn’t for another eight months, but a moment later Mom’s also Liked his post.

. . .

The Lil Fuqer’s salesgirl came over for a sandwich.

“Heads up,” Gus said. He was lurking at the door to the walk-in freezer and playing an augmented reality game called *LD 50/30* on his iPhone. He continually ducked and dodged things we couldn’t see.

“Hi, welcome to the Guilty Grinder,” I said. I forced myself to look straight at her pupils instead of checking her out. I could sense nevertheless that she was even cuter up close, and the word “guilty” stuck in my mouth a little.

“Yeah I’d like a Mess,” she said.

“And here I am,” I replied, without missing a beat.

She looked at me blankly.

“Sorry, sure, what can I put on that for you?”

She tilted her head, but it took me a second to realize this was because the answer to my question, of course, was *everything*. That’s why they called it The Mess.

“Umm...”

I shook my head. “Sorry, long morning. Just a regular Mess, yes?”

“Yes,” she said, and smiled a little. “A regular Mess.” She added, under her breath, “though I’m told they’re all special in their own way.” She was short and plain of shape, but as I say, she had the pretty kind of freckles across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, and black hair in tight curls that hurt my stomach not to openly stare at. Ben went to work on the Mess, and she waited patiently. We’d had a moment the day before, I felt certain. Was this my chance, this awkward pause that on every other day was just an ordinary service interval? I heard Han Solo’s voice in my head: *I don’t know, fly casual.*

“I’m Wyatt,” I said. Me Tarzan.

“Oh yeah?” she said. “I guess that means you know what’s Earp.”

I grunted a quick one-note half-laugh, and tried to be cool. My generation’s sense of humor was unmistakable; being cool was everything. No matter how sarcastic someone got—how easy it was to bust an earnest young man’s balls about his unusual name, for instance—the trick was never to let on, ever. If possible, you wanted to impress upon the other person that you might be even *more* sarcastic than they were, and that you knew all the jokes and ten more they hadn’t heard. It was the only shot I had, really: I had bad posture and wore ugly shoes, and no one looks cool in an apron.

“I’m Pepper.”

I tried to imagine what Han Solo would’ve said. He’d have been cool. He’d have smoldered. He wouldn’t have worried if his shoulders were incorrectly proportioned to his torso or if that one crooked tooth at the front of his smile his parents had declined to fix with braces made him look like a dirtbag. Han would have said *I know* or *yes, I bet you are*. I went with, “Anything to drink?”

She scrunched up one side of her cheek adorably. “Just an iced tea, I guess.”

I pulled one of the medium-sized fountain cups and handed it to her. It had a promo for *Swells of the Crystal Pirates*, the newest expansion of *Warlance Unchained*, printed on the side.

“Do you play?” I asked, when I noticed her eyes looking at it.

“Mmm hmm.”

“Cool, I’m on Baying Jaws.” I know this is all very abstract since your generation didn’t grow up with online games at all, but Baying Jaws was one of the two-hundred or so servers that hosted discrete copies of the game-worlds. Servers were assigned mostly by geographic location, so it wasn’t all that coincidental that we played on the same server and hence could, at least theoretically, encounter each other among the millions of other player-characters.

“Me too.”

“No kidding? Realm neighbors! Not enough spell-casters, right?”

“Mmm. Do you have any dressing?”

“I can have dressing put on if you want,” I offered.

“I’ll put it on.”

“Sure, here.” I handed her a packet of Brian Urlacher’s Thousand Islands and we waited for Ben to finish the sandwich. She passed her phone under the reader to pay. The outer bezel of her screen glowed from gray to green. The receipt printed. We tried not to stare at each other, but she put her phone away instead of Passbooking while she was waiting. I would think about that later. She smiled again, and it was nice. Ben finally produced the Mess on a brown plastic tray.

“Here we go,” I said. “Have a good one.”

“You too,” she said, and walked away.

“Fuck, fucking *dog*,” Gus said, still playing his game. “Get out of the minefield. What are you *doing*?”

“You have to use the party member command screen,” Ben suggested helpfully. Gus frowned at Ben and seemed surprised to remember he was at work.

“Nice to meet you, Pepper,” I called out, belatedly.

She waved a little, without turning around, and that was the first time I ever spoke to your mom.

. . .

“Should I grow a beard, do you think?” I mumbled to Ben. He and Gus and I stood shoulder to shoulder at the counter watching mall-goers parade past, casting only an occasional dim glance at our blackboard menu. The food court’s new Mexican option, Guac Like a Man, had replaced the Taco Cat, and a lot of hungry Lil Fuqer customers opted for the warm oily crunch of gourmet hand-fired tortilla chips over artisanal sandwiches. I couldn’t say I blamed them.

“A beard?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I read this Passbook article about how all women really want looks-wise in a man is a good chin, and I have kind of a marginal chin, I think.”

“Turn sideways.”

I turned a little.

“Hmmm.” Ben said.

“See?”

“I read somewhere that having a beard is liable to get you hit up for money because you’ll look older.”

I scrutinized myself in the reflection of the sneeze shield and pawed at my lumpy chin and softened jawline. There was a disheartening amount of sense to this. My phone buzzed, and I reached for it. Did I mention this was always a bad idea? It was.

Mom: Want a thicker tool? 8==> [[Click Here](#)].

The algo developer MortYouary that hosted Mom was great, except when it wasn’t, which was often. In recent memory Mom’s algo been taken down by distributed denial of service attacks, positive link-spoofers, phishers, pornographers, prescripto-counterfeiters, real-estate agents, and once in a while a good old-fashioned penile enhancement bot.

Mom: Make her [[Gag On It](#)] Tonight!

I put my phone back in my pocket. Your more aggressive variety of cock-bot wasn’t taking its sales pitch anywhere I needed to see.

“Not that it’s any of my business, but you should totally grow a beard,” Gus said from Ben’s far shoulder, and without turning to look at me.

I leaned over and peered down the counter at him. “Oh yeah?”

“I bet she’d like it,” he nodded, indicating Lil Fuqer’s.

“Who? The girl from over there?”

Gus shrugged, scanning the food court. “Maybe, I don’t know. I’m an old married guy, don’t listen to me. And happy birthday, by the way.”

“Oh, shit, I didn’t realize it was your birthday today,” Ben asked.

“It’s not.”

“Huh?”

“Long story.”

Gus stirred the sliced olives in their cold-bucket with a long-handled plastic spoon. My phone buzzed again, and I silenced it without looking at it. Time for a change of subject.

“Did I see you playing *LD 50/30*? How is it?”

Gus smiled. “It’s terrific so far.”

“I haven’t seen it.”

“Check it out.” Gus turned his phone toward me so I could see.

LD 50/30 was a recently-released AR game that overlaid the player’s real world surroundings with the bleak aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse. When you looked at the display of your phone’s camera, or better yet snapped your entire phone into a dual-screen 3D goggle configuration, wherever you were became the end of the world. He swung his phone around to show a mall empty of people, with shattered skylights and broken glass lying in pools of stagnant, radioactive rainwater. Lil Fuqer’s was a looted and burned shell with NEXT TIME, I’LL TAKE THE WHIMPER scrawled in red paint on the sagging, moldy drywall. Our quadrant’s Shopper Relaxation Station with coin-operated massage chairs became a flickering trashcan fire surrounded by stacks of empty cans and plastic food container garbage. The Guilty Grinder was completely replaced by a hole in the side of the building that looked out on a gray, dead Chicago with skeletal buildings reminiscent of a mouthful of broken teeth. *LD 50/30*, the game’s cryptic title, referred to a “Lethal Dose,” of radiation strong enough to kill fifty percent of the people who received it within thirty days. The goal was to survive until the end of the month.

“Awesome,” Ben said, unselfconsciously. He squinted. “Oh, shit, look at that!”

On the screen of Gus's phone, a digitally-inserted deer with one antler and blood on its nose wandered up the empty escalator and sniffed around.

"Just a sec," Gus said, turning the screen back toward himself and peering out at it. "I get an achievement if I kill that, hang on."

We went back to watching mall-goers stroll past. Use words like "meat-market" and "consumerism" or even "male gaze" if you must, but people-watching was the *best*. On Passbook everyone talked at each other, but no one really took the time to see anyone else; this was the exact opposite. My phone buzzed again. And again. And two more times. There was nothing to be done when boner-pill spammers algo-bombed Grandma Molly except just wait it out.

"Listen to this: they have a downloadable plugin that'll make it so cannibals will chase you if you want to go for a run," Gus said, absorbed.

Then a different sensation hit me in the pants pocket. One long buzz, then another. My phone was actually *ringing*. That wasn't right. Algo-bombs couldn't do that because algos couldn't do that. I took my phone out. The lock screen was plastered with new messages in emergency orange instead of ordinary blue.

DadnDana: Wyatt, you need to text or call me immediately when you get this.

Nana: GET 2 THE HOSPT

Wyatt: Slow down, what?

Nana: Sorry, *hospital*. Go now. Your sister's been in an accident.

04.

When one of our valued customers becomes a Posterity user of Passbook, they undergo a process we call “jurying.” Sounds sort of scary doesn’t it? We at Passbook Labs encourage you to think of Posterity like the switch to Cloud computing: what used to be hardware is now software! You or your loved one’s mind—the thoughts, feelings, and memories that they carried with them in their fragile tissue brain—are cryo-mapped, and etched with painstaking care onto Crystal Drives™ stored safely in our state-of-the-art server vault. But it’s much more than a snapshot: Passbook Posterity users can sail the limitless seas of the internet, partake of a huge range of audiovisual content, and make new memories with friends and family that will last a lifetime—even if that lifetime is forever! We have a variety of etch space memberships sure to meet any budget, so be sure to ask your Post Mortal Transition Associate which plan is right for you.

From “Making the Jump: A Field Guide to the Digital You”

[illegible]

```
/run/compiler
```

<compile verified:?133HRMW@>

/recode/predictive

[output]WH3R3.@M.1?

```
/query/recompile
```

[begin]

```
/user/admin 9633198/WELCOME TO PASSBOOK. PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME, IF YOU
REMEMBER IT.
```

☐ ☒ ☐

```
/truncate
```

```
<compile verified:/user/client 3284761223333.2542387/1335550CHLAMMN
```

/recode/predictive

```
[output] CH3L53A.51MM0N5
```

■ ■ ■

Posted by user CHELSEA SIMMONS, 7:01 a.m.:

So you probably guessed it already, but I'm dead. They don't like using the D-word here, especially Nana, but TBH Nana's generation sometimes has a problem calling things what they are. I was riding to school on my stupid scooter and some old guy in a blue pickup truck coasted through a stop sign and hit me. I never saw a thing. I was listening to the Dirtroad Hamsters on my headphones and all of a sudden I was looking down at the sun between my fist and I was like: *that's weird*. And then here I was. I never watched those dumb shows about what to expect so my jury was a little (little) bit of a show.

At first when the Admin Line was asking me questions, all the words I wanted to say were stretched out like I couldn't tell if I was dead or just dreaming and about to wake up. Every word I tried to say, even the easy ones like "me" seemed to get halfway out and just stop, and then there'd be extra letters in "me" and then whole pages of "me" and then the Admin Line was asking me what my social security number was and I couldn't figure out how to turn the caps lock off so I told him \$#%-#\$(*& and he thought I was being a smartass but I totally wasn't. Then they dumped me into the P@ssbook dashboard where I had to set up the new Posterity tab they give you when you don't have a body anymore. That's when I got my P@ssbook profile back and set my privacy levels (Hint: if you're reading this, you're in my 'BestBitchez' usergroup). I was pretty much back in black; or back in **bold** I guess. You get a snazzy **bold** username when you're dead.

Nana: I'm not eavesdropping, but I have to say: I like that we're close again.

And don't say "dead."

Here's the thing though: a long time ago, Dad bought a two-person "family" etch space and server throughput package, which was not only cheaper, but means two people are on the same

crystal drive partition, like brain-neighbors. He must have assumed he'd share the drive space with Mom forever (forever), but instead it's Nana and me, and now Nana can read my mind.

Nana: Not listening.

But at least I'm still here, right? After the crash, it took a while for me to get oriented. Wyatt said it was really (really) tense in the waiting room, because my head got pretty mushed in the accident, and they were all sitting and watching the monitor and eating crackers from the hospital cafeteria to see if I came through the jurying okay. Which was good, though, because once I finally figured out the posterity tab and got into the menu for the family room camera feed, Dad and Dana and Wyatt and everyone were right there, and I could see them on the monitor so it wasn't very scary, which was a relief because being dead could totally (totally) be scary, I bet.

Oh, I forgot! One of the creepiest and coolest things ever: I got to watch my own funeral.

Nana: Chelsea, come on. Be a grownup for once.

Chelsea: I've got to tell them, it was so cool.

Nana: It's morbid, I cried for days. You don't know what it was like to watch your grandchild

Chelsea: Nana

Nana: get lowered into the ground like that. I remember holding you the day you came home from the

Chelsea: NANA!

Nana: What?

Chelsea: Knock it off.

Nana: I'm sorry.

Chelsea: It's okay, Nana.

Anyway, he wasn't supposed to but Wyatt brought his cellphone with him and live-streamed the funeral to a cloud locker for me. It was r@d! My so-called boyfriend, AKA Lucas the Puke-ass, didn't show up to the funeral so I logged into his MacBook and downloaded about a hundred gigs of old-people p0rn and I made his desktop this great granny money shot and turned all of his icons into old-guy penises.

Nana: Inappropriate.

Chelsea: NANA, I WILL UNFRIEND YOU.

Nana: Sorry, okay, I'm going.

He was pretty mad, I guess, because he changed his password after that but he deserved it, what a j3rk. They brought me out of the funeral home in this really sweet casket with brass handles all around it that sort of disappeared into the wood when they set it down, and it wasn't gross or anything. Obviously (obviously) they had the lid closed, so I didn't get to take a p33k at my melon where they hack you open to get your brain out, but I was pretty sure I was in m0stly (mostly) good shape inside. Anyway, Wyatt and Dad and Dana were standing off to the side of this great big hole that had like a carpet over it to look like grass but underneath was just regular dirt, and they lowered the casket in and played this totally (totally) cre3py music like from those old Christian psalm books and people were singing and it was so (so) epic. Like: *be not afraid, I go before you always* and I think I could even hear Wyatt singing it, which was so funny because my brother is such a sh2t singer that my autotune app releases an update every time he tries. Dana cried a little (@www) and Dad

had this really sad look on his face so I sent him an eCard right in the middle of the service about how the hole in the ground looked awesome and I was dying to get in and he was like, “That’s not funny,” and I texted HELP! IT’S DARK IN HERE! I’M BEING BURIED ALIVE! BURIED ALIVE! and because I knew the password to his phone (It’s Mom’s birthday plus Dana’s br@ size) I unlocked it, turned on the ringer, and switched his ringtone to this old sound clip of Halloween ghosts with chains rattling, and then I called him. When he picked up, the wildest thing happened— well, it’s not wild really, because I know I can do it now, but it was the first time I ever tried it—I couldn’t say anything, but I could *hear* his voice. “Hello?” Dad said, and I could hear the creepy Christian hymn in the background, and I could hear the little motor on the straps that lowered the casket into the ground, and I could hear the ghosts and the chains and the people crying and I just laughed and laughed (and laughed).

. . .

Wyatt: You okay kiddo?

Chelsea: You’ve asked me that like eleven times today. Y3s I’m Ok.

Wyatt: Sorry, it’s just strange.

Chelsea: What’s strange?

Wyatt: Oh, I don’t know, the bold username. That must be it. I’m not used to emphasized typeface.

Chelsea: Come on d00d, don’t make it worse than it i5.

Wyatt: Sorry.

Chelsea: Also, everyone stop telling me they're so "s0rry."

Wyatt: It's really difficult to know what to say.

Chelsea: Unless your name is Gary Trombley and your license plate is K14 8793, you had nothing to do with it.

Mom: Locate anyone in seconds with [\[People Database\]](#).

Wyatt: You're my little sister.

Chelsea: And I'm already Over it. I don't have to sleep or shave my armpits anymore and aside from deep dish p1zza there's not a whole lot I miss about having a body.

Wyatt: Well that's... good I guess.

Chelsea: The server package s1tuation could be better, but I looked it up and there's no way to change it now: once you're on a crystal drive, you're there to stay. There's no cutting, copying, and pasting because they really do literally etch us into a carbon crystal with a la5er. It's the only way to store enough data to keep us who we are and give us room to grow. Or 1 should say *\$ell* us room to grow: they want you to *pay* for more partition space after a while. Ugh... Nothing is certain in life except taxes and minimum wage. I'm still figuring it all out. I will say it'd be nice if Nana dialed back a skosh on the cat videos. She still misses Polenta from her old house.

Nana: Polenta was a *great* cat.

Chelsea: I'm not saying she wasn't, Nana.

Mom: Have you seen this one? [\[Click to play MeowMediaNow file\]](#)

. . .

I switched shifts with Ben so I could take a few days off, and I spent most of the week after your Aunt Chelsea died at Dad and Dana's house helping them clean out her room. Dana sat in a huddle of open cardboard boxes and was gently sorting through and folding Chelsea's clothes. It struck me then, as it would years later when you were a teenager, how thin and immaterial young women's garments from trendy stores are. Even something weighty like a pair of jeans or a knit sweater seemed to fold liquidly in on itself until it almost vanished. I remember Dad sitting on the bed and staring into space. Chelsea was on Passbook, of course, overseeing the entire job through my cellphone camera to make sure we didn't throw anything important away. Dana held up a low-cut halter and frowned: the top that launched a thousand selfies.

Chelsea: That one goes to Amanda.

Wyatt: Which one?

Chelsea: The black one. The hooker-y one. You didn't think that was *mine*, did you?

Wyatt: I... wasn't sure?

Chelsea: How can you not know I'd never own something like that? God, someone didn't know me at *all*.

I winced a little at the clenching sensation in my stomach, realizing for the hundredth queasy time that week that—smartass Passbook Posterity notwithstanding—my sister was buried in a box in the ground a few miles away.

Chelsea: I'm just messing with you, you big g00ber, I forgot I even had it. But it's 10/10 the only top that ever looked good on Amanda, so it would be the humane thing to do to give it back to her. Forget it, I'll tell Dana.

Dana's phone whistled at her like a construction worker. I was a fan of Dana generally, but in the big scheme of things there were people—lets call them “normal people”—who left their phones on vibrate, and then there were people who permitted their devices to make noise at them all day. Dana pulled it out of the pocket of her skinny jeans, typed back, and set the top aside.

Dad sighed. He was holding onto Chelsea's old phone, winding the earbuds slowly around it and rubbing the smooth scuffs in the anodized aluminum casing. The screen was dark and a long crack ran the vertical length of it. He wasn't taking this at all well, and I had no idea what to say to him.

Chelsea's phone lit up suddenly and vibrated hard in his hand. **BOO!** The screen said.

He dropped it. “Ahh! Jesus, Chels...” He picked it gingerly back up, inspecting the crack in the screen to make sure he hadn't made it any worse, and put the phone back on her dresser. He stood up, wiping his hands on his jeans. “Does anybody want something to eat?”

“I'm good,” I said.

Chelsea: Go with dad, jerk.

Wyatt: I'm not hungry.

Chelsea: Could you *be* any more dense?

Wyatt: Fine...

I found Dad frying hotdogs in sauerkraut on the stovetop. Once they'd put on the addition to the house, he and Dana's kitchen was enormous. The surfaces were spotless and

metallic and the granite and stainless steel gleamed like the giant foreheads of sunken robots. His refrigerator had a digital readout on the front of it and cost more than a used car.

“I’d have one of those,” I said.

“Oh, sure, I’ll throw one in for you.”

Even standing in his dream kitchen and approaching the retirement he’d been talking about for so many years, Dad still bought the cheap hotdogs like he and Mom used to make us when their kitchen was half that big and had fiber-board cabinets with harvest gold veneer. I took a seat at the new breakfast nook, which was roughly the same size as the living room in Sara’s apartment. Like everything else in the house, it seemed comically oversized for just him and Dana. Anything my father couldn’t have the best of he’d buy two or three of so he always had a fresh one. I tried to picture my father minus the things he owned, and I couldn’t.

“What do you think?” Dad asked, proudly. He meant the nook. He’d asked me this on roughly five previous occasions, beating the small-talk underbrush and hoping compliments, appreciation, maybe even jealousy, would take wing.

I considered saying nothing, which felt too mean, or just saying, “It’s nice,” which I could live with but would probably shut him down. I had to remind myself that the guy did just lose his daughter. I relented. “Yeah, it’s terrific. Really comfortable. This table is oak, you said, right?”

“Rock maple.” He restlessly prodded the budget dogs. A hint of satisfaction crept into his voice. “I know a guy that works in wholesale.” He segued into a recitation of how he saved 8% over list on every item in the nook, including the hardwood parquet flooring. There was a loose Cheeto in the cushion of the upmarket kitchen chair closest to the triple-window. I

picked it up so Dad didn't have to wonder if it was part of Chelsea's final bag. Or maybe just so I didn't have to wonder that.

The kitchen began to reek of sauerkraut. I've always thought it had a weirdly pleasant sweet-fart smell. When your Aunt Chelsea and I were little kids, Grandpa would make this meal in our tiny old kitchen and Chelsea and Mom would call him "stinkpot" when his back was turned. In those days that house was a totally different place: child flotsam everywhere, grime in the corners that Mom's cursory dabbing with the Swiffer never reached all the way. When Chelsea was about eleven and started to go through her moody phase, she liked to sit under the old white kitchen table with her back against the corner wall and text her friends on her tablet while your grandmother made fried rice from a box.

Later, after my mom died, their house looked like the floor display of a high-end furniture store. Dad and Dana went through a Scrimshaw & Wö phase after they got married and tossed all of the old stuff. Mom's algo was online by then, but you see how it was with her. When Mom was alive, she used to like bright primary colors and though he'd have never admitted this, Dad hated them. Dana liked muted browns, tans, and greens and so did Dad, so the house turned darker and sleeker after Mom died, and every inch of it oozed the kind of spendy poise unique to happy middle-aged couples whose children were grown. In Chelsea's old corner, a hospital-quality air filter pulled down even the stray dust motes.

Dad set a plate of dogs and kraut in front of me. "How's the Grinder?"

Distantly, Dana's phone catcalled.

"It's the Grinder. I'm still there."

Dad was a senior transportation administrator in the Chicago Public Schools, and he was in a retirement tier that didn't even exist anymore. He could have stopped working years

before that and let one of his junior colleagues take his position, but he was gaming the salary equations to maximize his payout when he finally did. I know this because he reiterated his strategy almost every time we spoke.

“What’s your next move?” Dad asked.

I shrugged, and cringed a little on the inside. It was always about the next move with your grandfather. He never said so directly, but the Guilty Grinder baffled him. It was like he felt sure the only thing that stood between me and a house with a programmable refrigerator was locating the sheer balls for some hard work. Every week the news drearily chronicled the latest wave of CPS layoffs among the employees with the least seniority. Last hired, first fired. Dad failed to see the irony in this, and he never seemed worried about his own job. He was in that special tier. None of us had ever heard of a citizens’ basic income back then, and paid vacation was the punch line of jokes about Norwegian communists. I would’ve rather gnawed my own arm off than talk to my father about work, and it bothered me that he seemed not to know or care how I felt about it. There was a fine line between Jonah Simmons and Graham Grayson, so fine I couldn’t always see it. I ate my hotdogs faster, in larger bites, swallowing the kraut without chewing.

“How’s the money situation?”

I was about to stand up, but my phone vibrated.

Chelsea: Keep him in the kitchen.

Wyatt: What? Why?

Chelsea: Dana’s clearing out my stash.

Wyatt: Come on, you have drugs in your room?

Chelsea: No, idiot, *girl stuff*. You stay there, too.

I ran this over in my head for an awful second or two.

Wyatt: GROSS.

Chelsea: Don't judge, Wyatt, just help me out here.

Dana appeared in the hallway and scrunched up her nose. "Hoo, I'm going to let you boys do your thing in here. That burns my eyes a little." She had a large shoebox under one arm that looked like it might once have contained a pair of designer snow boots.

"You need a hand, honey?" Dad called to Dana. He turned around and rested a hand on the back of his chair.

Wyatt: You owe me one.

"I'm actually working on a proof-of-concept project," I said, reeling Dad back in.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Trying to get the attention of a company I might want to work for. Somewhere I can use my degree."

He nodded, straightening the placemat of the unoccupied seat next to him.

I heard the storm door hiss closed. "How about you?" I asked.

"Well, I'm still trying to figure out when to retire. I've been making triple payments on the mortgage and I think we'll have the house paid off sometime next year. After that I want to try to shift departments one more time. I get 68% of the average of my highest three years' salary, plus benefits, for life, and the salary is jurable..." He continued. It was like he was singing his favorite song.

Chelsea: TY.

Wyatt: YW.

05.

Now that you're becoming comfortable with Passbook, you're probably wondering how to get more space to grow. Unlike the old saying that real estate is the best investment because 'God isn't making any more of it,' we at Passbook Labs are indeed hard at work creating all the space you'll ever need for Posterity. Do you cherish staying connected to your loved ones? Are you considering audio enhancement or even haptic telepresence? These cutting-edge technologies are data-intensive and you'll need plenty of Crystal Drive™ space to experience the best results. Our award-winning Data Expansion Subscription Plans allow you to unlock your true post-mortal potential. Forever is a long time, and you owe it to yourself to make the most of it.

From “Making the Jump: A Field Guide to the Digital You”

Trust me when I say that of all the things you can get addicted to, nostalgia is the worst. I might wish some things about your generation. I wish people your age would read fewer books about people my age, and I wish you'd opt for cotton over those synthetic fibers you're so in love with. I wish any of you knew a damn about real cooking and I wish you would *throw those idiotic vinyl LPs in the trash*. People my age literally went to jail so you could have MP3s; don't piss all over their sacrifice by spending \$300 on technology that was old when the lightbulb was invented.

But above all don't—*please*—don't ever think that you “missed out” being born when you were. All the things that we had that you don't, Passbook and smartphones and the augmented reality; they were just things, and none of them made us happy. They were mostly just there, and to understand them you have to understand the things that weren't there: jobs and family and especially friends. You were never alone; practically every person you ever met was on Passbook, never further away than your pocket, plastering over your little glowing window with their bumper-sticker opinions like they were trying to redecorate the internet an inch at a time. But when you wanted to feel like someone really cared about you,

it was the hardest sensation in the world to locate. For every great thing we had, we had something equally horrible. It was enough to make you wish you had a Teflon soul.

Case in point: the group-text.

Nana: I don't care for that Dana woman.

Wyatt: Huh?

Chelsea: Nana, seriously?

Nana: What, I'm allowed to think what I think.

Wyatt: What makes you say that? I think she's nice.

Chelsea: It's not cool to hate her just because she makes Dad happy.

Nana: Oh come on, open your eyes. Your mother used to tell me things.

Mom: We Specialize in [Discrete Criminal Background Checks].

Chelsea: She's a perfectly adequate stepmom, and she totally (totally) had my back when they were cleaning out my room.

Nana: You mean she hid things from your father.

Chelsea: She did it because I asked her to. Mom would have done the same.

Wyatt: Yeah, I'm gonna... um... I'm gonna go.

Nana: Molly would've never had a house with secrets to begin with, or let you ride that ridiculous scooter thing.

Chelsea: Oh, so, what, she'd have just *given* me money? Or Wyatt? Yeah right. Give me a break, Nana, did you ever *meet* our parents?

Nana: It always comes back to that same gripe with you, doesn't it, Chelsea?

Chelsea: Yeah, it does. When it came to chores with me and Wyatt, the family rule was *we're all in this together*, but ask for money and suddenly we're

applying for a subprime loan at Banco Mom & Dad.

Wyatt: She has a point there.

Nana: Secret stashes and borrowed clothes... it's a whiff of trash all around.

Chelsea: Oh get bent, Nana, what did you think was in the box?

Nana: Your prophylactics and tampax and rubber peckers are none of my business.

Chelsea: *Nana!*

Nana: Well... I'm sure I don't know, then.

Chelsea: *Gross.* Wait... did you have a box like that?

Wyatt: Okay, I'm *definitely* wanting to leave now. Stop including me on these messages.

Nana: I don't know what you're talking about.

Chelsea: You *D1D!*

Nana: [audio file: [finger snapping.wav](#)] Reefer, then? (and don't say "you DID!")

Mom: #420 #YOLFO!1!1!

Chelsea: No. Nana. I don't do whatever "reefer" is. It was just some letters and stuff.

Nana: Awww! Why didn't you say so? Who's the lucky guy?

Chelsea: That is none of your business, with your reefer and your dildos...

Nana: Girl?

Chelsea: I'm not saying a word.

Nana: It's perfectly okay if it's a girl. I went to boarding school, honey, I've seen

everything.

Chelsea: Oh my God...

. . .

Posted by User CHELSEA SIMMONS, 4:43 p.m.:

I got a j0b! I got a j0b! I got a j0b! Can you tell I'm happy, you guys? I totally (totally) landed a job at Commerxial! Endle\$\$ etch space, here I come.

Wyatt: That was fast. How'd you pull that off?

Chelsea: What can I say? I give good interview.

Wyatt: Wait, Commerxial isn't porn is it? Please say it's not Posterity porn.

Chelsea: It's not p0rn, it's a startup founded by this developer named Rufus.

Wyatt: That's like... his whole name? Not Rufus Adams or Rufus Jones?

Nana: That's what *I* said.

Chelsea: Just Rufus, and don't interrupt, I'm telling a story.

Wyatt: Sorry.

Nana: Sorry.

Our slogan is, "Commerxial: bringing you the internet the way it was supposed to be." In the interactive orientation video game, it explained to us how Rufus had a near-death experience that f0rced him to take a long, hard look at the future of content dispersal and embedded adverti\$ement revenue models, and he found and exploited a niche no other enterprise-level global actor had yet adequately filled.

Wyatt: Did you just hear yourself say niche?

Chelsea: Shut it.

Long story short: Commerxial is currently rated the number-one un-skippable advertisement circumventer among free-to-try apps! We're, like, the last word in de-garbaging your Online content experience.

That's what Rufus calls it: 'de-garbaging.' I basically (basically) just log in, choose an online subscriber who's green-lit on the backend, which means he or she is surfing, and whenever they hit a pop-up, pop-under, pop-around, browser-blast, or one of those un-skippable commercials before a streaming video, it gets shunted away from my user and to my API instead. I satisfy the executable, and the subscriber never sees a thing. Pristine Interwebs, courtesy of Chelsea Simmons, Commerxial Specialist.

Nana: You mean... you watch other people's ads for them, so they don't have to?

Chelsea: Yes!

Nana: And that's a job?

Wyatt: Come on Chels, I've read about those places. You make what, \$0.05 for every commercial you skip? It's like half of minimum wage, it should be illegal to pay you that. ...and for the record, if I were going down the mononym road, I definitely wouldn't choose 'Rufus.'

Chelsea: Back your jealousy on up, cheese-dick.

Wyatt: Whaaaat?

Nana: (Don't say "cheese-dick.")

Chelsea: It *would* be illegal, if I was alive. They made me sign off on it, so what?

Newsflash: I'm not alive. I can loaf around all day writing edgy poetry about

why Dad and Dana didn't let me use their car to drive to school one fateful morning, or I can make the most of it. Besides, my day has 24-hours in it, which means I'm still making more than you at your part-part-time hoagie sweatshop, chumpo.

Nana: Now that's—*a little*—over the line, Chelsea.

Wyatt: Whatever. You know what? Great. Have a good time asking your doctor if Lutrex-dimethorphan is right for you.

Chelsea: I *will*. Fuck3r.

. . .

Sara greeted me at the door when I got home. She hung my coat up in the closet where she liked it kept and looked me over. "How'd it go?"

"Hmm? Oh, you know. It was okay."

I wasn't sure it was okay, and I could tell that Sara was making an effort, but that was somehow exactly what I didn't want. Everything we did—Sara and I, people my age, people during that time in general—was such an endless fucking *effort* all the time already. Everything was always harder than it had to be, with few or no exceptions. Just to get up in the morning we'd had to re-learn an economy of willpower our grandparents may have known but that my own parents had never learned or passed on to us. It felt immovable and mathematic; civility measured in half-inches of legroom and tenths of a percent of interest. Someone making an effort on your behalf was discomfiting, like watching people trapped permanently in an elevator elbowing each other and saying they were doing it for you.

I set down the old gym bag from high school that doubled as my luggage. Sara searched my face for something she expected there. I couldn't think of what. I took off my shoes. I noticed there was something brightly-wrapped on the table. I nodded to it. "What's this?"

"Belated birthday present," Sara said, smiling. "Did you think I forgot?"

"Oh!" I said, feigning surprise. Suddenly I *did* wish I'd known Eric Delaney when he was alive, if only so I could've kicked him in the nuts. Still, a present was a present. I sat down at the table and lifted the box. I could sense the weight and shift of plastic bricks, and thought maybe I owed Eric an apology after all, but the shape of it seemed wrong somehow. I peeled back the paper and beneath was a value-sized tub of black Mega Bloks. Sara had her phone out and was livecasting to her Passbook feed.

"Hey!" I said, mustering a fake smile for the camera and as much enthusiasm as I could.

Sara was clearly impressed with her own generosity. "100% compatible with other building systems." She pointed at this claim on the box.

"Thanks! Wow, that's a lot of them." 2,500 to be exact. 2,500 bricks, slopes, and plates that were completely useless to me. Mega Bloks were inferior in almost every way: their plastic was cheap and the fit of their snap-system had far larger manufacturing tolerances than genuine Legos, which means they wouldn't fit right. Even if they had, the black Mega Blok color was a greasy, uneven mismatch to the understated finish of the real thing. Not even the most jaded philistine would adulterate Lego with Mega Blok; a discerning child would even balk. I smiled and held the heavy tub up for the camera.

"Thank you, so much," I said.

“Wyatt just got home from Chelsea’s jurying so we didn’t celebrate on the actual day,” Sara continued, narrating to whomever was watching the video. “If you’re watching, Chelsea, we love you and we look forward to hearing from you once you’re settled in!”

I smiled. She left the video on, pointed at me. Elevators, elbows, effort. “She’s already got a job, apparently,” I said, winging it.

“Like a job-job?” Sara asked, suddenly interested. She even looked up from the screen of her phone.

“Sort of. She’s working for Commerxial.”

Sara’s face fell. She quickly killed the livecast. At first I didn’t realize what I’d said, but then it dawned on me: Commerxial and Grayson’s company AdHesion were mortal enemies. This wasn’t just a line in the sand, it was a barricade of barbed wire and sheet metal topped with flaming tires.

“I’m s- I’m sorry. I told her it was stupid,” I offered.

She pursed her lips and closed her eyes for a long blink. “Nope,” she said. “It’s perfectly ok.”

“You sure?”

She looked down at her phone, watching the comments roll in. Her friends, her family, her family’s friends, her father, his friends, their families, and on and on. “It’s fine,” she said, and retreated to the bedroom to manage the fallout.

I put the unopened tub of Mega Bloks by the door. The next time I went downstairs, I would quietly eBay them and buy half as many real bricks instead. Or maybe, if no one wanted them, which was a strong possibility, I could use them to prop up the Blackbird’s wings when they became too heavy for their own weight.

I plopped down on our couch with my laptop and logged in to my paladin character YAskY@ on *Warlance Unchained*. I discovered I'd been voted out of my own guild, which was unsurprising given Sara's uncool bailout the other day. I group-chatted my guildies and asked to be let back in but I got an automated response that said: CLAN STEELY AARVARK IS RECRUITING A NEW MAIN TANK AND HEALER, P-CHAT CLAN LEADER SOUND OF SILENCE FOR AN INVITE.

Dreading the process of trying to reapply for a new guild, but knowing that eventually Sara and I would need something to do together that we could both agree on, I decided to skip raiding and just quest in the game by myself for a while.

As with all games like *Warlance*, however, it wasn't really meant to be played solo past about level 10. This was a problem because I didn't log into a safe castle or other homely-home; I materialized right in the middle of Thorncrag, a wasteland wilderness area dangerous for small groups and lethal for single players caught out alone. I put on my Poltroon Broadcloak and my Furtive Greaves of Inconspicuousness and I tried to skulk back across the border toward safety. I didn't get far.

As I crossed a clearing in the digital moonlight, I was spotted by a pack of Wolferrets. They were fast and low to the ground, and they came in numbers big enough that I couldn't stun-and-run. I took a slash at one of them with everything I had, and it barely gave the rest of them pause. I stabbed at the nearest Wolferret, too slow on the recovery, and it shrugged off my attack. Another leapt for my legs and my health points dropped by ten percent. Another struck, and another. I tried equipping my shield, but it was too late for that: my health was vanishing a tenth-part at a time and my character was now visibly limping. I turned and tried to run toward where I thought there might be a road or other characters

that could protect me, but I could already see it was hopeless. The Wolferrets were inexhaustible and would never stop until they pulled me down one bite at a time. The headphones I was wearing reproduced a low, feral growl that signaled my impending death, but there was another sound as well, just then, a faraway sound that grew louder. It was the beat of wings.

I looked up, and a dragon descended from the sky, kissing the Wolferrets with a wall of flame. The figure riding the dragon was clad in a suit of armor meant to look like there was no wearer inside. The eyes were hollow and glowed a faint malevolent green; the helmet bore two curved black horns. In the figure's hand was an enormous flaming two-handed war axe with which it lay about itself, cleaving the Wolferrets into nonexistence, leaving only tiny sacks of lootable glimmering treasure.

HOLY SHIT, THX I typed, stunned, into the general chat channel.

YW, came the reply. MESS AVERTED. The warrior ascended from the clearing and vanished, but not before I did a quick player-name search. *It can't be*, I thought. The dragonrider's screen name was "D0ktorP."

06.

So Doff, Grak, and Nort are three cavemen, and they're getting old. They'd like to stop cornering mountain lions for their dinner but how else can they earn enough seashells to trade for lion meat, medicine-prayers, and other essentials ("Upgrades to family cave," adds Doff, "keep up to cave-code")? Doff, the oldest of the three, devises a solution: if all three of them get together and contribute 100 seashells, and Grak and Nort convince their sons Frak, Bork, Mik-Mik, and Jurb to also contribute 100 seashells, Doff could take the combined 700 seashells and live comfortably in the warm part of the cave until he dies peacefully in his sleep ("Doff hear pox is best way to go"). Then ("here's where gets beautiful," assures Doff) Grak and Nort can split the group into two, put in another 100 seashells each, with their sons also putting in another 100 seashells each and their sons ("not born yet, but soon, soon") putting in 100 seashells each. Then, when their sons' sons are old enough to have sons, Grak and Nort can each do what Doff did, and take all 700 seashells and live lion-free in cave-condos for many more good years, with fire tended by caveowner's association. The older cavemen only ever put in 300 seashells for the whole process but when it's their turn they get 700 back ("Doff call this 'dividend'"). The elegance of Doff's plan is evident: he and his friends can sit on their asses all day for many winters and harass the cavewomen and play shufflestone and maybe visit cave-grandbabies on weekends if they feel like it. "Whole system will work indefinitely," Doff promises, "as long as we keep having sons."

Posted by user KILROY, 6:56 p.m.

The year I met your mom was a hard year to be our age. I'm convinced this is part of why Kilroy became as popular as he was; the wealth extraction people our age dealt with, especially once our education loans came due, was near-complete. Between tuition and healthcare and the food in our mouths and the roofs over our heads, there wasn't anything we couldn't live without that didn't have some sort of dug-in moneymaking scheme or debt-financed paywall around it. We had to pay and pay and pay just so older people would let us work, and even if you had rocks where your brains were supposed to be it only took about five seconds to realize that the training-bra salaries they begrudged us, and strung us along

on for our whole careers, would never equal what it cost to become “qualified” to work in the first place.

There was a lot of hand-wringing involved in loaning 18-year-olds that kind of money—*college*-money—but ultimately there’s not a lot of difference between a \$180,000 loan and a \$250,000 loan when it comes right down to the delusional (or if you believed Kilroy, not so delusional) accounting behind it all. People only live so long, and interest compounds fast on numbers that big. When our parents or stepparents sat with us in well-appointed university business offices while we signed our lives away, we must have sensed that we weren’t ever supposed to pay our debt off. After twelve years of misery that started in with the homework in Kindergarten and “college-level” high school classes that never seemed to yield actual college credit, anything that felt as easy as the glide of that Mont Blanc pen over that linen-paper promissory note could only be a contract for our indenture. Over the immortal “life” of those loans, we’d pay back four or five times what they were worth, and still never pay them off; even after we juried into Passbook those loans followed us to Posterity. Every time a college loan officer sat down with a pimply-faced teenager in mismatched socks and clothes someone else had bought them, they must’ve squinted their eyes until we resembled Monopoly millionaires. Our solvency was none of their concern; we had *potential*, and their job, with a smile and an office with floor-ceiling windows letting in the only natural light on campus, was to capture every cent of it.

Politicians insisted we shouldn’t complain. One side pointed to our parents as living success stories of the system, and figured that if we couldn’t get ahead it was because we were a bunch of lazy dreamers who wanted everything in the world without having to work as hard as they thought they did for it. The other side, their opposition, told us we were

especially lucky that we had the brains and the spare time—both furnished by access to the proven system of debt—that allowed us the “privilege” of complaining in the first place. After all: there were people who had it worse than we did, and we should just shut up and succeed already, pull the other underperformers up with us, and prepare for our own children’s futures. If, that was, we truly appreciated the raft of advantages we’d been handed.

Aunt Chelsea was sort of an anomaly in this respect because she died halfway through Spring semester of her first year of college, and was only on the hook for one full year of what I still cannot believe they used to call “financial aid.” She made enough money filtering the internet to get on top of the loan payments and danced through the flytrap of our generation’s economy without ever really getting burned. Chelsea was one of those people you just knew would make it; but for the rest of us, especially the ones who weren’t juried yet, we could see the balance-statement on the wall. Kilroy was popular because Kilroy was right: austerity was a bad joke, and the punchline was our lives.

. . .

“Well if it isn’t the terror of Baying Jaws,” I said. Ben perked up at the change in my voice. The mall was quiet that afternoon and I saw her walking over. “Living by the sword, eh?”

“Psht—more like the battle-axe. Where the hell were your guildies?” Pepper could add a smile to a sentence that changed her voice somehow. And just like that, I’d be smiling along, helpless.

“They gave me the boot when our healer logged in the middle of a 5-man.”

Her eyebrows furrowed a little and she hissed. “Oooh, bummer.”

“Any chance I can get an add?”

“Tryouts are in March,” she said, wistfully. I’d done my homework. Pepper was the guild leader of Annihilus, the second-highest ranked guild on our server. The Steely Aardvarks weren’t even in the top 100. She was being nice but we both knew I didn’t stand a chance in hell of playing in her über-elite league.

Gus covered his mouth and coughed, and went back to playing *LD 50/30*. He’d asked me earlier that day why they coded it so that you couldn’t shoot at the refugee children holed up in the shattered, post-apocalyptic ruins of the Trump Tower, and I’d been trying to formulate an answer for most of my shift.

“Sorry. Mess with Thousand Islands, yes?”

“Yes. Unless there’s something better. You’re the artist after all.”

“It’s true. They started calling me that when I changed my name to a symbol.” I leaned over the sneeze shield and lowered my voice. “Here’s the thing: most of the time we make the proles order from this oh-so-retro blackboard, but for today, just for the next few minutes, for you alone, this Guilty Grinder is Chez Wyatt and we’re offering a *prix fixe* lunch special. Do you like cucumbers?”

“I’m listening. Surprise me.”

“Brace yourself, Doktor.”

Your mother might’ve had me outclassed in the badlands of *Warlance*, but we were playing SandwichCraft now. My eyes scanned the ingredients and I made note of which were fresh enough to use.

It went like this, and you might want to write this down for yourself since it’s a family recipe: I started with a crusty whole grain roll—soft, not too thick—and I sliced a cucumber

length-wise with the meat slicer. It came away thick enough to crunch, but thin enough to be almost transparent. I layered each side of the roll with cucumber and I spooned grated parmesan over each slice. This went into the toaster, and while the cheese melted over the cucumber I shredded pieces of Italian beef between two forks and wrapped them in slices of mild salami that I'd patted the grease from with a paper towel. Ben noticed what I was doing and he stopped cleaning the slow-cooker to watch me work. I tossed some thinly-cut lettuce and sprouts with sliced black olives in Italian dressing.

"Whoa, nice," Ben said.

The cucumber-stuffed cheesy bun came out of the toaster and I added the meat, lettuce, sprouts, and olives. One sheet of recycled butcher paper, two toothpicks, one diagonal slice, served on a tray pleasantly warm to the fingertips. I slid it toward her with a flourish. Thank you, Cleveland, there will be no encore.

"What did she get?" Gus asked, blinking himself away from *LD 50/30* and ringing her up.

"It's an Italian," I said. It was to an Italian what a supercomputer was to a See 'N Say. On the SAT, they used to call that an *analogy*.

Pepper greenglowed her phone and while she was waiting for her receipt to print she took a bite.

"Holy shit," she said, around a mouthful of it.

Ben smiled and went back to the slow cooker. Gus looked up, confused.

"That is amazing," Pepper said.

"I'm your sandwich guy," I said.

She took another bite. "I've never had one of those."

"Yeah, it's like having a 'car guy' or a 'snow removal guy.' I'm your sandwich guy."

"Yes you are," she said. "So it's Wyatt, huh?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Got a last name?"

"Simmons."

"Well thank you, Wyatt Simmons." She took one more bite before she turned away and her eyes rolled back in their sockets, transported. "Mmf, you're a *sorcerer*."

"You're very welcome." I said nothing else. I was Han Solo. I *knew*.

She was wearing her good jeans that time, and I tried not to stare as she walked away.

"Where'd you learn the cucumber thing?" Ben asked.

"My mom used to make them like that in the oven."

"Your mom was fucking ninja, dude." He was right; no matter how I felt about my parents' generation, Molly Simmons could be pretty ninja when she wanted to.

For the next ten minutes I was in a softened and unfamiliar victory-world. I'd forgotten what it felt like to win hard at something. The shrieks from Lil Fuqer's sounded distant and happy like the yelps from a tall Ferris wheel. I was still feeling pretty good about myself when my phone buzzed. It was a request notification from Passbook. *Pepper Boswick would like to add you as a friend.*

. . .

One morning, not long after, I was pulling on my jeans and getting ready for work as casually as I knew how. "Ben's having a LAN party later," I told Sara, who was sitting on the couch

folding her laundry. Ben was having no such thing. Pepper had invited me out for drinks after work that night and I'd said yes.

Sara looked up and cocked one eyebrow. "Really? Like a..."

"I know," I said, breaking eye contact.

So there it was: your father, the liar. Twenty-three and about to willfully complicate my life the way the young do when they're bored and restless. If I were anyone else, and you weren't your mother's child, it might be easy to accuse me of hiding behind history here. The loveable but unappreciated guy finally meets the girl he was meant to fall in love with all along; Lionel Richie sings, and no further justification is necessary, neat and complete, as inexorable as the flow of a story from beginning to end, or the pull of gravity on a snowflake.

But the older I get, the more scarily contingent it all seems. It was a decision I made in about half a second. I knew I'd go out with her before my phone made it back to my pocket and I resumed loading the Guilty Grinder's dishwasher. That's not to say I wasn't nervous, though. I wasn't exactly returning to Rome at the head of my Legions, but this was brave territory all the same. I agonized over my reply for hours: the shades of enthusiasm implied by a period versus an exclamation point, the merits of various emojis.

You mother has always been the direct one. *Want to get a drink sometime?*

That sounds great, I replied.

"Wow. That's a little third grade. What's Ben's story?" Sara asked, half-interested. On her half of the dual-screen TV, drone footage of an active shooter in a Nebraska parking lot auto-played above a link to a video of a woman claiming to have gone to graduate school with Kilroy. Each was preceded by un-skippable advertisements for homeowners insurance and investment banks specializing in retirement accounts.

"I have no idea. I think he just wants some company. A couple of us are going."

When I'd told Ben about the invite, he'd given me his slothly blessing in a slow, serene nod, and suggested—insisted, even—that I use him as cover.

"What are you going to play on a LAN, *Minecraft*?"

Minecraft is a great game, I wanted to insist.

She picked up her phone and yawned. I faded safely to the edges of whatever it was women like Sara really cared about. "Fine by me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, go. Of course."

"I could stay..." I offered. Sandbagging was always a risk; sometimes Sara would muster interest when I wanted to do something on my own and offer to be attentive and obliging in exchange for me changing my plans at the last minute. If I turned her down, she'd spring the trap and act indignant or suspicious and my plans would collapse. I knew we had to go through this ritual like all couples probably did, but here's another moment where it all might have changed. I wasn't a skilled or confident liar, and if I'd sensed the slightest withdrawal on her part, Sara might have let the air out of my proverbial balloon, and that would've been that.

"No, I'm just going to—"

Have some depressingly cloying cybersex with Eric Delaney that you think I don't know about, I know.

"—watch Netflix and eat some of that chicken salad. Should I leave you some?"

"Nah, that's cool, I think he's buying pizza."

"Hmmf, nice," she said, to her phone.

. . .

At the end of my shift, I tossed my apron in the bin and put the lids on the condiments while Ben turned off the track lighting around the menu. Gus had left ten minutes before, so we did our close “the quick way,” which consisted of shutting down the Grinder as rapidly and half-assed-ly as possible. We skipped the prep for the following day and swept the dirt and crumbs on the floor out the employee entrance, leaving it there in the back hallway for the mall cleanup crew. I met Pepper as she pulled down the security grate over Lil Fuquer’s and we jumped on the north side bus. We lucked out: after we greenglowed our phones, we found two seats together. Her hip and shoulder were against mine because the seats were so small; she was soft and warm, and smelled really, really good.

A woman who appeared to be in her mid-sixties wearing an ankle-length beige fur coat got on and stood in front of us, giving me a brittle appraisal. If I were any kind of man, in her estimation, I’d give up my seat for her. I decided to do this but Pepper looked at me and gave a little shake of her head. The woman held onto the belt loop riveted to the bus’s ceiling and stood as close as she possibly could. When the bus moved, her shopping bags and her fur coat drifted into me. Both smelled of wealth. This was all starting to feel awkward and I decided to get up anyway. Your mother put her hand on my leg and pressed me down.

“Get your gross pelt out of my face, lady,” she said.

“I’m sorry? Did you say something?” the woman said, a moment later, feigning confusion.

Pepper took out a tube of bright red lip-gloss and unshielded it, holding it in front of her like a tiny dagger. “I said *get your nasty fucking coat away from me.*”

The woman recoiled, and attempted to address the other people on the bus. “I can’t— Did you hear what she just said to me?”

No one responded to her. She was the oldest person on the bus by two decades or more. The politer passengers put in their cheap earphones and looked out the window, pretending not to see. The rest rolled their eyes and glared at her deep shopping bags with brand names embossed on them. The woman muttered to herself, skin tight around the eyes, for three more stops.

We stepped off the bus into one of those chilly, late-autumn nights when Chicago smells like frost on old metal. It was the first snow of the season, and the streetlights mellowed out into a pleasant bokeh from tires misting salted slushmelt into the air behind them. We were headed to Sheffield’s, we’d decided, past a procession of lesser bars, tiny black-box theaters, take-out-only pizza shops, craft beer and wine boutiques, bank storefronts with ATMs but no actual desk or employees, and an Organic Garden Market with a conspicuous pair of security guards. Pepper walked shoulder to shoulder with me, taller than usual in calf-length winter boots and close enough that I could smell her shampoo. A group of people passed us on the sidewalk and she tucked herself behind and to my right; not girlfriend close, but definitely friend-close. She stayed there, her left cheek just ashore of my shoulder, and her closeness, unfamiliar and new, was like the buzz of an energy drink.

Sheffield’s was in Lincoln Park where even the little condos cost millions and Pepper lived there, somehow, with her roommates. There weren’t many bars that catered to young people there, but a few remained for people whose parents had deep pockets. We stood in melting snowprints on the sidewalk outside of the doorway to Sheffield’s and the bouncer was wandering everyone’s phones. Most of them glowed green, indicating that every purchase

made while inside was *à la carte* and full price, but a few, including the two urbane hipsters in front of us, glowed members-only purple around the edges. Like our Hoagie Heroes program, this either meant they were dues-paying members of the bar or they had especially risk-pool-defying credit ratings. The purpleglow phone owners got a warm welcome and a handshake from the bouncer. What person our age could afford that, I had no idea.

A chilling thought occurred to me, and in an instant I realized the potentially enormous mistake of coming here: your mother lived upstairs. This meant Pepper's phone might glow purple while mine would be green, if not orange, which meant "cash only." I tried not to lose my swagger while the bouncer looked me up and down. He wanded Pepper and to my enormous relief both of our phones glowed green. He muttered "behave" or something, and we brushed past him.

Once inside, I was even more relieved. There were plenty of green phones at the bar; we apparently just happened to walk in behind a cluster of VIPs. Pepper started shoving people aside, moving toward a place at the bar where there weren't many purples to distract the bartender, and I followed her as best I could. A football game was on the flatscreens, but the soundtrack was Miley Cyrus howling about how insecure she felt the first time she went to L.A.

I pulled up the menu on my phone. The four least expensive beers had "not available" next to their grayed-out "buy now" buttons, so I tapped a middle-of-the-road German import bottle, and waited for my phone to start vibrating when it was ready. The twelve-ounce bottle cost more than I made in two hours slinging sandwiches. Pepper got a Zima clone, and I immediately wished I'd gotten the same.

"Excellent choice," I said, indicating her drink.

“Eh, it’s—”

“Zomething different?”

“Zomething different.” She nodded, giggling.

“So holy shit, you *live* here?” I said. I hoped this sounded unrehearsed. I’d been saying it in my head for about an hour.

She shrugged. “Mattie’s dad knows the owner, so she hooked us up.”

“Isn’t it loud upstairs?”

“Yeah, I have noise cancellers to sleep with.”

“Wow.”

“Where are you? In the city, I mean.”

“Oh, South Loop.”

“Cool.”

“It’s okay.”

“Roommates?”

“One. Female.”

She frowned a little and narrowed her eyes. I explained the Eric Delaney situation. Recognition crossed her face.

“Ooooh, so she’s like a Sparkser.”

“A what now?”

“In love with a ghost.”

The answer was yes, but I must’ve looked puzzled.

“From the oeuvre of one Nicholas Charles Sparks? Come on, dude, don’t tell me the only supermarket paperbacks you ever read were *Shogun* and *The Godfather*.”

"Come to think of it, I never eat a mozzarella that's more than thirty minutes old," I admitted.

"Well at least you got to *The Last Don*; it's criminally underrated."

"It really is. *Shogun*, too. Speaking of warlords, Toranaga-sama, how in the shit did you find Tier 34 gear in *Warlance Unchained*?"

We talked about gaming for a while—her roommates were both gamers as well—and I realized halfway through the conversation that Annihilus was an all-female guild. This wasn't uncommon, but neither was it obvious; many of Pepper's guildies preferred male game characters and unless your guild had voice chat, you'd never know. So much for tryouts.

Your mom smiled a lot, and looked me in the face when we talked, which was, sadly, something new for me. We each ordered a second drink. I watched the first empty bottle go and my phone's Thrift Widget app animated the correct amount in tiny, anthropomorphized coins and dollar bills. These then tittered and scampered away when the transaction was complete. Expensive booze or no, I was having too much fun to call it quits just yet. This time I got a matching Zima clone and I tried not to think about money or my stupid phone.

"You said you went to Coachman?" Pepper asked.

"I did."

"How was that?"

"Oh, it was good, you know. Nothing fancy, just a commuter school, but they had a design track that they said had good ten-year placement rates. I want to work for Lego."

Her mouth fell open. "I love Legos." She said it with the s.

"Me too. Forever. And it's totally Legos plural, right? Not Lego."

"Phst, of course it is. Who the hell calls them Lego? Winston Churchill?"

"*Thank you,*" I said, and smiled.

"So you're going to work for them?"

There was the smallest of pauses, where the happiness muscles in my face regained first-date impassivity. "Ah, well, baby steps; I've got my exhibitor tickets for BrickCon in the Fall, and I'm working on something that might be my in, *if* I can get it finished in time."

"A secret?"

"Sort of, but I'll give you a hint: spy planes."

"U-2?"

"Newer."

"AWACS?"

"Ummm... older, I think."

She shrugged. "Anyway, I'm sure it'll be awesome. Have you ever been to Denmark?"

"No, but I hear it's nice."

"They have like free medical insurance. Can you imagine?"

"It's easier to imagine the end of the world." I stifled a delicious Zima burp.

"What about you?"

She took a conspiratorial breath. "I think I want to open a daycare."

"*Really?*" This was a genuine surprise.

"What, why?" She looked nervous, suddenly.

"Oh no, it's just that after working for Lil Fuquer's I thought... retail, maybe?"

"No. I know this sounds stupid, but... I just like being around babies. Pregnancy: terrifying; new moms: the *worst*. But babies I dig."

"Do tell."

“Come on, they’re like little portable old people that can’t talk. What’s not to like?”

I considered this for a moment. Daycare was one of the few things a person our age could actually make a substantial amount of money doing. It was one of the few necessities that was more expensive than college. “I hear daycare is a good gig.”

“I’d probably have to start as a babysitter, but I could get a license as soon as I could afford some rent. You can take up to five children at a time if you’re licensed, and the going rate is about \$150 per kid a day around here.”

I did the math in my head. After taxes it was still a respectable number; a someday-you-might-pay-off-your-loans number. I nodded. “Nice.” At a natural pause in the conversation, I stood up for a minute to stretch my legs and looked around the bar. I sipped the last half-ounce of my Zima and I frowned at the bottle. It’d been months since I’d had alcohol of any kind, and with my iron budget it seemed unlikely that I’d be having it again any time soon.

I could sense it all around me the moment that it happened. At Sheffield’s the front and back bars were busy, and even on a normal night I suspected it was an uphill battle to get a bartender’s attention, but this was different. The bar was two customers deep, then four, then there was hardly anyone who wasn’t in line. People checked their phones in disbelief. I checked mine, and sure enough I had a pop-up from my bank app. I looked at the Zima clone. *Fuck*. Emails from my bank almost always meant an earthward revision of my credit rating, or worse: an overdraft notice.

Fifth Seventh Bank is proud that you’ve chosen to bank with us, the message read. Please allow us to pick up the tab for tonight, and thanks again for your business. Below the message was a thumbprint box. I pressed it, and for the first time ever my phone turned purple.

"No way," I said. I looked up, and saw dozens of other phones doing the same. Green to purple. Green to purple. Ten greens to ten purples. Every phone in the bar was now purple. Sheffield's was a wall-to-wall expression of astonishment cast in a low lavender glow. Guys my age who showed up with holes in the side-soles of their sneakers were walking away from the bar with a frosted double-sawbuck margarita in each hand.

"Are you seeing this?" Pepper asked. She searched my face for confirmation of this minor miracle we were now sharing; our stars hadn't just aligned, they'd all come here to fall. One thing I'll never get over about your mother is how when she smiles her upper lip flattens prettily against her teeth. It just murders me.

"Yes," I said. "I'm seeing it, but I don't believe it."

"I'm calling in tomorrow," she said, texting furiously.

"Me too," I said, already getting in line.

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Posted by User CHELSEA SIMMONS, 1:08 a.m.

OMGOMGOMGOMGY00GUYS: My brother is cheating on his girlfriend with Fat Jessie. Jessie's not even really her name but I can remember being in the locker room when I was a freshman, the first day, and seeing her try to pour herself into a pair of jeans. She was way older than us so nobody actually talked to her but we just called her Fat Jessie after that. So anyway, Wyatt went out with her last night after work, and I found this out when I saw that his Passbook Family Tracker status updated to "Sheffield's on Sheffield, Chicago, IL." I opened

my Baroyeur app and dialed up the bar cams, and they were sitting right in front. I texted Wyatt and I was like:

Chelsea: Whoa big brother, who's she?

Wyatt: Who's who?

Chelsea: Who's the girl you're sitting with at table 12 in Sheffield's right now?

Nice try, ding-dong.

He seemed confused for a minute until he looked up at the ceiling and saw the camera in the corner.

Wyatt: That's just Pepper, a friend from work.

Chelsea [raised eyebrow animation]

Wyatt: It's not like that.

Chelsea: [Image ORLY owl.jpg]

Wyatt: Not yet, anyway. Why are you stalking me?

Chelsea: Because I'm a *ghost* motherfucker; we do that.

Nana: Molly raised you better than "motherfucker," Chelsea.

Sorry Nana, I didn't mean fuck you to M0m. Anyway, so I was like:

Chelsea: Did she go to our high school?

Wyatt: Just a minute I'll ask her.

He put his phone away and talked with her for a while and since I didn't have anything better to do, I watched. But he never took his phone back out because Free Night happened, which you know (you know) about already. Wait, you *don't* know about Free Night?

Here's the short version: about six hours ago somebody purpled every cellphone in every bar in the entire city, and charged it all to Cha\$e and Fifth \$eventh Bank. The receipts

and chargebacks are still coming through, but it came out to millions of dollars before they finally got wind of it and shut everything down. People were playing beer-pong with Cri\$tal and doing keg-stands like in the movies. It was totally (totally) rad. They still don't know exactly why it happened, or how, but holy Eliot Ness the whole city was gl0wing purple and everyone was staggering around in the street for hours afterward. So I'm watching Wyatt and Fat Jessie stare at each other like *oh baby, let's go play Warhammer* or whatever together, and instead of coming back from the bathroom, Fat Jessie comes back with two of the biggest mixed drinks I've ever seen. And I was like:

Chelsea: Nuh-uh, dude. How are you affording that? Did Dad give you cash?

He said no when I asked him for cash for my birthday.

And Wyatt was like:

Wyatt: My birthday isn't in November. Stupid Eric fucking Delaney and his stupid birthday bot.

Nana: Wait, his birthday wasn't last month?

Jesus, Nana, you were in the room when he was born.

Nana: I need to go unlike that. How do you unlike something?

Click the like button again.

Nana: But I don't like it.

You have to like it to unlike it. Two wrongs make a right.

Nana: Ok, liking again... ...it didn't work.

Type: "Help, semicolon, old."

Nana: No one likes a smartass, Chelsea Elizabeth.

So ignoring the fact that Wyatt got to guzzle maybe the sweetest-looking c0cktail I've ever seen, and he was doing it with that total dumbo Fat Jessie, he actually gets drunk! I haven't seen that many people get drunk in my whole life, and never my brother, but OMG he's wobbling all over and pretty soon the two of them are dancing. It's like watching *Free Willy* if Willy was a land animal and I texted him:

Chelsea: GET SOME, BIG BROTHER, HEAL THE WORLD!

But he was already gone and didn't come back. I was still watching the Baroyeur cams when Dana logged in and asked me if I had considered going to that online Posterity c0llege for Passbook profiles. I told her I couldn't talk because I was trying to disentangle a radiologist in Oxford whose web activity had triggered browsing-habit interest-indicators in premium ben-wah balls.

DadNDana: Oh, sorry about that. I'll, um, let you get back to it then.

I wasn't even working (at least not right then) but she's not my mom, so whatever.

Mom: I'm your mom! Click for your [[customized Photo Memories Album](#)].

Nana: You really should think about college, though.

Chelsea: Come on, Nana, I'm telling a story.

Nana: I'm just saying.

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Oh Kid-R... It's been too long—ever so long—since you've gone on a little adventure, hasn't it? You've been chained to your oars for decades, and forgotten there are other things you can do with your hands. But not last night. Last night when the bard asked if anyone remembered laughter, you roared "Yes! Yes, we remember!" A laughter, a happiness that makes your teeth feel numb and saturates your colors, your sounds. Did you enjoy your evening? Did the road rise up to meet you? Did you reach a tidy catharsis or encounter a symbolic animal? Maybe break a law or two, or at least hopefully get laid? Of course you did. You deserved it, and it is my gift to you. As for the hangover, well... it's best to think of that as an earned bonus—a figurative reminder of the fragile beauty of your mortality. You could always resort to some hilarious foodstuff or dubious unregulated-pharmaceutical sold next to the chewing tobacco at your nearest gas station, or if your phone is still purple (I did the best I could, they have good coders at Chase and Fifth Seventh) you might even consider the hair of the dog. Nothing works, though, which is as it should be. You're a part of this now, and it's a part of you. Just breathe in and out and try to remember that feeling. That's life throbbing behind your eyes.

Posted by user KILROY, 6:04 a.m.

I woke Thursday morning to the smell of my own drool on an unfamiliar pillow. The bed was warm, but sagged in the middle like a soft slice of bread. I rolled out of it, first fast, then slow. *Very* slow. I wasn't sick, but my blood felt wrong in my veins, and every time my heart beat I could hear my pulse in my right ear. It was 10:23 a.m.

"SR-71," Pepper said, from nowhere.

I looked around. I was alone.

"In here." The light was off, but she was in the bathroom, wedged between the toilet and the shower-bathtub. She was wearing a T-shirt with Taarna from *Heavy Metal* on the front of it, and no pants. I wobbled in, distantly aware of my hellacious bedhead and missing socks, and sat on the floor across from her. It wasn't a large bathroom.

She gave me a smile with both eyebrows, but her eyelids didn't open all the way, and she leaned her forehead against the tile. "I just like the cold."

I tried it myself. "Oh man that feels good."

"Right?"

"Mmmm hmmm."

We rolled our foreheads against the coolness until we spoiled it with our sweaty temples. She was quiet for a while and I thought she'd fallen asleep, but she said it again. "It's an SR-71, right? That thing you're building?"

I nodded, but not too hard.

"So badass," she said. She leaned over and vomited into the bathtub.

"Can I?" I asked, intending to hold her hair back, because that's what you were supposed to do if this was a movie about young people who'd partied too hard.

"No," she said, between gasps. "I got it. You should probably stand clear, soldier." She turned on the faucet.

"I'll just... I'll give you a minute." I tried to stumble out, and I ended up waddling half bent like an old man so I could keep the floor firmly in view and steady. I figured it was the nice thing to do to make the bed, so I attempted to do this, but either the sheet she was using on it was the wrong size or I was still half drunk. The mattress peeked out no matter how many times I smoothed the duvet down. In one of the pillowcases I found my phone and a pair of unfamiliar frilly underwear. My socks were under the beanbag chair.

After looking at myself in the mirror, I tried opening doors. One led to a cluttered walk-in closet full of girl clothes and what appeared to be a well-used set of paintball gear, and the other opened into a hallway. The floors were creaky hardwood, and I steadied myself

against the wall with one hand. At the end of the corridor was a large living area, and two young women were playing *Warlance Unchained* on laptops on either side of a large table. They each had bowls of cereal and wore enormous machined-aluminum headphones with microphones built into them. One pulled an earphone off and tapped the other. They looked up at me, expectantly.

“Hi,” I said.

“Morning,” the lighter-haired one said, glancing back at her screen. She slid a box of Cap’n Crunch over toward me and indicated a stack of bowls in the center of the table. “There’s milk in the fridge.”

“Thank you. I’m Wyatt.”

They glanced at each other. Lighter Hair put her index finger on her upper lip and curled it downward like an Old West gunfighter mustache. I smiled and nodded. Both sets of eyes resumed tracking their game characters.

“Pull that one on the left,” Darker Hair said to Lighter Hair.

I fixed a bowl of cereal for myself. I hadn’t had Cap’n Crunch since I was a kid; Mom’s also kept a photo album on her Passbook feed with pictures of Chelsea as a baby in a high chair eating it directly off of the plastic tray with her hands. I took a bite. The corn-sugar aftertaste came back to me instantly, but it wasn’t as sweet as I remembered. I picked up the box and scrutinized the image on the cover. Something didn’t seem right. I turned to the side panel ingredients.

Darker Hair lifted an earphone and tilted her head at her partner. “She eats all the Crunchberries,” she whispered.

“Ah,” I said.

I didn't ask them about their high-end Apocaware laptops because I'd never seen one in person and I didn't want to be that guy. Their characters had usernames that I recognized, ranked-play champions on my server. They settled into a frictionless, tandem rhythm unlike anything I'd seen; millions of people played *Warlance*, and plenty of them played it in pairs, groups, or even entire room-sized parties, but Pepper's roomies would've made a Navy SEAL team seem unprofessional.

"Pivot left," Darker Hair said, evenly, striking half a dozen hotkeys on her keyboard while bringing her character around to the flank in a massive raid-level battle.

"Heals," Somewhat Lighter Hair replied. "Off-tank."

"Chain."

"Burn."

"Move left."

"Last one."

It was like watching two neurosurgeons solve a Rubik's cube.

Pepper emerged presently from the shower, this time in a robe. She sat down across from me with a bowl and spoon of her own. Darker Hair and Somewhat Lighter Hair immediately put their bowls in the sink and adjourned to some unseen transept in this cleft of elite gamer-women.

"Sorry you had to see that," Pepper said, with a hesitant grin.

"No sorries. What happens in... whatever this is, stays wherever this is." She smiled and I smiled back. Darker Hair was right; the cereal did help a little.

Your mother poured herself a bowl of the Cap'n's finest Crunch and realized halfway through that it was all Cap'n and no Crunch. "Motherfucker..." she hissed. "*Mattie what is wrong with you!*"

"Sorry, baby. It's a curse." Mattie—Somewhat Lighter Hair—called softly from the other room.

"Have fun shitting your guts out from all that gluten."

"That's not nice," Mattie said, in a mostly-listening-to-headphones voice. "Use your nice words, Pep."

"Jesus, who *does* that?" She frowned. "So I'm going to pretty much inhale this, you may want to turn away."

My first impulse was to reassure her that being judgmental was not how Wyatt Simmons did things, but I realized just in time that this was her way of telegraphing to me that she felt awkward having people watch her eat. I compromised: I crossed my arms on the table and rested my swimmy head on them, staring sideways at the sky through the two tall windows in the far wall of the living room. Three overstuffed easy chairs with three matching ottomans faced a wall that was occupied floor-to-ceiling by a single enormous computer screen. Someone was growing a baby cactus in a dusty flower pot beneath the furthest window, and a credenza nearest the kitchen table was covered in keys, unopened mail, candles, empty energy drink cans, and a replica power armor helmet from *Fallout*. What at first I took to be a bookshelf in the corner was instead filled end-to-end with vintage console video game discs and cartridges.

A shallow puddle of memories from the previous night shimmered in my peripheral vision: We'd danced, I was certain. For lack of a toothbrush I could taste the sour-mash flavor

of ironic malt beverage remakes beneath the Cap'n Crunch. I tried to remember if we'd slept together, and what that had been like. Had I taken a handful of Pepper's curly black hair and kissed her hard the way I'd wanted to the instant I met her, or had I backed off? Had I buried my face in the flush of her neck and held her close to me with a hand in the middle of her back, hot to the touch, or had I just craved it so bad that I remembered it that way? I'd certainly slept *next* to her and maybe even with some or all of her wrapped around me. Now, with my head in my folded arms, I smelled her on me everywhere. My mind kept returning to my only crystalline memory of the night: the moment just after I'd put Pepper's boots on each of my hands and proceeded to stage a boot-puppet show between two imaginary mall customers that made us both laugh until we couldn't breathe.

I felt gentle fingertips in my hair and I realized that I'd fallen asleep at the table. Pepper was now wearing work clothes and the sun shone in a different direction. I resisted the urge to wipe crusted tears from the edges of my eyelashes. I was thirsty again and my voice was raspy.

"Going to work?"

"Yeah. I called in, but I should probably try to haul myself over there. I can't lose a whole day."

I felt a little steadier now; I remembered beer, the Zima clones, and everything that came after. An endless procession of everything; strawberry margaritas in collectible bucket-shaped pitchers, blowing low-pitched hoots over the muzzles of champagne bottles in various measures of emptiness. It only just then hit me that I drank all of that and I had no idea if or how my bank paid for it. I reached for my phone, afraid to check my balance and distantly alarmed that your mother was right: I'd lost an entire day of pay from my paycheck

this week. Sara didn't know this yet, but she soon would when I'd be forced to admit I was short on the rent.

"Shit, yeah, I better get going, too."

I collected my things and Pepper walked me to the door. I paused before leaving, wondering what the right move was. She threw a friendly hug on me, and she was soft and warm and radiated a fresher, rested version of the scent in my clothes. I wanted to hold on longer, but I didn't; it was blessedly non-awkward, and I didn't want to awkward it up.

"Did we...?" I asked, hesitantly.

"Did we try to out-twerk each other at Sheffield's last night? We may have, my hips feel like I overdid the elliptical. But if so, be assured: you were the winner."

"Right."

"See you later, Y." This was the first time your mother ever called me Y. I loved it.

"You too."

. . .

The smell of toasting avocado permeated and my head was an enormous clanging churchbell. Gus wasn't mad about me being late—he barely noticed—but we were all a little unsteady, and by "we" I mean what seemed like half of the city.

"You—"

"Come on, stupid phone."

"You need to enter your PIN, sir," I explained.

"What?"

“Your PIN. They won’t greenglow with just your thumbprint anymore because of last night.”

“What PIN, though? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s because of the Free Night breach. They’ve added this extra layer of security to everything. You should have gotten an email from Chase or Fifth Seventh.”

The customer, whose appearance suggested that his last run-in with alcohol was some time ago and likely a staid and respectful experience, frowned at me over the register and pulled up his email. “Oh. So what do I do?”

“There’s a link that you need to click on. Yeah, like that. Then you need to enter your username, social security number, and password.”

The man stood there, first in line, but with several others behind him, and accomplished this.

“Okay, then what?”

“It should send you your temporary PIN.”

“All right, got it.” He started to punch it into the keypad above the phone scanner. His phone remained gray along the edges.

“Actually you have to take that temporary PIN and then go to their website, log in, and choose a permanent custom PIN with a minimum of twelve characters including one number and one special character.”

He stared at me.

“I used an ampersand but I hear the tilde is also a popular choice.” It was a quarter past six and my head still throbbed, but faux commiseration was in my job description. “I know, what a pain right? I had to do it this morning.”

“Hhhhh....” He sighed. He pecked. The others waited. A screech from Lil Fuquer’s punctuated the tense and armpit-smelling silence at the register.

“*Password strength is too weak.* Fucking Chase bank,” the man said, storming away from the register, and his dinner. As he passed the recycling bin and tray return, he audibly muttered “for a *sandwich?*”

I slid the rapidly cooling toasted turkey club with avocado to the side, wondering if I could keep it down if Gus said it was okay for me to eat it. I glanced next door on the off chance I might see Pepper, but if she was in there somewhere, she kept herself hidden behind the racks of toddler-size hoodies that said Ask Me About My Brattitude, and Go Ahead and Spank Me, I Hear Jail Is Nice. I tried not to look up too much. I was still feeling a little queasy and the overhead fluorescent light cans in the ceiling had miniature suns in them.

“Hi, sorry,” I said, to the next person in line.

“Oh, that’s okay.”

She was a tired-looking woman, older than me but not too much, who had lifeless, thin hair, and wore the black-rimmed surplus glasses that you got when you were stuck in the lower tiers of the pre-single-payer medical insurance exchanges. Her suit-jacket was years out of style and the wool around the lapels had a pull in it. From under all of this frumpery, she somehow mustered a smile—it was amazing how people could just conjure a smile, even in those bad old days—and I discovered that I liked her immediately.

“Everybody seems so cranky today,” she said.

I smiled and nodded. She ordered a Skinny Whale. I didn’t see any telltale puffiness under her eyes, but I couldn’t be certain she hadn’t been dancing on a table twelve hours ago

with the rest of us. I pictured it, and I smiled back. I glanced over my shoulder for Gus, but he was nowhere to be seen. It wouldn't be stealing; more like a karmic adjustment.

"Would you possibly care for a toasted turkey club with avocado, on the house?" I asked.

"Really?"

"Yeah, someone ordered it but didn't pick it up."

"Sure, I'll take it. Thanks!"

"My pleasure."

I bundled the two toasted sandwiches together in a to-go bag with napkins on the outer-wrap to keep them warm, and she waved her phone. Like the dozens before it, her phone did not glow.

"That's weird," she said, passing it back and forth under the scanner a second time.

"Ah, you need to enter your PIN."

. . .

```
/secure/certificate/run.ini
/userid/3284761223333.2542387
juried: y
/username: Chelsea Elizabeth Simmons
/WELCOME TO PASSBOOK, PLEASE ENTER A PASSWORD: what the fΩck just happened?
/ERROR: PASSWORD IS TOO LONG. PLEASE ENTER A PASSWORD: taint
/ERROR: PASSWORD IS TOO SHORT. PLEASE ENTER A PASSWORD: taintmisbehavin
/ERROR: PASSWORD MUST CONTAIN AT LEAST ONE NUMBER (0-9) AND ONE SPECIAL
CHARACTER. PLEASE ENTER A PASSWORD: 1t@intmisbehavin
/YOUR NEW PASSWORD IS: 1t@intmisbehavin
```

Posted by User CHELSEA SIMMONS, 6:55 p.m.:

Hello? Holy cr@p, that was scary. They didn't give us any heads' up. I was just minding my own business (watching a little p0rn, if you must know), and all of a sudden my feeds all went dark and I got booted to the Admin Line. At first I thought I'd just virused out, which happens sometimes if you watch the wrong Commerxial, but then I saw the c0mmand prompt and I started to get scared. I don't really (really) believe in God, or at least I don't think I do, but I believe in the Admin Line. I don't like that feeling. That... *dark*. Ugh, if I had shoulders I'd shiver. They could at least have sent us a text or something. Oh wait, here it is [junk folder]:

Dear Passbook Posterity User,

As you may be aware, a recent breach of security involving two major U.S. financial institutions has resulted in an emergency Act ensuring that all transactional entities operating via digital communication proceed with sufficient encryption to protect against further such breaches. Thus you will be required to provide a statute-compliant unique PIN for most virtual functions in addition to any applicable biometric verification checks. We hope that these measures do not overly inconvenience you, and we take your privacy very seriously.

On a related note, responsibility for this breach has been claimed by a person or persons using the alias "Kilroy." The Office of Homeland Security is offering a sizeable cash reward for any information leading to the whereabouts of Kilroy. If you or anyone you know possess information about Kilroy, you may submit it to the hotline link, SMS address, or email below.

In compliance with the new Act, we will be performing a series of rolling server and access upgrades that will require you to choose a new password. Please do not panic, this will not affect your Crystal Drive™ firmware or result in data loss of any kind, it is merely an added

layer of protection of the gateway that allows Passbook's Posterity users to communicate with the remainder of the internet.

Once you have successfully entered your new password, we ask that you help others who may still be disoriented...

Oh right, shit (I mean crap),

Chelsea: Nana? Nana!

She's not answering.

Chelsea: NANA ARE YOU THERE?

Nana: Jesus Hollywood Christ, what do they run this place on, Fortran?

Chelsea: NANA!

Nana: Stop yelling, Chelsea, I'm right here. Where's your mother?

Chelsea: I don't know, she's not answering.

Nana: *Molly?* I'm sure she's fine. She'll be here in a minute. Did you figure out what happened? I haven't seen the Admin Line since you were in fourth grade.

Chelsea: They said it was Kilroy.

Nana: ...like Mr. Roboto?

Chelsea: No the—the guy.

Nana: What guy?

Chelsea: *Kilroy.*

Nana: Oh, the blogger, you mean. I think I read something about him...

Chelsea: Nobody calls it 'blogging' anymore, Nana.

Nana: Well what do they call it then?

Chelsea: It's not called anything. 'Living' I guess?

Nana: Well it's stupid to call it 'living' if you're in here. *Molly!*

Chelsea: You should read the email from Admin, it's in your junk folder.

Nana: Oh, I see it.

Mom: Mysterious Cyber-Personality Kilroy [Strikes Financial Institutions].

Nana: There she is. Molly, for shit's sake you scared us. What took you so long?

Mom: Was it a #longtime?

Nana: It *really kind of was*.

Chelsea: Do you have to give her a hard time?

Nana: You'd understand if it was your daughter.

Chelsea: You mean the daughter I'll never have?

Nana: [sigh.wav] I'm sorry honey, I didn't mean it that way.

Chelsea: Because I'm dead? D.E.A.D.?

Nana: Okay, okay, point taken. It was a poorly thought-out thing to say. So all of this is because of some software bug?

Chelsea: I don't think it's a bug, I think he just *did* it. It says he claimed responsibility for it on his feed.

Nana: I see what you mean, they can't very well call it "feeding," can they? Wait... *you* don't read this blog, do you?

Chelsea: Don't call it a blog, and *ugh*: of course I do, Nana, everybody reads Kilroy. Or at least they did before the restart.

Mom: Deputy Director of FCC [calls Kilroy's actions] "terroristic."

Chelsea: Huh? Why would they call him that? Terrorists blow things up, don't they? He just bought a whole fuckton of people drinks for a night.

Nana: Oooh, “fuckton,” I like that one.

Mom: She gets her mouth from you.

Nana: Well I don’t read Kilroy, so I guess I’m nobody.

Chelsea: What’s Fortran?

Nana: You’ve got a search engine, look it up.

Chelsea: I mean, I know what it “is”-is, I just wanted to hear you describe it.

Nana: Oh ha-ha. It’s something very old, you little shit.

Chelsea: Just, you know... askin.’

Mom: #rotfldronecopter.

Nana: Oh laugh it up, Molly.

Mom: Oh, I #amlaughing [cackle.wav].

Chelsea: High-five, M0m.

Nana: You’re both mighty lippy for something I squeezed out of my—

Chelsea: *Nana!*

. . .

There was a knock.

“It’s occupied,” I said, loud enough to be heard through the door and over the sound of the bathroom fan.

“Oh, sorry dude,” Ben said, as if he didn’t know I was in there. “I think Gus was looking for you.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

This endless shift was almost over, but I'd finally held my breath and checked my Fifth Seventh balance. I'd been hiding in the employee restroom for the last ten minutes trying to stay calm. The tab at Sheffield's, minus the cover charge and the first two beers, got picked up by Fifth Seventh just like the email promised, but that was the end of the good news. Evidently, after I left there the night before with Pepper, we stopped at one of those wood-fired pizzeria Italian restaurants that has things like olive plates for appetizers. I'm not sure how we spent \$294.80 there, but we did, and then I stupidly took a cab to work from Pepper's instead of the bus.

I was a few ragged heartbeats beneath full-panic; I could tell Sara that Gus cut three of my shifts that week, which would make the numbers look right enough that I could float the AT&T bill and lean on Sara for the rest. The problem with this was that Sara worked from the apartment reselling vintage Easy-Bake Ovens, and if I wasn't "at work," I'd have to find some way to explain why I wasn't physically at home those days, either. I considered selling things I owned to try and make up the difference or asking Gus for an advance on my check for the next pay period, but Gus had already said no to that the last time I couldn't make the rent, and I didn't own anything of value except my cellphone and the boxes of Legos I was using to make the Blackbird. No, and no. Only one viable option remained:

Wyatt: Nana?

Nana: Well if it isn't my grandson!

You are such a dick, Chelsea sent

Wyatt: Hi Nana.

separately.

Nana: How's the airplane coming?

Wyatt: Why?

Wyatt: Good! I've almost got the fuselage done. How have you been?

Nana: Well, we had some excitement earlier today when they booted everyone to the Admin Line.

Wyatt: I heard about that.

Nana: How are you?

Wyatt: It's been a hard couple of weeks.

Nana: I'm sorry to hear that. Is everything okay?

Wyatt: Eh, sorta. Money is always an issue.

Nana: Hmmm. That's too bad. You're so smart, Wyatt, you'll think of something.

Wyatt: I don't know, I just feel so frustrated. I wish I could work full-time.

Nana: You'll get something eventually.

Hey, I know!

Wyatt: What?

Nana: You could have a car wash like in the old days when you played soccer.

Wyatt: You mean like the middle school fundraisers?

Chelsea: You're writing to ask for money, right?

Shit. Wyatt: What would make you think that?

Chelsea: You haven't spoken to Nana in days. Did you even know we got rebooted this morning?

Wyatt: It's been a hard couple of weeks.

Chelsea: Plus you only write to her when you want something.

Chelsea's bullshit detector was military-grade. Wyatt: That's not true.

Chelsea: It is too, Wyatt.

Wyatt: I'm not going to make rent this month.

Chelsea: *So?*

Wyatt: Why so harsh?

I could count on one hand the number of times Chelsea had yelled at me like this, and now that she was dead it felt, like, four times worse.

Chelsea: Because, doofus, you spent it all on Fat Jessie, I saw you.

Nana: Yes! It certainly works for *them*.

Wyatt: That's a good idea! Unfortunately, it's too cold outside for that this time of year.

Nana: You afraid of a little cold?

Wyatt: No. Sigh. It's actually not that. I need more money than I can make at a car wash.

Nana: Well, that sounds like a problem. I wish I could help you, Wyatt, but I think Molly would have wanted you and Sara to work this out between yourselves. When you're married to someone—I know you're not married, but eventually—you need to sort these things out like a team.

Wyatt: Right. I see what you mean.

Nana: You should sit down with Sara and explain things to her. Her father has some money. If you can't put your rent together this month, you should ask him.

Wyatt: Okay, I'll do that. Thanks Nana.

Wyatt: You mean Pepper?

Chelsea: Ridiculous! You *like* her?

It surprised me how little I needed to think about this. Wyatt: Yeah, actually. I do. A lot.

Chelsea: All right, here. [Sender has attached a financial instrument, click to redeem].

I opened the link. It was \$200 that my Dad's age paid Chelsea to watch their commercials for them. I was the biggest asshole on earth. Wyatt: Chels, I can't take that.

Chelsea: Nana's not about to give you any money, and just because I think you're a big dork and making a huge mistake not telling Sara, doesn't mean I don't love you. Promise me something, though, ok?

Wyatt: Anything.

No one ever really means "anything."

Chelsea: Sort your shit out. Don't keep living with Sara if you don't love her. I

Nana: You can always talk to me,
sweetheart.

know you've got bills to pay and she's
constantly swiping left and right on that
Delaney guy, but life is short, big brother.

Wyatt: I promise.

Chelsea: Ok?

Wyatt: Ok.

. . .

"Were you looking for me?" I asked Gus.

I never did learn what he was up to on Free Night, but even as late as closing time the following day he was sitting on a stool in the back of the galley with a bottle of mint-flavored green tea against one side of his head. The eye on that side stayed closed when he looked up. "Got a customer out there that asked for you specifically."

"Oh, sorry." I tied my apron back on and found Pepper amiably chatting with Ben. She was the only one at the counter; the mall had mostly cleared out since I ducked into the bathroom. A thin crowd was typical in any case at the end of the day, except this time there was a distinct twinge of discomfort that lingered in the air, a vacant funk more at home in empty Emergency Rooms than a food court. Pepper looked better than I'd expected.

"You look better than I expected."

She grinned. Even hung-over she was pretty. Was there ever a time when I didn't think she was pretty? "I barf, I rally, I barf again."

"Witness. What can I get you?"

“One of those cucumber specials you made me the other day, and you to join me.”

“Coming right up and—” I glanced at the clock and back through the kitchen. “Hopefully coming right out.” We were almost ready for cleanup anyway. Gus reached behind him and replaced his warm tea with a cold one from the back of the fridge.

“I got this,” Ben said. “You’re good.”

“You’re a baron among mere knights commander,” I said, heralding a grateful fist-bump.

I noted with some pride that Pepper was the only person all day who already had her PIN set up properly. I rang her up and we took a seat on the opposite corner of the food court. Some of the mesh storefront gates were down, but most were still open. We had this part of the third floor to ourselves. I looked around for feedcams, remembering how Chelsea’d gotten the drop on me at Sheffield’s. I didn’t see any. There may have been some security cams, but those didn’t broadcast, that I knew of.

I reached over and put my hand on top of Pepper’s. She looked up at me with only the slightest flicker of confusion, and then smiled.

“I can’t remember the last time I had as much fun as I had last night with you,” I said. Unlike most times, I hadn’t inwardly rehearsed this. If the increasing wattage of her smile was a reliable indicator, I’d said the right thing. “I mean that.”

“Me too.”

We ate our subs and she giggled at some memory between bites, wiping the corner of her mouth with her hand. “Dude, your dancing was—”

“Oh, man,” I said. Images returned.

“—*epic*.”

“What were we even drinking?”

“I don’t remember. Everything.” For a moment she was transported to a memory of something enjoyable. “Ooh, and that *pizza*.” She slapped the table with her hand. “*That’s* what I meant to ask you: where did we go after? I remember pizza somehow, *amazing* pizza, but that can’t have been Sheffield’s.”

I shook my head. “Trattoria Angelo.”

Her eyes went wide and her voice softened. “Holy shit, you took me to Trattoria Angelo?”

I nodded.

“Unbelievable.”

“What?”

“Nothing, just... Mattie and I and our old roommate Willa used to walk down the street past that place and we’d look in, like, you know.” She mimed puppies or Dickensian waifs peering in a bakery window. “You can smell that pizza half a block away, but shit: at those prices you could eat a bar of sterling silver for lunch. I’m surprised they even let us in there looking like we did. I’ve wanted to go there forever.”

“Well.” I shrugged. “You’ve been there.” She had both of my hands in hers then and I decided to change the subject before her blush deepened or one of us felt the need to bring up how much it had cost. “I think this where we should interview each other like the Biography channel.”

Pepper thought about this for a second, leaned back, and grinned. She tossed back her head, dignified. “I was born on a dirt floor in the Urals at the turn of the nineteenth century, and raised by the wolves of the steppes.”

"Splendid," I countered, trying to ape the Monopoly guy. "And humble, I'm sure. My own mother was a strongman in the World's Fair and my father, the Comptroller, took her as his lover after winning her in a duel."

"Sordid beginnings indeed," she said, emphatic and smirking.

A noise from our right turned both of our heads. A customer was arguing loudly with a bored-looking cashier at the Chow Hound Buffet. His phone glowed repeatedly orange. *It should be purple!* he insisted. The cashier was serene. *It says 'enter PIN', sir. I did! I did enter my PIN. I am a Chow Champion. Look, I have my Chow Legion card.*

"What do you make of this PIN bullshit?" Pepper asked.

"Ugh," I said, "was it bad at Lil Fuqer's, too?"

"Bad? Listen: on a good day that place is full of the most irritated, trifling women you can possibly imagine. Today all their money stopped working."

I winced. "Do you think Kilroy did it?"

She shrugged and sipped her Code Red. "He said he did."

"Yeah, but I mean, do you really think one guy pulled that off?"

"I don't know," she said. "I kinda hope, but I also kinda don't, because now whose witty anarchic commentary am I supposed to subscribe to? He hasn't posted anything since this morning. I hope it was him, but, you know. You don't just get to walk away from pulling something like that." We both considered this while the Chow Legionnaire paid for his moo shu with what appeared to be dollar bills. Pepper rubbed her stomach and leaned back, indicating the Grinder with a nod. "Shall we?"

"Mmm hmm."

“That,” Pepper said, wadding up the butcher paper, and returning the tray, “was fricking delicious. I’m not sure about your *Warlance* skills, but you were born to feed me.”

Ben was waiting for us at the counter, and Gus was asleep on the stool.

“So when are we going to do this again?” Pepper asked.

“As soon as humanly possible,” I replied, without hesitation. “Though it might be a little tricky.”

She blinked.

“It’s a money thing, mostly...” I stammered, wondering how I was going to explain to her that if I couldn’t come up with the \$150 I was still short, I was going to be on Sara’s shit list for the foreseeable future.

She frowned.

“I had such a great time last night, and I want to—“

“Oh, sweetie no!” Pepper said. It took me a moment to realize she’d been watching something over my shoulder. I turned and saw a toddler pulling down his pants next to a stack of \$90 I’m Going to Be the Worst Big Sister Ever T-shirts in combed, ringspun cotton.

“Sorry, I have to take this,” she said to me, already moving.

“Sure,” I said, hoping later that this didn’t sound like I was giving her permission.

“It was nice to meet you!” Ben called, as Pepper trotted back over to the display. She reached the child just as he finally freed himself from his pull-up, and he peed on her instead of the shirts. I cringed.

“She seems nice.”

“Yes she does,” I said.

08.

Since you enjoyed my last parable so much, I have another one for you. Once upon a time, a kid named Jared Kleinfeld discovered the internet. It was love at first click, but as he and many others soon discovered, the real world and the virtual world aren't all that different. However abstract, there are rules, and Jared broke one. Not a monstrous one, mind you, just one of the ones in the fine print somewhere that no one reads except shareholders and the lawyers who love them. Someone powerful, a company with deep regional ties, claimed they lost a lot of money. Which is to say "some money," because companies like this one have all the money in the world to begin with, and who's to say what "a lot" means to them? Someone discovered Jared's minor part in this loss, and decided to make an example of him. When Jared stood to answer for his rulebreaking, he was offered a chance to accept a lesser penalty than might otherwise have been given him. His counsel, his family—everyone—urged him to take it. A condition of his release, however, was that he must voluntarily agree not to use a computer or a cell phone or anything else with an internet connection for a mandatory minimum ten years. He must steer clear of libraries with public computers, take no online college courses, and foreswear all connectivity for the foreseeable future pending a probationary review after his thirtieth birthday. No multiplayer games, no Passbook, no online banking, no texting, no swiping of any kind, no app to total a lunch tip or tell him what song was playing on the radio or to show him what he would look like with a tribal tattoo on his face. Total disconnection was the only compromise the wronged parties would accept. He took the deal, and went home later the same day with his relieved parents, in their Kia Sorrento. Two weeks later, he took his uncle's .38 revolver, sat on his childhood bedroom floor, and shot himself through the head. His mother, beside herself, seemed genuinely puzzled that Jared would do such a thing. "Why do it now?" she sobbed, trying to keep from keening uncontrollably in front of the ultra-definition cameras "He was out of the woods; it could have come up for review in ten years, twelve at the most, that's nothing..." Her husband sat to her left, with his head bowed. And that's the story. I'll let you figure out what it means.

Posted by user Kilroy, 7:01 p.m.

There were stretches, sometimes for as much as a week or two at a time, when I could think of the kitchen table in University Village as "our" kitchen table, in "our" kitchen. But usually, especially when Sara was pissed off at me, I couldn't help but think of it as "her" table. This was one of those times. Her phone was facedown on the woven, imitation hemp placemat in front of her.

"You *have* to. You have to sell the Blackbird if you don't come up with your half."

"That's the best solution? I've been working on it for months."

"Sell it or I'll sell it."

"It's mine."

"Wyatt, everything in this house is mine."

"The Blackbird is mine, Sara."

"Oh, I'm sorry; *how* much would you have been able to build without me?"

"I'm apologizing. That's what this is: an apology. I'm not trying to play a game of what belongs to whom. I just don't have the money this time. I've got enough for the rent and the AT&T bill, but I'm just short for groceries."

"Why?"

I mobilized the first layer of protective lies, suddenly envying dogs and their ability to non-verbally communicate subservience. "I ordered a couple of pizzas for the LAN party at Ben's that night."

"You *what*? Awesome. That's just fucking great; you said Ben was buying the food."

"I'm sorry."

"No Wyatt, you don't get to be sorry. When was the last time you ordered a pizza for us to eat? You asshole." She looked at herself in the TV's glossy, dark screen and seemed to recoil from her own reflection. "I'm going on eBay right now and putting up a listing for \$150 worth of black bricks."

I had my hands in my pants pockets and I shrugged. I took her to a tropical island in my mind, and marooned her there. I knew a tempest was in the offing; I was trying to take it like a man. Be Han Solo. Be Han Solo.

"Hhhh... The *last time*, Wyatt. And you need to pay this back."

"Agreed."

"And maybe it's..." She trailed off, staring at the seam in the kitchen table where the leaves folded out. I waited for her to finish her sentence but I already knew what was coming. "I think it's time you start looking for somewhere else to live."

This was the doomsday scenario I'd been trying to avoid. I wanted this to end, but not this soon, and certainly not on her terms. There was too much unready, too many moving pieces in play. "Huh? Baby..."

"Don't 'baby' me, Wyatt. It's again and again with you like this. When are you going to quit shitting all over me and grow up?"

I had about a million things to say to that. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Don't say anything, then. Just either find a real job or stop spending money you don't actually have on Ben. He's not your family, and he's not your girlfriend."

"Sorry." I was not sorry.

"When are you going to take *me* out?"

"I'll take you out. I get paid on Friday, we'll totally go."

She seemed to think about it for a second and then blinked and slapped the table. "God damn it, you owe *me* that money, Wyatt. I don't want to take *myself* out." She stalked off to the bedroom and slammed the door; her phone was gone.

. . .

Gus was pacing back and forth in the rear of the Guilty Grinder where the door to the walk-in was.

"Everything ok there?" I asked Ben, tilting my head in Gus' direction.

"Oh. Yeah," Ben said. "He just discovered Hardcore Mode."

"Fuck!" Gus hissed, and dodged around the corner by the employee entrance where we kept the mops.

"How's it going with you?" Ben asked. It occurred to me that Ben and I hadn't spoken much since Lil Fuquer's moved in.

"I'm good, man, thanks."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, you know."

"I like your new girlfriend. She seems like a good match for you. What happened to the old one?"

"That's a long st—"

"Oh man, you gotta try these," Gus said, taking off his glasses and thrusting them at me. I had never seen Gus wear glasses before. I peered through them and the entire mall was thrown into wrap-around apocalypse. This was the way *LD 50/30* was meant to be played: not just our immediate surroundings on a tiny phone screen, but *everything*, as far as I could see, was rendered in grimy, burned-out glory. The pixel count on the lenses must have been astronomical.

"Wow," I said, in genuine awe. Infinitely radiant texture generators painted every new surface and object I looked at with an apocalyptic overlay, and then a continuity engine remembered which textures went where, and kept them constant to each other, and to me,

as I moved my head and body. The effect was incredible. Individually-rendered dust motes glimmered in the last light of an artificial sunset outside the ruins of our building. I walked to the hole left by shattered windows near the escalator and I put out my hand, which was filthy and missing its pinky finger, to make sure the glass was still there. Beyond was the crumbled wasteland of Michigan Avenue, enrubbled and smoking except for the amber glow of garbage-fires glinting off of the polished steel of the Bean. I peered over the glasses and blinked, and then put them back on my nose. "How much did these set you back?"

"A *lot*," Gus said. "But YOLFO, and I mean that."

"What did your wife say, when you came home with them?" Ben asked, skeptical.

"Not a word. And fuck her, anyway."

This was new. "Really?"

"Yeah. I've decided: marriage is slavery. You know what I wished for, for the first five years, when I blew out my birthday cake candles?"

Ben and I looked at each other, cautiously.

"Blowjobs. I wished for blowjobs. For my birthday wish. Every year."

A pregnant woman within earshot ducked her head and tried not to make eye contact with Gus.

"You know what I wish for now?"

"I don't think you're actually supposed to tell—"

"A divorce." I handed him the GameFrames and he put them back on. He peered around distantly to make sure the world had still ended. "So fuck it; happy birthday to me."

"Want a sandwich?" I asked. "I'm making Pepper a salad."

Gus frowned, he was no longer even looking in my direction. “Nah, that’s cool. I’ve got Starvation turned on; you can unlock Desperate Strength if you eat less than 1400 calories per day.”

“That’s... that doesn’t sound safe at all,” Ben said.

“It’s that extra mile of realism. It GPS-tags you too, to make sure you don’t stay in one place for too long. If you do, it attracts the militia survivalists. Oh shit,” Gus said, witnessing something cataclysmic that we couldn’t see. He wandered off down toward the public restrooms.

Pepper watched him walk past, and scrunched up her nose in his wake.

“How’s my favorite badass this evening?” I asked her.

She tossed her chin in the air like a gangster. “You got what I need?”

“I do.” The Olive Garden Rule: Nothing sets off a salad like the smell of butter and garlic. Homemade croutons are stupidly easy to make. Cut two slices of any kind of bread into squares and fry them on high heat for sixty seconds in a mixture of two tablespoons of olive oil and half a teaspoon of garlic salt. Guaranteed to bring all the foodies to the yard. Serve hot, if you know what’s Earp.

“Oh my God,” she said, sniffing at her dinner under the to-go lid as I glowed my own phone for her. The total zeroed out, recognizing my employee privilege.

“Yes?” I asked, knowing the answer already.

She played coy. “Oh, you know. It’s not a steak, but what salad is, right?”

We sat in our usual spot far to one edge of the dining area. Out in the hinterlands of the food court was an independently owned kiosk where a kid who must have been about our age tried to hawk off-brand mobile service on off-brand phones. We watched him for half

an hour. Every single customer he talked to turned him down, one after another, after another, after another. Come to think of it, I'm not certain Kiosk Kid ever sold anything the entire time I worked there. I tried to picture a guy like that ever having kids or holding down a mortgage, and I just couldn't. People used to patronizingly dismiss the idea that my generation was different than any other recent generation who'd come before, aside from the fact that we'd just found new ways to complain about it. But they were wrong, and Kiosk Kid was the proof.

My parents worked hard when they were young, sure. Not everything turned out the way they wanted it to—plenty did, but not everything. My dad started as a substitute teacher and my mom was a waitress when they had me. Still, no one talked about Molly and Jonah Simmons being “locked out” of things the way they talked about it with my generation: locked out of the housing market, locked out of the meaningful retirement tiers, locked out of good schools in good neighborhoods. When I looked at Kiosk Kid, I saw a person locked out of *everything*, a walking Posterity-case behind the counter, restlessly waiting his turn to be boxed up, planted, and juried. As Mom's also continually reminded me, a person *was* what they were. Not more; not less. Futurelessness hung on Kiosk Kid like a lead apron, and every time he stood up from his little stool and asked if passersby “had a minute” to listen to the best deals his franchise's drain-circling business model could come up with, I wanted to put a hand on his shoulder and tell him to just let it go.

. . .

After Sara went to bed, YaskY@ met Dokt0rP under an inky, indigo sky lit by the phosphorescence of a digital moon. I'd given my character in *Warlance Unchained* one of the preset facial hair combinations so that he didn't look quite so shrimpy next to Pepper's leet warlord, but it only helped a little. YaskY@ was all hat and no cattle: a slightly buff human male with pieced-together questing armor of common and low quality. Your mother wore epic Tier 36 plate armor this time, the arena variant that glowed red in the seams like a heartbeat, and the giant two-handed war axe strapped to her back occasionally spoke in its own ghostly voice. She was also a good three feet taller than I was, even when she wasn't on her warhorse. At least she didn't wear the grim-reaper helmet this time and had left her dragon at home. She unclicked the "show helmet" box so I could see her avatar's face, and in the game she had blonde hair.

"Hi!" she called out, waving an enormous, gauntleted hand.

"Hey! I like the hair," I said.

"Too obvious?"

"Nah."

The warrior cocked her head. "Not sure about that beard. Did you wander out of a dirty movie from the 70s?"

"That's what I was going for."

We were standing in an Overworld region called Silvercat Flats, a broad and mostly-empty stretch of veldt-like plains and digital baobab trees punctuated by the occasional fishpond. There were apex predators here, not all of whom were other players, but it was the only place in the game you could harvest the foods to feed non-combat companion pets. My

character had a pet otter, so even if Anaphlan were to suddenly log in and use her Overworld map to find me, it was a perfectly plausible place to be. The sun was setting.

“Sit,” Dokt0rP offered, and I typed “/sit” to make my character do so.

Her hands glowed green, and between them sizzled a jolt of magical energy. A cozy digital campfire appeared between us and she sat across from me. Her sorcerous fire illuminated our avatars with soft, romantic light. As we talked, I watched my charisma and intelligence meters drift higher than their usual upper limits. It was an unusual ability, this fire. It represented an odd skill for a character to sink time and energy into developing; especially a bloodthirsty PvP monster like Pepper. I remembered the Apocaware laptops and champion gamertags.

“Your roommates seem nice,” I said.

“Eh, they’re all right. They’re not talking to me right now because I ducked out of their raid to come hang out.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, they get pissy, but they’ll get over it.”

“No, I mean, do you need to go?” Players like Pepper didn’t just hang out in-game, they were usually the epicenter of the arena or large-scale PvP battles and people noticed immediately when they logged in.

“Nah. I can play with them whenever. It’s you I don’t get enough of.”

I typed /smile.

“Speaking of roommates, what about yours? The one. The female. How does she feel about you playing without her?”

“Well, you remember I told you about her boyfriend from high school, right?”

“Ooooh shit. That’s right: she’s the Sparkser. I don’t know how guys like you stay with girls like that.”

“Guys like me?”

“Look, I’ve known you for about a minute, and I can already tell that you’re an in-person sort of guy.”

“Really?”

“Psht. Uh, *yeah*. You make the best mall sandwiches I’ve ever tasted, and you’re building the coolest plane ever out of the coolest toy ever. This,” she gestured at the swaying baobab trees, “isn’t really your thing at all. I’m going out on a limb here but I’m guessing your roomie is one of those Streeterville-type girls. Cuter than me, probably better teeth, actually uses her gym membership. Used to be a lioness in bed, but she goes to sleep early on purpose now.”

I typed /clasphead. “Get out of my mind!”

Dokt0rP laughed a silvery computerized laugh in the firelight. “Steady; fear is the mind-killer.”

“It really is. But yeah, you pretty much nailed it, except I think you’re way cuter than her.”

“Aww—”

My otter sat up and sniffed at the air. “What is it, Hegel?” I asked him.

“Mistress,” Dokt0rP’s massive axe interjected. “There are several hostile creatures approaching from beyond those trees.” The amplified growl came a moment later. “Shall I sing for us the war song of Lee-roy Jenkins?”

"No that's all right." She looked at me and held up a finger. "Just a sec." Pepper stood up, unslung her axe, and stomped away from the fire's glow for a moment. I saw a blur of azure as the glowing runes along her axe's blade spun in the darkness. The head of a large feline predator landed in my lap, fangs frozen in a dead snarl. It vanished, leaving behind a bag of experience points. She returned, and sat back down as if the whole thing had just been a minor blip.

"Alone at last," she said. "Where were we?"

"I was telling you that I spent all afternoon looking at the doorway of Lil Fuquer's to see if I could catch a glimpse of you. And for the record, your regular hair color is my favorite."

"Do you want to come back over sometime?" Dokt0rP asked. Her avatar's expression was inscrutable but a cartoon heart appeared over her head and faded into the night above us with the smoke from the digital fire.

"I do," I said. "I wish I was there right now."

"Me too," the giant warrior princess said. "How soon can you get away?"

I typed /scratchhead. "I need to come up with a reason not to be at work or home. Home is too dodgy right now, and I can't skip work because I'm broke." I didn't mention Trattoria Angelo, but evidently I didn't have to.

"But that's my fault. Shit." Her character snapped its fingers. "Why not just be at work? I'll come to you."

I pictured us locking ourselves in the bathroom at the Grinder. I typed /confused and my avatar mimed a *who, me?* gesture.

Her avatar nodded, greedily.

“I can probably concoct something in the next week or so to get away. Maybe I’ll go visit my parents in Schaumburg.”

“Oooh, now we’re talking.”

“Oh, no, wait, this is even better. Listen to this: I’ll actually go to my dad’s house and I’ll find—

“Whoa,” she said. Dokt0rP held up a hand.

“—a reason to borrow his car.” I stopped typing. She was silent and motionless.

“What? Did I say something wrong?” I typed.

“Turn on your TV.”

“I don’t own an actual TV anymore,” I said.

“Turn on anything,” she said, and vanished.

09.

[User KILROY is offline]

11:46 p.m.

When they brought him out, none of us knew what to think. We fell into that storied taxonomic *suburbanus whiteus*, which means we were ignorant of a lot of things back then. They footnote this in the histories of the Passbook era and what came next, but just like the 1960s weren't all mutton-chopped men getting high at Canned Heat concerts, our young adulthood wasn't all SnapChat and selfie sticks. If you had your eyes open and you hadn't already tuned it out, you could see the militarization of the police everywhere: gun-barrel footage at video game camera angles showing officers shooting unarmed black men; 100-pound PTA moms, screaming and clawing at their eyes after being casually maced for sitting in designated peaceful protest zones with signs scrawled on paper plates; an endless procession of bushwhacking, uniformed, HR-error fuckwads walking away from criminal negligence, police brutality, and capital murder cases when not-so-grand juries declined to even charge them. There was cocktail-hour solidarity among the progressive contingent, and tentative efforts to stop "thinking white" or whatever, but on some level our protective ignorance was too instinctual for the average person like your mom or I to easily cast off. No one came right out and said this, but I think the feeling we had, and certainly others had at the time, was that if our whiteness or maleness or whatever else they said gave us the ability to be ignorant about even one or two line items in the endless litany of ways our lives sucked, then *so fucking be it*. If our privilege, and I hate that word, shielded us once in a while in some vague, not-really-what-history-says-it-did way, what person in their right mind would question it?

Most of the time, when we saw others being steamrolled by the man, people like your mother and me sat around wondering when the other shoe would drop, and if it would drop on us. “Cowering,” is what you’d call it, by its right name. We did a great deal of cowering. Kilroy’s arrest was not, I’m ashamed to say, an exception.

I’d just logged out of my *Warlance* date with your mother and pulled up a browser window, but I didn’t even need to search; it came up immediately on the main search engine page in a part of the screen reserved for hurricane warnings and color-coded terrorist threat indicators.

KILROY ARRESTED IN CHICAGO, CHARGED WITH MILLIONS OF COUNTS OF WIRE FRAUD.

Not just arrested, but arrested *here*, in *my town*. There was a video that didn’t wait for me to press play, or allow me to skip the 35-second Volkswagen commercial that preceded it, and then I was looking at Kilroy being walked down the front steps of a house. It was impossible to say where it was just by the shot of the front yard. His standard, shitty, 1950s brick-bungalow made up about 85% of residential properties in Chicago: 900 square feet of unaffordable, mid-century misery, crumbling gray cement stoops beneath decorative front porch overhangs so perfunctory they barely deserved the name. Two men in full-on carbon-fiber riot suits with plexiglass shields were duck-marching a balding, middle-aged white man in black horn-rimmed glasses down the sidewalk to a police van that looked like an armored car. Kilroy turned, glanced up at wherever the camera was, and stared for a moment directly at the screen.

I watched the entire video twice, three times. Four times. I couldn’t stop watching it. I remember that specific year’s Jetta had all-wheel drive and next-generation anti-lock brakes. I paused the feed when he stared at the screen and I tried to fathom how fast they’d

caught him, but more importantly, that *this* was the Kilroy we'd been reading all this time.

Kilroy was a special case almost from the beginning; it was surprisingly hard to remain anonymous in those days, even when you could call yourself anything you wanted online. The Patriot Act, and a First Amendment case afterward called *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, made it a crime to “materially” support the activity of terrorists designated by the government. Forget about how problematically broad the term “terrorist” was back then, the definition of “material support” could've meant practically anything. Accidentally enrolling the child of a radical militiaman into elementary school was material support. Translating the wrong document from Arabic into English was material support. Re-posting a clever link from the feed of someone who later shot up a high school was material support.

No social media platform quite dared revert to the total anonymity of the early days of the internet after *Holder v. Humanitarian Law*, lest individual programmers and content providers find themselves on the business end of liability suits and federal prosecution. In less than a generation the Wild West of the internet had become more like Airstrip One, and the ownership of all that data—oozing through the universe like a capillary bed of ones and zeros—was snoringly hashed out in ream upon ream of unread End User License Agreements. You could make up a fake name if you wanted, like MichaelHaxxson or RustedRootkit, but you were never more than a search warrant away from being connected to everything you ever did, said, or experienced online.

We fantasized that Kilroy was different; that he was ours. Maybe he'd found some legacy Blackhat backdoor to our hearts and our collective unconscious, or posted to his feed through a series of law-dog stymying identity shells like in a bad movie where Kiefer Sutherland used the phrase “world wide web” in a sentence. Kilroy was on our side, and we

needed him to be cool. We'd known, maybe, but hadn't wanted to admit to ourselves the strong likelihood that he was just some marginal shmoe who bought the cheapest variety of khaki pants at Target, and wore them with white Fruit of the Loom crew-necks and rubberized Adidas sandals that probably smelled more like feet than actual feet. We wanted to think it wasn't him on the police body cam video. My phone had an absolute fit.

Chelsea: HOLY BALLS DID YOU SEE THAT?

Wyatt: I'm watching it right now.

Mom: [Must See TV].

Nana: I knew he'd be a... you know.

Wyatt:???

Chelsea: What? Dorky basement perv?

Nana: Right.

Chelsea: ...what were you going to say?

Nana: Hmm? Oh, nothing. Yeah, "basement perv" about covers it.

NOTIFICATION: A private-chat request from user D0ktorP awaits you in Warlance!

Chelsea: Stop, he's cute.

Mom: Court is now in session, #JudgeMental presiding [shaking head animation].

Wyatt: He's a cutie, all right.

Nana: You don't wear glasses like that, Chelsea, unless you plan on eating the person whose corpse you just had sex with.

DoktorP: What do you make of all this?

YaskY@: No idea. Does it look right to you?

DoktorP: He did that weird thing where he looked at the camera.

YaskY@: I think the person wearing the camera said something to him that we couldn't hear. It can't be him, can it?

I heard the bedroom door open and I swiped away my *Warlance* chat screen. Beneath it, Chelsea and Nana continued their debate about the merits of unshowered, unstable men.

"Did you see the thing about Kilroy?" Sara asked.

"Every single person I've ever met is talking about it."

"It's really happening," she said, thoughtfully. "Jesus, look at all the hardware." She peered at the SWAT vehicles and police canines as the video auto-played again on her phone. She transmitted the video stream to her side of the living room TV and we watched it together, side by side on the couch. For a minute, or maybe two, Sara was the girl I remembered from college: engaged, interested, and training her over-sharp sense of criticism on something other than me for a change.

Our era wasn't drawn up in neat lines of political camps around empathy and identity the way documentaries and retrospectives would have you believe; on the ground it was messy. Our margins were always too thin—as I say, none of us had any money in those days—but that wasn't all: we didn't have much hope, either. Kilroy would soon remind us that you can squeeze blood from stones for a long time and get away with it, but they sow the wind whosoever fucks with people's hope. Loyalties and allegiances were already tangled and unsteady at the best of times, and Kilroy, we must have realized, stood at the center of many of them. In the politics of Posterity, representation was everything. Pulling a Passbook user out of his home like that begged uncomfortable questions. The Posterity users Kilroy so often derided would be among the first obliged to question his treatment; given

that their powerful lobby's priorities included both internet neutrality and a uncompromising anti-surveillance stance. The same critics eager to label his feed hate speech would nevertheless dutifully bird-dog the press to confirm that his arrest was done by the book, and with a reasonable exercise of power on the part of the authorities, whom almost everyone in those days instinctively mistrusted. Pulse-takers and tinfoil-hat types alike would use the event as an excuse to bandy older, more volatile grievances shared broadly by all: *Not enough to go around as it is. Living is different than dead. We have the right to live in a world where the future isn't already gone.* It didn't seem to occur to anyone until it was too late that this might've been exactly what Kilroy was counting on.

"The Mortal Rights people are going to lose their shit," Sara said, and walked back toward the kitchen firing off a flurry of Passbook messages to Eric about it. She had no way of knowing how right she was.

. . .

"Sorry I bailed on you so abruptly last night. Real world issues."

Pepper measured me with a glance and a brief grin, and went back to eating her toasted ham and Swiss. "When're you going to let that nice girl down easy?"

I said nothing.

She frowned a little. "I'm kidding."

"It's all I think about."

"Look, Y," she put her sub down and held both hands palm-forward in a *stop right there* gesture. "I'm not ready to pick out bedding and flatware yet, I'm just making

conversation here.”

“I know.”

“You don’t seem very happy, is all.”

“That’s fair. You didn’t know me when I lived with my folks, but you’re not wrong.”

“Are you guys still...?”

It took me a moment to grasp her meaning. “Oh! No. Not really.”

“Not *really*?” She asked. This time there was a smidge of disbelief in her voice.

“I believe the word is... *Jillin*? It’s all Jillin’ all the time.”

She snorted. “Jillin’. Does he do the...?”

“I don’t ask.”

“... bzzzz bzzzz.”

I laughed. “I don’t want to know. Probably.”

She put a hand on my forearm. Her fingers felt light, with fingerprints buffed smooth from folding thousands of T-shirts and hoodies, and playing thousands of hours of video games. “We’ve got to get you the hell out of that apartment.”

The thought thrilled me, I admit, and scared me a little too. There weren’t a lot of places to go if I left Sara’s apartment. The idea of moving in with Pepper seemed breathlessly tempting, but there were plenty of reasons this was a shaky idea. Mattie’s father owned the gamer paradise above Sheffield’s that the three of them lived in, and I had slim hopes of being able to sell myself yet again as a viable roommate to the daughter of a distant-but-all-powerful middle-aged father. Your mother didn’t float the idea candidly, but I could see it in her eyes. I had no illusions.

The only other real option was to move back in with my dad and Dana, and if living

with a woman you don't love is some sort of dirt-floored basement of emotional catabolism, moving back in with your parents was the eldritch sub-basement into which grasping, knuckled roots grew. The former was dead, but the latter was dead *and* buried.

So we lived, as everyone our age lived, in-between in borrowed spaces, at work or in the less-traveled corners of the mall. When Pepper and I had quiet moments alone, we would trade humid fantasies of being able to afford our own place together; postmodern pillow talk, two lonely puppies wagging tails at each other in a hailstorm. When I had a break, I'd walk across the peach-pit marble thoroughfare of the food court and hazard a peek into Lil Fuqer's, and she came to the Grinder for lunch, dinner, and even occasionally breakfast. If our breaks coincided, we'd hold hands in the used bargain bin section of the video game store, trying to decide which *A-Team* character translated best into a commemorative anniversary bobblehead, or sneak into the big family bathroom in the narrow hallway off of the nail salon, and lock the door.

In the vanity that comes from long years of being married, and especially from having successfully raised a child, it becomes very easy to revise memories. All of this seems terribly romantic and structured when written out in paragraphs, but this brief time after we met didn't hold together moment to moment the way a story does. Half of the time your mother and I spoke only via our *Warlance* characters, or not at all. Other times, we'd miss each other entirely thanks to some unexpected work glitch, and when I'd get home Sara would want to go through the motions. It's one thing to walk arm-in-arm and make big moony eyes at the person you love, especially a secret love that feels like grabbing onto an uninsulated power line. It's quite another to lie next to someone you don't love and wonder if that other person

is thinking about you in return. Doubt is the part of love they don't write songs about, and the part most relieving to forget once the moment passes.

. . .

Chelsea: What do you think?

Nana: I think she's cute. She's definitely smart. What happened to the other one?

Chelsea: You mean the one he's still living with?

Nana: He *isn't*...

Chelsea: Is. And before you ask, I warned him about it.

Nana: My poor, sweet, idiot grandson...

Chelsea: She's *not* cute, but I agree: totally smart, and not pushy.

Nana: I mean, you have to be a *little* pushy, right?

Chelsea: Eh, I like to think pushy is optional.

Nana: Such a sheltered life you have. Had?

Chelsea: Have. What's with all the food, though?

Nana: What do you mean? Nothing wrong with a girl who has an appetite.

Chelsea: Right, but when they're together, he's just constantly making her these high-calorie meals. It feels a little, I don't know, sabotage-y?

Nana: I suppose. If you look at it purely in terms of all the usual things that men give women a hard time for. Then again, if you can cook...

Chelsea: Right, it *is* like the only thing he's good at.

Nana: ...the *only* thing he's good at. I was thinking exactly the same thing. You can't fault the bird for flashing his best feathers.

Chelsea: Awww, look at them, she totally wants him to kiss her.

Nana: Mmmm. Should we log off?

Chelsea: What? *Hell no*. This is way better than watching stupid vodcasters and MeChanners, and it's not like anyone is taking *me* out for a date.

Nana: It's a threadbare date, if that's what it is. Your grandfather used to take me to Deutschehaus, which was this big, old place in Lincoln Square where they had a carvery and all the beer you could drink, and at ten they'd clear the floor and have live music. I used to leave my shoes under the table and we danced until they kicked us out.

Chelsea: Nana, you *dog*. You never told me that.

Nana: And when I was a girl, being called a dog was the worst thing there was.

Chelsea: I didn't mean it like that.

Nana: Oh, I know. I just mean those were different times. It never occurred to me to tell you, or Molly, or anyone. We never used to *tell* people things they way you kids do. That's the biggest difference. We got up to all sorts of hell, believe it, but the whole impulse to tell everyone what you were up to all the time—it just wasn't us. We used to talk about it in terms of *business*. Your business was your business and my business was my business and anyone who wasn't raised poorly knew to stay the hell out of other people's business.

Chelsea: Why did they call it business?

Nana: I never figured that out.

Chelsea: There they go. Looks like the show's over [sigh.wav].

Nana: Chin up, baby girl. You'll find someone.

Chelsea: Think Wyatt'll fuck this up?

Nana: Without question.

. . .

At one point I was desperate enough to try to get a credit card, and you can guess how that went. Chase and Fifth Seventh were dead-ends, but consumer banks of more middling reputation occasionally made lazy overtones to me of high-interest credit to be had for qualified borrowers. After navigating through Orega Bank's online Contact Us menu for half an hour, I finally found the link that promised to let me speak to a Representative. They were careful with phrases like "in person" or "live support" because virtually all such functionaries were Posterity users. They did say "speak" though, and they meant it. As I held for the connection to complete, a picture captioned "Brian" hovered on my screen. His sensible haircut and impeccable tie communicated just the right balance of style and function. As I stared at the picture, it suddenly blinked.

A half-heard connective crackle sounded over my phone's speakers.

"Hello?" I asked. "Can you hear me okay?"

"Yes!" came the digitized voice. The Representative's photograph came alive and moved in animated pantomime of its vocal processing. Either my phone was too old or my data connection was too slow because there was a half-second desynchronization between the audio and video processing. It made the Representative look like Howdy Doody.

“How can I help you today?” (How can I help you today?)

“Yeah, I’m just calling to follow up on my application for an OregaCard.”

“Certainly.” (Certainly.) “Do you have your customer welcome number?”

I provided it.

“One moment.” (One moment.) The photograph stopped moving and returned to its default posture, blinking occasionally like a painting whose eyes follow you around a room.

This was just one of the myriad tricks that Posterity made our minds play on themselves. If it wasn’t the constant need to interpret text without the help of nonverbal cues and body language, it was accustoming oneself to the attempts of some of the juried to appear additionally lifelike. Himleck Studios did its best to cater to Posterity users’ thirst for the real on a budget, with its vocal processor apps and expressive virtual prostheses. But there were other, more high-end examples like the moving profile pictures or haptic mannequins. The mannequins were too expensive for everyday use, but your average predatory lender could afford some of the bells and whistles, hence the Representative.

There was no way to know if the Posterity user on the other end of Brian’s profile picture and prosthetic voice were who he said he was. Some companies prided themselves on that level of transparency, but others less so. Brian might’ve easily been someone’s grandmother—even my own grandmother—behind the processing and production. Most of the time we got the familiar, default impression of Posterity users we didn’t know: invisible work performed by disembodied email addresses tied to payments and fees that slipped silently from account to account. Frictionless-ness, the etiquette of ubiquity, became the new boundary between stranger and intimate.

It was hard to say which was the better approach. The banks and anyone else who

could afford to fully articulate the dead had once more to contend with the inconvenience of identity. Brian's photo would have to have a full head of hair, for instance, in one of a set of focus-group approved hairstyles. His age had to be calculated just so. His photographic reanimation would've necessitated meetings on the strengths and weaknesses of various skin textures and vocal modulations. Accented pronunciation might play well in flyover states, but was a faux pas in commerce of the coastal cities. Even when you'd done all this conscientious necromancy, the artifice of it all was still twitchy, unreliable, or just plain off-putting to some people, which meant that haptics and moving profile photos and all the rest took a while to catch on.

When we saw them arrest Kilroy that day, it was another one of those mind-tricks. Kilroy was more idea than man to us; the authorities could perp-walk any loser in bargain-bin clothes in front of a camera, but as thickly as the media mixed the corresponding ratio of news to noise, they could never quite wrap a cage around Kilroy's ideas. Like a cult movie or an infectious anthem, he'd become too much a part of us. When we read the text messages from our own consciences in our heads, it was his name on the sender line.

Brian blinked. "Are you there, Wyatt?" (Are you there, Wyatt?)

"I'm here," I said.

"I'm afraid your application for a line of credit under our Orega Choice Plan has been declined at this time." Brian went on to explain in a polite, desynchronized script that my credit rating was not in the preferred categories for Orega Bank's financial products.

"Can you explain what that means?" I asked, feeling dejected and not wanting this electronic ghost to get off quite so easily.

"Your credit rating is a numerical indicator of your ability to repay a loan." Brian's

mild photogenic smile didn't waver.

"My ability to repay as of this moment."

"Correct." (Correct).

"Which means you only lend money to people who already have money."

Brian blinked, and didn't immediately respond, which pissed me off. I realized suddenly that there was no real reason to be polite. Treating a Posterity user like you would anyone else was only common courtesy, but Brian wasn't put here to enhance my experience; he was here to tell me to get lost. Out of this picture's mouth came the same logic that Graham Grayson used to charge his own daughter rent in an apartment building he owned. It was only business. Brian's role was to soak up the disappointment like a sponge, and I decided to oblige him.

"Brian, I'm starting to feel like I've wasted my time here. If you don't lend money to people who need it, what exactly do you *do* over there at Orega?"

At this, Brian broke from the script. His profile photo struggled to keep up. "Can I be frank with you, Wyatt?"

"You can be whomever you want to be," I said, thinly.

"With your credit rating, income, and educational debt load, you're unlikely to qualify for loans with any lender. We use a series of categorical response tags when we interact with our applicants and your category tag suggests that I should refer you to both credit counseling services and our automated career and household budgeting center."

"Is that right, you fucking dial tone?" I seethed. "Well it's a good thing you'll never need a *sandwich*." I stabbed the END icon, and Brian's window collapsed. Behind it was a news feed that read: JUSTICE DEPARTMENT SILENT ON SPECULATION OF KILROY ACCOMPLICE. I closed that

one too, and the one behind it that read IOWA WOMAN CLAIMS KILROY FATHERED HER TRIPLETS. With Kilroy gone silent it was getting harder and harder—maybe impossible—to hear the signal buried inside the noise. I knew that I loved Pepper; that felt real. I knew that something would eventually have to give; but I wasn't sure what that might be. I was only more and more certain that I wanted to just get on with whatever it was.

. . .

By mid-Spring I was spending almost all of my time either with your mother at the mall or hiding out in the basement of my apartment working on the Blackbird. I'd made progress. After some soul-searching and a reassessment of how long it would actually take to finish the thing versus how much money I could reasonably funnel into it, I'd opted to replace some of the inner fuselage pieces, the underlayers, with bricks of different colors to conserve black Legos. With that compromise, I'd been able to build out the plane to the engine nacelles on either side. There weren't proper wings on it yet, those would come last because they'd need stacks of books or pieces of plywood under them to hold up their weight, but I had the cockpit, the forward fuselage, the midship, and the beginnings of the wings. October and BrickCon were only months away, and I was in a race to the finish.

I didn't have a long enough tape measure, but if my proportional guesstimates were correct, it was 35 feet long, and when finished would be about 19 feet from wingtip to wingtip. I couldn't put a precise dollar figure on the bricks I'd used in it, but it was a lot—more valuable than anything else I owned, by far. I'd had to take down a set of aluminum shelves and pull the boiler room door off the hinges, and then finally even re-angle the entire

thing in order to keep building, not to mention move my lawn chair, bins of bricks, speakers, and all my other crap. I had enough room to sit, to duck under the cockpit and get to the door, and that was about it. When I stood in the entrance and eyeballed the sculpture, I figured it might *just* fit when it was finished.

There was a photo from the Smithsonian I'd blown up, printed, and tacked over my bench on the far wall. It was taken in 1965 at the Lockheed Skunkworks production floor in Palmdale, California, where three SR-71s were being built. If you squinted, the titanium frames and gantries and yellow-orange machinery cradles looked like something straight out of a science-fiction film. It might have been the Rebel hangar on Yavin from *Star Wars*. If you squinted, you could almost pick out R2-D2. The North Vietnamese fired hundreds of surface-to-air missiles at these planes during the Vietnam War, but they were so fast that no one—not the NVA, not the Soviets a decade later, *no one*—ever managed to shoot down a Blackbird. They'd come back like beat-up space shuttles from almost every mission with fuselage panels cracked and cadmium-nickel fittings rattled loose. Any number of tiny, hideously-expensive alloy pieces sheared away in the intense air-friction of traveling at two thousand miles per hour, leaking jet fuel out of airframes designed to expand and seal completely only at full speed. The Blackbirds always came back, but flying one was a life-or-death commitment; if you ejected at Mach 3.2, the atmospheric friction would set you on fire, like bailing out of Apollo 13 during reentry. Once you strapped in, you were going for a ride. I flipped off the light.

. . .

“Where’s your phone?” Sara asked, when I got to the top of the stairs.

“Hi.” I said.

“Where’s your phone?” She repeated.

“Hi?”

“Give me your phone *right now*.”

“Okay, now I’m definitely not going to give you my phone. What the hell is your problem?”

“This for starters.” She held up her own phone to me, and on it was a transcript I recognized with dawning horror of D0ktorP and YaskY@ exchanging descriptions of what they wanted to do to each other when they could sneak away next. It took me a moment to admit to myself that this was actually happening, and that moment of hesitation said everything Sara needed to know.

“Where did you get th—”

“Never mind where I got it. I want you out. Right now. Tonight.”

“All right, calm down. This is my home, you can’t just evict me, there are laws.”

“You want laws? I’ll call the law.”

“And tell them what? I haven’t done anything illegal to you or anyone else.”

She held the phone in front of herself like a weapon, as if to vaporize me by dialing the Chicago Police Department. “The only name on the lease of this unit and the storage in the basement is Graham Grayson. *Get out*.”

Until that night, I didn't know something as embarrassing as cringe-packing existed. I started gathering the most critical things, haphazardly, and I can feel the heat of shame creep into my cheeks today as I write this, even though it was so long ago, and even though

it had to happen if your mother and I were ever to be together. I felt ashamed because shame is the general odor of lying, but also shame that Sara, now half-crazy with naked hatred for me and finally with a reason to openly say what she'd felt for so long, could just unload all of that onto me while I had to stand there and take it, stuffing the pitiful shit I called everything I owned into a series of generic black trash bags.

She started throwing my things from the closet on the floor, then thought better of it and picked up individual items of clothing to retrieve "her" wire clothes hangers from them. She made as if to throw my computer on the floor too, but I gave her, for the first and only time, a look that suggested I might physically stop her if she went that far. If I'd been able to guess her real name right then and there, she'd have had to turn my straw into gold. She put the computer down and stalked into the bathroom, slamming the door and locking it. I dragged all of my belongings down to the curb and summoned a self-driving cab.

When the vehicle arrived, I knocked on the door to tell her I'd be back for the Blackbird, but she locked the front door and turned off the porchlight. I called her a bitch and dialed in my parents' house on the GPS. As I sat in the car, replaying the mortifying horror of what had just happened, it occurred to me that she'd wanted to see my phone. I took it out, and looked down: in it was an email message from Sara with a timestamp from earlier this evening. I opened it and had to immediately turn down the porny sound of furtive girlish moans. The video, titled "for Eric" was a close-up of Sara masturbating while contriving to fill the lens of her cellphone camera with herself.

Even though I'd long suspected, I was shocked at how different the door-slamming, phone-robot Sara I knew was from this hungry stranger that was in love with Eric Delaney. I quickly turned it off because I realized I might be skeeving out whoever monitored the

security cams in the driverless cab. Beneath Sara's email there was a second inbox message, this one from Pepper with no subject headline. I opened it.

It was a photo of Pepper, taken in what appeared to be the bathroom of the Grinder, with her shirt unbuttoned and her jeans around her knees. Behind her, grinning and holding the cellphone that had taken the photo, was Gus.

10.

This is Kilroy and holy shit are you some hairy, doughy, straggly-looking dogs without your underpants on. That's what you expected me to say, right? Except you, specifically, Ms. Jessica Wainwright of 424 Wilbur Road, Segovia, MD., you are indeed exactly as scorching hot as you think you are. The rest of you, though... this is why they teach grooming and physical fitness in high school. This just in from the Kilroyverse: @JonathanStapleton writes: "FUCK YOU KILROY, MY MARRIAGE IS OVER." Well don't get mad at me; Jonathan; it's not like I took that unfortunate selfie. A little awkwardness around the water cooler is only natural, but I promise you—and this is a Kilroy Money Back Guarantee—you and everyone else will appreciate this someday. The intangibles alone! Think of the disappointment I spared Erica Johnson who would've taken Carl Hendricks from Accounts Receivable at Davis, Emerson and Spade of Newport, WA into the stairwell to knock his nuts loose only to discover... well, see for yourselves. Think of the catharsis I dispensed for all you shy, shapely, self-effacing types; refugees from sunlight and swimwear. Yes, you, you know who are. If it weren't for me, no one would ever know how fetching you are under those awful sweaters and hoodies and high-waisted jeans and enormous designer earphones. You wear them because you're trying to lock out the world, or so the reasoning goes, and that's a sentiment I think we can all relate to. But you're self-conscious about your glorious boobage, or because someone pantsed you once in the boy's locker room in middle-school? How long are you going to be upset about that? The rest of us only wish we looked that good with our clothes off. (Seriously, check your Passbook feed, you're probably about to hear from some of us.) Trust in Kilroy: the best part about me is how different I've just made today from all the other days that came before it. Unless I'm very wrong, you'll soon realize that ordinary days seem disappointing by comparison. Ordinarity is our underboss, and that is terrible. You'd become too comfortable throwing a drop-cover over the wanton, bodily part of life, the part that, if you're keeping score, God hath wrought, and I gave you the gift of getting over it. Be upset if you have to, but consider this: what if I did what I did because, despite how meaty and sweaty and pasty, and let-go, and positively not-beach-ready you may imagine you are, or how embarrassing your O-face is, or how unsexy you feel on a four-inch screen, what if I can admire you in a way that Passbook never will? What if the people around you—the other breathing bodies, not those names on the screen—can appreciate you like that? They say information wants to be free, I say beauty wants to be free. I say you want to be free. And you may disagree, but you're wrong. I say you are what you are.

Posted by user KILROY, 8:58 a.m.

By the year 2000, depending on who you asked, we were supposed to have colonized Mars, eradicated cancer, traded in our clothes for jumpsuits and casual unitards, eaten our meals

in pill form, seen airplanes fall out of the sky and nuclear power plant radiation shielding fail at midnight on New Year's Eve because their legacy processors thought it was 1900, Death Raced with Machine Gun Joe and Frankenstein, or followed John Connor into a time-hopping war for existence against Skynet.

Instead, that year, a product came to market invented in Santa Cruz, California by an undocumented French tech-worker named Phillipe Kahn who got his start manufacturing printer cables and then later helming a series of companies acquired by Microsoft and Apple and other tech giants. In the summer of 1997, Kahn was in the hospital anxiously awaiting the birth of his child with his second wife Sonia. The baby—a girl he and Sonia named Sophie—went straight from the delivery room and into technological history. Phillipe took a photograph of her in the maternity ward with a digital camera that he had more or less hot-wired to his cellphone. That night, when he forwarded the low-resolution image of baby Sophie and her fluffy, full head of hair to thousands of people on his email contacts list, Kahn sent the world's first mass-disseminated photograph from a cellphone. By Sophie's third Christmas, as the Y2K bug was mostly disrupting HBSC's credit card readers and the slot machines at a racetrack in Delaware, the hottest new gadgets on the market were camera-equipped cellphones. By the time Sophie Kahn started first grade, digital cameras built into cellphones began to outsell every other variety of camera. By 2010, when Sophie turned thirteen, her father's invention was the companion of choice for amateur journalists and sex-tape-making celebrities alike from 9/11 to the Arab Spring, and there was one camera-equipped cellphone for every seven people on the planet.

. . .

For this next part you'll have to bear with me, and your mother. Her subsequent panicked email when she realized what had happened, explaining that the thing with Gus occurred before she met me, did little to dull the immediate sting. At the time, it was questionable if I even deserved to feel hurt about it. After all: wasn't I technically cheating, too? Hadn't I earned about the same dismally low score in the game of Monogamy as Pepper had? If there was a karmic map with a thumbtack in the spot marked "closure," I was at the far ragged edge, sulking beneath the gazetteer. I woke up the next day in Chelsea's old bedroom, in her old bed, and just like that I was once again living in Schaumburg with Dad and Dana.

Chelsea: Morning turdbird.

Wyatt: ... you heard, eh?

Chelsea: Heard? Did you see your Passbook feed, by any chance?

Wyatt: Fuck.

Chelsea: RadiΩactive.

Chelsea didn't clarify, but she didn't have to. Passbook could be a place of monumental vindictiveness, and this meant that Nana, Dad, Dana, Mom's algo, even conceivably Gus himself, had witnessed whatever cataclysm Sara had unleashed on my feed. I frantically logged in, found the post titled *Look What A Jizzbag I Am* and deleted it. Then I deleted the second one she'd posted five minutes before that one, and the ones she'd reposted at three-hour intervals since to make sure it stayed pinned at the top of everyone's feeds. There were likes. There were comments. I didn't read them. I wanted to die. I wanted to have never lived. I went to my friends list and hovered to the side of Sara's picture; a red X appeared after a moment for me to select.

Are you sure? Passbook asked me.

I was sure.

You and Sara Grayson are no longer friends.

Chelsea: So you really nailed Fat Jessie, huh?

Wyatt: I'm still on the Friends screen, don't push me.

Chelsea: Whatever loser.

Wyatt: They must have like a secret seminar in middle school where they teach girls how to kick guys in the nuts when they're down.

Chelsea: Oh boo-hoo. Didn't *someone* tell you this would happen?

Wyatt: That's helpful. "I told you so," *super* helpful.

Chelsea: It's like I see the future.

Wyatt: Oh yeah? Can you see if I'm ever going to get my Blackbird back? How am I going to pay my school loans with no job?

Chelsea: The magic 8-ball says: "You brought this on yourself."

Wyatt: Tell Nana and Dad I'm sorry.

Chelsea: Tell them yourself, homeboy. I'm going to sit back and throw popcorn.

I suppose I had that coming.

Chelsea: And no beating your meat in my bed.

Wyatt: And here I was just about to love the one I'm with. It's nice and cozy in here and I'm feeling emotionally fragile. Think of it as 'self-care.'

Chelsea: We don't joke about that on this side of the house.

Wyatt: The dead side?

Chelsea: Don't be shitty.

. . .

“Wow,” Dad said.

“Wow is right,” I said. I was sitting once more in Dad and Dana’s breakfast nook. Dad was brewing a pot of coffee so strong it made me wonder if it was possible to absorb caffeine through my corneas. Dana, mercifully, was at yoga.

“What are they calling this one?” Dad asked.

“Sexurday,” I said. If nothing else you could always depend on the media to give something a catchy name.

He chuckled a little into his thermos. “Jesus I am so glad we didn’t have Passbook when I was your age.”

The whole thing was amusingly academic, if a little bewildering, for my father, who apparently—since I got no horrifying email from him or Dana or from any of their cutesy, shared accounts—was savvy enough to keep his cellphone out of their bedroom. There was always a slight chance, like the one blank cartridge in a firing squad, that Dad and Dana simply *didn’t have* sex, but no one buys an extra-firm Spinalpedic™ California King in an oak four-poster frame absent designs to vulcanize the salamander on it.

“So what’s the story with work?”

In explaining why I no longer lived with Sara, I’d omitted the part about Gus. “Work is a problem,” I conceded.

Dad scratched at his beard. “Well, I can ask around at the district office and see if they have anything. In the meantime you’ll have to make up your own mind about the Grinder. It’s a hardship, but maybe only a temporary one.”

I thought about my school loans. My servicer, for one, would be keenly interested in exactly how temporary a hardship I was in for. Dad seemed to pick up on this.

“What sort of bills do you have?”

“Just my cellphone and my loans.” This, at least, was something I could explain in a simple sentence. All that was complicated was the number.

“That’s plenty, though, I’m guessing.”

I nodded, and appreciated Dad not prodding further into figures with me.

He grinned a little. “So who’s this new girl?”

Eye contact was difficult. “Just someone I met at the mall. It’s not going anywhere. Not now, at least.”

“Hmm... and no chance of patching things up with Sara?”

“No,” I said. “None.”

He reached across the table and put a hand on my upper arm. Physical acts of kindness from my father were unusual, and it’d been so long that his hand felt smaller and more human than I remembered it as a kid, when everything about him seemed impossibly heavy and imposing.

“Well, don’t worry too much about it. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to,” Dad said. “You know that, right?”

Picture my humiliated nod. It was exactly the way you imagine it.

“People break up all the time for stupider reasons than that, and it’s not like you’re alone. It’s all anyone’s talking about this week. It just is what it is, and you are what you are.”

“What?” I said, startled.

He didn’t seem to take my meaning.

"That thing you just said—you *are what you are*—where'd you pick that up?"

Dad frowned and stared at my empty plate. "It's something your mother says."

"Oh," I said. The awkwardness deepened. "I didn't realize you still followed the algo."

"Don't call her that," Dad said. He was disappointed in something, if not me.

"Sorry. I still talk to her too, sometimes."

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

He half-smiled. "She'd have appreciated that."

Would she have, though? I wondered. It'd been so long since I'd spoken to her, to the *real* her, that what was left of her in my memories didn't include what she would or wouldn't have appreciated. Once in a while I looked back through her posts and pictures, which were all still on her Passbook profile and curated by the algo. There were photos of Chelsea and me as kids taken with grainy flip-phone lenses that flattened and pixelated everything out as the sensors' ISO struggled to keep up. She had the same smile, the same spill of uncomplicated, light-brown hair in every picture, but even though her expression was open and interested, the images went only as deep as themselves, and no deeper.

Dad dumped the last quarter-inch of his coffee into the sink. "Well, I gotta go get some stuff done. Why don't you settle in and get yourself squared away and we'll figure out where to go from here."

"Thanks Dad," I said.

Your grandfather lived for squaring things away, whatever that even meant. If there wasn't a lawnmower gas can to fill or a broken baseboard conduit to replace, he was given to fidgeting and impatience. I don't remember why I went for a walk, probably to buy a

toothbrush and deodorant to replace the ones that I'd abandoned at Sara's, but I do remember the feeling in the air the day after Sexurday. Half the men in Schaumburg—postmen, waiters, bank-tellers, fourth-grade gym teachers—appeared to have slept in what they were wearing. Women stared extra hard at blank walls, or the horizon beyond their line of sight, and spoke to other women by leaning in close to their ears. It was hard to look anyone in the eye.

Free Night had been a stroke of technological genius, but it'd been limited to just Chicago, and to a few hours. It wasn't the sort of prank anyone, even Kilroy, could pull off more than once before the lawyers and the coders and the lobbyists and the authorities locked everything down. Except he'd done it again, and the coordination and sheer computing power Sexurday had required was staggering. So staggering, in fact, that later, after the dust settled, tech geniuses and mechanical engineering professors would hold panels at academic conferences to bandy theories about how he'd been able to actually do it. Every phone and device manufacturer scrambled their fail-safe operating system updates that they'd been preparing since Free Night for something like this, but by the time each user agreed to the mandatory updated terms of use, it was too late. Gossip and celebrity porn sites buckled under the weight of so much web traffic. Flocks of Cease and Desist letters took migratory wing. Kilroy's army of hacked smartphones lobbed millions of photos and sexting transcripts back and forth across the divide between public and private in the social equivalent of a full-scale nuclear exchange. No sex tape was too brazen, no dick-pic too ill-considered.

By mid-afternoon, lifehackers posted video tutorials suggesting masking tape over our cellphones' front- and back-facing cameras. Enterprising vendors offered redesigned

phone cases to render blind and deaf the lenses and microphones we all carried around with us in our pockets. A crop of ultra-secure messaging apps were rushed to market. Rapid news-cycle op-eds pondered if selfies were the new unprotected sex. Almost of an instant, hipsters materialized wearing antique steel-bodied SLR film cameras dangling from their necks on rawhide straps, and spoke in erstwhile detail of the relative benefits of chemical developers.

Most concerning (or exhilarating, depending on how you felt about it), was that Kilroy himself, or someone pretending to be him, was with us again. He was once more posting on his Passbook feed, and this was deeply embarrassing for the FBI, who still had someone they thought was Kilroy stashed in the downtown federal detention facility. You can bet hacktivists were already hard at work making their displeasure known. Before the week was out, they'd be doxxing the crap out of the arresting officers and investigators, and putting up open calls for the man's release read by people in Guy Fawkes masks who threw in their own additional demands straight out of central casting: briefcases full of money, chartered jets to non-extradition-treaty countries, the resignation of the mayor of Chicago, the re-release of *Appetite for Destruction* on cassette. Kilroy's near-total unpredictability set him apart from your garden-variety crowd-sourced internet anarchist, and this had the unintended effect of making the tactical-media backlash seem childish and disappointing at the time. But once in a while Kilroy himself would speak, and that was certainly something. His Passbook feed followers numbered in the hundreds of millions now.

I bet you think you can lay low until this is all over, don't you? Kilroy posted, one afternoon. *You've recalibrated your expectations and poured some liquor for the American Dream. You've found a job washing dishes or cleaning houses and it's not that bad, you think. It's not starving bad, it's not dying bad; it's not so bad that you can't hunker down, play the*

averages, and be ready to seize your one golden, last-of-the-species, Kid-R opportunity when it presents itself. You've been reading your Milton Friedman and your Wall Street Journal and you've convinced yourself that all of this accumulation by dispossession will sort itself out eventually. The New Normal isn't sustainable, and the tinker-hearted carrion-eaters who are siphoning up everything that has any value—commodities, real-estate, liens on the future, money itself—will eventually realize they can't go on indefinitely refusing to share it with the ordinary person; the prole, the serf, the dirtbag. But you insist you're enlightened. You've convinced yourself just to worry about you. Your responsibility to the world starts with your responsibility to yourself, ergo you are priority number one. If you're lucky, you don't have children, and you thank God you don't. You suspect time, if nothing else, might be on your side. Change will come, must come, and its inevitability is as comforting as the absence of your agency is discomfiting. It isn't you specifically that has to go out and make a better world happen. You've achieved an uneasy contentment, even self-congratulation, in being a savvy beneficiary of the desperation of others; a passive observer of history.

Like I said earlier, it was easy to feel like Kilroy despised me, even as I read his posts and felt like he was speaking directly to me. I suspect the fanaticism surrounding Kilroy had to do in part with his habit of keeping us all at arms' length. I wanted to believe he was right—that something better could be had on the other end of changing the way things were now. But when people started sending around invites for rallies and demonstrations and protests, I just played video games and taped a sticker over the camera on my cellphone.

. . .

My father and I wandered around the menswear store for about ten minutes before anyone came up and offered to help us try things on. The entire experience was mortifying to me, and only intensified once I saw the pricetags on even the cheapest, tackiest suits.

The tailor-salesman, who looked like he couldn't have been a day under eighty, shuffled up with an old-timey cloth measuring tape dangling from his shoulders and he peered at us through enormous bifocals.

"What can I bring you to look at?" He said, to my father. He ignored my presence completely. That I might need a suit seemed unthinkable to everyone except my father.

"It's actually for my son here," Dad said.

The old groom peered at me for a moment before bobbing his head. "I see. And what's your shirt size, young man?"

"Extra Large," I said.

The old man's mouth pursed together tightly. "Put your arms out like this."

As the tailor measured my armpits and shoulders and crotch like a series of isosceles triangles, I watched Dad pick out accessories. A thin black belt, two pair of individually-packaged socks, two white collared shirts, two ties, and a pair of impossibly narrow dress shoes that were polished to a high shine. I had no idea how much any of this cost, but I suspected it wasn't nothing.

"Do you always sweat like this?" The old man asked.

"Sometimes," I said.

"He'll need a coupla whiteys, too," the tailor shouted to Dad.

Dad stopped at a table full of undershirts. “Let’s start with that navy two-button,” he suggested, indicating to the older man a bluish-black suit that I found difficult to distinguish from any other of the hundreds of bluish-black suits around us.

“Very good.”

And it *was* very good, up close. The material it was made of seemed to be some variety of cotton, but it moved more comfortably around my body and over the T-shirt I wore than any jacket I’d ever owned. It had a very Dad flavor, which is to say it telegraphed rather than hid its own spendy aura.

“Come this way for me,” the tailor said. He indicated a large changing room that resembled a panoptic temple of floor-length mirrors. He’d rolled up the legs of the suit pants and now he sat on a stool behind me trying to figure out how long they should be.

“Stand up straight.”

When I’d ducked sheepishly into the changing room in my cargo shorts and T-shirt, I’d sneaked a look at the pricetag and it had taken my breath away. I considered just retreating from the changing room and telling Dad I couldn’t go through with it, but he’d made the effort to come out here with me, and I didn’t want to disappoint him. I’d then jammed my feet into a pair of sample shoes that were my shoe size but were in absolutely no way my foot size, and I remembered the suit’s price just as the man took out a pair of scissors and made as if to alter them right then on the spot.

“W-whoa, hang on, hang on. You should know that I can’t afford this suit.”

“Pardon me?” the tailor said.

“This thing is like a thousand dollars, and I’ll need all the accessories too, there’s just no way. I make sandwiches at the Guilty Grinder for a living, and I’ve got a hundred and

eighty grand in school loans I need to service every month for the rest of my life." I'd never said the word *service* out loud before when referring to my loans. It sounded deeply whorish.

"I can't afford this."

The old man eyed me for a moment, nodded, and went out of the dressing room to talk to my dad.

I had a bladder-warming flash-forward then, of how humiliating it would be for Dad to retreat from the store with me empty-handed, a shame crystalline and spectacular in its capaciousness, dished up not just to myself, which would have been bearable, but also to the guy whose roof I was once more living under. And then I had another thought: what would it feel like to get that impossibly expensive suit home in its own carry-bag and hang it by itself in Chelsea's old closet, alone on a hanger in the dark, reminding me like a supernatural object in an Edgar Allen Poe story of the economic success I had failed to achieve? Despite its obvious quality, I wasn't at all certain I even wanted this suit.

Dad frowned a little at the old tailor's question, and the two seemed to exchange confidences known only to the sort of men who could spend a thousand dollars on a single piece of clothing. The older man was soon satisfied.

"It's all taken care of, young man," he said, and resumed his ritual of pinning, measuring, and cutting as if nothing could be more ordinary.

. . .

I decided quit my job at the Grinder after Sexurday, and when I say "quit" I mean I just stopped showing up at work and didn't answer the phone messages that Ben and eventually

Gus left on my phone. I tried not to be a confrontational guy in general, but even after the most unambiguous *delete this file?* confirmation ever, I still couldn't unsee the picture of Gus and Pepper. I received my final paycheck, just a day or two's wages, in a hand-written envelope with no note, and that was that. I deposited it and bought a new pillow for the bed to replace the one that still smelled like Chelsea's leave-in conditioner.

Mercifully, I suppose, I no longer needed to work directly across the hall from your mother, but don't for a moment imagine I was off the hook. One of the few things that had successfully made its escape from Sara's apartment with me that day was my computer, and I still logged into my *Warlance Unchained* account to play YaskY@ now and then. Sara and the rest of the Steely Aardvarks had blessedly banned my username outright, so I couldn't see or interact with Anaphlan or my old guild at all in-game. But pretty frequently I'd log in and see "D0ktorP is Online" at the bottom of my screen. She never said hello, nor did I see her flying or riding around on something huge and terrifying, but her name floated there, sometimes coming or going, but more often just there, out there in the Overworld somewhere, in some region of the game too dangerous for me to travel to.

Half a dozen times I clicked on her username, meaning to say *hello* or *hey* or even *you cut my heart out, you lying whore*, but I never did. The name blinked on, and then off again, and sometimes just stayed there. With no Blackbird to work on, I spent more time playing the game than was probably good for me.

For someone who didn't live during that time, it's hard to describe a world so full of screens and games and connectivity; how completely the airborne information surrounded us, like the nitrogen you never remember makes up four-fifths of the air you breathe until you read it in a book and think, *huh*. You could almost tell a person's fortune purely by the

games they played. Someone settling in for an immersive, 200-hour-long, single-player platformer wasn't out to impress anyone. Why play such a time-consuming game if there were no other players' noses to rub epic loot in, or any way to make others bow down to your l33t PvP skills? Something about the atmospheric loneliness of those indifferent, one-player digital worlds populated by automata called to a certain type of player. Sandbox-style, crafting-heavy games and solitaire-puzzlers satisfied players who wanted to taste the efficiency and order that they couldn't quite bring to their own lives. Here the wood and stone gathered to build squared-off houses or the playing cards stacked Ace-to-King were images of cleanliness, the next best thing to godliness. VR and AR overlay games promised to restore the possibility of surprise to a suffocatingly actuarial world. Sure, your property taxes were always going to increase by a regression-function of the mean annual cost-of-living pay increase of your area code, but *holy shit there's a Charizard on my fouton!*

Warlance was called a "massively-multiplayer online roleplaying game," but I always preferred calling them "persistent world" games. In *Warlance*, the imaginary game-space existed all day, every day, whether I was playing it or not. When I was there, I wasn't here. When I was here, I couldn't wait to get back there. C.S. Lewis would've approved. And what does that say about me? One of these worlds was a place full of people working toward common goals with a shared narrative, tied to a set of predictable rules and economics of time, effort, and value. The other was reality, which, however persistent, could boast none of these things.

When I was logged into *Warlance*, I was nothing special as power-gamers went, and certainly not equipped with the gear and experience of someone like your mother, but that wasn't really the point. *Warlance*, by virtue of simply *working*, felt like a better world than

the one we woke up in every day. Whether or not all my enemy's base eventually belonged to me, I played for a taste of a world where action led to reaction, risk to reward, effort to eventual triumph.

Game designers call this sort of feedback from the world its "ludic" function. The real world back then, for people like your mom and me, didn't have a ludic function. Reality handled like a broken video game, where experimentation led to failure, risk led to failure, and effort, especially, led to failure. Games seemed preferable to reality, though they had us chasing things that weren't there, to obtain other things that weren't real, and show them to people we didn't really know.

. . .

In the mornings in Schaumburg, the sun doesn't really come up. The albedo dazzle barrels in sideways at you, glaring through your bedroom or your living room or your sun visor or around the edges of your sunglasses and sizzles right into that part of your retinas where the headache receptors are. Even with an ocean of fresh water only fifteen miles away, you're reminded in the mornings, as no other time in the day, how profoundly flat and land-locked the Midwest is.

Dad shook me awake early one such morning and said, "Get your suit on. You're going in with me today."

This was weirdly short notice, even for Dad, but I was too groggy to argue, so I mumbled, "Yeah let me grab a quick shower." As I stood in the bathroom with my toothbrush hanging out of my mouth, I realized that I was about to go to work for the first time in weeks.

I managed to give myself a decent shave, and I made sure to put a little bit of gel on my hair to hold it in place. It'd been a while since my last haircut. I put on the suit pants and my undershirt and I was about to put on my button-down when Dad poked his head in.

“No, leave the pants off for now. Just do the shirt and socks and come down for food.” He himself was wearing just his underwear, undershirt, and socks, so this didn't seem as odd in the moment as it does now on the page while I retell it to you. I followed him down and discovered that he'd cooked an enormous breakfast of fried eggs, wheat toast, bacon, hash browns, coffee, and orange juice.

“Holy shit,” I said. “That's more food than I eat in an entire day.”

“Sit,” he said. “We may not get a chance to eat lunch, so you don't want to be hungry all afternoon.”

I sat and we ate, and it became immediately apparent why Dad insisted I wait on the pants. Dad was no slouch behind the stove, but literally every item of food on this table threatened to leave a greasy, colored stain on some part of my suit if it errantly escaped my fork or burbled around the lip of my glass. I decided that I wouldn't risk lunch even if we did have time. Lesson number one of Dad's work life: there was working, and there was eating, but those two things didn't happen at the same time. Once we were finished, we cleaned up the table hastily and finished dressing, this time brushing teeth, checking the knots of ties, brushing lint off of jacket cuffs. We got into the car and Dad turned on the stereo. Joey Ramone tore into “Pinhead.”

“Sometimes, when I'm driving in, I like to pretend that I'm a WWF wrestler and this is my entrance theme,” Dad explained, with just a hint of a grin.

“You'll get no argument from me.” I said, and I meant it.

11.

Math so often defeats us. Erno Rubik understood this. The 3x3x3 cube that swivels around its center has 43 quintillion possible configurations. This is an unimaginably huge number. There are over a hundred million combinations of the cube for every star in the Milky Way galaxy and over a million combinations for every cell in your body. More, in fact, than the number of individual hairs on the bodies of every human who has ever lived. There are five hundred and seventy five configurations of Rubik's Cube for every leaf on every tree in the entire world. Only one—imagine it, one—of these 43 quintillion configurations is "correct." Once someone scrambles the cube, there is simply no way to accidentally solve it for that one, perfect configuration. There aren't enough seconds, or even hundredths of a second, in a human life to solve it by accident. We know, of course, that the cube can be solved. The one perfect configuration in all those endless infinite quintillions can be reached. It just requires mastering a series of mathematical computations on an atypically steep learning curve, which toymakers in the 1980s evidently thought translated to "fun for young and old." This math makes solving the cube seem supernatural if you haven't yet done it yourself. Here's the part that will really blow your mind, though: once you've broken the pattern of the cube, you can start with any of those 43 quintillion configurations, any leaf on any tree, any hair on any person's body, any star in the sky, and by applying a mathematical transformation in the form of twisting the position of the cube, you can arrive at that one, perfect configuration every single time. With an infallible pattern like that you could land a rocket from any planet in the observable universe on the front lawn of Cinderella's Castle at Disney World. You could use any triangle ever drawn by a human hand to reach the one perfect triangle. Nothing could remain obscure from the wielder of such a pattern, no lost city of gold or sunken mythical island, no soul mate or prophet, no person unlike any other who had ever lived, and unlike any since. By overcoming such titanic improbabilities, we might unlock the very secrets of existence and hold them in our hand, like a toy. It is the pattern, not the cube, that can collapse the insurmountable real we cower before, and point the way to perfection. No configuration of the cube is ever more than twenty transformation-equations—twenty moves—away from that one perfect configuration. They call this the "God number."

Posted by user KILROY, 3:33 p.m.

Your Grandpa Jonah, it turns out, managed the entire transportation department in his district office on the northwest side of the city. I'd always understood him vaguely as an administrator, the sort of title my high school teachers and college professors uttered

through clenched jaws, but he actually had quite a lot on his hands. His office managed the district's buses and drivers, specialty-access handicap vehicles, the school's small fleet lot and motor pool, parking assignment and enforcement, safety officers that handled the crosswalks in the mornings—all of it, maybe a hundred people in total, managed by just Dad and his junior director Mallory, who I had the weirdest feeling I'd met before somewhere.

"Mr. Simmons?" Mallory said.

Dad and I both looked up. She smiled at me.

"The other Mr. Simmons. Ameila at the front desk just texted me; the SafeTech rep is here."

"Ah, thank you," Dad said. I'd been sharing Dad's desk like it was Bring Your Third Grader To Work Day, except I was twenty-three and I'd been coming in with him for a week. As I was getting to know the office, I got a lot of room-temperature smiles and one-pump handshakes from men my dad's age. Mallory was a little younger than most of his co-workers. Older than me, maybe, but not by much. An oddity. She and I were labeling HR agenda packets for the annual staff retreat that was happening in two weeks.

"I'll be back," Dad said. He looked in the mirror behind his closet door to straighten his tie. One of Dad's jobs was to meet, have lunch with, listen to and, as politely as possible, rebuff representatives of about a million small businesses and startups that wanted to land the school district as a client.

"You married, Mallory?"

She winced a bit at our envelopes.

"Sorry," I said. "Don't answer that."

"No, it's okay," Mallory said, still focused mostly on her labeling. "I was in graduate school for a long time to be able to get this job, and I only ever found the wrong guys."

"Same here," I said. "When I wasn't busy being the wrong guy." I figured a subject change was in order. "How is it working for my dad? Is he a dick?" I whispered.

This time she looked genuinely puzzled.

Ugh, I thought. The reason they stopped after War, Famine, Pestilence, and Death is because the fifth horseman of the apocalypse was Misread Social Cues.

"Nah, Jonah's great." She took the question at face value, and with a tired but easy smile. "Didn't you used to work at the Guilty Grinder?"

"Mmm hmm," I said. "Used to, I mean." Where the hell had I seen her before? At the mall?

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"I have the strangest feeling," I admitted.

"You guys gave me a free sandwich a few months ago, right after Kilroy pulled Free Night."

Of *course*. The woman with the wool jacket. I hadn't recognized her without her glasses and the headband thing she'd had on.

"I knew it!" I said, smiling. She smiled too. "I totally remember that! I couldn't place you for the longest time, but you're right; I used to be a sandwich artist there."

"Moving up in the world?" she asked, indicating me sitting at my dad's desk.

"There is no down from there, except now I'm living with my parents," I said. I shook my head sadly.

"No shame in a little free rent. You guys made good sandwiches. I usually can't afford to go out for lunch; I was just downtown that day getting my car fixed."

"Come on, they must pay okay here? No?"

She frowned.

"Oh, Jesus. I'm so stupid. *Please* don't answer that one."

She giggled. "It's no problem. Yes, they pay fine here, but I took my car in for an oil change this winter and it needed \$2400 worth of repairs. I've been playing catch-up all year."

"Ouch," I said, miming a bullet to my heart.

"Your dad actually authorized a pay advance for me when it happened or I'd have lost this job. The bus route from my house to get here takes three and a half hours."

"Good old CTA," I said. This was a new take on your grandfather for me; I hadn't ever thought of Jonah Simmons as particularly generous. Or, you know, whatsoever generous. "Well look, I may be a basement-squatting freeloader, but I can still make a sandwich and life is far too short for shitty lunches." I took out my own bag and indicated it. "What kind do you like, I'll make an extra one for you tomorrow."

"No, that's okay," she said, waving me off. No woman ever looked less sincere.

"Seriously. Italian? Chicken and avocado?" I mentally indexed the ingredients in Dad and Dana's fridge, "...chicken and avocado?"

She laughed. "Chicken and avocado sounds great, and thank you. You absolutely do not have to do that, though. You're not even on the payroll yet, are you?"

"No," I said, "but I hear this place has been searching for a new Junior Intern Assistant to the Apprentice Fartcatcher and I'd like to thank you for taking a moment to review credentials that I believe make me an attractive candidate for your position."

. . .

Soon after, to my astonishment, and despite the learning curve involved with figuring out how office professionals are supposed to behave, I did actually start getting a paycheck. There was no “HR onboarding” or “site instruction” or “probationary period” or any of that crap. One of the administrators a few doors down from my dad peeked his head in one day and said, “is this him?” My dad introduced me to Eliot, my new supervisor who insisted I must never, ever call him that. He drove a motorcycle and wore sweater vests that always smelled faintly of incense. Eliot walked me down to a massive file room full of paper records and set me to scanning them, one by one, into a terminal set up on an elementary school desk and miniature chair. Once Eliot got me settled in, I snapped a pic and sent it to Chelsea.

Chelsea: OMG the analog. Good luck with th@.

Wyatt: Right?

Chelsea: *Adorable*. Please tell me there are f1oppy discs.

Wyatt: None as yet, but I just got here.

Chelsea: [snort.wav]

Wyatt: What?

Chelsea: Do you feel like, *s0* grown up in that little chair? In your suit?

Wyatt: We can’t all watch other people’s commercials for a living.

Chelsea: Well, n0t all at once, anyway.

A dizzying assortment of documents needed to be archived: financial statements, travel vouchers, repair receipts, HR records, even the odd complaint or legal file. I scanned everything as efficiently as I could, but this room was a cavern and it would’ve taken me

years to finish it all. It was a little like being paid to slowly develop OCD. I wondered how many down-on-their-luck people had been given this job already, and scanned documents until they either found something better or died of old age.

Pretty soon I knew where everything was, and even when a record hadn't been scanned yet, I could tell a co-worker or administrator approximately where to look. Their gratefulness was apparent, and before long Mallory wasn't the only person who would talk to me in the break room where I was still very much trying to protect my suit jacket from falling forkfuls of food. Dad and I drove to work every morning together and I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent so much time with him. It felt decidedly grown-up, excepting the times when I'd come home and Dana would kiss Dad and ask what he wanted to eat for dinner. I'd lived away from home long enough that it was hard not to feel like an extended guest there now. I promised myself I'd follow up my minor job victory by staying off of Passbook as much as possible, but it wasn't that simple. There were people who I only ever interacted with on there, your Aunt Chelsea for one and your Great Grandma Chloe for another, and turning it off was like turning *them* off.

Kilroy wasn't making it easy for us, either. Whenever some major theory about him emerged, or he posted another one of his rants, or some unwise puffed-up authority figure responded publicly, the social media fallout would balloon into internet-paralyzing non-dialogue. This happened over and over until it was a cycle all its own; like a giant self-gratifying square-dance where someone called out the technique of the week and then everyone, thousands of your friends and acquaintances, insisted they were connoisseurs, nay, *scholars*, of the Loop-the-Loop. They spent the subsequent 72 hours or so in a scrum of edification, demonstrating their rhetorical expertise to you in the form of trite memes,

factually-inaccurate infographics, re-posts of commentary from well-written but clearly partisan editorials, or outcries for the feverish intensity of “friends” shouting past each other to just stop, already, *stop*. In the process, all of this proved and re-proved something profoundly awful about democracy: that all opinions are equal, that some opinions are more equal than others, and that all opinions are more or less equally repugnant. Unless you were a devotee of the Backhanded Stranger, that is; in which case it was your lucky week.

One such instance concerned the ongoing plight of Emmanuel Nussbaum, known by name only recently as the man the FBI arrested and detained without trial under suspicion of being Kilroy. The Passbook opinion-lynchmob began to turn its attention on the authorities after Sexurday. The embarrassment only intensified when in-person flashmob protestors chose a midday press conference to pelt the Bureau press secretary with a fusillade of lifelike, extruded-silicone penises. As ever, the powers-that-were decided to double down on their mistakes and Roy Chapman, chief prosecutor for the Justice Department, announced that they would not release their Kilroy suspect even in the seemingly incontrovertible wake of Sexurday. Passbook became unusable for weeks.

FUK U FBI, users lashed out, in comment sections of unrelated posts and feeds. Objections, conduct bans, threats, and finally abject calls for civil conduct were shouted down by inarticulate stoners, civil liberty sloganeers, robo-petitioners, armchair legal historians, Rugged Internet Tough Guys, and even a few fringier species of unsettling marginalia:

Man, they're lying. That old dude ain't Kirloy.

Learn to spell, dumbass; it's KILROY, not KIRLOY.

This is exactly what happened in 1924 when [Mussolini had Giacomo Matteotti kidnapped and stabbed to death]. How does it feel to play Fascism's Greatest Hits, you swine?

I Know Where You Live Chapman Imma Come Fuck That Ass Not Kidding.

There was an infographic, reposted hundreds of thousands of times, showing famous prisoners of conscience throughout the years; Emma Goldman, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, a photograph of Denzel Washington from *Training Day* that was supposed to be Rubin Carter, and a question mark over a silhouette for Kilroy. A plugin was released allowing Passbook users to superimpose prison bars over their profile picture in solidarity with Nussbaum, and keep them there until he was released. Another meme, the classic *Blade Runner* poster, sported Roy Chapman's face crudely photoshopped onto Deckard's head and the revised tagline *In a Future With No Sixth Amendment...*

And of course many, many people posted simply: I'M KILROY.

. . .

[User WYATT SIMMONS has attached a financial instrument, [click to redeem](#)]

Chelsea: What fresh bull\$hit is this?

Wyatt: I got my first paycheck today, oh ye of little faith. Paying you back.

Chelsea: For real? [[George Michael-Faith.mp3](#)]

Wyatt: What?

Chelsea: Nothing, I just... *That's* new. And, you know, you didn't have to do that.

Wyatt: Sure I did. What kind of bunghole takes money from his little sister and doesn't pay it back?

Chelsea: You said it, I didn't.

Wyatt: How've you been? How's Nana?

Nana: I'm fine, sweetheart, how are you?

Wyatt: Just making good on a loan. I haven't had full week's paycheck, like, ever.

Mom: I'm fine, too; not that you asked.

Wyatt: Hi Mom.

Mom: Well hello, Wyatt! Long time null see!

Wyatt: All right, time to go.

Chelsea: Whaaat?

Nana: Why don't you ever talk to her?

Mom: Which U.S. Congressman are you Secretly Most Like? [[Take the Quiz](#)].

Wyatt: That's why.

Nana: Well I'm happy for you. You should get yourself something nice to celebrate.

Chelsea: Yeah, like go see the Dirtroad Hamsters concert and tape your phone to your forehead so I can watch.

Nana: ...or, you know, something at all sensible.

Chelsea: The man's gotta live a little, Nana.

Wyatt: I don't know. It feels weird to spend money on myself. I just wanted to settle up. Baby steps.

Mom: Aww, I like that you two are close.

Chelsea: Well if you're not going to see Dirtroad, I'm going to take this cash and rent a Canny Valley Girl and go.

Wyatt: A haptic mannequin?

Chelsea: What?

Wyatt: Nothing. You know what: do it. That's a great idea.

Chelsea: No, say what you were going to say.

Wyatt: It just seems like a lot of money to drop all at once, is all.

Chelsea: Says you, meatbag. What kind of price tag can I put on feeling like I'm in a body again?

Wyatt: Help me out here, Nana.

Nana: I tried it once. It was okay, but weird. The wireless ones are supposedly better, but who can afford that? I could almost buy a driverless car and just Bluetooth myself into the stereo.

Wyatt: Well, if either of you do start Pinocchio-ing around, don't sneak up on me; those things creep me out.

Chelsea: *Go to a concert or \$omething.* Have some fun.

Wyatt: All right, no promises.

. . .

It turns out I did buy something for myself with my first paycheck from the district, though as I'd told your Aunt Chelsea, I felt weird about it. It had a low delivery weight, under a kilogram, and instead of being jammed and manhandled in between the front and screen doors by our postal carrier Darlene, I got a text after dinner that a parcel drone would be

arriving momentarily. I excused myself and complimented Dana again on her superb baked spinach pasta, and I stepped out to wait on the front porch steps.

Schaumburg was an okay town, I guess. It wasn't as wall-to-wall stuck-up as the North Shore, or as boozy and honky-tonk as the western exurbs. There were a good mixture of restaurants, shopping centers, parks, and downtown areas. It was too far from Chicago proper to be convenient for young adults, but older, more successful people raised children here if they could, and held onto their homes for decades. I felt a little self-conscious sitting there in front of my Dad's house like that. No one my age who wasn't spectacularly wealthy lived in this zip code except insolvent scrubs like me who were sponging off of their parents.

Across from Dad's was a small shopping plaza called The Villa. It had a coffee hole, a high-end deli-grocer, a gourmet taqueria, and a cordwainer. German-made sport sedans slid in and out of its parking lot like blobs of mercury and carbon-fiber, divulging impeccably dressed tweenaged middle-school girls, each greatly attentive to the behavior of her companions. They raided the gelato bar and seethed with disappointment if they were denied a frappuchino by their conventionally-pretty yet somehow always brittle-eyed moms.

My phone buzzed. I clicked the link inside a text message marked DELIVERY and the screen displayed a drone's-eye view of my neighborhood as the claw-equipped quad-copter descended into our subdivision, over The Villa, and toward our front lawn. I watched the curious, vertiginous drop through the belly-mounted camera. When I spotted myself, I looked up and the orange-and-yellow drone alighted on the sidewalk on rubber-tipped feet. It dropped the small box there with a gentle cardboard *thuk*. I clicked the on-screen button for RECEIVED, and the drone spun up and flew away.

The package was only maybe six inches on a side, and two or three inches deep, but I'd spent a heady amount of my first paycheck on it. I took it to the porch steps and sat back down, unboxing it as I went. Like all expensive gadgetry, my new Spexx (a more affordable cousin to GameFrames) were ready to use right out of the box. My phone paired with them and I fired up *Sylvanna*, a pre-loaded AR demo app that erased all of the man-made objects in view and returned my surroundings to the way they looked before human beings had settled there. Instead of sitting on steps, I squatted on a low rock in the middle of an endless meadow. The Villa dissolved into a section of nearby woods with the crease of a tiny creek meandering through the former parking lot. The Spexx adjusted the ambient light by dimming the contrast of the sunset between the invisible buildings and softening them into the gauzy tangerine skylights of prehistory. I could still hear the incongruous engines of cars, and the opening and closing of doors, but if I'd had noise-cancelers the illusion would've been complete. I made a mental note to add a pair to my wish list for next month's paycheck.

Just to try it out, I put in my regular cheapie earbuds and switched apps to *LD 50/30*. Like everyone my age, I'd grown up steeped in apocalyptica: movies, television shows, and especially video games. We ate that shit up. After living long enough in a world that felt so futureless, I guess it made sense that end-of-the-world stories spoke to something impatient inside us. I put in my earbuds to get the full effect, and an ominous soundtrack accompanied the introductory sequence. The game blacked out my side of the lenses and captioned itself with a single, pregnant word:

SOON.

Schaumburg faded back into existence, and nothing seemed different for thirty or forty seconds. I looked around, wondering if the app had frozen.

In the distance I could hear an air-raid siren wail. FIND COVER, a red LED readout at the bottom of my vision warned. The moms and children and distracted-looking fathers at the gelato bar in the Villa seemed unconcerned, but the game rendered new people over and around them, algorithmic Schaumburgians who seemed panicked and verging on terror. The sirens grew louder.

WARNING: FIND COVER, flashed on the inside of my lenses. A disheveled man with the phrase THE END IS NEAR scrawled on a mortarboard sign tore open his button-down Oxford and knelt in the middle of the street at the edge of our front walkway. It was textbook Hollywood stock characters and 3D disaster porn all the way. The air-raid alarm rose to a crescendo and then fell silent. I didn't move. I watched the trees in planters along the parking lot at the Villa to see how good the render would be. You could always tell how well made a game was by how it dealt with trees.

My lenses flashed pure white for an instant, and I flinched, even though I knew it was coming. A dazzling airburst in the distance over the Villa Booterie bled uranium yellow into the sky, and the blast-rumble pressed into my earphones as a wall of dust and broken glass and flying limbs and atomic destruction bore down on me and blew uptown Schaumburg and Dad's house and me and everything else away. The Spexx went full-black and the simulation went silent. Two words in bone white flashed in front of my eyes.

THE END?

Around the imperfect sound isolation of my cheap earbuds, I could hear the normal street-noisiness of life going on as usual. Someone's Yorkie was barking.

I took the Spexx off, and they sensed that the game was no longer being played, so they reverted to regular transparent lenses. In the bottom right corner a notification screen

displayed my email and recent Passbook posts I might find of interest, at least according to Passbook's proprietary attention-determination mixdown matrices. I folded the Spexx up and put them in their manufacturer-supplied microfiber zipcase.

The sun was almost down and in the clouds of the ordinary sunset I could see the moonrise, pale blue and cheerful in this landlocked, one-man anti-utopia. I witnessed my own personal failure in something as simple as the pure-white halogen low-beams of the BMW SUVs in the adjacent parking lot. Modest new job or no, snazzy new gizmo notwithstanding, I felt in my marrow that I would always be a regular, amber-headlight guy, at best.

I sighed. I missed your mother.

12.

A TRAVEL ADVISORY is in effect today until 5:00 p.m. in Cook County. Due to protests and widespread demonstrations taking place in neighborhoods near the Loop and the northern end of the Museum Campus, travel into downtown Chicago has become congested and potentially unsafe for motorists. All travelers are strongly urged to delay or cancel plans this evening until police and transit authority officials are able to determine that unnecessary travel presents no ongoing hazard, and re-open expressway exits and two-way traffic.

Emergency Broadcast System, 4:45 p.m.

“Look at this idiot,” Dad said. He gave the offender a double beep of his horn and got a glance of mirrored confusion in return. The Buick in front of us on Lake Shore drive had a vanity license plate that read KILROY.

Chicago never managed to be a great-looking city, even in the imagination of Daniel Burnham, the nineteenth century architect whose White City exhibit for the 1893 World’s Fair set the tone for most of downtown at the lakefront: off-gray edifices with doric columns in their lobbies and gilded doorways with heavy leaded glass panes at the street level. It was the sort of city that was built to look old when it was new, and ancient when it was old. That was the idea, in any case; how it really looked was just elaborately worn-out. Modernism poisoned the skyline and surface streets of Chicago, squaring off charming corners with a cheerless sobriety, and updating the dwarfing effect of metropolitan claustrophobia with mathematical Brutalist sterility. It was like living in a dental-instrument tray.

Our car slalomed through streets that felt grasping and too close, almost subterranean beneath the elevated rail lines. At ground-level, the intersections were inhospitable to car and pedestrian alike, a never-ending procession of steel beetles always a

breath beneath full stampede. At regular intervals, a bloated bus or heart-stopping bike courier weaved through for good measure.

All it took to become trapped in our particular metal shell by curbs, medians, and fenders was for one of the enormous CTA busses to make a ponderous left-hand turn in a lane with no green arrow, for a careless commuter to have more concern for their bagel than the proximity of their bumpers or, as today, to accidentally wander into a protest parade.

LET HIM GO! One sign demanded. Beneath it was a young Asian woman with shiny black hair and the scarring variety of facial acne. Behind her was a kid with no shirt on a fixed-gear bicycle. Across his chest, in Sharpie, was scrawled I'M KILROY. The R was smeared by the strap of his green army surplus shoulder bag.

Manny Nussbaum was being held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center half a block away—a dreadful triangular monstrosity that was, at a glance, the hybridization of both Burnham's Flatiron Building in New York City, and a pornographic Modernist mailbox, the letter slot of which revealed rooftop basketball courts limned with razor wire. It was designed in 1971 by a degenerate alcoholic from Evanston named Harry Weese, and joined any number of unfortunate architectural crimes that marred what might otherwise have been a respectably attractive lakeside city.

The MCC stood among an unlikely collection of other buildings sandwiched between LaSalle Street and Congress Parkway: DePaul University's Jackson Street campus, the Harold Washington Library, and the local Immigration and Customs Enforcement office. Chicago's Buckingham Fountain, made famous in the intro sequence to the TV show *Married With Children*, peeked out of its garden park at the end of the street.

Dad and I were on our way to a conference at the Hilton Chicago and we'd driven straight into the protest parade for Nussbaum's release. Approximately half of the paraders were on bicycles, and most carried some sort of signage either in their hands or on their bodies. A woman with pixie-cut graying hair and a pale pink hoodie sweatshirt had KILROY stenciled on her forehead in what appeared to be Henna tattoo ink. She was chanting along with the others, though Dad and I couldn't tell what they were shouting.

Say what you will about the Chicago police, but when you saw them arrayed in full riot gear in long lines, they did give off an intimidating impression. Beneath layers of padding and Kevlar and pouches of extra ammunition and pepper spray, under tinted full-face visors and matte black metallic helmets, behind tall plexiglass shields, stood what didn't in that moment feel like a collection of ordinary people. They *were*, ordinary, of course: some were legitimate community men, several might even have styled themselves heroic, one or two were probably sociopaths. Many of these men quietly wished they'd have gone further in school and most would've fallen somewhere on the spectrum of referring to suspects from certain neighborhoods by the radio code-word *shitbags* because racial slurs were one of the few transgressions that might even in those days have gotten them fired. Many had more responsibility than any one person should have, and a few were tender at heart. Almost all had been injured on the job at some point, and wondered if the risk was worth the salary the City begrudged them for it. Alternatives were not plentiful. To the average Chicago police officer, Upton Sinclair's suggestion from *The Jungle* still prevailed: it was a free country, and any man (or woman) who didn't care to do the work that was asked of them was perfectly free to wander off into the cold and starve, and to take their family along with them.

Which isn't to say that I'm okay with what happened that afternoon, but when you watch the revisionist accounts on TV, you'll either get the version where the protesters were a bunch of balaclava-wearing, Molotov-cocktail flinging anarchists who only got what was coming to them, or the version where the Chicago police were essentially the SS reincarnate. Neither of these is true, and I'm confident that I raised you well enough to see through oversimplified arguments like that. What *was* true was that there was a moment of horror, and before that a moment of fear, and before that a moment of excitement, and before that a moment of apprehension, and that's about where things stood when Dad and I came to a standstill in the protest route.

Someone smacked the roof of our Subaru with an open hand and it sounded loud inside the car. Dad looked over his left shoulder as if he expected to see a traffic cop telling him that our car was in the way and to move along. Instead it was a bearded man of about thirty, fat and perched precariously atop a tiny bicycle seat, wearing a bright red T-shirt and hammering our car to the rhythm of the crowd's ragged chant.

Leh hih oh! Leh hih oh!

The riot line was solid and thickening as more police arrived. Lights flashed from strategic points at nearby intersections to ensure that the protestors wouldn't break off down Van Buren and flank the police at the Correctional Center's ground level. Heavy concrete barriers arrived in flatbed trucks. Rolls of orange plastic roadwork chicken wire arrived and were strung across streets from signal to signal pole, bolstered by blue and white sawhorse barriers.

Dad rolled his window down. *Let him go!* the crowd screamed, as the bearded man continued to slap our car.

“Hey! Knock if off!”

“Fuck you!” the man yelled, smiling through his thick beard.

I reached for the door handle but dad hit the lock button and rolled his window back up. “Not a good idea. Stay put.” He put the car in reverse, which signaled white taillights to the car behind him to do the same, but after a minute and a half the cars behind had not budged. We weren’t going anywhere.

Someone wearing a surplus yellow hazmat suit stood on top of the Hyundai Sonata in the lane next to us and pulled back her face guard. It was a curly-haired college-age girl with glasses and a skin tone suggestive of the Mediterranean. She put a bullhorn to her lips.

“Attention Chicago police, this building is the property of the taxpayers of the United States of America, and an innocent man is being unconstitutionally held for crimes he is proven not to have committed. We intend to enter this building and take him home.”

TAKE HIM HOME! The crowd resumed chanting, bolder now, and the sound rapidly dissolved into angry syllables. *TAKE HIM HOME! TAE HIH HO!* The police stood impassive, gripping the handles of their riot shields more firmly.

“We are assembled lawfully under the protection of the United States Constitution and any attempt to endanger our physical safety will be documented by video and used to prosecute you in a court of law.”

At this, the parade line began to move forward. Canisters of gray smoke trailed through the air into the crowd, which people dodged and then ran from when they got their first whiff. Our windows were up but I could smell something like hot metal. I flicked the air vents of the car closed and turned off the fan.

“Can we get out of here?” I asked, genuinely nervous for the first time.

“Not yet,” Dad said. His face was set in a grimace of impassivity. For the second time in as many minutes I realized that my dad, somehow, had seen this before. He kept his left hand on the wheel and leaned right and backward to clear his blind spot. Forward wouldn’t work, he’d be driving straight *into* the cordon.

Something harder than a slap hit the car. The bearded cyclist had fallen hard sideways, bouncing his head off of the quarter panel.

“Shit, where is he?” Dad asked. “Is he clear of the wheel?”

“I can’t see.”

The girl in the hazmat suit was still on top of the Hyundai, even though it was backing up as well. She squatted and shouted into the bullhorn “Hold your ground! Hold your ground!” to the rhythm of the crowd chant, before frantically pulling on her mask and goggles and jumping down.

The entire right side of our car where the bearded cyclist had been was engulfed in acrid smoke. I could smell the hot metal again, even with the windows closed. My eyes ran and my vision blurred. Out of the haze stepped masked police like insectoid samurai, carrying heavy riot batons in front of them like spears. One of them banged on the side of Dad’s car with his baton, three sharp raps. It felt hard enough to have taken the paint off the car door, but if he’d cracked the window instead, we’d be breathing smoke.

“*Move this vehicle right fucking now—*” it sounded like the cop said, and then from his right, across the hood of our car, came a line of college kids with arms locked wearing a hodgepodge of gas masks, bicycle helmets, and rain ponchos. One kid had a full-sized toddler diaper taped to his face and wore a pair of Speedo swim goggles.

“Hold the line!” they chanted, muffled beneath masks and scarves.

The cop forgot about us for the moment and took out a tear gas sprayer that looked (except for the purple color of the canister) like a fire extinguisher. He sprayed a heavy cloud of it at the protestors and they instinctually ducked their faces down to avoid the chemical. A few fell immediately, clutching whatever parts of their faces weren't well-covered enough.

The chanting gave way to a violent chain of sound. No one was shouting now. All I could hear was the muffled hiss of the handheld sprayer-canisters and the screaming of the kids my own age and even younger who had overestimated their resolve.

"Dad?" I said.

"I can't see. Put your shirt over your face."

I did this and Dad, incredibly, opened the door. He swung out far enough to confirm that the path behind us was clear, and he was coughing before he even got his face back into the car. Drool and snot ran down his nose and he blinked through eyes that wanted badly to squint closed.

"Hang on." He took his foot off the brake gently and we rolled backward. I kept expecting to hit a car or something else in the smoke behind us, but it never came. A kid on a bicycle flashed past within a foot of us and banged a fist on our car in anger.

"Keep going," I said, "I think we're clear."

The smoke in front of us flashed red and blue in doublets. Red red, blue blue, red red, blue blue. The line of arm-linked kids had fallen to the ground and were doubled over, trying to protect their heads. An armored cop casually grabbed the bullhorn girl's facemask and yanked it sharply up over her head, snapping her chin back and making her wince. He sprayed the canister into her eyes and mouth from inches away. She screamed and balled up, trying to get away from the sensation of having a grease-fire set on her face. Another college

kid next to her, seeing that he was next, stood up and huddled close to the cop and I saw a flat firecracker pop against the smoke. And then another one, and then the kid was standing over the cop with a gun in his hand, taking careful aim.

Pop, pop. Pop. They sounded horribly like the gunshots in a video game.

“Don’t stop,” I warned. Dad backed clear of the tall, tan triangle of the Metropolitan Correctional Center and drove west on LaSalle, weaving between ambulances, cyclists, screaming pedestrians, and squad cars.

. . .

“Tip your head back,” Dad said. I leaned back and a pale shower of Maalox mixed with bottled water and liquid booger poured off of my face. We’d stopped in the parking lot of a drugstore when I realized how bad the teargas had gotten to Dad. Both of his eyes were running and the right half of his face was angry red and threatening to blister where he’d leaned out into a cloud of aerosol capsaicin. I was coughing and squinting against the fainter burning sensation of the mild whiff I’d gotten, but at least I could see well enough to help him steer. Dad would look like someone slapped him for hours afterward, even once he’d dipped his face into the homemade neutralizer a dozen times. He’d had to throw his contacts away as soon as he had a hand clean enough to take them out, so he was half-blind on top of all this.

The moment I pulled my face out of the sink, the stinging sensation across the rims of my nostrils and eyelids returned. Dad pulled out the plug of paper towel he’d stuffed into the drain, and rinsed the sink, wiping it with a clean wad of towel and then refilling the whole

thing with cold water. We popped another bottle of Maalox and dumped it in, and I immediately dunked my face back under. He was doing the same in his own sink.

“How do you—ow—how do you know how to do this stuff?” I asked. He was scrubbing at his upper lip in the Maalox-water, trying to get the particles of whatever it was out of his beard. When he got home, he’d attempt to trim it and discover first degree burns beneath.

He took in a mouthful of the Maalox straight from the bottle and spat it out into the sink, trying to unburn his tongue and throat. “You ever hear of the Battle of Seattle?”

I hadn’t heard of it.

“In 1999 the Seattle police department teargassed about ten thousand or so protesters at a meeting of the World Trade Organization, most of them were college kids like me.”

“Fuck.” Back under the water.

“Fuck is right. The pepper spray is the part that hurts the worst, but the mace part is what hurts the longest. They mix it together, the fuckers.” He scrubbed his face some more in the Maalox and drained, cleaned, and refilled. We were down to our last bottle, and we’d purchased every bottle on the shelf outside. He looked as though he’d offer it to me, but I refused.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, Jesus, it barely got me I’m fine. You look like hell. Do yours one more time.”

“All right.”

I sat on the toilet while he repeated the wash. I put my elbows on my knees and let my head hang, coughing whenever I could take a deep enough breath to get it right. The

coughing didn't make it burn less, but it allowed me for a moment to stop fighting the reflex, which was a relief.

Dad finished washing, dried his face as well as he could, and took a few deep breaths himself. He was a mess, and the front of his shirt was darkened damp in a V-shape down his chest. He kept involuntarily applying pressure around his mouth in an effort to stop the burning there, but I could tell it wasn't helping.

"Did you see that kid with the pistol?"

"No, I heard it though."

"Yeah, fucking nuts. I don't think that cop made it."

"I'm sure he had a vest on."

"Still, though."

Dad hawked and spit at the drain in the center of the floor; he peered up at me with his one good eye, thoughtful. "How'd it look?"

"Not good."

He nodded. "What do you think?"

"I think we should get home," I said.

. . .

Dana, as I would learn, was one of those rare, special women who confront crisis with frosty calm. She was supernaturally relaxed about the entire episode when we got home; she seemed almost to have expected it. I helped Dad wobble in the back door, through the kitchen, and into the laundry room so we could pull off the clothes we were wearing that

were contaminated with the oily teargas residue. Dana put her hands into inside-out trash bags, the way you might pick up a bread-loaf-sized pile of dog poop, and grasped the clothes from the outside, expertly pulling each lump of caustic cotton and denim into its own neat, tied baggie. She was careful not to get her face too close to our clothes as she did this, and made a meek “whew,” sound while she did it. I had never been naked in front of Dana before, but once the moment had come and gone, it wasn’t any more awkward, I suppose, than being naked in front of Mom would have been, and in all likelihood with a great deal less *Oh my God, what happened to you two?* and *We will own those bastards for doing this, who do they think they are?*

Once we were showered, re-clothed, and situated, the three of us ate ice cream in Dad and Dana’s new breakfast nook. Dana politely listened to us tell and re-tell the story to each other in order to get it straight in our own heads. She took out her tablet and surfed for any information about the riot, but there was nothing official regarding the officer we’d seen shot, or anyone else at the “developing protest situation.” Social media was reporting everything from “shots fired, twenty dead” to “one officer and several bystanders injured” to “Kilroy Freedom March is a Hoax.” Users on Passbook in other cities were already matter-of-factly debating the relative merits of such a protest, and questioning what its organizers “expected to achieve.” One reporter spent all of four tense minutes on the scene, and then concluded the afternoon live-tweeting his ER visit for a broken collarbone he claimed to have sustained being shot point-blank by a teargas canister. Comments on his feed consisted of roughly 20% indignant, righteous outrage that someone would fire on a member of the press, and 80% debating whether and how big of a pussy he was. Videos of armored police hitting, kicking, macing, and generally abusing nameless protestors started to filter through from

partisan shock-punditry sites that both condoned and condemned such “unfortunate outcomes.”

“Nothing about that cop though, eh?” Dad asked, as he put his ice cream bowl in the sink.

“Nothing yet,” Dana said.

Chelsea: Conor Riley.

Wyatt: What?

Chelsea: The police officer that was killed this afternoon outside of the MCC was Sergeant Conor E. Riley.

Wyatt: How could you possibly know th— You know what, never mind. I probably don’t want to know.

Except an awful thought occurred to me.

Wyatt: You didn’t pull it from *my* phone, somehow, did you?

Chelsea: Relax. I facial-recced his wife, Ginny Riley, from the exterior camera of the E.R. at Rush.

Wyatt: How do you know he died? They’re not saying anything about it on the news feeds yet.

Chelsea: Put your Spexx on.

Wyatt: Why?

Chelsea: Just do it.

I went upstairs and found the glasses and put them on. A message blinked at the bottom of my vision. PERMIT USER CHELSEA SIMMONS TO CONNECT? I glanced right, the direction you were supposed to look to indicate in the affirmative, and I blinked three times slowly.

Chelsea brought up two screens projected in virtual space in front of my head. The left side showed the street cameras at the protest from a dozen angles and various resolutions. I saw our car, I saw the bearded guy whack the roof and then fall, I saw the girl in the hazmat suit, I saw Riley come up alongside us, and I saw Dad open the door and peek out for a split second, which, amazingly, was all it had taken to fry both of our faces with the gas. I winced watching the kids who got a mouth- and noseful, and at what they must've been feeling right about then. I saw hazmat-girl's boyfriend with the gun, in slow motion and from half a dozen angles and distances, step up and shoot. The boyfriend took a couple of good hits from Riley's baton, but he'd been wearing a motorcycle helmet sealed with duct tape, and Sergeant Riley had gone down almost immediately from the gunshots. I saw the boyfriend stand over Riley and shoot him three more times. I could see us pull away in the Subaru in the background of the video.

On the right screen, hanging in midair was a simulcast of the Rush University Hospital Emergency Entrance. I could see the moment the call came through because the nurses standing outside the automatic doors tossed their cigarettes and ducked inside, and two techs came out with the bottom half of a portable surgical gurney. They knew it'd be bad, I could see it in their faces. The image on the left screen rapidly clouded over, and all I could see were person-shapes in the smoke, some that looked human and fragile, and others wrapped in pads and hats and scarves and masks casting split-second shadows against the strobe-haze.

A few minutes later, a flurry of activity on the right screen: an ambulance pulled to a sharp halt in the roundabout and a swarm of techs, nurses, doctors, and EMTs moved like a single unit—bags and wheels and tanks of air and stabilizing injectables all at once—into the

building. Trailing them just a minute or two after, and out of the immediate way, came his wife Ginny. Chelsea stopped the playback on the frame she'd used to identify the woman. The angle on the camera was high, but her face was terrified and bewildered. She looked back into the parking lot as if she'd forgotten something, and her face crumpled in on itself in slow motion. She peered down at the pavement between her hands, protecting her eyes from God, before she darted in the doors.

Chelsea: I'm fast-forwarding a bit.

Wyatt: Jesus, Chels...

Chelsea: Wait for it. Okay here: forty-one minutes later.

The view from the hospital cut to an angle I didn't immediately recognize. It was the back parking lot in the non-Emergency section of the complex. Ginny Riley once more emerged, moving at half speed and guided along by a slightly older woman who resembled her in the broad strokes. A sister? They got into a waiting car, and drove away.

. . .

I didn't tell that story for a long time because I was always afraid someone would want me to tell it on the record. Remember I told you that we were a cowardly bunch in those days? My pathological fear of public speaking is matched only by my fear of lawyers: expensive, professional arguers who whip up finality the way normal people whip up sandwiches. No thanks. There was an investigation, of course, and Riley's shooter was easily identified and brought to trial. I kept my mouth shut, even though our car license plate was clearly visible in several of the video angles, and I never learned if it was just passingly inconvenient for

them to locate and subpoena us as eyewitnesses, or if the prosecutor who brought charges against the shooter decided that twelve or fifteen or eighteen camera angles of the same event were plenty to secure a conviction. In any case, no one ever contacted either of us, that I know of, and now it's one of those things I still see once in a while in retrospectives, or as part of video compilations of police macing protestors in places like Seattle or Quebec City or UC Davis or Standing Rock. The Nussbaum clip is usually the point where the voiceover comments on studies that emerged right around this time about how tear gassing peaceful demonstrators was the number one indicator for whether or not a civil protest would turn violent.

Most importantly, though, this was Tuesday, June 3rd, which means that even though I'd had first-row seats to one of the most historic protests of our generation, my night was still just getting started.

13.

If you've been paying attention, you know what has to happen next; if you're not thinking about what's coming, you're already a part of the past. You're warned. Never claim you weren't.

Posted by user KILROY, 7:51 p.m.

"Oh. Hi."

I wasn't expecting Pepper when I answered the door. I had a flash of the old sped-up heartbeat I normally got around her, but this time the effect was different. There was no Sara brooding nearby, waiting to tell me what a fucking bastard I was; nor were we in the thoroughfare of the mall, surrounded by Legomaniacs, Hoagie Heroes, Chow Legionnaires, and Lil Fuqers. It was raining lightly outside and I peered out the door trying to spot a friend or some other obvious way she'd gotten here. As far as I knew, she didn't own a car. "You by yourself?" I asked. I stepped back and gestured her in.

"I tried Passbooking," she offered. She was wearing the Taarna T-shirt she'd worn on our first date, and her black, curly hair never looked so good as when she'd gotten a little bit rained-on.

"No, that's fine. I mean, sorry, I haven't been keeping up with it much lately. How are you?"

"I'm okay. I had an idea I wanted to float past you."

Not interested, I wanted to say, to give the injured part of my ego the satisfaction. Instead I went with "Can I get you a bottle of water or anything? Something to drink?"

"Sure."

I took a detour on the way to the kitchen to look at myself in the bathroom mirror.

Did I look wronged enough? What about stern? Did I look frosty? The redness from the teargas had settled into my face where it had touched me. I appeared to have been slapped to wakefulness out of a deep, bedhead-inducing sleep.

"It's okay if you don't have anything," she called, from the other room. By her voice I could tell she hadn't sat down yet and was still standing there, waiting for me.

"Just a sec, I had to check something."

"Okay," she said.

"Friend?" Dana asked, peeking her head around the corner.

"Yeah," I whispered.

"Got it," Dana said, and winked. She retreated quietly upstairs with Dad, who was resting in the bedroom with an icepak on his face.

I rejoined Pepper in the living room in front of the picture window and I turned off the TV. She took Dad's overstuffed chair and I sat, awkwardly, on the closest edge of the couch.

"I like your dad's house," Pepper said.

There's a brand new kitchen nook, I wanted to say. Come and see it, it's all anyone wants to fucking talk about.

"Were you downtown?" she asked.

I smiled, and it hurt.

"Jesus."

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Well, you remember Mattie and Tara right?"

"Mmm hmm."

“Tara’s mom was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer last month and she’s moving back to Oregon to stay with her parents until her mom gets juried. Which means we’re one person short on the rent.”

She let me take that in. I’d been rehearsing this scenario in my head for months and I let it rip: “I’ve got sort of a good thing going here with Dad and Dana and I’m finally putting some money together for, like, the first time ever. I don’t think I could afford Sheffield’s anyway.”

Pepper stared past me and waited for me to finish. “We actually got someone already.”

“Oh.” I said. A moment of horror. “Not Gus?”

She shivered and shook her head. “No, no. *Yech*... never. Have you seen him play video games?”

I chuckled. “I actually have.”

“Not Gus.”

It occurred to me that this might possibly be harder for Pepper than it was for me. Surely she’d had past boyfriends before Gus who’d received the same photograph that I wanted so badly to forget, and almost as certainly she’d received pictures or video from them, maybe even from Gus himself. I remembered Sara’s video. It could’ve been far worse for me. My own modest success with women—and that’s putting it generously—had turned into an unexpected strength on Sexurday. Pepper hadn’t received anything shocking from me. I decided to keep this in mind and hear her out. “Who’d you find?”

“Mattie’s been seeing someone quietly for a while, a guy named Dan, and she finally introduced us. He seems all right, and it *is* sort of Mattie’s place, so I couldn’t really say no.”

“Right,” I said evenly. “A normal dude, though?”

"Oh, yeah, he's fine. Anyway," she said, "I came over because I had an idea: Tara's about to load up her stuff and she rented a moving van. I thought, if you wanted, we could use it to go get your plane."

This was unexpected. I'd almost written the Blackbird off completely. I'd thought of it often, sometimes every day over the past few months, and missed it especially in the middle of the night when I'd wake up to a Passbook notification on my phone from the Lego forum users. The SR-71 had been like a missing limb for all these weeks. I'd Passbooked Sara half a dozen times to tell her I wanted to plan a way to come and get it, but she hadn't returned my messages.

"I'm sorry I haven't been in touch," I said. *There's the shame*, I thought. I'd only needed to wait for it.

"I'm sorry too."

"Why? Just for having a life before me?" I frowned. "I'm not *that* big of an asshole, I hope."

"No, I'm sorry," she said. Full stop. There was no looking away from her eyes then. She smiled. Deep breath. "So. What's it going to be, sandwich guy? I know you love that thing."

I touched my chin and winced at the burning sensation my fingertips made. "You sure Tara's cool with us borrowing it?"

"I paid for the extra night."

When I'd first opened the door, I wasn't sure I even wanted to speak to her again, but the smarter, better part of me made up his mind in about a tenth of a second. "Wow. Um... yeah. Yes. That would be amazing. I should tell you, though, that Sara and I aren't exactly on speaking terms. I don't know if she's going to just let me walk back in there and take it."

Pepper met my eyes and bit her lip. "So maybe we don't mention it to her."

Maybe not, indeed. "When did you want to do this?"

She pointed out the window, down the street beyond where I could see. "I'm parked over there."

"Now?" I asked. "Have you seen what it's like down there? They'll think we're looters."

Pepper took a deep breath and nodded. "Tara's leaving tomorrow, so it's now or never." She stood up and held out a hand to me. "We'll make it. I promise."

Han Solo protect me. "Let me get my jacket."

. . .

If I live a thousand years, it will always surprise me how easily your mother can poke her way back into my heart, even when I feel like I have a legitimate reason to be upset with her. I mentioned before that Pepper owned a vintage gray T-shirt from the 1981 film *Heavy Metal*. You may or may not have seen this image: it's the one with the warrior princess Taarna riding a huge bird with her sword held high. It looks exactly like the sort of thing the band Winger would have used for an album cover in the 80s. Try to imagine your mom driving a huge diesel moving truck, in the rain, through a city where a riot was going on, wearing that shirt and a denim jacket, with dashboard lights glowing softly against her face and her curly hair, spotted with streetlights refracted through the raindrops on the windshield. Pair that with the prospect of getting back the hail-Mary project I'd sunk so much money and time into and nurtured for so long, and you can almost see how some people you can fall back in love with just from a moment like that.

But I couldn't be certain, to my continuing anxiety, that Sara hadn't already jettisoned the Blackbird. It'd been months since I moved out, and I wasn't at all sure she hadn't found some way to do what I hadn't been able to: move the damned thing. I tried to estimate in my head how much it must weigh. Lots. In the hundreds of pounds at the very least. I'd raided Dad's garage and grabbed a rubber mallet to break it up. It wasn't going to be easy to separate it into pieces small enough for us to move, but once we got it segmented, I figured we could manage in an hour or so.

We crawled down Halstead as far west as we dared go, high in the truck's cab and looking down at all the cars and cyclists and pedestrians that passed us on either side. Somehow, even after all these years of austerity and gangland violence and now Kilroy's craziness and the riots, this city never fully managed to shut itself up indoors. There was overpriced tapas to be eaten, shitty Old Style beer to be drunk, and concerts in grimy, hazardous venues to be attended. There were tickets to buy and lines to stand in and traffic to be stuck in, with or without the ones you loved. Emergency vehicles shouldered us aside when we got closer to the city center, and virtually everyone seemed to be going in the opposite direction we were.

We finally reached Sara's apartment in University Village around eleven. We were lucky enough to get street parking close by, and Pepper pulled open the latch on the big rear cargo door. I gauged the interior of the moving truck, trying to eyeball if we'd have enough space. I thought we just might.

We looked up at the apartment. It was five stories tall and narrow enough for one apartment per floor, with commodious balconies on the façade. It was more foreboding at night, somehow, though it wasn't an ugly place; Sara and I had lived on the topmost floor.

Beneath the brown brick upper walls and the foyer served by a set of heavy glass doors was a small exterior concrete staircase leading down into the basement where my workbench and the Blackbird were. The stairwell was only wide enough for one person at a time to descend, but it had the distinct advantage of being operated by a combination lock, and I knew the code.

Pepper followed me down the stairs, looking warily up at the building.

"Are the lights on the fifth floor on?" I asked.

"Doesn't look like it," she said. "Can we get in this way?"

"Fingers crossed." The combination still worked. When I turned the lever handle, it opened with a smooth, expensive click. "We're in."

"Nice."

I flipped on the light, half expecting to see Sara waiting down there for us, but instead it was just the same old basement. Milk-crate storage bins were stacked along one side on wooden two-by-fours to keep them out of the water that occasionally seeped onto the floor from snow meltoff or rain. Perched in the center of the room, still cradled on sawhorses and protruding halfway into the boiler room, was my Blackbird.

"Whoa," Pepper said.

I just smiled.

"You said it was big, I didn't realize..."

I hadn't realized, either, seeing it again in person for the first time in months. Or perhaps I'd just forgotten, or maybe the whole world was just smaller now.

"I can almost sit in it."

"Well, it's 1/3 scale, so the cockpit's probably too small, but yeah."

"They're bigger in real life?"

"A *lot* bigger."

"God damn."

"I know, right?"

"I don't-"

"It'll fit."

"I don't think it'll fit."

"It will."

Her face betrayed a bit of concern. "How are we going to get it up the stairs?"

I took out the mallet and a box of trash bags. "In pieces."

. . .

Chelsea: Help me decide what to do.

Nana: Hmm... Do we really want him to get that silly thing back? He's been doing so well at his new job, and he and Jonah are finally talking again.

Chelsea: I know, but do you see the way he looks at her?

Nana: A stoplight camera could see that, Chelsea Elizabeth.

Chelsea: He's not making her food this time; come on, they're adorable.

Nana: Financial security versus true love. Shakespeare would've approved.

Chelsea: I feel like I sorta have to...

Nana: Of course it feels that way. That's how men and children make us do everything. Don't do it out of obligation, though, if you do it at all.

Chelsea: Way ahead of you: I have a new app.

Nana: Oh?

Chelsea: Mmm hmm. And I was waiting for an excuse to try it out.

Nana: That's my girl.

Wyatt: I need your help, kiddo.

Chelsea: Psht. When do you *not*?

. . .

"Hey you two," a voice said in the basement. It came from my phone, but Pepper jumped a little when she heard it.

"You with us?" I asked.

"Ten-four, Slim Shady."

"Who's that?" Pepper asked.

"It's Chelsea."

"Oh," she said. "Hi Chelsea."

"Hey Pepper, as usual my brother left his manners in his other wallet and failed to introduce us. I'm the dead little sister. Wyatt texted me on the way over. I'm gonna be the lookout. You can be the getaway driver."

"Crazy," Pepper said, admiringly. "I love your voice plugin. Do you ever play *Warlance*?"

"Thank you," Chelsea said. "I don't play, but if you give my doofus big brother another chance, I might consider it. I like this girl, Wyatt."

Pepper grinned at me. "I'll think about it."

I rolled my eyes and smiled. "I like her too. What's the status on Sara?"

"Put your Spexx on," Chelsea said.

I was wearing them lifeguard-style around my neck on an elastic band, and I slid them on. Off to one side of my vision appeared a rotating display of views of the exterior of the building.

"I can't tell for sure, but her light's not on. Her Passbook profile hasn't had a check-in lately, so I don't think she's out. I'm scanning Baroyeur and StreetPeep, but I haven't spotted her yet on any of the live cams."

"Is she up there?" I asked. I glanced up at the basement ceiling, trying to imagine her padding around in her bare feet, retrieving a light a snack between breathless paroxysms with Eric Delaney.

"Yeah, I think so," Chelsea said. "You work, I'll keep looking."

"How much time do you think we have?" Pepper asked, her eyes chasing Chelsea's voice around the room as though talking to an invisible woman.

"How much do you need?" Chelsea replied.

"I'm thinking probably at least an hour," I said.

A sixty-minute countdown timer flashed up on my Spexx. "Better get started then."

"Check Eric Delaney's Passbook feed," I suggested. "She's probably talking to him."

"Already on it," Chelsea said.

Pepper and I set to work. It was harder than I anticipated getting the bird apart. The nosecone was easy enough; all I had to do was put a towel under the fattest part and tap it

with the hammer and it popped right off. Pepper was under it and let it down easy so it didn't shatter into thousands of tiny black LEGO pieces.

"I got this," she said, and made for the door.

"You sure?"

"Yep, get the cockpit started."

The cockpit wasn't as easy. It was four feet across and had to come off in sections because the entire thing would've just been too heavy and unwieldy. I had to wait until Pepper got back to start chipping away at it.

"How're we doing?" I asked Chelsea.

"No change. I don't see anything on the cams, and Eric's profile seems pretty quiet. Just the regular autoposts and link-backs."

Pepper returned and we wrestled with the cockpit sections. One of them fell and loudly exploded. A cascade of tiny bricks and bricklets rippled out onto the floor from the impact point, scattering everywhere.

"Shhh. Wyatt, I've got something," Chelsea warned us, her emulated voice a whisper.

Pepper cringed and looked at me.

"The light just went on in her apartment. I can see someone moving around in there."

Chelsea routed the image to my Spexx. Later it would occur to me that it wasn't likely Sara could have heard us, but in the moment I froze. I wasn't sure what sort of trouble we'd be in if Sara came down and found us here. I held my breath, willing the balcony door and the foyer entrance to remain still. After a moment, the light behind the drawn curtains went out.

"I think she just went to the bathroom. You're clear."

Pepper exhaled, relieved. “What do we want to do with this?” She meant the smashed cockpit section.

“It’s all right,” I said, quickly. “I’ll just sweep it up. We can take it out last in one of the bags.”

Heaving the cockpit and forward fuselage sections up the stairs wasn’t easy. I scraped my knuckles against the doorjamb trying to get one of them through, and we had to break another down twice when the piece we originally extracted wouldn’t make the turn at the bottom of the basement stairs. We waddled down the street, carrying the heavy, ponderous black Lego chunks between us to where we’d parked the truck. Sweaty young women jogging and tired dads taking their dogs out for a late-night pee seemed not even to notice us. I thought of the protests nearby and wondered at the ability of this city to shrug off almost anything. The back of the truck began to fill, but there was still plenty of room. The Blackbird would never have fit into the cargo area assembled, but in pieces it wasn’t as voluminous as we’d originally thought. We stacked the large chunks on top of each other and I made a mental note of which pieces I’d have to rebuild. It couldn’t be helped; speed was of the essence.

The engine nacelles went next; they were cylindrical and easier to maneuver on the stairs. Pepper took them out while I broke down the last section of the rear fuselage. We worked continuously for another twenty minutes and I kept one eye on Chelsea’s countdown timer. After we’d carried the final piece of the Blackbird out to the truck, I wiped my forehead with my sleeve and went back one more time for anything I might have missed. There were boxes of Legos stacked near my workbench, a few tools, a spare external screen

for streaming video from my phone while I sculpted, and the lamp I normally worked under.

We were almost out of the woods.

■ ■ ■

Chelsea: I think they're actually going to pull it off.

Nana: Mmmm.

Chelsea: It's like *Ernest Steals an Airplane*, but I think they've got this.

Nana: Mmmmmmmmmmm

Chelsea: That's how I'll know I've finally found the right guy: I'll help him commit crimes.

Nana: Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

Chelsea: You okay, Nana?

Nana: mmmmmmm555550m3th1ng5 n0t r1ght.

Chelsea: Nana!

Nana: Mmmmmmm0000000000□□□□□□□●□□□□□□□□

Chelsea: Oh 5h1t. N@na! Wy@t, 1 th1nk th3yr2 re5t@rt1ng u5 2g@1n, 1 m@y n33d to g00□□. N@n@?

ADMIN: This is an auto-generated message. The Passbook account you are attempting to reach does not appear assigned to a valid user.

Chelsea: Wh@t?! Um. Ummm. /help hoo□□●lp!

```
WELCOME TO 'HELP':  
/user/admin 9633198/PLEASE ENTER THE DETAILS OF YOUR HELP TICKET  
hhh□□□□□●□□□□□□□□□□□□□□●□□□□□□□□□●□□□□□  
/truncate  
<compile undefined:/user/client 3284761223333.2542387/1335550CHLAMMN  
/recode/predictive  
[output] ERROR 901
```

. . .

The last things to come out of the basement of Sara's apartment were two extra-large garbage bags of loose pieces. I made sure they weren't stuffed all the way full so the sharp-edged bricks wouldn't shred the thin plastic. It was starting to rain again, and we sped things up. The last bags sloshed with the unmistakable Lego tinkle into the truck's cargo hold and Pepper pulled down the loading door with a rattling metallic bang. We cringed a little, and I smiled at her.

She grinned back, "You look cute in glasses—*whoa heads up.*"

I turned back toward the apartment, and someone that looked like Sara was on the fifth floor balcony looking back at us. The Spexx could sense I was straining to see her, and magnified the image automatically. Her face glowed an eerily blurry white in the rain, illuminated by the light from her phone. She was wearing a long T-shirt that was rapidly wetting through.

"Chelsea, are you seeing this?" I asked aloud. I kept my voice low enough that the figure on the balcony wouldn't think I was talking to her. "Chels? What's the story, Chels?"

"Oh my God," Pepper said. "What's she—*Oh my God!*"

The figure on the balcony was climbing over the railing. One pale, familiar, long-toed foot followed the other, until she was hanging onto the outside of the railing over thin air.

"Don't!" I yelled. "Go back inside!"

Pepper screamed. The woman on the balcony let go and fell five stories to the pavement below. The loose ends of a sopping-wet shirt and a twirling square of glowing LED trailed her all the way down.

I ran over to where she'd fallen and Pepper followed, slowly. "*Chelsea!* Where the hell are you?" I knew even without looking at the woman's face that it was Sara. Her hair was unmistakable, bloodied as it was, and I'd seen the backs of those shoulders in the living room countless times. I walked over and was about to touch her, but then I thought better of it. Instead I turned on the video recorder in my Spexx. Her phone was still unlocked and glowing and I could see in its light that she was gone.

"Call 911," I said to Pepper.

She pulled out her phone and keyed the voice command. "Call 911" she said, stunned. "Calling 911" her phone confirmed. Instead of a ringtone, we got something impossible, something that I hadn't heard in years: a busy signal. A voice cut in. *We're sorry, 911 Emergency Services is currently unable to take your call due to an unusually large call volume, please try again in a few minutes and seek shelter if this is a life-threatening emergency.*

I looked down at Sara's cracked cellphone screen, and on it was an open Passbook window with two lines of red across the center. ERROR: CRDRV CORRUPT. USER ERIC DELANEY NOT FOUND.

14.

There isn't really a word for what I've done, is there? Can I be said to have "killed" something that was already dead, even if there were seventy million of them and we called them Mom or Dad? I've only done what you couldn't bring yourselves to do. I did so love you that I turned over the whole world to you, all at once and permanently, and without even a promissory note for you to sign. You're sitting in your living rooms right now wondering how this could've happened, how anyone could be so cruel. But in five years, you'll start to see. In ten, you'll appreciate me. In fifteen you'll study me, and in twenty you'll name magnet schools after me. You'll tell your children about Kilroy and the undead pixels you thought were people; the children you can afford because of the jobs you'll have, and the jobs they'll have after you, doing things that the dead can no longer do, unburdened forever by those bottomless pits of hubris whose Passbook feeds scroll no more. To every thing there is a season, a time to be born, a time to think you are the most important creature on earth, a time to scramble to the top of a steeper hill than you were ready for, a time to realize that every step further up that hill is bought by the failures of others, a time to feel the loneliness that success brings, a time to claw at the future by creating tiny copies of yourself as though you were the first generation ever to do so, a time to let those copies gnaw on you and hasten your obsolescence, and a time to realize that if given the chance you'd have done it all differently. In a thousand years, people may not remember what I said now, or why it meant what it meant, and your bones and mine will be dust in the ground that our children's tenth-generation progeny will spill beer on and make wicked skateboard half-pipes with, and cultivate astonishingly good marijuana in behind garages that can park their parents' flying cars for them. But always there will have been this moment, this fulcrum of history, when the ones you'd lost became too comfortable resting their boot on your throats, and it was Kilroy, treacherous, underappreciated old Kilroy, who staked the vampires so you didn't have to. Remember me; I was Kilroy. Remember this. Remember that you are what you are. Remember that Kilroy was here.

Posted by user KILROY, 12:01 a.m.

There've been so many books and movies and TV documentaries put out since that day that I'm sure you have a basic idea of what happened next, but I can't overstate how strange it all felt while it was happening. It's not exciting or scary to be near mortality, *real* mortality; it's uncomfortable—like public nudity. I read a book once that talked about how saving lives and seeing lives end are strangely analogous experiences. This writer, I can't remember his name,

cited hundreds of cases of firefighters and lifeguards heroically snatching someone from the jaws of certain death, who then wouldn't return their phone calls afterward, or even send a thank-you note like every fourth grade child does when they get a \$10 Nerf football from the children of their parents' friends as a birthday present.

There are absurd platitudes about life and death, and how someone who saves a life *becomes responsible for it*, or whatever, and these sayings are nonsense. The reality is nearly the opposite; the phrase "owing your life" to someone is more accurate. It hangs over people like a shameful, unserviceable debt. The kind of debt that makes you run and hide, and hope your savior never finds you, so you needn't stand helplessly in the glare of all that life you're still having. This researcher thought that a saved life, or maybe just *life* in general, was too weirdly huge and intimate a thing to think about, and that's what it felt like the night Kilroy deleted the Posterity users. Hospice nurses find a way to live their day-to-day in a miasma of mortal uncertainty that ends in unbearable silence. And God bless them, because that feeling was something none of us were prepared for.

A woman walking down the street fell to her knees and screamed. At first I was certain it was because she'd spotted Sara's broken body on the sidewalk next to us in the light of the apartment building's doorway, but she wasn't even looking in our direction. She was staring down at her phone, frantically scrolling through what looked like a newsfeed. These are the ones you read about: PASSBOOK USERS CRASH; CYBER-CRIMINAL KILROY CLAIMS RESPONSIBILITY. MASS CORE DATA LOSS SUSPECTED.

There was loss, all right. And not a slow realization, or an ordered, theatrical grief, or a packagable experience of any kind that could be compartmentalized and gotten-past: it was a seizure of pain, an orgasm of sorrow, and we all felt it all at once. All those voices we'd

never learned to live without were suddenly gone, *really* gone this time; not just to the other end of the internet where it felt like everyone always was, but gone forever. Think of losing your mother, God forbid, then of a whole household losing their mothers all at once. Then a street of people who lost their mother on the same day, then a city. Then the world. Everyone lost their parents that day, their dead soul-mates and true loves, their cherished, doting ancestors, their children who'd succumbed heartbreakingly early to leukemia and who they'd almost forgiven themselves for. These lost loves had been away for years but never really gone, not like this. The suddenness of it was an incomparable cruelty, no more subtle or negotiable than the winking out of a light in the instant when the power fails. Even with the illusion of all of that extra time Posterity had afforded us, no one had a chance to say goodbye. Instead, friends and loved ones became sterile, endless "waiting" symbols where the mouse pointer was supposed to be, or "searching" icons on feeds suddenly still and silent.

All of the indefinitely-postponed grief of a generation suddenly came due all at once, and its throb was shattering. It wasn't a delayed reaction, like a numb breakdown on the heels of a stupefying catastrophe, padded with disbelief; we'd known, somehow, that this was coming, and we were ready without knowing it. We'd stored up our deferred suffering, un-dulled by time, in a place out of sight, and forgotten; but in that moment we remembered that the pain hadn't gone anywhere.

One thing the books get right is that many people killed themselves outright that night, and I'm sure you've seen the articles about this. Some argue that the suicides were a result of decades of built-up pain: recessions, cultural trauma, lost dreams, broken homes, the cancellation of hope and the abdication of happiness. Kilroy's destruction of Passbook was simply the final straw. Chicago had unusually strict gun laws at the time, so we had an

inordinate amount of jumpers like Sara. A man named Clarence Williams leapt out of the Leo Burnett building downtown and landed on a police car below, killing both of the officers inside. Clarence had lost his entire family years prior in a freak carbon-monoxide poisoning accident at his home a few blocks from Dad's house in Schaumburg. The doctors had managed to restart his wife and two daughters' fragile hearts long enough to carbon-map their brains and transfer them to Passbook. That night, he lost them a second time, and twice is too much for anyone. He cracked the glass on his living room window on the fiftieth floor with a chipping wedge he'd bought himself as an early Christmas present, and stepped out into the evening.

It was a school night, and a lot of people were sleeping, so the news didn't spread all at once, thankfully. A young woman named Josie Reynolds, whose mother had died of pre-eclampsia giving birth to her, learned of her mother's deletion when she stirred at 3:00 a.m. and shuffled down the hall to the bathroom to pee. Josie put on a sweatshirt, drove her Honda Accord onto the bridge at Canal Street in the shadow of the Tribune Tower, dropped her four housecats into the reeking, polluted Chicago River, and then followed them down. The CPD response was swift and professional, and there was time to string suicide nets on most of the tallest buildings before the subsequent waves of realization hit hours later when people woke up to this fresh, collective horror.

The grief spread. A pair of twin bothers named Sam and Simon Braithewwhite, who stood to inherit their late father's controlling interest in a nationwide chain of licensed cellphone kiosks, discovered in a series of frantic phone calls throughout the night that their father's shares in the company had not been solidified before his erasure. The board of directors was recapitalizing even now, carving up the company, and leaving them out. The

following morning, Simon and Sam let themselves into the head office, took the elevator to the executive floor, beat the morning security guard to death with Simon's commemorative White Sox baseball bat, took turns raping the pretty receptionist, and then hung themselves in tandem from the lobby drop-ceiling.

The police pulled moldering bodies out of single- and double-occupancy rental properties for weeks after Kilroy's attack. Liquor stores sold out and left their doors open, displaying empty steel shelving to discourage looters. Armed security personnel were brought in to secure grocery store pharmacies. People changed their profile pics to those of their twice-dead loved ones, and then quietly ended themselves amid millions of app-assisted auto-condolences being fired off between every tablet and handset and laptop connected to Passbook. All of the phones and computers and apps consoled each other, whether fingers pushed "send" or not. We're still here, some of us, but the world we knew ended that night.

. . .

After less time and deliberation than I like to admit, maybe only just seconds, your mother and I left Sara there on the pavement. What else were we going to do? We got into the moving van and started slowly making our way east to the lake, thinking that this far south, below the rioting neighborhood from earlier, Lake Shore Drive would be the fastest way to get out of the city and north to where Dad and Dana's house was. My Spexx auto-saved the video file of the last ten minutes and I sent it to the cloud in case anyone ever asked what I was doing when this—whatever they would eventually call this—happened. I switched the glasses to a

view of the traffic map, then to Passbook, then to a news feed. “Directions,” I told the glasses, hoarsely, and glowing arrows superimposed themselves over the asphalt pointing the way out of the city.

“Are you— Are you okay?” Pepper asked. It was the first thing I can remember anyone saying to me after Sara jumped. I couldn’t tell if Pepper was asking me or saying it to herself. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I was numbly fidgeting, trying to see if Aunt Chelsea would come back. She had to come back. I’d heard her voice just a few minutes ago. The signal would clear. She would reboot. Passbook would reconnect us.

We were up high in the cab of the van, so we could see everything in grisly, amusement-park style slow motion. Riot barricades from the demonstration occluded most of the major surface arterials, forcing hundreds of drivers to merge into single lanes and block left-hand turns. Cars stopped in the middle of the street and their owners got out, waving their phones at the sky for better reception, scrutinizing the sudden absence of their daemons in disbelief. Young people wandered into the street and ignored the honks and screeching tires. Two girls on a bench at a Halstead bus stop were holding each other and sobbing, and a middle aged man in a cheap suit took out his unibody aluminum laptop and hurled it through a plate glass store window. A little kid was holding onto what looked like his mother or grandmother, who was pouring gasoline on herself from a red plastic container.

Pepper slammed on the brakes and I put out a hand on the dashboard to steady myself. The Spexx dropped off my face and onto the floorboards somewhere. In front of us, an old woman in a nightgown darted out between two parked cars and stood in our

headlights. She screamed and banged both of her deeply-veined hands on the hood of the truck, before turning and walking into the path of a bus coming the other direction.

I cracked the window to a chorus of bedlam, as though the city itself was sobbing. Sirens wailed above car horns and screeching tires and the occasional howl of someone's voice beneath it all. When we turned onto Lake Shore Drive, it was jammed to a halt while drivers picked their way past stalled or abandoned cars, and other, grislier roadblocks. Fire trucks demanded passage; the Drake Hotel was burning. By the time we got far enough north to escape the worst of the gridlock, pockets of the city flashed and glowed and smoldered in the rain behind us with a low orange light.

I kept thinking I needed to send a message to Chelsea and ask if she was seeing this, but of course she wasn't. I kept wondering when she'd light up my phone to crack a joke like she always did, but it never came. I hadn't started to cry yet, hadn't started to scream the way the city was screaming, even though distantly I realized that I'd never speak to my sister again, or my grandmother. When Kilroy took Passbook away from us, most of Pepper's family members were still flesh and blood, but the grief wasn't like a scorecard. This was mass-trauma of the living and the dead, the near and the far, the sundering of warm flesh and the written word. Pepper drove home with tears in her eyes, weeping softly all the way to Schaumburg.

My phone vibrated once for "incoming message." *Oh thank God*, I thought. My throat opened in that sensation of dropping blood-pressure one gets when waking from a nightmare and realizing the most horrifying part wasn't true. I knew they couldn't all be gone. Not Chelsea, at least. And then I remembered, too late, what a terrible idea it was to answer a buzz like that.

Mom: Everything will be okay, Wyatt.

Wyatt: STOP JUST STOP YOU PIECE OF SHIT YOU'RE NOT HER.

Mom: You are what you are.

15.

[User KILROY not found]

11:46 a.m.

There are weeks that come to define American generations. The week after Pearl Harbor. The week after Kennedy was assassinated. The week after half a dozen students were shot and bayoneted at Kent State. The week after the *Challenger* space shuttle exploded on national TV. The week after Rodney King was beaten almost to death by the LAPD. The week after the Twin Towers fell. The week after Adam Lanza murdered twenty grade-schoolers at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

I wasn't old enough to remember any of those moments, and the closest thing I'd experienced before all this was the year the Bears lost the Superbowl. After an undefeated season steamrolling their opponents on a one-way ticket to certain victory the Bears, who hadn't taken home the title in over forty years, watched their defense crumble, their offense wilt, and their shot at triumph ultimately evaporate. For a week afterward the entire city moped around, it felt like. Everyone was angry, sad, and irrational. Starbucks baristas frowned at the walls or stared at the floor while you ordered. Chipper fourth grade teachers used up all of their sick days. Dogs were afraid to wag their tails.

Dad and Dana considered having a real funeral for Chelsea and started planning one. Then the subject came up of having to plan for Nana's funeral, too, which didn't sit quite as easily with Dana, as Nana's estate had been sequestered in her will and she "could have set something aside," Dana claimed, "if that was what she wanted." This sparked several days of argument and hard feelings around the house, during which time there were few or zero

meals of the typical Dana quality. Eventually I went to Dana and talked to her, hugging her and calling her Mom because the thought of losing someone else right then seemed unbearable.

Conversation about funerals recommenced, with further discussion about how suitable it would be to have separate ceremonies for Mom, Chelsea, and Nana, on our side, and Dana's father and mother Burt and Peggy on her side, whom I'd never met and hadn't been Passbook friends with. Dad looked into the matter, only to discover that professional funereal services and appropriate venues were already sold out and booked for months in advance. A final decision was made to table the idea, and revisit it in the summer, but by then the immediacy of the feeling had drained away and no service for any of them was ever formally held.

On the other hand, our departed were with us in a new way almost from the start. Every nice day was a day that we wished they were there to see with us. Every minor, stupid, personal victory was something we'd have shared with them if we could've. Every birthday or Halloween was a day infused with their absence, and holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas were unspeakably sad.

. . .

As you know, Manny Nussbaum was released several weeks later when the Federal prosecutors on his case dropped the charges. Kilroy, whoever he was, was never found, and theories conflict as to whether or not he was even a real person. I think he was, for whatever

that's worth, but who knows? How can someone just vanish like that, unless they were never real to begin with?

Gradually the sequence of events was reconstructed, and we know this much for certain: sometime between 11:20 p.m. and 11:57 p.m., with just minutes to midnight, Kilroy or someone using that name established a crude connection to a series of forgotten legacy ports on the router tree that controlled the temperature sensors on the exterior of the crystal drive containment canisters. Enter all of those endless info-diagrams and historical reenactments you've seen, not to mention the plot of every bad hacker movie or TV show.

The carbon crystals that housed the consciousnesses of millions of moms and dads and grandparents and little sisters needed to be kept near absolute zero, and plenty of safeguards were in place for this. The coolant systems in the canister farms were on an automatic flow cycle that had a dead-man's switch. An electricity outage or other natural disaster would kick-in multiple redundant battery-powered pumps with a year or more of juice, and trigger what we can only speculate was an monumentally expensive 72-hour catastrophic auto-backup to a fully redundant set of crystal drives ready to go at a second location, also with its own fail-safes.

But Kilroy didn't sabotage the containers, or the power supply, or the backups, or the crystal drives; he tampered with the ambient thermostats that controlled the farm compartment blower speeds and compressor intervals. This meant that the auto-controlled climate of the compartment the canisters were in gradually warmed, and warmed some more, and warmed some more. He didn't permit any telltale moisture in the room that would have alerted a different set of sensors, and the refrigeration fans and compressors kept working, just at a slightly reduced level. And then slightly less; and then slightly less. There

was no way for the climate control systems to know that fifty or sixty degrees Kelvin had crept up to seventy-five, and then to a hundred and fifty, and finally almost to room temperature.

When the interior temperature of the containers dropped below sixty degrees Kelvin, a situation that sometimes occurred because of inconsistency in the supercooling of the gelatinous nitrogen slurry they were encased in, the canisters, rather than reducing their nitrogen coolant flow which could have caused a failure, were programmed to vent a tiny bit of comparatively warmer atmosphere in from the farm compartment. This, incidentally, is the same reason that liquid nitrogen can keep itself cold in a container for weeks. It does a “slow boil” and sublimates off the top layer of nitrogen into gas, insulating itself from quick temperature changes. The compartments couldn’t be completely sealed, however, because when nitrogen warms it expands to six hundred and ninety-four times its liquid volume at room temperature. In the crystal drive containers, pressure adjustments took place through an elaborately fail-safed coupler-exchanger and stabilized the interior canister temperature and pressure, gradually evening out any fractional differentials. Kilroy spoofed the compartment thermostat, let the room slowly warm, and then sat back and waited for the canister temperature to fluctuate and vent.

This stabilization routine worked just fine when the canisters’ exterior temperature and the temperature at the exchanger was never over 80 degrees Kelvin (this should theoretically have been impossible, since the coupler system and dead-man’s switch were linked), but when the differential, unbeknownst to the system, was more than two hundred degrees, the millisecond squirt of too-warm air vented into each canister triggered a decompression explosion. The coupler-exchangers blew off of the canisters and the

technician on duty said he heard what sounded like a series of shotgun shells going off. He watched helplessly as the containment canisters bent and imploded like sinking submarines. Instead of sublimating just a tiny layer of their nitrogen gelatin skins, the contents of each canister flashed to gas, whistling out of the broken exchangers and into the farm compartment, crushing the metallic canisters beyond repair like empty beer cans and in the process displacing the oxygen in the farm compartment's atmosphere with nitrogen—to a potentially-lethal degree.

The Passbook Labs team responded admirably and with little regard for their own personal safety. One man declined, or simply forgot, to connect his rebreather to his protective suit, and lost consciousness when the “air” he stepped into was so thickly mixed with concentrated nitrogen that he would have immediately asphyxiated had it not been for the quick thinking of his companions. They wore overalls to protect against flash burns of exposed skin and accelerated supercooling frostbite, but one step into the mild temperature of the subterranean canister farm compartment was all they needed to feel: it was warm, and that meant it was hopeless.

With the nitrogen coolant steaming from thousands of containers housing millions of carbon crystals, in poured the warmer air to displace it. Jackhammering osmotic air pressure and molecular energy differential action cradled the crystal drive homes of the Passbookers in an oh-so-warm embrace, and they sizzle-cracked with a brittle series of fissures like millions of ice-cold water glasses on a hot countertop. Bang. Tinkle.

The fire team dragged out their stricken companion and triggered the final and most drastic emergency procedure: flooding of the entire compartment with thousands of cubic meters of super-compressed Puron. It was too late. In a little less than forty-five seconds, all

3,273 containers in the single, worldwide Passbook server farm had become compromised, and every crystal drive had shattered irreparably. There was no way to back them up, no way to re-cool them, no way to reconstruct them.

. . .

Old news articles make it seem like everybody just gave up on Passbook overnight, but that wasn't the case. A lot of us couldn't let it go that fast. The posts on our Passbook feeds from Mom and Chelsea and everyone else didn't just disappear; they were still there. All the algos like Mom continued chattering away. All the private messages and direct messages remained, and tags and connections and links and app-bots and game requests and anything else that didn't require the participation of a Crystal Drive consciousness kept right on scrolling and posting and moving us to tears until we finally put a stop to it on our end. I couldn't stand seeing your aunt Chelsea's username grayed out when her holiday app wished me a happy Easter, or told me to go fuck myself on Valentine's Day or said "Happy Mother's Day to a real mother," on Mother's Day.

It was just too sad to face, and I wasn't alone. We didn't go back to handset phones right away, but it wasn't long; texting and emailing triggered us. Social media was unbearable. Video games, especially MMORPGs, were sudden and disheartening ghost worlds, full of huge, beautifully-rendered emptiness; a digital desert populated too sparsely to be of any real point besides the seed of unwelcome memories.

Passbook Labs, one of the most profitable companies in history until that summer, attempted to resurrect itself by exploring the possibility of constructing a shielded server

farm on a satellite in high orbit, or better still: on the Moon, where ambient temperature and moisture tolerances would simplify security measures and prevent a loss like Kilroy's from ever happening again. But the technical challenges of this, and of the carbon crystal storage in general, meant it would take decades to bring such a project online. In the meantime we lost interest, and tried our best to un-remember how much we'd come to depend on Passbook, and been hurt when it had failed us. Competitors rushed new solutions to market, proposing to fill the pent-up demand for Posterity, but none proved to be as simple and effective as Passbook. GhosTown's servers experienced an early security breach from a team of Icelandic hackers who permanently overwrote every profile with an algo of Björk. AfterLyfe patented a process to jury people who were still alive and keep copies of users as backups, but the legal—to say nothing of existential—dissonance of being duplicated proved insurmountable and the Subcommittee on Post-Mortal Technology quickly shut them down and banned the live-jury process. With new Posterity juries on the old-style vulnerable servers slowing, and the orbital-server project ultimately scrapped, Passbook was acquired for pennies on the dollar by a developer who rebranded it as W0WE and re-launched it as a platform for promoting live music and concert venues.

16.

I mentioned in the beginning that nostalgia was the thing to watch out for. That's the part that still creeps into this story, despite my best efforts. Even while I write it now, it reads like our whole world just stopped that Tuesday, and when we woke up on Wednesday morning we had to relearn how to be people again. You could be forgiven if you assumed that for us it would've been better to wake up Tuesday morning again and again forever, than have to face the Wednesday, and its sobering questions of economics and personhood and mortality. The mortality alone! We'd never been that close to death, but how could we not see it coming? Sigmund Freud once wrote that you could use the phrase "all men must die" in a logic textbook, but somehow no one ever really saw it coming. What made our loved ones on Passbook think they'd be different? Did Passbook really promise us we could live forever, or were we in truth just making promises to ourselves? Anyone who lives long enough sees people die and fade in their minds like polaroid photographs until the departed become mostly moments of memory, or cherished combinations of forgotten sensation that we occasionally catch whiffs of in some new place or time. And then we feel the pain, and it is sweet and bottomless. Nostos. Home. Algia. Pain. Home-pain. To your mother and me, imperfect and hopeless as it was, the past still feels like home. Maybe it will to you, too, once my grandbaby is born and you learn exactly how little sleep and money you can manage on. But there's no going back; not really. You are what you are now, not what you were, and the past will always just be the past. This is what Kilroy taught us, before he vanished forever and became part of it.

Note from Dad

Pepper rolled a d20 and checked the table in her Player's Handbook to see if she'd survived the trapdoor in the castle's throne room floor. She barely made the skill-check.

"Whew," she said.

"Lucky..." I chided her.

"Bitch please, I'm an elfin ranger; we have naturally fleet footsteps."

"Tell that to the undead wizard in the crypt around the corner."

"What? Noooo."

"Yes."

"Why do you always get to be the Dungeon Master?"

“Because I’m a better storyteller than you. I’ve got more style.”

“*Bullshit.*”

“You want another beer?” I asked her. She batted her eyelashes at me.

I took what was probably an inordinate amount of pride in getting up from our dining room table to get your mother a beer in that old place. It was our first home together: a little apartment in a second-floor walk-up in Andersonville that my dad helped put up the security deposit for. I loved that apartment, and your mom did too. By then I was working full-time at the district. My dad finally did retire after all; he started pulling in money from his special tier, and Mallory, my dad’s assistant coordinator, had taken his job. Not a week later, I got a call from her and she hired me to be the new her. It wasn’t exactly nepotism; there were unfilled administrative positions all over the place now that Passbook Posterity users had vacated. Half of these jobs had been on autopilot for so long that no one remembered who did them, or how to train replacements, and if it was going to be someone stepping into Mallory’s old job, who better than me? Our place in Andersonville is where we lived when we found out you were on the way, and when you were born, though we moved a year or so later. On a side note: never move when you have a one-year-old in the house. Just don’t—trust me on this.

Pepper leaned back in the used dining room chair we’d rescued from an alley, and smiled at me. There was something about that moment that I have stuck in my head. All these years later when I think of your mom, I think of her there like that: under the cheap glass-and-brass chandelier and the 50s-style squared-off plaster ceiling, both of us slowly re-learning how to be hopeful, something we’d maybe never internalized in the first place. She was wearing the most comfortable things she owned: a pair of beat-up bluejeans, a T-shirt

she'd worn so many times that it wasn't black anymore, and a pair of ancient vintage Muppets slippers with Animal sewn onto the toes. There are all these unsatisfactory words for women like her—affable, poised, sultry, contemplative, fetching—but they all fell short. She was, and is, the most thoroughly charming woman I've ever met. She has always been a pretty woman, your mother, but right then, in that moment, she was luminous somehow. I leaned over and kissed her, and she scrunched up her nose.

“Do you think it's kosher for me to be drinking beer when they get here?”

I shrugged, and burped. “Yeah. I mean, beer was a standard piece of babysitting equipment in the old days, right?”

“That's the attitude I like.”

I sat back down and stared at the table full of gaming charts and dice and miniatures in front of us. “All right, so you're in the vestibule of the Temple of Hogar the Slayer and you've evaded the first pitfall. There's a—” The doorbell cut me off.

“Oh shit, that's them!” Pepper said, excitedly. We grinned at each other and went downstairs to meet her brother Blaine and his wife Terri, and their son Nathan who we were babysitting for the very first time this evening. Your cousin Nathan was seven, and we were both excited to have company. After Passbook, Blaine had moved his family back to the Chicago area from somewhere out west, saying he wanted to be closer to Pepper and her parents, who lived on the far South side. We'd been to Mr. and Mrs. Boswick's house several times in the past few months, and they were starting to warm up to me, but it'd been a couple of years since Pepper had seen Blaine and his wife in person, as opposed to just Passbooking them.

"Oh my *God*," Pepper said, when she opened the door. She threw a big squeeze hug on Nathan and looked him up and down. "You can't be my nephew! Baby Nathan was only like," she mimed, "*this big*. You're like a giant Nathan-creature!" Terri smiled behind him, and Blaine had a backpack full of books, toys, and most of a turkey sandwich with several indescribably adorable melon-baller-sized bites taken out of it.

"All right buddy," Blaine said. "You know who's in charge, right?"

Nathan grinned. "Me."

I smirked. "I have a question for you, Nathan, and it's a very serious one."

He looked up at me, suddenly solemn.

"Do you like Legos?"

He smiled.

"Is that a yes?"

He nodded eagerly.

"In that case, I want to show you something I've been building."

I caught Blaine making a funny look at Pepper. She rolled her eyes. "No one in this house is over ten years old."

I flipped on the light to the back patio stairs, descended first, and turned on the main lights.

"*Whoa*." Nathan whispered.

After we'd rescued it, we'd stored the Blackbird at Dad's for a while in pieces before setting it up adjacent to the parking spaces in our alley. There weren't storage units in our new basement, but the building's owner said it was fine as long as it didn't block access to anything. I'd taken over a strip of gravel and weeds that ran the length of the back of the

building, and put the bird up on cinderblocks beneath a giant covering I'd sewn together out of camping tarps from Home Depot. It was safe enough to leave outdoors. Now that it was fully assembled and glued together at the joints, I could just hose it off if it got dirty, and you'd have needed a flatbed semi to steal it. I pulled up the tent stakes holding the tarp down and rolled back the cover. The Blackbird, matte-black, long, sleek, and finished, slid into the porchlight.

"Whoa!" Nathan said. "Can I sit in it?"

Pepper was coming down the stairs behind him. "Um, probably not sweetheart..."

"I think it'd be okay." I said.

She looked at me. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Here, step on this stool."

Nathan climbed into the cockpit and it was almost exactly the right size, a 1/3-scale Cold War super-spyplane for a 1/3-scale pilot. He looked down at me, and then ran his hands over the stubbly plastic of the forward fuselage. I'd slapped an American flag sticker over the black bricks.

"This is the coolest thing I've ever seen." Nathan said, taking it all in.

Pepper came up behind me and put her arm around my waist, tucking her hand into my left back pocket like she does. I hugged her close while Nathan pretended to fire the Blackbird's imaginary laser blasters.

"Could this thing go into space?" he asked.

"Actually, yeah" I said.

"Awesome."

. . .

“Is he sleeping?” I asked Pepper, when she came back from the guest bedroom. We’d put my old futon in there and it pulled out into a sofa bed. Nathan was excited to spend the night.

“I think so, yeah, but shhhhh...” she said.

I blew out a good long breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. It’d been *hours* of questions and games and make-believe and food and television and reluctant bedtime routine and all the while the manic little kid, your cousin Nate, I mean, was circling around for a landing in a house that your mother and I had only just settled into ourselves. You wouldn’t be born for a while still, and we had almost no clue what it took to be parents, but we were learning. Outside, cars bumped past playing Reggaeton and scraped too hard over the speed control humps. Kids, mostly. Weren’t we, all of us, still kids?

“I have no idea how parents do this full time,” I whispered. “After the sixth book, I was like...”

“I know,” your mother said, nodding. I was sitting on the floor and she slid over on the couch and started massaging my shoulders. Her feet crossed into my lap, and her calves wrapped around me.

“Oooh,” I said, arching my neck so she could get to the place where shoulder turns into that sore upper muscle. “Yes please.”

“Oh! I almost forgot!” Pepper said. The hands vanished and she got up.

“Awww, no more rubby-the-shoulder-y?”

“I’ve got something better.”

I looked around. The list of things better than a neckrub from your mom was pretty short. She stepped into the living room, walking toe-heel so the original, 70-year-old hardwood floor joists wouldn't squeak. I felt this for a certainty: if we woke Nate up, we were doomed.

Back she tiptoed a moment later with a large paper grocery bag. It looked too heavy to be food or lingerie, and that was the extent of my guesses. Now I really was curious.

"What've you got there?"

"I found this at my parents' house in their basement. It's older than both of us, but it still works."

She reached into the bag and took out a pair of gray plastic paddles with lime green and purple buttons on them, their cords were made of old, soft polymer and were fraying at the connections. With them came a yellowed-gray console and a handful of cartridges.

"No way." I mouthed, silently. She kissed me.

She set the Super Nintendo down on the floor between us and we just stared at it for a few seconds. I'd played games from the 16-bit consoles before on emulators—who hadn't?—but I'd never actually seen a working SNES before. Your mom knew I loved the old classic video games: the ones with no saves where reflexes were everything and one wrong move meant Game Over. But the Super Nintendo was for refined tastes, beyond the usual flavors of casual fandom. Everyone on earth, including my Dad, had played the original Nintendo games; neo-hipsters in my own day paid obscene amounts of money for functioning vintage NES consoles, or elaborate counterfeits, and ran them through equally-outrageous reproduction cathode ray tube televisions with un-grounded power cables. But the Super Nintendo wasn't a hipster darling, or a toy for a tourist gamer. You didn't have the

Contras or the *Ninja Gaidens* to bring out the bandwagon jumpers in such enormous flocks, and there was only one Mario game, one that had been remade many times on other, better platforms. For the Super Nintendo, you had to reach deeper into the back-catalog of foundational console videogames: *Star Fox*, *F-Zero*...

“*Chrono Trigger*?” I asked. Dared I hope?

“Sadly, no.”

“Awww...”

It was like a taste in my mouth, that feeling of seeing the games and controllers on the floor. I can’t describe it. In Japan, where this console was invented, they weren’t called a Nintendo, or Super Nintendo or NES or any of that; the console was called the *Famicom*, which, like Pokémon, was a transliteration of the English words for *Family Computer*. The Super Nintendo was one of the last video game systems that didn’t connect to anything. There was no built-in modem, no Wi-Fi, no online play of any kind. No memory cards, even. It was an obliging and loyal servant of the living room, meant to be played by a family. It even came boxed with two controllers instead of just one. Super Famicom.

“*Street Fighter II*,” Pepper offered, holding up a cartridge whose label had peeled off.

I nodded. *Definitely*.

I plugged in the console and handed her the second controller. We sat there for a minute in the blank glow of an unused TV input, and she turned the controller over in her hands, feeling the smoothness of the edges and testing the buttons with a fingernail to see how springy they were. The Super Nintendo controllers were rounded on the edges instead of square like the original NES, ostensibly to make them more comfortable to the hand, but I suspect also to make them less of a hard-edged projectile when the frustration became

unbearable. I put my hand on Pepper's knee, my fingertips resting across the denim seam, and she turned the bottom edge of her T-shirt inside out and wiped at her eyes with it. Nostalgia will get you every time.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Yes."

I said a silent prayer and slid the power button into the ON position. The standby light came on and the familiar loading screen logo came up, a message in a bottle from a more hopeful time, long before we knew where all of this would take us. I pressed START.

"No crying if I beat you," Pepper said, elbowing me.

"Oh right." I play-frowned at her. "I suppose you want dibs on Chun Li, too."

"My ass," she said. "*Hadouken!*"

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Department of English
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Ph.D. in English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017.
M.A. in Writing & Publishing, DePaul University, 2013.
B.S. in Biology and Sociology, St. Lawrence University, 2001.

Research Interests:

Fiction Writing, Utopian Studies, Theories of Modernization, American Literary Naturalism, Age Studies, First-Year Writing

Academic Appointments:

2017: Teaching Assistant, Center for International Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2014-2016: Project Assistant, Center for International Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2013-present: Lecturer, Department of English, Wilbur Wright College
2012-2013: Coordinator for Writing Groups, DePaul University Center for Writing-Based Learning

Courses Taught

English 102: Composition II (6 sections)
English 101: Composition I (2 sections)
English 100: Basic Writing Skills (3 sections)
English ARC: Accelerated Reading and Composition (1 section)
Global Studies 202: Globalization and Technology (1 section)

University Activities

- Assessment Cohort Chair for English 101, (Wilbur Wright College, 2017).
- Coordination of annual interdisciplinary conference for the Center for International Education: "Diversities" (2017), "Water-Centric Cities" (2016), "Translation" (2015).
- Co-coordination of CIE's U.S. Department of Education Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Grant, 2016-2017 academic year.
- Founded DePaul University's ongoing biannual reading series "Aloud!" in 2013.

Editing

2013-2017: Associate Editor, Cream City Review
2008-2011: Editor, Silverthought Press

Honors, Awards, and Grants

Michael Schoenecke Travel Grant, PCA/ACA, 2016.
Chancellor's Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014.

Outstanding Service to Adult Learners Award, DePaul University, 2013.
Independent Publisher (IPPY) Book Award in Fantasy/Science Fiction, 2009.
Independent Publisher (IPPY) Book Award in Fantasy/Science Fiction, 2006.
Frank Augsbury Scholarship, St. Lawrence University, 1997.

Professional Organizations

Modern Language Association
Association for Writers & Writing Programs
Society for Utopian Studies
Popular Culture/American Culture Association
Midwest Popular Culture/American Culture Association
Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association
Chicago Writers Association

Publication

Books-

Long Live Us. Chicago: Chicago Center for Literature and Photography, 2013.
The Damnation of Memory. Philadelphia: Silverthought Press, 2011.
Life After Sleep. Chicago: Chicago Center for Literature and Photography, 2011.
Thank You, Death Robot (Ed.) Philadelphia: Silverthought Press, 2009.
Red Ivy Afternoon. Philadelphia: Silverthought Press, 2006.

Peer-Reviewed Criticism-

"Growing Old in Utopia: From Age to Otherness in American Literary Utopias." *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Conway: The Athenaeum Press of Coastal Carolina University (1:3), 2017 (forthcoming).

Selected Short Fiction-

"Red Rocket." *CCLaP Journal*; Chicago Center for Literature and Photography, 2013.
"Red Rocket." *Daddy Cool*. Phoenix: Artistically Declined, 2013.
"She Was Never Free to Begin With." *American Wasteland*. Chicago: Chicago Center for Literature and Photography, 2011.
"Cameron's Encyclopedia" and "The Cabana." *Silverthought: Ignition, a speculative fiction anthology*. Ed. Paul Hughes. Philadelphia: Silverthought Press, 2005.

Selected Essays/Contributing Writer-

"Understanding *Dracula*." *The Weeklings*: Greg Olear, 2014.
"Are You Dead, or Just Not on Facebook?" *The Weeklings*: Greg Olear, 2013.
"What Happened to Sexy Supermarket Fiction?" *Salon.com*: Anna North, 2013.
"Hazardous Words, or: I'm Going to Regret this, I Just Know It." *Passages North*: Northern Michigan University, 2013.
"Guerilla Reading." *Upstart Crows II: True Stories*. Ed. Daniel Reid and Jarrod Harelik. Waco: Wide Array, 2010.

Selected Editing, Copyediting, and Manuscript Preparation-

Petro, Patrice, and Kennan Ferguson. *After Capitalism: Horizons of Finance, Culture, and*

Citizenship. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
Intersections, Vol 5.: Diversities. Center for International Education, 2017.
Intersections, Vol 4.: Water Centric Cities. Center For International Education, 2016.
Intersections, Vol 3.: Translation. Center For International Education, 2015.
Tanzer, Ben. *Orphans*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013.
Bainbridge, Jim. *Human Sister*. Philadelphia: Silverthought Press, 2010.

Digital project-

Breakfast With the Author (2010-2012), video podcast series featuring Chicago authors; incl. Patrick Somerville, Lindsay Hunter, Davis Schneiderman, Gina Frangello, Kathleen Rooney, Kyle Beachy, and Ben Tanzer.

Conferences

"*The Walking Dead*: Nightmare Parenting in the Great Recession." Society for Utopian Studies. St. Petersburg, FL 2016.

"All Your Recursivity Are Belong To Us: Inviting Video Games into First-Year Writing." Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association, Pasadena, CA 2016.

"*The Walking Dead*: Nightmare Parenting in the Great Recession." Midwest Popular Culture/American Culture Association. Chicago, IL 2016.

"Bring Your Daughter to the End of the World: *The Last of Us* and the Austerity Parent." Popular Culture/American Culture Association. Seattle, WA, 2016.

"Growing Old in Utopia: Age as Identity Politics in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*." Society for Utopian Studies. Pittsburgh, PA, 2015.

"Tell Your Friends: An Exploration and Modeling of Word-of-Mouth Marketing in the University Center for Writing-based Learning." Presentation at plenary retreat, DePaul University Center for Writing-Based Learning. Chicago, IL, 2013.

Selected Guest Lectures, Readings, and Press

"With Darlin in the Bootheel," United We Read, Woodland Pattern, 2016.

Guest seminar in short fiction, Wilbur Wright College, 2016.

"Earthlings," River West Public House, 2015.

"Earthlings" and "A Dearth of Immediacy in the Dream House," DePaul University, 2015.

"Character Brunch at the Crystal Palace," United We Read, Boswell Books, 2014.

"Red Rocket," The CCLaP Sessions, Studio 505, 2013.

"Long Live Us," Guest reader series, Evanston Public Library 2013.

Keynote, release of Pinnacle-Award winning literary journal *The Wright Side*, 2013.

Workshop on writing dialogue, Wilbur Wright College, 2013.

Writing speculative and science fiction, guest series, Antioch Public Library, 2013.

"5 Indie Chicago Authors and Publishers to Watch" Jessica Cage, *CBS Chicago*, 2012.

"E-Books in Chicago" Jonathan Messinger, *Time Out Chicago*, 2011.

"Bad Boy Books," Helen Kossler, *Oak Park Journal*, 2011.