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Adam Christopher Lippert

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“CLARITY” AND “THE ROMANTIC MARVIN MILKWEED”

By

Adam Christopher Lippert  
B. S., Central Michigan University, 2012

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
In English

Department of English  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2016

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A Thesis Approved on

April 8, 2016

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## ABSTRACT

### “CLARITY” AND “THE ROMANTIC MARVIN MILKWEED”

Adam Christopher Lippert

February 3, 2016

My creative thesis will be comprised of two separate works of fiction. “Clarity” will occupy most of the project, and “The Romantic Marvin Milkweed” will be a shorter work that brings the cumulative number of pages to the required length.

“Clarity” is set seven months after the birth of Alge and Esmeralda Bay’s stillborn son, and features the blatant alienation, disconnect, and frustration that is now present in their marriage. The story is observed from the limited third-person point-of-view, and follows Alge throughout a day that will alter the direction of his life. Alge is confronted by the consequences of his actions, but is also forced to react to a few very extreme decisions Esmeralda makes.

The story would be considered realism, until the climax of the story, where Alge experiences a surreal hallucination because his wife placed drugs in a bottle of absinthe she knew that he would drink. But since the story is experienced through Alge’s perspective, the scene is still realistic because it could be something he actually hallucinated while under the influence of psychedelic drugs.

One aspect of “Clarity” that needs attention is the complexity and depth of each character, especially Esmeralda. At the moment, Esmeralda seems like a horrible person.

I need to revise her character and highlight more of her favorable attributes so she is not portrayed as a villain, but simply a complex individual that is working through these unfathomable hardships, similarly to Alge. To accomplish this, I plan on inserting a few more specific details about Esmeralda's personality and memories that remind Alge of the reasons he loves his wife. Also, Alice Valentine is a local artist who Alge has been working closely with recently. Alice doesn't actually appear in the story, and I intend to keep it that way. However, I plan on adding more instances where Alge thinks about Alice and reflects on his relationship with her. I still think that Alice should not actually make an appearance in the story, but her presence should be more prominent. Eventually, she will come to stand as a symbol of hope to Alge, just as the Seurat painting he purchases does before Esmeralda taints it.

There are many writers that affected the creation of "Clarity," one of which is T. C. Boyle, especially his story "The Lie." This story depicts a man that undergoes a personal crisis. The protagonist tells his boss a lie to escape work for the day, and progressively over the next few days, his lies become more severe. Eventually, he relays that his infant son is dead, which is a lie. And the consequences of the protagonist's deception alter his life drastically. The protagonist acts on the dissatisfaction with the monotony of his life and marriage that has built within him over time, until he erupts. I attribute the moment in "Clarity" when Alge violently smacks his sleeping wife's ass as a similar action. The distance and disconnect between Alge and Esmeralda over the last seven months, since their stillborn son was born, has finally built enough where Alge cannot control it any longer. He purely acts, without regard to the consequences, and the following events change his life.

“The Romantic Marvin Milkweed” is about a quixotic librarian that has fallen in love with one of his employees. Zoe doesn’t know that Marvin is in love with her, not even that he is interested. It is a story about unrequited love and the extremes a lonely, fanciful man will endure to express his affections to a young lady.

An aspect of the story that needs attention is Zoe’s characterization. Right now, Zoe just exists. There is nothing unique about her that would justify Marvin’s deep adoration. I need to revise the scenes that include Zoe, so the reader understands why Marvin loves her so much. His actions need to be understandable and relatable, which is not the case at the moment. It appears that Marvin loves Zoe for no good reason, simply because she is cute and he spends several hours a week near her, and I think Marvin’s unrequited love would have more of a significance if the reasons behind his motives were more apparent.

A work that influenced “The Romantic Marvin Milkweed” is T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” I tried to emulate the irony of Eliot’s poem, in which he creates a poem that is a *love song*, where the protagonist is awkward and does not seem like a traditional romantic character at all. I thought replicating this type of irony in “The Romantic Marvin Milkweed” would increase the meaning and potency of Marvin’s love, and also create opportunity for humor. To make Marvin unromantic, he wears an eye patch that he doesn’t need. He has a glass eye that looks quite natural, but he chooses to wear an eye patch because it makes him feel like a rugged and dangerous pirate, which he believes women look for in a lover. Also, Marvin is not very socially apt. He still lives in his parent’s basement and looks for companionship in books, which is why he is so



fanciful and aloof. Therefore, the irony created in the story makes Marvin's actions; although silly and strange, seem like very powerful gestures of love.

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## CLARITY

We live together, we act on, and react to, one another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves. The martyrs go hand in hand into the arena; they are crucified alone. Embraced, the lovers, desperately try to fuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence; in vain. By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude.

—Aldous Huxley from  
*The Doors of Perception*

## I.

Alge stood in the thin channel between the wall and bed. He licked his lips and glared down at his wife's sleeping body with bleary, feral eyes. She was absolutely dead to the world. And she was such a busy sleeper. Throughout the night, the silk teddy Esmeralda wore had wriggled up to her chest, and she'd pushed the comforter to the foot of the bed so now only her toes were tucked beneath the covers. She wasn't wearing panties. Esmeralda was completely bare from toes to breasts. She lay on her back, hips slightly twisted so that her knees rested on each other and half of her butt hovered above the mattress. Alge allowed his eyes to graze over his wife's body. Everything about Esmeralda screamed beauty and sexual allure. She had smooth, slender legs that most men would kill to rake their fingers down, her stomach was toned, and the faint imprint of her ribcage was visible on either side of her chest. It didn't look like she'd given birth almost a year ago.

Alge kinked his neck and looked at the thin strip of Esmeralda's Brazilian wax. He was disgusted. Menace flooded into his face. And he couldn't fathom how anybody could sleep so fucking deeply. On the bedside table near Esmeralda's head, her cell phone had been barking like a malicious dog for twenty minutes.

At 7:30, Alge's alarm had surged to life and flooded the bedroom with the electric din of imitated quacking. The alarm on Esmeralda's cell phone erupted almost simultaneously with his, although hers slightly lagged behind, so the bedroom sounded

crowded with a rabid dog nipping at the heels of a laryngitic duck. Alge awoke immediately, filled with a potent blend of angst and grogginess because he'd only crawled into bed five hours ago. He reached over to his bedside table. And after a few moments of fumbling with his phone, it lay quiet. But the crazed barking from Esmeralda's phone persisted. It seemed to rape the peaceful morning silence that Alge had expected and that filled the bedroom every other day. His subconscious nagged at him, and told him that something was horribly wrong because normally Esmeralda turned off the alarm immediately, rolled her lazy ass over, and continued to snooze the morning away. But now, she lay there like a corpse.

Alge placed a finger beneath his wife's nose and trained his eyes on her chest. She was still breathing.

"Bitch," he muttered under his breath.

"Bitch," he said again a little louder when he was more confident that she was still unconscious and couldn't hear him.

Because of Esmeralda's blaring alarm, Alge didn't get to hear the down-comforter crackle as he got out of bed this morning, and he loved that sound the way some people love a cat's purring or the soft patter of rain on window-glass. He could just imagine the goose feathers bending and poking at the comforter's fabric. But this morning, all Alge could hear when he peeled back the covers and lowered his feet onto the chilly floorboards was mechanical barking, which compounded his anger because the only reason he was leaving this comfortable sanctuary warm with sleep was his wife's irresponsibility and selfishness. Was it really *that* hard for her to wake up in the mornings? Alge shuffled to the master bathroom with slit and vacant eyes. His face wore

an expression of brainless rage. If Alge were doing the same thing outside, along Chicago's sidewalks, it's possible that people would actually think he were a freshly infected zombie and sprint away for fear of being eaten alive.

Alge stopped in the bathroom's doorway.

"Wake up, dearest," he turned and said with as much ire and condescension he could fit into his voice. Then, he slammed the door behind him. Most mornings began as a milder version of this. If Alge didn't wake up earlier than necessary and force his wife into facing the day, Esmeralda would be late for work three or four days a week. Typically this morning exchange didn't bother Alge very much. Things had been difficult over the last year, and he tried his damndest to be caring and patient, but today was different.

Alge had been up late, crawling into bed a mere five hours ago. He had driven to Louisville yesterday to attend an estate sale. Alge owned an art gallery. He sifted through websites and magazines almost every day to find quality, affordable paintings, and two months ago a very peculiar item caught his eye. Francois Philippe Seurat had named the picture: *What Horror Hides Behind a Mirror? Clarity*. But to save breath, Alge simply acknowledged it as *Clarity*. The price had been set at \$11,000. It was obvious that the estate's inheritor, who had decided to oversee the sale without hiring professionals, had no idea how rare the painting was, or how much it was worth. Not many people did. *Clarity* was a hidden gem, and only the true art connoisseurs knew its fantastic lore. So Alge called immediately and spoke to Jessica Shaw, the daughter of the deceased.

Alge explained that he owned The Bay Gallery in Chicago and knew much more about the picture than she, which were both true. He also explained that he wanted the

painting as a gift for his mother's rapidly approaching birthday and that the appraisal was tremendously high, both of which were lies.

"I know this isn't the way these things typically operate," Alge had said through the phone. "But, I'd appreciate it if you'd consider selling it to me before the sale. I'll pay \$5,000 in cash, but only because I'm offering before the actual sale starts, and because my mother would love the piece. Let's just say she has peculiar taste. Otherwise, you can realistically expect the painting to fetch no more than \$3,700. People who know about this painting wouldn't pay more than that. I know you must be dealing with a lot, and this way, it might put some money in your pocket and save you some hassle."

"Let me think it over," Jessica replied. She sounded very skeptical. And Alge was certain that he'd end up buying it during the sale. He'd be able to talk her down, but he wasn't sure how low. Either way, he was desperate to own that painting. "Actually, I'm considering keeping it as an heirloom. I'll call you and let you know."

A few days later Jessica Shaw called. And her mood had drastically changed.

"You can have it," she said. "What'd you offer? 5,000? Fine. I'll send it out first thing tomorrow morning. What's your address?"

"No!" Alge said, horrified. "You can't send a masterpiece like *Clarity* through a regular delivery company."

Alge was very curious to learn the reason for her change of heart, but he wasn't going to bring it up.

"Then, how do you plan on getting it?" Jessica asked.

"I'll pick it up when you host the estate sale. Cash in hand."

Alge arrived at the Shaw estate a little while before the sale began. He figured it'd only take a few minutes to exchange his money for the painting, and then he'd head home, making it back before midnight. But Alge was disappointed to learn that he would have to wait until the sale's conclusion to retrieve his prize. This tactic didn't make sense to him. In this case, why didn't Ms. Shaw just leave the painting up for sale?

Alge waited for three hours, perusing the house. And at first it was kind of fun. He pretended to be very wealthy and studied every item as if he were an interested buyer, but the deceased didn't have that much of value. There was a gold, antique pocket-watch that Alge adored and a marble chess set that was very impressive, but not much else. He couldn't even look at *Clarity* because it was stashed somewhere in the garage, sloppily fixed in brown paper as if Jessica had wrapped it while panicked. Those few hours that Alge meandered through the house stretched into an eternity. Only when the sale had concluded and everyone had gone did Jessica retrieve *Clarity* from behind a pile of cardboard boxes. Her hands twitched nervously while snatching the money from Alge's hand. He noticed Jessica's bizarre behavior. But he was trying to leave as soon as possible. It was already getting late. So, Alge packaged the painting in a layer of bubble-wrap, placed it in a protective case, and left. He didn't get back on the road until 8 o'clock, and home until 2:30 a.m.

The return drive was horrible. Alge's eyes strained to focus on the road, his eyelids drooped, and a couple of times the rumble strip at the edge of the highway caught him dozing off. But he made it back to Chicago in one piece. Overall, the trip was a success. Alge was now the immensely proud owner of a genuine painting by Francois Philippe Seurat, nephew of the infamous Georges Seurat.



“Damn you,” Alge muttered while drying his body with a towel. Even after a shower, his thoughts were still foggy and his temples throbbed contemporaneously with his heart. “At least some of the time why can’t you be less of a lazy weasel.”

Esmeralda’s alarm still blared on and on and on in the bedroom. The racket leaked through the seams along the bathroom doorframe. Was she dead? Alge had checked to make sure she was breathing, but had he imagined the slight breeze against his finger and the movement of her chest? The phone wasn’t two feet away from Esmeralda’s left ear. How could she not hear it? Most mornings, Alge couldn’t escape feeling at least a minor disbelief at the depth of his wife’s slumber. Now, his slight disconcert had boiled into a furious resentment. And he began wondering about Alice Valentine. She was a local artist that Alge had been working with throughout the last month. Today was Wednesday, and Friday he was hosting a private exhibition of her work at The Bay Gallery. If he were married to Alice instead of Esmeralda, would she lie in bed like a husk of humanity too? Probably not. Alge imagined Alice popping out of bed with a grin, ten minutes before the alarm came to life. Maybe she would have even joined him in the shower. He tried to picture Alice acting like a teenager that didn’t want to wake up for school, and couldn’t.

Alge snatched his toothbrush from the holder, but before cleaning his teeth, he flicked the latch on the doorknob to lock it as if this would somehow hush the alarm. Alge finished getting ready in the bathroom and stormed into the room. He halted when standing between the bed and wall, above his wife’s body.

Alge swiped a finger across the screen of Esmeralda’s phone, and the dog stopped barking as if kicked by an angry neighbor. All of a sudden the room seemed unsettling.

The silence felt untrustworthy. Alge was hesitant to revive his wife from sleep. In truth, he didn't want to be near her, and he knew that once Esmeralda was conscious and hustling around the apartment, life would become a harried frenzy. He thought of last night when returning to Chicago. The streets had looked desolate. No other headlights twinkled through the starless night. No one was hurrying along the sidewalk. The scene seemed peaceful, but in an eerie, abnormal way that made the hairs on the nape of his neck prickle. *The calm before the storm* Alge had thought.

As he stood and watched his wife, Alge just wanted to leave. He was itching to see his new painting. He had been so tired last night that he rushed it into the gallery and locked it in his office without unwrapping it. Alge thought about how the picture was now lying on his desk, suffocating under the bubble-wrap and brown paper. A coffin came to mind, and Alge cringed. Such a masterpiece deserved to be worshipped, not buried. Alge's inkling to get downstairs and liberate his prize increased, but first he'd have deal with Esmeralda.

Alge swiveled around, pulling open the window curtains. Morning sunlight spilled through the window and fell directly on Esmeralda's face. It was so bright that Alge had to avert his gaze. He drifted a few feet toward the bedside table until he had gained an angle on the sunlight.

Alge would have found his wife's nakedness and vulnerability sexy before Esmeralda had given birth. He would've wanted to wake her with intimate kisses and begin the day with sex, but now he was a storm cloud looming above her, swelling with malignance and cheeks darkening into a shade of scarlet.

Alge stared for several minutes. He let the emotions from the last year roil within him and seethe to the surface. He'd had enough. Being in such a tumultuous marriage was exhausting.

“Wake up,” Alge growled.

He flattened his hand and smacked Esmeralda's ass violently.

The noise hung in the air like awkwardness.

Esmeralda jolted upright screaming. She was finally awake.

## II.

Alge sat at the kitchen table. He'd withstood the initial flurry of Esmeralda's bewildered outrage by scampering to the kitchen and pouring himself a bowl of cornflakes, which now sat before him untouched. From the bedroom, the closet door slammed. A clothes hanger clanged against the wall and rattled on the floor. Alge desperately tried to ignore these accusing noises that seemed to point at him. He stared ahead until the kitchen became a blur while contemplating what had possessed him earlier.

All of a sudden, he'd exploded. That was the only explanation: he'd exploded. Logic and rationale hadn't existed for that brief span of time, until the smack resonated throughout the bedroom and the sting in his palm pulled him back into reality. Alge was like a young hunter caught up in the thrill, and hadn't fully understood that he'd murdered one of nature's innocent creatures in cold blood until staring down at the mangled carcass. Consequences and guilt were only very real afterthoughts.

Alge had never so much as ripped a hair out of Esmeralda's head as a playful annoyance. What had he been thinking? Sure, things had been rocky. It seemed like every time he and Esmeralda spoke, someone got extremely frustrated and walked away cursing under their breath. But Alge would never hurt her. She was still his wife, no matter how horrible things got.

Esmeralda stamped through the apartment in a frantic rush while getting ready for work. This was no different than any other morning. Her high-heels pounded on the wooden floor like a hammer. The blow dryer had been whirring off and on for the last five minutes, and the radio in the bedroom was turned on. It was nearly impossible to sleep-in during a weekday because of Esmeralda's commotion.

"I'm sorry," Alge said as his wife entered the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets. She plopped the cinnamon bread on the counter, snatched the butter from the fridge, and started making toast. Esmeralda seemed extra cautious to show Alge her back. Alge watched while making his eyes as large and sad as possible. His eyes had always enchanted Esmeralda. He used to catch her prolonging each shared look for as long as possible. She described them as bizarrely beautiful. Alge's eyes were a sparkling shade of pale blue. So Esmeralda would have a better look, Alge removed his stylish horn-rimmed glasses.

"Dear?" He said. "Truly, I'm so . . . I just feel awful. So much. I don't know what came over me."

Alge flirted with the idea of making up some excuse for his actions. Temporary insanity was the one he kept returning to, but this seemed like overkill, not to mention a blatant lie that would only pour gasoline on lively flames. Alge also considered claiming that he'd been sleepwalking. People did all kinds of crazy stuff while sleepwalking. Years ago, Alge had even read a newspaper article about a boy that swore, under oath, that he'd been sleepwalking when he killed his sleeping parents. But again, this excuse had too many flaws. And Alge knew that fabricating an explanation would only worsen the circumstances. He was extremely sorry and wanted Esmeralda to know it.

Esmeralda finished making her toast and put everything away. She used her fingertips to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, which was a subconscious habit of hers. The way she did this was a very accurate reflection her mood. Now, her fingers worked in an aggressive flick.

“Sweetie, I’m very sorry,” Alge said while fidgeting with his wedding band. He imagined that Alice would have accepted his apology without hesitation. Of course, he probably wouldn’t have been so upset with her, because Alice wouldn’t have acted like a stubborn child.

“Oh, now you want to talk?” Esmeralda retorted. “I’ve been trying to talk to you for weeks and weeks. And every time I do, you stare at me like an idiot and say nothing.”

“Try to talk? All you do is nag at me.”

Esmeralda had been trying to start conversations more often, but only about mundane matters of daily life. Alge didn’t want to discuss his day, or hear about Esmeralda’s. Why couldn’t they just have fun like they did before Oscar was born.

Esmeralda stomped into the living room without saying anything else. The sole word he could understand among the flourishes of Portuguese spilling out of her mouth was his actual name: Algernon, like a vexed mother using her child’s full name for effect. Obviously from her tone, Esmeralda was cursing and griping without limits, which she could do because Alge didn’t speak more than twenty words of Portuguese, even after four years of marriage.

Esmeralda’s parents had emigrated from Lisbon when she was three. Both her English and Portuguese were perfect.

Once upon a time, while still living out a fairytale as newlyweds, Esmeralda had tried to teach him. Although, the lessons hadn't lasted long. Esmeralda had no teaching experience. But more importantly, she didn't have any patience. She would speak too fast and occasionally skip fundamental information like verb conjugation and sentence structure, assuming Alge already knew these crucial details, and when he still had no idea what Esmeralda was saying after several repetitions, she would march out of the room, mouth foaming with foreign obscenities. Eventually Alge quit prompting to learn. And Esmeralda stopped caring whether he became bilingual. Then, Portuguese-speaking was almost strictly used as a way to spice up their sex-life. They even tried role-playing.

About two years ago, they pretended Esmeralda was a European tourist and Alge was an irresistible local that offered to show her around the city.

Alge had descended the steps into a small, yet eloquent place known for the bourbon selection. Neither of them had been there before. He spotted Esmeralda sitting at the bar. Her back was turned toward him. She gazed around, seemingly unaware, at the hundreds of bottles on display. The red dress she wore clung tightly to her exquisite figure. It was partially backless and had a slit high up her thigh. That dress stimulated his imagination even though he already knew intimately what lay underneath it. Alge noticed how soft Esmeralda's chestnut hair looked as he approached, and how it seemed to gleam despite the dull lighting. She grabbed a loose strand of hair and guided it innocently behind her ear. Her lips formed a playful smile.

*Damn, Alge thought. My God, I can't believe I'm married to this woman.*

"Excuse me miss," Alge said. "Is this seat taken?"

Esmeralda only shook her head and shrugged a shoulder. A half-drunk glass of red wine sat before her. Alge took the barstool next to her and ordered a neat glass of expensive bourbon. He wore jeans and a plaid button-down shirt that didn't coincide with his typical choice of attire, but in order to make this fantasy authentic, he wanted to act like a stereotypical American. Alge hoped this marital game would be exciting and fun, but most of all, special. This was the first night they were trying to conceive a baby.

Alge glanced over when his glass of bourbon arrived and asked Esmeralda if she came here often. He couldn't think of another generic comment that one stranger would say to another, but this one worked perfectly. He could've asked if Esmeralda had heard about the Pope's recent spell of explosive diarrhea and it still would've been the perfect conversation starter, solely because of Esmeralda's reply. She responded in slow, drawn out Portuguese. It was the way an adult would answer a toddler. Somehow, it's a common belief that sounding words out will help translate them into another language.

The couple chatted back and forth. Esmeralda made exaggerated hand gestures while speaking her exotic-sounding Portuguese. Her mahogany eyes were caring and inquisitive. Her lips seemed bare without any lipstick. In that moment, Alge wanted so desperately to kiss her, but restrained himself so as not to ruin the illusion. Esmeralda was doing a magnificent job of seeming out of place, like an actual foreigner. And she seemed too beautiful compared to the women across the room, who wore jeans and long-sleeved blouses. The other women's bodies were bloated and lumpy. Their make-up looked as if slathered on with a dripping paintbrush. Esmeralda was the sole person in the bar drinking wine.



It was apparent from the look in her eyes that Esmeralda loved him so much. Alge's heart was swollen with contentment.

It was a Thursday night in early December.

Three or four drinks later, Alge led the stunning lady to Chicago's Millennium Park. His hand rested on her lower back as they walked. Periodically, they peeked to the side and giggled when their eyes met.

Since all Esmeralda had to wear was the red dress and a black pea coat, they stopped at Macy's along the way and Alge bought her a pair of mittens, long wool socks, and a winter hat. It was 8 o'clock when they arrived at Millennium Park. A look of enchantment showed on Esmeralda's face as she followed Alge through the park and gazed up at the illumined skyscrapers. The recently purchased hat, coupled with her expression of awe made her look like a child truly staring at the stars for the first time. It was an expression of pure joy, unadulterated by grown-up worries such as money and work and fleeting time. Alge knew that these were the emotions Esmeralda was experiencing, because he felt the same way.

Their stroll through the park concluded at *The Bean*. They stood under it and watched the image of them warp into silver ripples. Alge moved closer to the sculpture and held out his hand.

"Hey look, I'm flicking the bean," he said while doing so.

When they moved over to the railing, Alge tapped Esmeralda's arm and motioned to the platform below, which transformed into an outdoor ice rink during the winter. His smile pleaded Esmeralda to join him on the ice. And after a moment of contemplation,

she conceded with a playful nod. But she also shrugged, as if to suggest that she didn't know how.

Alge held on to Esmeralda's arm tightly so he could bear her weight at a moment's notice. She did good, only actually falling two or three times. The rest were just stumbles where Alge was able to catch her in his arms and hold her until she could regain a footing.

Afterward, and although they were speaking mostly through gestures, Alge convinced Esmeralda to walk back to his apartment for the night. They had another drink in the living room before shuffling to the bedroom, hand-in-hand, to make passionate, romantic love. It was around that time they conceived a stillborn infant named Oscar Raphael Bay.

Now, over the past year, Portuguese only exited Esmeralda's mouth when she was fuming mad.

Alge sat at the kitchen table while Esmeralda hid in the living room and ate breakfast. His mushy cereal floated in the bowl like uneaten flakes of fish food. Alge thought about how all of their problems had originated with the death of their baby. Before that, they were deeply in love. Alge screwed his eyes shut and tried desperately not to remember. That nightmare belonged printed on the pages of a sickening horror story, not within his memory. But everything reminded him of it, especially Esmeralda. Alge knew that it wasn't her fault. But he couldn't, no matter how hard he consciously tried, stop from blaming her.

Alge remembered shuffling backwards into a corner of the hospital room. Metal clanged as he knocked a tray of medical instruments onto the floor. He'd just heard the

news. And he was shell-shocked. Alge's mind couldn't process the information. Dead? What did the doctor mean: dead? The doctor and nurses carried on, bustling to and fro as if everything were normal.

"Push," they instructed. "Come on, push."

They acted like Esmeralda were giving birth to their son Oscar, who would exit the womb screaming and crying like any other child, not a lifeless sack of flesh.

"We need to get this baby out, quickly," the doctor pleaded to Esmeralda. "Or we'll have even more complications. This could grow increasingly dangerous. Do you understand?"

Alge huddled in the corner and watched with a wide, innocuous stare as a raspy-voiced nurse commanded Esmeralda to push. Esmeralda screamed. She took a short break and panted heavily like someone lost in the desert. She screamed again, and again, and again, and after several more of these intervals Alge could see a tiny body slide out from his wife's vagina. A miracle had become an abomination. Grotesque clumps of burgundy slime covered the small pink, silent, motionless baby. His stomach turned, and Alge doubled over and vomited on the floor.

Alge pushed himself up from the kitchen table so quickly that some of the milk in his cereal bowl sloshed over the brim. It was only 8:30 a.m., and Alge didn't normally head downstairs to his art gallery until 10, but this morning was different. He needed a distraction. Alge remembered his new painting. Yes, the Francois Philippe Seurat. He had been waiting for this day for a long time. To Alge, it was more than a picture. It stood for stability, hope, and appreciation, which were things that had been lacking from his life over the last year.

Alge dug into his pocket and laid everything out on the table. His key ring, wallet, and a few receipts sat before him. He was looking for money. But there was only change, which he set down on the table and left for Esmeralda. She probably wouldn't even notice it, but Alge left it as a token of his guilt. Alge walked through the living room and left for the day, without lifting his eyes from the carpet, and without saying goodbye.

### III.

At 11:30 am, Esmeralda made an unexpected visit to Alge's art gallery. She arrived as Alge was following Mrs. Floater from painting to painting. Mrs. Floater would stop before each, shuffle forward until her nose was within a few inches of the canvas, adjust her glasses, and then step farther away. She performed this habit for every painting she observed, and felt the need to explain the reason behind it almost every visit.

"This way, I examine the painting from every angle," she'd tell Alge. "A famous painter taught me to view art this way, so I can both acknowledge the forethought of each brushstroke, and also appreciate the overall affect of the piece."

The sixty-five year old lady hobbled into The Bay Gallery at least once a week, sometimes more, which puzzled Alge because there was only enough wall-space for twenty-five paintings, but even that amount would make the walls look crowded and unorganized. And Alge didn't replace them very often, only when a painting was purchased, or when there was a private event. Alge sold artwork by the quality, not the quantity. So, Alge wondered if Mrs. Floater ever got bored of contemplating the purchase of the same paintings over and over and over.

Alge thought it was funny that Mrs. Floater always wore a solid colored dress. Today she wore pale yellow. And she started every visit with chitchat about some frivolous topic that didn't directly affect either of their lives, like the progress of a new skyscraper that was under construction. Never anything personal. In fact, Alge didn't

know a single thing about Mrs. Floater, except for the things he could visually discern. Mrs. Floater wore a wedding ring, but never referenced having a husband. In fact, Alge had a strong suspicion that she wasn't actually married. He couldn't imagine her ever making personal sacrifices, or having the patience and dedication required to stay in a marriage when things got rough, like Alge had over the past year. Yes. He was almost positive that Mrs. Floater wore the wedding ring simply for social purposes. She seemed that hungry for attention and desperate to fit in. Every time Alge saw her ring he was deeply insulted.

Alge assumed that Mrs. Floater was wealthy from the jewelry she wore. She had a large, expensive sapphire ring with matching earrings that she wore every visit. Except, she didn't have them on today. Alge often wondered how there was room for all the paintings Mrs. Floater had purchased over the last year, and imagined that every wall in her apartment was covered with a disjunctive smorgasbord of paintings.

Mrs. Floater's nose was currently ten inches away from a surrealist painting of vultures pecking at a gazelle's innards. It looked like a terrifying hallucination.

"I'll never understand the inclination to create something so gruesome," Mrs. Floater said to the painting. She often talked to the paintings, which unnerved Alge for some reason. She spoke as if it had some-type of inner consciousness that only she were aware of. Mrs. Floater's favorite category of art was Italian Renaissance. Alge's was Neo-Impressionism. "You poor little thing. I'm afraid I'll never understand dears like you. It's not your fault, sweetie. But you were created in dreadful, dreadful taste. Horrific."

As soon as Alge spotted his wife, he started toward her without excusing himself from Mrs. Floater's company. Esmeralda wore a smile that radiated glee. She wasn't wearing her usual tight-lipped smirk that Alge had become accustomed to over the last year. As if he'd forgotten that Esmeralda had teeth, Alge was taken aback. She gave him a long kiss when he approached. It was nice. Esmeralda had been trying more and more to reconnect with him lately. She'd been going out to dinner and movies with friends, and practically begged Alge to accompany her. But he wasn't up for it yet. Alge felt that something must be terribly wrong, because he hadn't seen Esmeralda smile like this in ages. She wore a short, white sundress that had a thick stripe of red along the bottom of the skirt, and she'd applied a light dusting of make-up as if for an important date.

"Hi," Alge said, confused.

"Hi yourself. Well?"

"What are you doing here?" Alge said, a little more sternly than intended. He looked at his watch and saw that Esmeralda would typically still be working. Normally, her lunch started at one.

She shook her fingertips through her hair, and tucked a loose strand behind her ear swiftly and flirtatiously.

"That's some way to greet your wife," she said.

"I didn't mean it like that," Alge said. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I took an early lunch. I had some errands to run. But also, I wanted to come see."

All the loathing that Esmeralda had displayed earlier this morning seemed to have leaked away in the few hours that had elapsed.

"See what?" Alge said.

“Your new painting, silly. I know how much it means to you. You’ve been blabbering on about it for weeks and weeks now. What was the title again?”

“*What Horror Hides Behind a Mirror? Clarity.* But I didn’t think you cared.”

It was strange. Alge couldn’t remember the last time Esmeralda had stepped foot in his gallery. She hadn’t given him a definite answer, but Alge was sure that she wouldn’t attend the exhibition on Friday. In fact, he didn’t want her to come. He planned on spending the entire evening with the artist, Alice Valentine, without his volatile wife lurking around. Alge could never cheat, but he felt a strong connection with Alice and loved spending time with her. They had common interests, like art. In Esmeralda’s eyes, paintings were something that decorated a wall. They didn’t really affect her or hold any significance.

“Of course I care. It means so much to you,” Esmeralda said. She walked to the far wall and began scanning the paintings.

The décor in The Bay Gallery was modern and swanky, yet minimalistic. The only place to sit was a plush sofa positioned toward the left wall, which viewed the gallery’s most coveted wall-space. Right now, one of James Abbott McNeill Whistler’s relatively unknown maritime nocturnes occupied the space. The painting was one of his earliest attempts at this technique. Art critics had deemed it a failure at ingenuity; a confusion of colors that seem separate entities all-together, rather than contrasting elements that work towards a common purpose. But the painting’s initial condemnations didn’t matter. That was decades in the past. And Alge was aware of the painting’s inherent worth, not only because of the painter’s fame, but because he knew that Whistler had been an adamant proponent of the Aesthetic Movement. And even though Alge’s



overall sense of the piece was slightly hazy, it was fascinating. As Wilde would have put it, the nocturne was absolutely useless. Alge had purchased the painting a month ago at auction.

Mrs. Floater fell back into the couch, presumably, because she was being ignored.

“*Clarity* is hanging in the office,” Alge said to his wife. “Follow me.”

“Sure,” she replied, while gazing at a painting by Alice Valentine. The picture featured an enormous tree that stood in the middle of a prairie. The branches were heavy with green leaves, but it was the dead of winter. The sky was a dismal gray, and the ground was covered in large drifts of fresh snow.

“Come on. Hurry,” Alge said. He didn’t want Esmeralda to have any association with Alice, or her work if he could help it.

While ignoring Mrs. Floater’s calls, Alge led Esmeralda down the back hallway to his office, which was small and cozy. Alge’s desk sat in the middle of the room, and behind it were a leather office chair, a bookshelf that ran underneath the window, and an antique table that Alge used as a makeshift wet-bar. In preparation for the *ritual*, he’d recently purchased all of the items resting on the table, including a crystal decanter filled with expensive absinthe, a beautiful crystal glass, an absinthe spoon, and a small jar of sugar cubes.

Alge left the office door slightly ajar in case Mrs. Floater had a panic attack from being alone for five seconds. She seemed like the type that would “clumsily” knock into a waiter at a cocktail party if she felt her audience’s attention wandering away.

“Wow,” Esmeralda whispered. She made her way around the desk and sat in the leather chair. She swiveled to face *Clarity*. Alge didn’t think his wife was mocking him, but he wasn’t absolutely sure. “It’s striking.”

Alge stared down at the floor. So far throughout the day, he only looked at it for a few minutes after hanging it on the wall. Otherwise, he had restrained his gaze because he wanted the tension and excitement to mount throughout the day, so the inaugural *ritual* was very special. Alge wanted his eyes to widen with genuine awe when he drank in *Clarity’s* colorful magnificence. Tonight, would be a monumental stepping-stone, a desperately needed recalibration of his life. It wasn’t only about coveting artistic ingenuity.

Sunlight shined through the window. *Clarity’s* golden frame gave off a dull, yet wonderful gleam. It made the picture look magical, supernatural.

“Mr. Bay? Mr. Bay?” Mrs. Floater called. Her beckon seemed like a failed attempt to mask an intense jealousy that the spotlight of Alge’s attention had been hijacked.

Alge ignored Mrs. Floater, hoping she would suddenly become patient. But she didn’t. She continued calling out for him, and each time, more and more urgency crawled into her voice. Mrs. Floater was like caged puppy that would relentlessly whine and squeal until his owner complied. What else did she have to do? Nothing.

Alge looked at Esmeralda.

“Go,” she said, propping her heels up on Alge’s desk. “It’s fine, don’t keep her waiting.”

“Why don’t you come with me for moral support. That old crow has more wind than a tornado. And I guarantee that she asks to be introduced to you. Save me the hassle of traipsing back down the hall to fetch you. Mrs. Floater’s a polite, high-society type. At least, she sees herself that way. I’ll bet my left arm that she asks to meet you.”

“I’d rather just stay here and look at your new painting for a few minutes, if that’s okay.” Esmeralda’s voice was shaky and soft, like the way she teased the loose hair above her ear. “If she’d like to meet me that bad, just come and get me.”

“Okay.” Upon reaching the door, he halted and turned to his wife. “Listen sweetie, about this morning-“

“Stop,” she interrupted. “It’s fine. Everything is fine. My cheek is a little sore, but I think I’ll survive. You’ve spanked me harder than that before, only, it was in a different context. I may even ask you to kiss it better for me later. I just need to forget, get over, and move on from everything that has happened in the last year. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do, but I need your help. Go. I’ll be fine here.”

Alge remembered his favorite things about Esmeralda. He thought about the way she would spend some nights curled up in the living room, with a crossword puzzle, a glass of wine, and a Bob Dylan record. He loved this woman, even though it was so damned hard to be together recently. But quickly, guilt weighed down his smile. His infant son was dead. He wasn’t supposed to be happy.

Mrs. Floater beckoned once more. Alge left the office.

As Alge exited the hallway, Mrs. Floater was waiting in the middle of the gallery, staring. She wore a dejected look that suggested Alge had forgotten something important, like her birthday, or her name. But Mrs. Floater was simply jealous that the spotlight of

Alge's wholehearted attention had effortlessly slid onto his wife, as if he had been waiting for a distraction to tug him away. It was easy to tell because Mrs. Floater had to scramble for something to talk about, which ended up being Esmeralda.

"Was that your wife?" She asked. Before this moment, Mrs. Floater had never pried this far into Alge's personal life. But now she had an excuse. "How long have you two lovebirds been nesting together?"

"We've been married four years," Alge replied while shifting his weight from foot to foot and digging his hands in his pockets and clenching them into fists.

"Well, I'd love to meet her."

"Actually, she might be a little busy at the moment. How about next time?" Alge said, remembering Esmeralda's body language that pleaded innocently to be spared from Mrs. Floater's judgment.

"It used to be proper social, let alone business, etiquette to introduce people when they came around. Even if they were just passing through. That's how businesses used to be conducted."

Alge could see that Mrs. Floater wasn't going to forget the subject easily. And being his most frequent customer, he figured that he should at least try to appease her. So he raised his hand to suggest that he'd be right back, and punctuated this motion with a short puff of air from his nostrils. He walked back through the hallway and paused at the door. It was peculiar. Alge had left the door wide open. And now it was closed. Alge summarized that Esmeralda must have closed it because he and Mrs. Floater had been speaking too loudly and she wanted enjoy *Clarity* in peace.

Alge tried to open the office door, but it was locked.

He started to yell out, but refrained. He remembered that Mrs. Floater was in the gallery, probably leaning an ear towards the hall and listening intently. Alge had seen her rubberneck and eavesdrop when other customers were browsing through the gallery, and he didn't want his marital drama to become her latest bit of juicy gossip. So he knocked on the door gently. He heard Esmeralda rustling on the opposite side. There was clinking of glass. And then, Esmeralda hurried to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it back so there was a sliver to peep through.

“What's going on?” Alge questioned.

“Oh, um, I'm sorry,” Esmeralda said, opening the door enough to reveal her face. She blinked furiously and she was so pale that her face looked like a snowman's. Obviously, she hadn't been, but Esmeralda seemed so embarrassed that Alge felt as if he'd caught his wife masturbating. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “This must seem odd. But, I heard you talking to that woman and didn't want any part of it. She seems wretched. Pretentious. Arrogant.”

“But you locked the door. Why?”

“Did I? Oh. Force of habit, I guess. Funny, I don't remember doing it.”

Eventually, through using Esmeralda's earlier expression of desire to rekindle the cooling, crumbling embers of their marriage, Alge convinced her to make Mrs. Floater's acquaintance. He described how much it'd mean to him, and the continued business if Esmeralda would only spare a few minutes to satisfy Mrs. Floater's social expectations. But in retrospect, Alge realized that it didn't take much convincing.

Esmeralda stole a kiss.

“I’m doing this because I love you dear,” she said, and sashayed toward the gallery with a smile smeared across her lips. Alge thought the exaggerated walk was a nice touch. It was the type of thing Mrs. Floater would have done in her younger years.

Alge had planned on following his wife down the hall, but listening from the office doorway seemed much more fun. He felt as if he’d swapped places with Mrs. Floater, gathering new bundles of scandal.

As soon as Esmeralda entered the gallery floor, the two women spoke as if old friends that hadn’t seen each other in years. The origin of Esmeralda’s name fascinated Mrs. Floater. And Esmeralda told the story of how she immigrated to the United States from Lisbon, Portugal when she was a child. It sounded like Mrs. Floater absolutely drooled over the fact that Esmeralda’s father had at one time been a professional *matador de toros*. Actually, he’d been the most renown in the Iberian Peninsula for a short time.

Esmeralda was exquisite at telling people what they wanted to hear, which sometimes proved very handy.

It occurred to Alge that his wife did really love him and wanted to repair their marriage. Maybe they could move passed that horrendous tragedy. A daydream formulated in Alge’s mind. He and Esmeralda were walking through Millennium Park on a steamy June morning. Initially, his mind tried to torture him by including a stroller that held a pudgy infant, wearing a blue shirt that said *Daddy’s Best Friend* in silver lettering. Alge had purchased the shirt soon after finding out that Esmeralda was pregnant. He kept it for months after the funeral, unsure of what to do with it. Esmeralda wanted to sell Oscar’s unused clothes and toys and accessories through putting an ad in the paper. But even though she’d spoken constantly about doing all this, it never happened. All of the

baby clothes, toys, and furniture still resided in the nursery. Nothing had moved in a year. And sometimes during the day when Esmeralda was at work, Alge would sneak upstairs, sit in the rocking chair, and hold a stuffed animal as if it were Oscar. After realizing what his wandering mind was doing, Alge edited his daydream to only include him and his wife in the stroll through the park, gazing up at the shimmering skyscrapers above, finally happy. But when Alge snapped back to reality, he was left with a sense of depression.

Alge heard the chimes hanging to the front door rattle.

“So long,” Mrs. Floater said right before the door clicked shut.

Thank God that she’s gone, Alge thought. This had been an unusually lengthy visit. Alge had been Mrs. Floater’s loyal puppy for nearly an hour minutes before his wife appeared. It was about noon now. The buzz from his two coffees had dissipated and last night’s lack of sleep was dragging down his eyelids and gnawing at his mind. Alge had been waiting for the store to empty so he could run upstairs and eat lunch in the apartment. He expected business to be slow today, so he could probably even take a nap without anyone noticing. He just needed to go, at least try to show his wife a little appreciation for her newfound dedication and enthusiasm toward their marriage.

This morning, when Alge was standing above his sleeping wife’s naked delicacies, not a single sexual desire had aroused within him. Esmeralda was an exotic, gorgeous woman, but since Oscar’s death there had been an unspoken agreement that sex was something to be avoided, an act that was out of the question, an act that only led to a catastrophic tragedy. There had been a few half-hearted attempts at love making since, which ended by dousing one another with scalding words and flashing each other malicious looks like gnarling beasts in the wild, disputing over territory. And earlier,

seeing his wife nude had only made him want to lash out violently. And he had. But so much can change in a few hours. Alge even thought that they could go upstairs right now and try again.

“Ha! Well done, honey.” Alge said loud enough for Esmeralda to hear. “You’ll have to teach me that technique. I’ve been trying to get rid of that old bat for nearly an hour. I’m finally heading back up to the apartment. Come with me. Take a personal day.”

To Alge’s surprise, when he strolled back onto the gallery floor he didn’t meet his wife’s warm, mahogany eyes, but the cold, curious peepers of Mrs. Floater. The light leaking in through the glass door made her white hair glow, illuminating the frizzy, untamable strands of hair that stuck out from her braid at odd angles, which looked like a lightning storm hovering above her head. The lines around her cheeks and mouth were trenches. Alge wasn’t sure if she’d caught the gist of his comment, so he thought it best to be as vague as possible.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Floater,” Alge said. “I must’ve mistaken that my wife was still here. Did she say where she was off to?”

She snorted indignantly. Alge remained silent while she turned around and barged out the door, onto the sidewalk with her back arched and nose in the air.



#### IV.

Alge closed the gallery immediately after Mrs. Floater left. He went upstairs, made a sandwich, and took a nap. He felt completely revitalized afterwards, but also very confused. Why had Esmeralda left so suddenly, without saying goodbye? It seemed quite strange.

Alge spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning the gallery meticulously. He wanted nothing more than Alice Valentine's art exhibition to fair well. If it did, he could gain the exclusive rights to be the proprietor of Alice's paintings. And it wasn't just about the heaps and heaps of money this deal potentially meant. Alge wanted to establish a closer relationship with Alice. She was fascinating, and unbelievably cute. The way she pranced through his gallery and gazed at her own work with humble admiration drove him crazy. It was as if Alice was in awe that she could create something so beautiful and meaningful. They'd met several times over the last month to discuss the exhibition. But they were becoming friends too, and between visits Alge thought about her often. A closer professional, and personal relationship with Alice hung just before his eyes. It hinged on the success of the exhibition.

While Alge cleaned, only a few tourists had wandered into the gallery, who were the complete opposite of Mrs. Floater. They goggled at paintings like they'd never seen art before, and then departed without acknowledging Alge's existence. It was as if they thought The Bay Gallery was an art museum.

The day seemed to drag by. Alge was bored. And preparing the gallery for this weekend was tedious. But he did find something peculiar in his office, which occupied his mind until the gallery closed.

While cleaning his office, Alge kept his head down to avoid looking at *Clarity*. His office would be where the servers retreated during the event to gather more snacks and wine. On the antique table behind Alge's desk, he found a tiny dropper. He had no idea where it'd come from. He theorized that Esmeralda had meant to toss it in the trash. But how would it have ended up there? From where Esmeralda had sat, it would've taken more effort to place the dropper on the table than to toss it in the garbage. And what had it contained? There were beads of liquid clinging the clear plastic. Esmeralda wasn't sick, so she didn't need medicine. Even after thinking about it all day, Alge still had no idea what had been in the little container. And he played a game, trying to decide what Esmeralda had been doing in his office when she'd been alone. He wondered if she'd tampered with *Clarity* in some way. Nothing else in the office seemed out-of-order, so he settled on believing that Esmeralda's motives were heartfelt and genuine. But the dropper's presence still nagged at him.

Alge now stood in the center of his gallery. He did a slow turn and gazed with admiration at how spotless the place looked. The wine and refreshments would be delivered tomorrow afternoon, and tomorrow night Alice would stop by with the canvases she'd like featured in the show, which he and Alice had already agreed upon. Today was Wednesday, and the event was on Friday. The stage was almost set. And Alge couldn't wait.

But for the time being, a more pressing matter was at hand. Alge peered down at his wristwatch and it was 5 o'clock. The time for his inaugural *ritual* had finally come.

Alge closed the store. He slid onto in his office chair after flashing upstairs to grab a cold bottle of water from the refrigerator. Alge moved the items from the antique table onto his desk and poured three-finger-widths of lime green liquid into the crystal glass. He laid the spoon across the middle, and placed the sugar cube atop the flat surface of the spoon. Then, he trickled the cold water over the sugar cube until it had crumbled into the liquid below. He diluted the remaining chunks of sugar into the absinthe by stirring the drink with the spoon. When this process was complete, the absinthe had transformed into an opaque liquor that contained swirling clouds of sugar like drifts of snow tumbling down Chicago's sidewalks on a blustery January morning. Who knew the process of drinking absinthe was so elaborate? Alge had always been allured by the mystique absinthe held. He'd heard the stories about the green fairy, and how people had reveled in absinthe's hallucinogenic glory, and how it had guided the fingers of early twentieth century painters and writers in creating works of brilliance. Alge had never tried it, but he'd always wanted to because of these notions. He'd ordered this bottle from Europe for 200 dollars.

Alge lifted his glass.

"To *Clarity*," he said aloud to himself.

Alge took a small, slow sip. It tasted like concentrated licorice. Alge loved licorice, but he hadn't been expecting the flavor, and the potency required some getting used to. It was overwhelming. When they first lived together, Esmeralda said at least once a week that Alge had odd taste buds. He simply had peculiar tastes, which is not to

be confused with liking gross things, but Alge was fond of flavors that required an acquired taste, like raw oysters or candy corn.

Alge closed his eyes and leaned back in the leather office chair until a sense of calmness blanketed him, and his mind cleared. Only then did he feel prepared to appreciate Francois Philippe Seurat's work. This would be Alge's ritual everyday after closing the gallery.

The gallery's phone rang. Alge remained seated with his eyes shut. The message machine was in the office on a bookshelf. Mrs. Floater left a message that stated her disapproval of the way Alge treated her earlier. The message was approximately a minute long, but Alge tried to ignore it as much as possible. He remembered her wedding ring. No one would ever marry such a pest.

Alge waited until the echoes of Mrs. Floater's selfishness and narcissism had dissipated from the room. Then, Alge allowed his eyes to open and fixate on the picture.

The way the colors clashed, yet complimented each other simultaneously was amazing. Georges Seurat's influence clearly breathed life into the work.

The painting contained a couple that stood before a cheval mirror, which he judged to be very old and ornate, but it was difficult to tell because of the neo-impressionistic style. The mirror was in the foreground, and was clearly the focal point of the picture, although it sat off to the side so the couple was completely visible. The couple stood in the middle of an unrealistically clean bedroom, as if it hadn't been entered for ages. The couple stared directly at Alge, and they stood in an unnatural and uncomfortable looking pose. Various hues of gold, green, and scarlet were chosen to depict this scene with thick brushstrokes, set close together without actually blending, or

the use of any transitory colors, so the stark contrast between each brushstroke was unavoidable. Each choppy stroke seemed to quarrel with its neighbors, as if in a violent, yet gorgeous skirmish. For the first few moments, the effect of this technique stunned Alge. He forgot his artistic expertise and felt like a boy setting eyes upon a truly great masterpiece for the first time, awestruck, but unaware of what he was actually glimpsing. The painting had an otherworldly seduction. It was like a campfire, a magnet for the eyes.

Alge couldn't believe that *Clarity* was Francois Philippe Seurat's first, and last artistic endeavor. But even more so, he couldn't believe that he owned it. Over the years, many art critics had speculated that *Clarity* had actually been painted by Georges Seurat, whom allowed his nephew to take credit when the painting was finished. Alge restrained himself from succumbing to this view, but just barely, because of the painting's technical mastery.

There was also a scene painted on the backside of the mirror. It was a reflection. However, in juxtaposition to the rest of the room, the back of the mirror was painted in the softer hues of sea-foam green, cerulean, and lavender, and the painting technique had changed from neo-impressionistic, to the crisp, smooth lines of a realistic portrait. El Greco would have been impressed. The back of the mirror encapsulated the same couple that stood in the unusually tidy bedroom, but now the mood of this scene had altered. The couple's mouths grimaced with hatred and disgust. Behind them, clothes were strewn everywhere as if these items had recently glided through the air, tossed between man and woman as impotent weapons. Alge hadn't carefully considered the title of this canvas until now: *What Horror Hides Behind a Mirror? Clarity*.

Alge's mind began to swim with profound ideas.

He sipped the absinthe over the next ten minutes until only splotches of residue were left within the glass. A powerful dose of licorice overpowered Alge's senses with every deep breath he drew.

Alge began feeling like he could float. His ears detected a crackling sound, like the noise a record made after all the tracks were finished, but the noise didn't seem to originate from anywhere in particular. And his head started to bob gently. His eyes glided from one object to another without discrimination, and without pause. Suddenly, all thoughts from Alge's mind seemed to evaporate, and he was awestruck by everything. Unsure if absinthe was the cause, and unaware of everything except the sudden mystical allure that every object held, Alge continued to gaze around the room, enamored. The cause of this mental state was unimportant. Alge was focused on nothing else but *being*. The faint crackling decreased in volume until the office felt like a vacuum, completely silent and still, as if Alge himself was suspended in a picture. Although, his senses seemed heightened, not dulled.

So far, Alge found absinthe wonderful.

A sharp, playful hiss called for Alge's attention, which was bizarre because he specifically remembered locking the front door. A few moments later, Alge heard the soft hiss again. There was a tiny fairy just above the glass. She hovered there effortlessly, surrounded by a bright green aura.

"Wow," Alge said. Absinthe was living up to its reputation in every way possible.

The little sprite flew out of the glass and flitted before Alge's eyes like a lightning bug. The only sound living within the room was Alge's heavy inhales and exhales, induced by his wonderment. He watched as the fairy glided through the air. It circled

around his head and made its way behind him. He swiveled the chair to follow the fairy's path with his eyes, and continued to watch as the tiny green specter, glittering like an emerald under a brilliant light, slipped through the crack under the door that led into the hallway. Alge feared that it would stray forever. The creature was so beautiful that he couldn't let it leave. Alge rose from the chair. His legs were wobbly, but he stumbled toward the door as quickly as possible. For some reason, pursuing the fluttering myth was essential. It had brought beauty into his life, and satisfaction. Although deep down, in Alge's heart of hearts, he knew he was chasing, and trying to tame a creature that could not be domesticated.

When Alge flung open the door, he stepped forward into the hall without pausing to check where he was going. There was no sign of the fairy anywhere. In fact, the corridor that Alge traversed countless times a week, so many times that the finer details of the hallway went overlooked, was no longer familiar. Now, the world was painted in vibrant colors. But Alge didn't have time to worry about such insignificant details. He spotted the fairy ahead near the front door, and he followed as the fairy went out onto the sidewalk.

The sun was so bright that Alge had to shield his eyes upon stepping outside. It was a spectacular day. The sidewalk was bustling with people. But Alge didn't pay any attention to them. It required all of Alge's efforts to lock the gallery door swiftly, so he wouldn't lose the fairy.

Alge owned the four-story building, which was on the trendy, north side of Chicago. His uncle had left it to him several years ago. The Bay Gallery occupied the street level. Alge and Esmeralda dwelled in the apartment on the fourth floor, while the

other two levels were empty at the moment. They needed a few renovations to bring them up-to-date, but Alge hadn't gotten around to doing them in the last year. So he let the apartments sit, vacant.

Alge hurried into the building's other entrance, which led into a quaint lobby. The fairy fluttered upstairs to the second floor landing and zipped under the door. Alge chased it. He looked around and became extremely dizzy when he entered apartment number 2. He brought a finger to the bridge of his nose to make sure his glasses hadn't fallen to the floor. When he found they hadn't, he removed them, screwed his eyes shut, used his knuckles to knead them, and placed his glasses back on his head. But the world around him was still jarring. He stood in the room from Francois Philippe Seurat's painting, a scarcely furnished bedroom so tidy that it seemed like a museum. Every item was in the proper position as if a historical figure had once inhabited the space. The couple stood together in the center of the room, posing motionless before the mirror. And somehow, Alge saw the scene in scarlet, green, and gold swathes of paint, as Seurat had painted in the picture.

Alge constantly shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His fingers shook while twirling his wedding ring around and around his finger. He looked down and discovered that his body appeared as normal. He hadn't transformed into a neo-impressionistic version of himself.

Although the common reaction would be for Alge to deteriorate into a frantic state of madness, he remained composed and simply peered around the room, fascinated. Nothing about this seemed bizarre. Alge peeked over his shoulder to see if a door stood



where he had entered. There was a door, but it was folded open and belonged to a neatly organized closet.

“Hello?” Alge whispered.

The couple remained motionless.

Alge crept slowly toward the them. He hunched into an athletic posture, and prepared for a brutal shock in case the figures suddenly erupted to life. He approached until he was within a foot of the couple, but nothing happened. The façade was now obvious. The couple’s faces were contorted into wide smiles that stretched their lips to an unnatural extent. Their hands were laced, but it looked as if their fingers were applying extreme pressure. And they leaned against each other in an uncomfortable pose. It looked like they could barely stand the touch of one another. The man’s neck was kinked into a straining angle, and he pressed his temple against the woman’s in a gesture that was supposed to be loving, but appeared mean and creepy. The woman stretched as tall as she could to match her companion’s height.

All of these things weren’t detectable when farther away, because of the painter’s technique. But up close, it was clear as day.

The couple stood before Alge as wax models with wild looking eyes. He wondered if they were really alive. What if there was a consciousness behind those eyes, but they just couldn’t move their bodies? The thought unnerved Alge so much that he shuffled backwards until he bumped into the wall.

Alge focused on regaining his composure. Once he had, he edged around the room’s perimeter. An idea that had flit through Alge’s mind earlier resurfaced. What did the couple’s reflection look like in the mirror? Only the back was visible when viewing

the painting, but since Alge had somehow transposed himself into *Clarity*, he could now explore at his discretion, not Seurat's. The opportunity to unveil this answer lay within his grasp.

Alge stopped when behind the couple. He rose up on tiptoes to get a clear view of the mirror. It reflected nothing. In fact, the front panel of the mirror had been removed. There was nothing but a smooth oak surface.

To once again see the other side of the mirror, Alge moved back across the room, clinging to the walls like he were on the edge of a cliff. Once Alge laid eyes on the reflection, it came in motion. The couple backed away from each other and emitted bestial noises: throaty grunting and high-pitched screeching as they tore clothes away from hangers and out of dresser drawers and chucked the articles of fabric at one another. The man bared his teeth like an animal defending his territory. He took one of the woman's blouses, and ripped it apart using his teeth. The woman's mouth moved as if she were a wolf, howling at a full moon on a cloudless night.

Familiar emotions filled Alge. He saw the mess and the furious looks in the couples eyes as they stood on opposite ends of the room, and Alge reflected upon the last year. He remembered the distance between him and his wife because they could no longer communicate. He thought about how every minute detail seemed to set Esmeralda into an angry frenzy. It was like they were roommates now, instead of lovers. He couldn't live like this anymore, which was why he had snapped this morning and smacked his wife. And Alge understood that the state of their marriage was his fault too. Maybe it was mostly his fault. He'd made his choices. And he knew that he needed to change. But Alge didn't know if he could.

He backed into the closet and closed the door to avoid the unsettling couple standing in the center of the room. All sense of time blurred. He sat there for hours, weeks, years, and decades, until he finally dozed off.

Nothing in particular caused Alge to wake. He rose to consciousness gradually. He looked down at his watch and saw that the time was only 5:45. How was that possible? It felt like weeks since he sat down at his desk, drank his glass of absinthe, and looked at *Clarity*. But only a half hour or so had passed since then. If this was what absinthe did, he'd need to drink a glass of whiskey during his nightly ritual instead.

Alge was in the empty apartment on the second floor. He had fallen asleep on the living room carpet.

He exited the apartment and lumbered up the steps to his door with intense concentration. Each foot had become a cinderblock. Alge fumbled with his keys and unfastened the latch with sluggish fingers. Fighting with Esmeralda, waiting on Mrs. Floater for nearly an hour, cleaning the gallery, and having that bizarre, vivid episode after drinking the absinthe all in one day had been exhausting.

Once inside the apartment, Alge didn't even glance around to see if Esmeralda was home. He was extremely groggy and needed to lie down for a little while longer. Wearing shoes and all, Alge collapsed onto the bed, and when he heard the comforter's feathers crinkle within the fabric, he released a sigh of delight and closed his eyes. At once, Alge began to ease into a calm sleep, and it seemed like the universe wanted to help with this process. The sound of falling rain splattered on the window, and the soft echo of indecipherable voices sounded like a lullaby and soothed him immensely. But something felt amiss. There was a minor detail that wouldn't quite emerge into full comprehension,

as if there was a word on the tip of Alge's tongue. After listening to the sound of falling rain for a moment, Alge realized that it wasn't storming outside. When he had been on the sidewalk, The Sun had been shining and there hadn't been a cloud in the sky. And whose voice was he hearing? The radio and television had both been off when he'd entered the apartment.

Alge perked to a state of foggy awareness, propping himself up on his elbows. Both sounds were coming from the bathroom.

"Hello?" Alge called.

His mind began to reel. He knew what these signs meant, but couldn't believe it was happening. A silence fell over the room as if the voices had heard his presence and paused. Now, only the water from the showerhead pelting the walls and floor was audible.

Alge crossed the room and flung open the bathroom door. Time slowed when Alge surveyed the scene, the way it does when a person realizes that a dreadful nightmare was bleeding into reality. He'd had this feeling once before.

The shower door was glass. It was partially steamed over, and partially blurred by dripping drops of water, but Alge could easily decipher that there were two bodies in the shower, instead of one. The two figures were frozen like skittish deer during hunting season after the snap of a twig. For a moment, everyone stayed suspended in stillness.

"Who the hell is that?" The taller, bulkier figure in the shower said in a smooth baritone voice.

The petite figure, with long, clumps of wet hair running down her spine rotated the levers to cease the water. She gave the glass door a gentle nudge, and it swept open

slowly. Alge was reminded of his new painting, Francois Philippe Seurat's opus that hung in his office three stories below, because of the juxtaposition of styles: neo-impressionistic, and detailed portrait. The obfuscated silhouettes behind the glass were now unveiled, and the fine details were visible. Esmeralda's lovely, mahogany eyes projected perplexity in Alge's direction. Her mouth was creased with indignation. Another man stood beside her. His muscles were thick and perfectly sculpted. Thatches of wet hair slanted across his forehead. The man cupped his hands over his genitals and swiveled to the side bashfully. Esmeralda stood stark naked and faced her husband, confronting him with her gorgeous body.

"The hell?" The other man said, with slightly more agitation this time. He realized the girlish pose that he'd assumed and squared his body again, but remained cupping his pee-pee like a toddler doing a potty-dance.

"I forgot to mention that I was married," Esmeralda said.

Alge realized that ever since Oscar had perished, their relationship had been mounting to this moment. What hurt the most was that Esmeralda had betrayed him, not only with sexual indiscretion, but also with her kind words earlier in the day that had explicitly declared her devotion and intent to repair this marriage. Alge had felt something akin to hope, and admiration for her once again.

Alge just wanted to get away. He knew why she would want to do such a thing, but he couldn't believe Esmeralda could actually do it. He backtracked from the doorway, and headed into the living room. Esmeralda uttered hushed instructions to the other man in the shower, then, the slapping of wet feet against the floor chased Alge. The

living room looked bare because every picture containing the two of them had been hidden from sight.

“Stay clear,” Alge said while brushing away the tears he felt welling up in his eyes. He faced the front door, contemplating his next move. Although his eyes were watering, Alge felt relieved.

Esmeralda rushed closer and grabbed for Alge’s wrist, but he reacted in time to avoid her outstretched fingers.

“I said stay away from me,” he said. “How? How could you do this? In our own place? Did you want me to find you? If that’s the case, why didn’t you just take that bastard by the wrist and strut him in here when I was sitting on the couch? What kind of sick fucking game are you playing?”

“No,” Esmeralda replied. She didn’t appear to be conscious of her nakedness. She stopped for a moment to gather her thoughts. She lowered her eyes to the ground and guided a loose strand of her hair behind her ear in a methodical manner, telling Alge that she knew it’d be pointless to avoid answering these questions. “I tried to make sure you wouldn’t come home until later. The guy said you’d have fun, and be gone for hours. Didn’t you have your damned *ritual*? Didn’t you drink the absinthe?”

“What guy?” But as soon as the words left Alge’s mouth, he understood the significance of the mysterious dropper he’d found in this office.

Some of Esmeralda’s confrontational disposition seemed to evaporate. Her straightened back slumped forward into a defeated posture and she looked down at her body as if finally realizing that she was not wearing clothes. She looked embarrassed.

“You won’t believe me,” she said. “But I still think there is hope for us. But I cannot live in this museum any longer. We don’t talk anymore, about anything. We don’t show each other respect. And we don’t have fun anymore. We treat each other like strangers. I’m not saying that I’m exempt from these things, but I have tried to talk about them. Every time I say Oscar’s name, you leave because it is too painful to talk about. When I attempt to stir up a simple conversation, we end up screaming at each other, and I don’t know why. We need to move on, and I feel like you can’t. I will always want to be with you, but I need human contact. Don’t you see?”

“And this is your version of moving on? Humping some other guy?”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Esmeralda said.

Alge pondered his wife’s words for a moment, and started to feel guilty. He realized that he had already been moving on, in becoming closer with Alice Valentine. Secretly, he’d already envisioned a future without Esmeralda and acted as if their marriage had already failed. Soon after Oscar’s death, Alge had tried to repair the relationship. And he’d continued to perform smaller courtesies to comfort Esmeralda and make her life easier, like waking up early to ensure she wasn’t late for work. But Alge hadn’t tried to save the relationship recently. He just couldn’t break the association between Esmeralda and their dead infant. Although to Alge, it didn’t seem like Esmeralda had tried either, unless talking about the weather or a television show was trying to overcome the tragedy of a stillborn baby. Alge hadn’t realized that the healing process needed to start somewhere, and that there is no way to resume a relationship after such an event. It needs to be rebuilt.

“I’ll be back later.” Alge said. “And you should leave.”

Alge walked out the door, like he had a hundred other times.



V.

The only sleep that had come to Alge last night was shallow and restless. After leaving the apartment, he'd walked to a dive bar and drunk six or seven bourbons, until he tottered while walking home, and the agony wrenching his heart momentarily abated. Esmeralda had taken his advice and left for the night. He didn't know when she'd be back, and if she'd simply grab her possessions and move out, or if she'd try to discuss the state of their marriage, even if it was just for a sense of closure. But Alge hadn't seen her all day. He hoped it stayed that way. Alge wasn't ready to see her, and wouldn't be for some time.

For most of the day, Alge lounged around the apartment. He realized that he was the one hanging on to the past. Esmeralda had attempted to reconnect, however small her efforts seemed. More and more frequently, she'd been going out with friends to movies and dinner while Alge hunkered down in the apartment. She'd pleaded Alge to join her, but he'd refused every invitation. Alge understood these things now, along with the notion that he could never be with Esmeralda again. No matter how much he still loved her.

The Bay Gallery was closed all day. Alge only came downstairs at 5 o'clock to receive the delivery of wine and refreshments for the art exhibition, and Alice was due to arrive around 6. She was bringing the paintings that would be displayed tomorrow night, so Alge remained in the gallery until she appeared. He killed the in-between time by

doing tomorrow's caterers a favor, and arranging the wine and refreshments on his desk. He erased Mrs. Floater's message without listening to it. When he'd finished in the office, Alge walked down the hall and sat in the middle of the gallery. He was cross-legged and gazed around at the different paintings. The wooden floor was brisk, and the dull grey light that drizzled in from the window set a gloomy ambiance, which was similar to Alge's mood. But he needed to cheer up, since Alice was coming. He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable, or let her know that he was upset. He decided to wait and tell her about Esmeralda later on. Thus far, every time Alice had come to the gallery, Alge had removed his wedding ring. He started doing this the first time they met, immediately after introducing himself. So Alice didn't know that he was married.

So he didn't forget, Alge slipped the wedding band off his finger and dropped it in his pocket.

Alge wanted to avoid thinking about Esmeralda, so he thought about the private event he was hosting tomorrow, and mentally ensured that everything would be perfect. He wanted to impress Alice now, more than ever.

Alge was still sitting on the floor when Alice arrived. She wore a peach colored v-neck shirt and jeans. Her clothes were tight and revealed her athletic form. The neck of the shirt dropped between her perky breasts just enough to make someone think they could get a glimpse, but without actually allowing them to. Alice was short and petit, and had piercing blue eyes. She wasn't exotic or drop-dead gorgeous like Esmeralda. Although, Alge found that to be a good thing. He felt warm, comfortable in her presence.

"Hey there," Alice said with a slight southern drawl. She'd moved to Chicago five years ago to attend Northwestern, and after her degree had been completed, she'd decided

to stay. Alice was twenty-four. And Alge was twenty-nine, but that didn't matter. He wanted to have fun, and love again.

"I parked out front," Alice continued. "But I don't have any change. Do you think my car will be okay?"

"Sure. They should stop checking the meters any minute now. But just in case, I'll put a few quarters in the slot."

It was raining outside, and Alge insisted that Alice remain in the gallery while he retrieved the paintings from the car. There were fifteen canvases total. Most were paintings, only a few were sketches. Alice had wrapped the pictures in bubble wrap, so Alge didn't worry about the rain. And each piece was already framed appropriately.

When everything was inside, Alge's hair and shirt were soaked.

"Thank you so much," Alice said. "I cannot wait for tomorrow night."

"Me either. It should be a blast. I think you'll be impressed with the event I've put together."

"I'm sure I will. All I have to do now is find something to wear," Alice said while giggling. "I've never had an exclusive show before. I'm going to apologize in advance, but I'll probably rely on your experience to keep my nerves calm. If you get sick of me hanging around you too much, let me know."

Alice stood, leaning against the back of the couch. Alge moved close to her. The gallery was silent, and for some reason it felt appropriate to speak softly.

"Trust me, I won't get sick of you," Alge said. "I don't see how anyone could. In fact, I was thinking that we could go grab a cup of coffee."

"Right now?" Alice stared directly into his eyes.

“Why not? I could quiz you about your art, like people will tomorrow. Actually, I should warn you. Tomorrow, you’ll probably talk about your work so much that you’ll contemplate giving up painting all-together.”

Alge thought that going on a little impromptu date would be a light and fun way to get to know each other better. It’d give them a chance to see each other outside of The Bay Gallery, and as something other than work associates.

“I would, but can’t. I have somewhere to be.”

“Oh,” Alge said, a little jealous. He knew it wasn’t any of his business, but he had to ask. “Hot date?”

“No. I’m taking a dance class actually. Salsa. But, if you’ll let me take a rain check, I’d be willing to stay a little after the show tomorrow and drink the rest of the wine that’s left over with you. I’ll probably need it.”

“Deal.”

Alice left a few minutes later. Alge jumped over the back of the couch and lay down. He rested there for a while, and daydreamed about tomorrow night. He would have to hide a bottle of wine, and make sure that everything went according to plan. But Alge realized a small problem. Only invited guests were allowed to attend the event, and to be generous Alge had invited Mrs. Floater. He realized this to be a mistake. Mrs. Floater would most likely spend the evening mingling and discussing art with the other guests. However, there was also the possibility that the other art connoisseurs would ignore her, and she’d badger Alge for attention like she did during her usual visits. Alge wouldn’t have the patience, much less the time for that. He became sure that Mrs. Floater would interfere with his chances of impressing Alice in some fashion or another. He needed to

uninvited her, but how? She was already disgusted with his manners. She'd made that clear yesterday from storming out of the gallery with her nose in the air, and by leaving that phone message. Maybe she'd be so mad that she wouldn't show up. But that was a chance Alge wasn't willing to take. He needed to ensure that Mrs. Floater wouldn't be in attendance.

The best way to uninvite Mrs. Floater would be to simply tell her, face to face. But Alge thought he'd be sneaky, and go over to Mrs. Floater's apartment, pretending to apologize for his behavior yesterday, and he would casually mention that the exhibition had been pushed back to a later date because the artist didn't feel ready to unveil her work.

Alge went into his office and found a copy of Mrs. Floater's most recent receipt, which contained her address. He locked the office and hailed a cab. Mrs. Floater lived on the southern fringe of the metropolitan area, and he didn't want to fuss with trying to drive. Mostly while staying in Chicago, Alge took a cab instead of driving. He detested taking the L-train.

It took him about twenty minutes to get there. For once, the streets weren't congested. The rain had stopped falling, so he told the cabbie to pull over a few blocks short and walked the rest of the distance. Alge wondered about Esmeralda. He wanted to know where she was and what she was doing at that very moment. Did she get a hotel last night? Or had she stayed with the other man? It didn't seem possible. Alge couldn't believe they were actually separating. But he pushed all these thoughts aside. He wanted to ignore them for as long as possible, until they weren't raw and sharp.

When he'd arrived, Alge looked up at the building with disbelief. It was a skyscraper, but it was older. It appeared as if the building were nice twenty years ago, and hadn't had many updates since. Alge took the elevator to the tenth floor, and found Mrs. Floater's apartment down the hall. He knocked on the door. He still didn't know exactly how he would *apologize*. Footsteps shuffled toward the door, and Mrs. Floater appeared in the threshold.

Alge's heartbeat jumped into his throat. Suddenly, this didn't seem like such a good idea.

"Mr. Bay?" She said. "What are you doing here?"

Alge cleared his throat, but before he could answer Mrs. Floater spoke again.

"Where are my manners? Please, come in."

She stepped back and allowed room for Alge in the small entryway. She led him into the living room, and invited him to sit. It appeared as if Mrs. Floater had forgotten about yesterday. She didn't display any contempt or hostility toward him as expected. Instead, she appeared elated to have company.

"I'll be just a moment," she said, and then disappeared into the kitchen.

While she was gone, Alge peered around and noticed that the furniture was comfortable, but very shabby. In fact, everything in the room similarly seemed dingy, yet functional. There were no amenities, such as a television or radio, and the light provided by the cheap lamps was soft enough to allow shadows to gather in the corners. Alge looked around, and couldn't spot any of the paintings she'd purchased from him.

Mrs. Floater returned a few minutes later with a pitcher of lemonade and cups. She poured Alge a glass and placed it on the table beside him.

“I apologize for the mess,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

Alge looked around once more and didn’t think the apartment looked disorganized, but it didn’t feel clean either. It was nothing like the lavish penthouse Alge had envisioned. Mrs. Floater wore expensive dresses, jewelry, and acted like a wealthy socialite that would scoff at someone who dwelled here. It didn’t make sense.

“Betty?” A voice croaked from the back room.

“Yes. One minute,” Mrs. Floater replied. She walked down the short hallway to the bedroom, and Alge realized that the feeble voice beckoning from the back room must belong to Mr. Floater. But Alge had truly believed Mrs. Floater was single. He often imagined her purchasing the gaudy diamond ring and matching wedding band from a ritzy antique shop, alone. In The Bay Gallery, Mrs. Floater seemed starved for attention and extremely pretentious. Alge knew that she didn’t possess the qualities necessary to sustain a marriage.

When Mrs. Floater returned, she asked if Alge would like to meet her husband Donald. But the way she approached the situation, it seemed that Mrs. Floater didn’t want Alge to meet him for some reason. She seemed embarrassed. Alge was very curious, so he agreed and followed the old lady down the hall. He needed to see it with his own eyes.

The bedroom smelled strongly of bleach. It was very dim, and the only light in the room was fixed to the wall, focusing on a painting that Alge remembered well. He’d sold it to Mrs. Floater three weeks ago for \$8,000. Mr. Floater was lying in a hospital bed, and the top half was elevated so he could better observe the painting on the opposite wall. There was a shelf beside the bed that must have been crowded with a thousand

prescription drugs, Donald's arms were bruised from numerous pinpricks, and it looked as if each breath was torturous.

Mrs. Floater made the proper introductions, and pulled up a chair for Alge. She left the room. However, she was adamant that Alge yell for her if anything was needed.

"So, you're the art dealer," Donald said. He held out his hand, and Alge took it. Donald's grip was so weak that his hand felt limp. "I cannot thank you enough. These days, the only joy I get is looking at the pictures you sell. Years ago, I used to own a lucrative real estate business. But art has always been my true love. Art gives meaning to life."

"I would agree," Alge said.

"You'll have to excuse our apartment. We've had to make some downgrades and cutbacks recently. If you can't tell, I am withering away, slowly and painfully. I have been for the past two years. Betty has sold most of our possessions to afford my medical treatments. She has sacrificed so much. We used to live in a penthouse, in a building across from the art institute. I used to walk there three or four times a week. It was heaven."

"If you don't mind my asking, where are the other paintings?" Alge said. "Mrs. Floater has purchased so many from me over the past year. Yet, the only one I've seen is the Wolf Kahn picture hanging there."

Donald had to take short breaks between sentences and muster the strength to speak.

"I thought I saw you peeping around for something," Donald said. "Betty keeps a couple in a closet down the hall, but only my favorites. She's sold the rest. Because she



insists on buying new ones for me to look at. She's such a sweet woman. Recently, she sold the set of sapphire jewelry to pay for that piece hanging there. I've thanked you for the aesthetic pleasure you provide. But there is something more important I'd like to say. Thank you so much for appeasing Betty when she visits your gallery. It is the only social interaction she gets anymore. And those visits are so fun for her. It's all she talks about. You are truly a wonderful man. I wish that we could have a discussion about art, but I'm afraid you'll have to leave now. I'm extremely tired and sore. But promise me that you'll still let Betty visit your gallery once I'm gone. Please."

Alge promised that he would, and said goodbye. Although, Donald didn't hear it. By the time Alge left the room, Donald had fallen asleep. It was a very brief and strange encounter, but it seemed fitting, considering the last two days. And it changed Alge's perception of Mrs. Floater, once he saw that she did hold the qualities to sustain a marriage, even after the fairytale turned into a nightmare. Perhaps, she succeeded at this even better than Alge had. She has sacrificed her quality of life to ensure that Donald's last days are lived as happily as possible. And Alge better understood Mrs. Floater's desperation for attention. He couldn't revoke her invitation now.

"Well, how is he?" Mrs. Floater said when Alge entered the living room.

"He is sleeping. He said he wasn't feeling well."

"Poor Donald has had such a rough time lately," Mrs. Floater said. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"I have a present for you," Alge said. "It's my way of apologizing for my rude behavior yesterday. I don't have it here, but I'll bring it over in the morning. I only have one condition. Okay?"

“What is it?”

“You just have to promise me something. That you’ll never sell it. At least, not until Donald has passed.”

Alge left without waiting for Mrs. Floater’s response. Tomorrow, he would give the Francois Philippe Seurat painting to Donald as a gift, who could now appreciate it more than Alge. It didn’t hold the same significance that it had a few days ago, before Alge actually owned the painting, and Esmeralda had tainted it. And it was finally time for Alge to step out of the shadow of the past.

## THE ROMANTIC MARVIN MILKWEED

Marvin quit reading and scrambled in search of his eye patch when the sleigh bells hanging on the library's front door jingled and clinked against the glass. He assumed it was Zoe arriving for her shift, which started one minute ago. The office door was closed. But Zoe would need to sign the time sheet kept in Marvin's office, so she was bound to knock on the door any second now. Marvin was desperate to find his eye patch. Zoe could not see him without it.

Marvin had been reading *The Bell Jar*. He idolized Sylvia Plath.

He was the head librarian at the Grayling district library. Atop his desk was a city constructed out of book-stacks. He stood over the skyline and peered into the broad avenues separating the towers. He scanned around the outrageously thick dictionary someone had borrowed; a sports stadium situated among the metropolis, but still found nothing. He dragged his fingertips over his face to make sure he hadn't simply imagined removing the patch, which happened plenty because he couldn't actually see if it was on his face. Again, it wasn't there. Having only one eye made the search half as fruitful, and twice as frustrating. The patch had vanished, even though Marvin specifically remembered setting it down on the cover of *Rabbit Punches*, which was the shortest building at only three stories tall.

From his frantic reaction, a person might assume that Marvin's right eye socket stood gaping and hollow like a carved jack o' lantern, which couldn't be farther from the truth. Marvin had a fake eye, and had all his life. The name for his condition was Anophthalmia, and meant that Marvin had simply been born without an eye. He was lucky to not have any of the other deformities that typically accompany Anophthalmia.

Marvin clung to the word Anophthalmia tightly, like a secret that pertained almost exclusively to him.

His fake eye looked quite nice and natural. The eye patch was unnecessary, but Marvin wore it most of the time anyway. It made him feel rugged and cavalier. It was something a pirate might wear, as if Marvin's eye had been plucked from his head by a rusty cutlass during a duel against a gruff, light-footed scallywag. Marvin could just imagine balancing fifty feet in the air, on top of a wooden mast. He could feel the cold spray of saltwater whip against his face, and imagined teetering to the side as a large swell rocked the ship beneath him. He could hear the poor souls that had been stabbed, pushed overboard, and could only scream as sharks finished the job. In this daydream, Marvin knew that he'd look dashing as he regained his balance and clashed swords with his foe. Marvin relied heavily on the confidence produced from wearing the eye patch. The only reason he removed it while in his office was because it was uncomfortably tight and caused skin irritation if worn too long. There was already a narrow ring where the hair was already thinning because of the eye patch's strap.

The only problem was that Marvin embodied the polar opposite of daring-handsomeness. Marvin's face was attractive, but in a non-threatening way. He was average height, and slightly less than average weight.

Zoe thought that Marvin was polite and funny, and the fact that Marvin still occupied his parent's basement at age twenty-nine, and occasionally allowed his mother to choose his outfit didn't bother her. She thought it was cute and harmless. The main reason that Zoe didn't take Marvin seriously as a potential lover was because there was a discernable sadness and loneliness lurking behind his façade of gaiety and goofiness.

At the moment, she was actually in the shower. She'd gotten a late start to the day, but wasn't in a hurry. Marvin acted very strange around her as if trying to be smooth and exotic, but had no idea how assume those qualities. He clearly had a crush on her. She'd have to be blind not to see it. But that was fine. It didn't matter to Zoe. She like the special treatment Marvin showed her, like never holding her accountable for being late or completing tasks in a timely manner. Zoe would get to work today. But there was no need to rush.

There was a knock on the door, and Marvin still hadn't found his eye patch. Assuming it was Zoe, he got up and shuffled a few steps closer.

"I'm busy. Go away. I'll be out in a minute," Marvin said in the most labored voice he could manage.

But she kept wrapping on the door like a woodpecker. He had even been afraid he yelled too loud and been too rude. Although, maybe he hadn't spoken loud enough. He wondered if Zoe was angry with him for some reason, and why she was so desperate to get into the office. A glorious thought crossed Marvin's mind. Maybe Zoe was simply pretending not to acknowledge his rude attempt at stalling because she couldn't wait to see him. This idea got Marvin's heart hammering and temperature rising. Zoe had been

gone all weekend. And it seemed possible that Zoe was so eager, because she missed his company.

Marvin dropped to his hands and knees and crawled towards the desk. He spotted the eye patch on the chair where he'd been sitting.

The knuckles still tapped furiously at the door.

"Don't worry, I'm coming" Marvin said in the most chipper voice he could find, once he was finally wearing the eye patch.

When he opened the door, Marvin was surprised to find Denise standing there instead of Zoe. But his face didn't show his disappointment. Marvin was short of breath, his tousled bangs were damp with perspiration and his lips were formed into a shit-eating grin. It looked as if he'd been exercising, or masturbating in his office.

"Oh hi," Marvin said, trying to catch his breath. "What's wrong? You look discombobulated."

"I had something to tell you," Denise said while slowly backing up. Her cheeks started to blush. "But now I can't remember. Sorry if I interrupted something."

"Okay. Well, I thought you were Zoe, needing to initial the time sheet. Has she arrived yet?" He peeked at his watch. "It's past noon. So her shift has technically already started."

Without responding Denise resumed her position behind the front counter. She was thirty-nine years old. Only ten years older than Marvin, but Denise already acted like a senior citizen, and she treated Marvin as if he were a teenager. When she gave birth for the first time, Denise had been fifteen. She became a grandmother three years ago when she was only thirty-six. To say the least, someone had pressed the fast-forward button

when looking at Denise's life. Marvin always wondered what Denise would act like when she really became a senior citizen.

Denise was short and homely. She wore a tie-dye shirt and too many bracelets. Her hair was braided, except for the small band of hair that had already turned grey, which was tucked behind her ear as if Denise wanted to accentuate this sign of age. But she was a genuine person. She loved books and talking to people about them. Marvin enjoyed having her around. But right now, he didn't appreciate the way Denise was ignoring him.

"I guess that she's late," Denise said.

Marvin saw an opportunity to call Zoe without appearing needy and pathetic. He knew from movies that women hated those characteristics.

"Well, I suppose I should call her then."

Marvin walked back into his office and called Zoe's cell phone, but she didn't answer and her voicemail inbox was full. For the next thirty minutes, Marvin stared blankly at the city of books atop his desk and worried that he wouldn't get to see Zoe today. He didn't remove the eye patch, even though it was beginning to make his skin itch.

Once again, knuckles pounded on the office door. This time, instead of stalling, he answered the call immediately. Denise stood in the doorway as before. Again, Marvin was a sight to see. His shoulders were slouched forward and he wore an expression of defeat. His hair stood on end because he'd been yanking on it, and the askew eye patch made him look like an injured soldier walking away from a field hospital.

"What is it?" Marvin asked.

Denise had remembered the problem from earlier. She explained that a homeless man had been loitering near the building. Out front there was a little shaded garden that Marvin had created a few years ago and spent almost an hour a day maintaining. A few comfortable chairs rested in the middle of the flowers, trees, and bushes, which made for a peaceful reading garden.

Most people didn't know that Ernest Hemingway spent many of his childhood summers in northern Michigan. He used to canoe down the Au Sable River, which ran through Grayling. Instead of neglecting this information, Marvin thought that the town should flaunt this history. For the past year or so, he had been writing letters to the mayor's office that suggested building an Ernest Hemingway statue, and he knew just the place. Marvin thought that his little garden in front of the library would be a perfect spot for such a memorial. Hemingway was Marvin's favorite author. He wished that he could be Hemingway. Marvin even canoed as a hobby, because Hemingway had.

Denise explained that a homeless man was loitering in the garden and guzzling vodka from a bottle. A mother who was now doing her best, but failing to keep her five young ones from making a catastrophic mess had complained upon arrival.

"Damn. Really?" Marvin muttered. Grayling was a very small town, and didn't have homeless people. The weather was too sporadic and cold, and there weren't enough people walking the sidewalks to successfully panhandle. "What the hell is he doing here?"

The goddess Zoe had arrived while Marvin sulked in his office. She was behind the desk, scanning returned books into the computer. He observed her perfect figure and saw an opportunity to impress her.



“Hey Denise,” Marvin said louder than necessary. “Did that lady describe the drifter in the garden?”

“Not really,” she replied.

“Was he burly and have a menacing look in his eye that yearned for violence?”

“She didn’t say.”

Marvin peeked over at Zoe. She hadn’t even glanced toward their conversation, and just continued scanning books into the computer like an automaton. She wore little blue shorts and a red shirt that was a little too short. As Zoe bent for a book, the shirt raised and revealed the marvelous dimples of her lower back, and then in the cutest way she reached back to cover the span of skin with the back of her hand. Zoe had fair skin and naturally blonde hair. She was the type of person who seemed skittish and quiet at first, and not until she felt absolutely certain of a person would she unleash her silly personality. Marvin liked that too. He thought it made Zoe smart for protecting her from embarrassment or criticism. He also thought it was damn cute. And she always had a witty remark in her back pocket to make Marvin giggle.

Marvin hadn’t actually taken Zoe on a date, or even called her just to shoot the breeze, but he knew sparks would fly if he could only get Zoe to view him as anything other than an authority figure. They were meant to be together. Marvin was as sure as Romeo. He was a true Romantic at heart and tried to act as chivalrous as possible.

“Did the woman spot if the miscreant had a jagged knife tucked in his trousers that could make this encounter highly dangerous?” Marvin said.

“I’m sorry, she didn’t say,” Denise replied, rolling her eyes.

“Well, that lady did say he was quite drunk. Right? That could make him threatening. But don’t worry, I’ll go sort him out anyways.”

Marvin rolled up his sleeves for effect, but did so unevenly, which made his left arm look longer than the other.

Marvin stole one more look at Zoe to see if she was impressed. She was almost finished scanning the cart of books, oblivious to anything except the task at hand. Marvin quickly imagined that the existence of the world depended on her completing that mundane chore. Zoe had always been a serious worker, a trait that made Marvin admire her even more. It didn’t matter that she worked with blinders on. Once the homeless man had been dealt with, Zoe would swoon with affection and really view him as a hero.

But Marvin didn’t need to walk outside in order to confront the loiterer. The sleigh bells on the front doors rattled against the glass. A tall, portly man came plodding into the library. His body swayed drastically from side to side with each step. It was more of a top-heavy stumble than a walk. He wore an ancient t-shirt that was smeared with filth. Only a few stubborn wisps of hair clung to his bald, sunburned head. Marvin felt sorry for the man, but he couldn’t allow him to stay since he was so drunk. And soon Marvin noticed another problem.

Marvin stared, dumbfounded. His mind reeled. Suddenly he remembered that Zoe was nearby, and hoped desperately that she continued to ignore the man.

“My word,” Denise remarked. “Marvin, aren’t you going to do something? There are children in here!”

The children were savages. They were huddled in a corner of the library. Two of them were dueling, using rulers as swords and books as shields. The other three were

crowded around watching and cheering. Nowhere to be found was their mother. None of them noticed the homeless man at all, which was a blessing because the zipper of the homeless man's jeans was broken, and drooping through the gap were his wrinkly testicles. A few strands of hair clung to the expanse of skin, like on his almost bald head.

Marvin didn't know what to think. A mixture of confusion and disbelief froze him. There, in the open area before the library's front desk, the space where children sat and played while waiting for their mommy or daddy to check out a book, was a homeless man with half of his genitals hanging out, blaspheming everything the library stood for.

Zoe gasped and began to chuckle. She'd been daydreaming about a boy named Tim that she'd played cat and mouse with all weekend, and finally on Saturday they'd broken away from the others and gone skinny-dipping. It had been extremely late, closer to sunrise than to when the sun had set. His muscles looked so chiseled in the moonlight. His confidence was enough to convince her to join him. He was already in the water waiting for her. Without Denise's urgent remark about the children, Zoe would have never looked up and noticed the homeless man. Zoe found the sight before her hilarious, and not at all disconcerting. She was slightly stoned. But for Marvin, this situation was as serious as death.

He tried to trick himself into believing Zoe couldn't see the man's privates. Marvin used his one eye to trace the line of Zoe's two, and sure enough, found that they landed upon the sagging skin poking through the homeless man's broken zipper. This infuriated him.

"Zoe! No! Stop!" Marvin screamed. Out of the millions of words that surrounded him, Marvin couldn't seem to express his thoughts. Even if there was a thick dictionary

spread open before him, Marvin felt as if he still wouldn't be able to pick out the words he wanted. He stuttered for a minute, babbling nonsense, until he was finally furious and worried enough to scream at the top of his lungs. If he were a character in one of the nearby books, his face would have been beat red and steam would have poured out of his ears. "Damn it to hell, woman! Get out!"

Marvin shot his fiercest look at Zoe, whose eyes were fixed on the bum's genitalia. It was impossible for Marvin to look imposing, especially while wearing his silly black eye patch and his sleeves were rolled up to different lengths on each arm. But he tried.

"Zoe Russell. Get the fuck out of my library now! This instant!"

"Me?" She said, confused. She still didn't realize that Marvin was yelling her instead of the homeless man.

"Hurry. Hurry. Hurry," was all Marvin responded with.

He felt a sudden relief as Zoe picked up her handbag and stomped away toward the back, where there was a door only employee's could use. He was glad she hadn't tried to exit the main door and skirt around the large, dirty man in front of the desk. The way that the man was stumbling about, it was impressive that he hadn't fallen over yet. Marvin wanted Zoe to be as far away from the homeless man and his genitals as possible. He was trying to protect her. Why couldn't she see that, and admire him for it?

Denise watched as Marvin chased after Zoe. So she picked up the telephone and dialed the police.

Marvin sat in his office a few hours later. There were no patrons in the library. Marvin and Denise were the only ones left. The homeless man was long gone, probably

pacing around a jail cell, completely sober now, trying his best to ignore the familiar, acrid taste of vomit lingering on his tongue.

Marvin hadn't been able to catch Zoe when he ran after her. When he stepped out the back door, her car was already pulling away. It bugged him that he didn't get a chance to explain himself. Here, Marvin saw another opportunity to call her cell phone and talk, as close companions, but Zoe hadn't answered any of his eighteen attempts. Marvin's office door was open and he could see Denise walking the library, straightening the bookshelves and picking up debris from the tabletops. She'd spent a long time in the corner that had hosted the little delinquents' gladiator fight earlier on in the day. Marvin looked through the front doors and could see dusk's comforting shades of orange and purple. He just wanted to go home. Thinking about the perilous state of Zoe and his relationship depressed him.

But Marvin shot up from his chair as he had an idea. He strode out of his office and snaked through the maze of bookshelves, grabbing every book he could think of that was Romantic until the pile extended from his sagging hands to his chin.

When the night ended, he took all of these books home. He had to take a separate trip out to his car because the nightly routine to close the library required the use of Marvin's hands. During the last few hours of the night, when it was just Marvin and Denise, he'd considered embracing her matriarchic inclinations and asked for her advice on this situation. But he'd eventually decided against it. If he supported the notion that she was older and wiser than he, even once, working with her from then on would be a nightmare, a never-ending bombardment of questions and concerns.

Marvin's parents owned an old farmhouse on the outskirts of town. He occupied the basement, but it was all his. The laundry was upstairs just off the kitchen, there wasn't a storage room down there, and there were no other reasons for his parents to venture down into his domain. His mother did come down often, but only for the amount of time it took to bring down a meal. Sometimes Marvin would return home and his dirty dishes had vanished or his clean clothes would be folded into stacks atop his made bed, but Marvin didn't count this as her being in his space. In these instances Marvin didn't mind, because he viewed his mother like air, being remotely aware of her presence, but not being able to visually detect her. He treated it as something that just happened.

Marvin sat on the couch in the basement. The coffee table was covered with books like his desk at the office. He read all night, not sleeping a wink. The book Marvin started with was an anthology of love stories, but not the typical happily-ever-after love stories that would leave the reader with a residue of warmth and comfort and satisfaction when finished. No. This anthology contained stories like James Joyce's "The Dead" and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter." It even included some poetry from Poe and Byron, like "Annabelle Lee," "The Raven," and "So, We'll Go No More A' roving." Marvin read some of the collection, and then switched to read the last few chapters of Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms*. Marvin soaked in the utter despair of losing a soul mate and an infant during the process of birth, which was supposed to be such a divine gift. He sifted through all these works, although not light-hearted and romantic, for suggestions on how to win back Zoe's favor. And Marvin learned what was at the core of true, undying love. No matter what prevents or

obstructs the relationship, be it death, or marriage, or distance, it is crucial that the heart's dedication and affection never falters for any reason.

The only times Marvin left his downstairs couch was when he crept upstairs to the kitchen for a snack or beer. The rest of the night, he sat, curled up under the bright light from the lamp standing behind the couch, and read.

Zoe went to bed around three in the morning. She'd eaten dinner with her parents, and then ventured out to the bar with her friends from high school. In order to receive the most laughs, she'd withheld the story about the homeless man until the table was full of empty glasses. That was the only time Zoe thought about Marvin the rest of the night. She and her friends met some guys at the bar that were in town for a golf tournament. Northern Michigan is notorious for beautiful golf courses during the summer. They all went back to the guys' hotel and snuck into the outside pool and hot tub. The rest of Zoe's night can be left up to the imagination.

Marvin put down his book and went about his day as usual when dawn arrived. He shaved, showered, and chitchatted with his mother while eating breakfast, and then headed to the library. He spent the day mostly hiding in his office. Normally, most of Marvin's day was spent conversing with his employees, straightening up the book stacks and making sure every book was in its proper place, discussing books with patrons, and tending to the little reading garden he'd built out front. Marvin even did most of his paperwork at a table in the library's main room. He loved being around fellow book worshipers, feeling the excitement radiate off them as they discovered a new book, a new world to imagine. Marvin had discovered his love for books at a young age. With only

one eye, playing sports was out of the question. His depth perception and body coordination were noticeably less than everyone else's.

Marvin had spent all night reading love stories. The majority of them had been bleak. But some hadn't been. Marvin also hid in his office all day and read about love. And all of these stories weighed heavily on Marvin's mind.

All day Marvin felt tired. He yawned almost continuously and kept rubbing his eye. He drank so much coffee throughout the day that his urine was bubbly and shiny like soap. But he refused sleep.

In the afternoon Marvin wrote a long, sincere note to Zoe that declared his undying love for her. It also included a poem that was his best attempt at replicating Lord Byron's style. After the note was complete, Marvin ducked out early and caught a matinee. It was the newest chick-flick, technically falling into the paranormal romance sub-genre. It was a sight, a twenty-nine year old man that had been awake for thirty hours and wore an eye-patch, in a afternoon showing of a chick-flick, tearing up, while the only other people in the theater were teenage girls.

Afterwards, Marvin headed to a coffee shop and waited there until dark. He worked on revising his love note. It was finally getting dark when Marvin felt that he had the note perfectly written on a new sheet of paper, and it was crafted to the best of his ability. But he ordered another coffee and waited until the shop was ready to close. Then, he set off. Zoe's house was his destination.

Marvin wanted to wait until dark for several reasons, the main one being that he planned on sneaking around the house, peeping into windows until he found the one that belonged to Zoe's bedroom. Marvin didn't want any neighbors to see him and become



suspicious of his presence. He wanted to be like a character in the stories that threw pebbles at the fair lady's window to gain her attention, declare his love for her as she looked down upon him, and watch as she climbed down when she accepted and requited his love.

The drive would take about twenty minutes. Zoe lived on the other side of town where the buildings were very sparse and the trees were abundant. At the library, Marvin had rifled through files until finding Zoe's employment forms to find her parent's address.

But Zoe wasn't even home. She'd been at a friend's house all night, and planned on staying there.

Marvin was on a two-lane highway. He risked pushing his Toyota up to sixty-five miles an hour because there weren't any other cars on the road and there weren't any good spots for cops to hide and monitor traffic. Ranch-style houses line one side of the highway. They all had expansive yards and were spread out. And on the other side of the highway was the Au Sable River. The river was barely visible at night. There were only different shades of black. The water was darker than the night air. The highway followed the river the entire way to Zoe's house, and the only thing separating the road from the water was a guardrail and a steep twenty-foot embankment.

The coffee hadn't done much good to keep Marvin alert in the coffee shop, now it was as if he hadn't drunk any at all. His thoughts had an aloof, dream-like quality to them as if he'd just drunk some absinthe. Marvin had never stayed awake all night before. He'd tried at slumber parties when he was younger, but had always failed and woken up with derogatory sharpie-tattoos across his face and arms. Marvin began to picture Ernest

Hemingway in a canoe, down on the Au Sable. He always thought that Hemingway's childhood presence was something the town should wear like a badge. Every time Marvin had canoed down the Au Sable, he found himself slipping into an awestruck trance. He was floating down the same river Hemingway had. These thoughts quickly abated when Marvin realized the car was on the wrong side of the road. He jerked the wheel, a little too hard, and the car veered back to its proper side.

Marvin seemed to move in slow motion. The world zipped past at its regular pace, but Marvin's body reacted sluggishly to his commands. There was a small lag between the time he told his hands to turn the radio volume up, and when they reached out and did so. And the blaring music didn't make him more alert. It just agitated him and made him more aware of his exhaustion.

Marvin had been so lost in his Hemingway reveries that he would have died if there had been an oncoming car. He considered this, and then wondered what would happen after his untimely demise. Would people miss him? What would people think happened? The car had been drifting toward the guardrail, and at this speed he surely would have made it into the river.

Marvin peeked over at the passenger seat, and on it, was the handwritten declaration of love for Zoe. He recollected all the wonderful characters that had died in the name of love, and what a noble, beautiful act it was. To die on a mission of love was the death of a true Romantic, Marvin realized. People would assume he had committed suicide. But that didn't matter to him. The letter would let them know that it was in the name of love. And maybe, just maybe, that would notify Zoe of how much he was truly dedicated to her. Then, he would live in her eternal memory as a true, chivalrous lover.

Marvin's eyelids were extremely heavy. They wanted to close. And Marvin gradually let them. The car slowly began to drift onto the other side of the road, toward the river.

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