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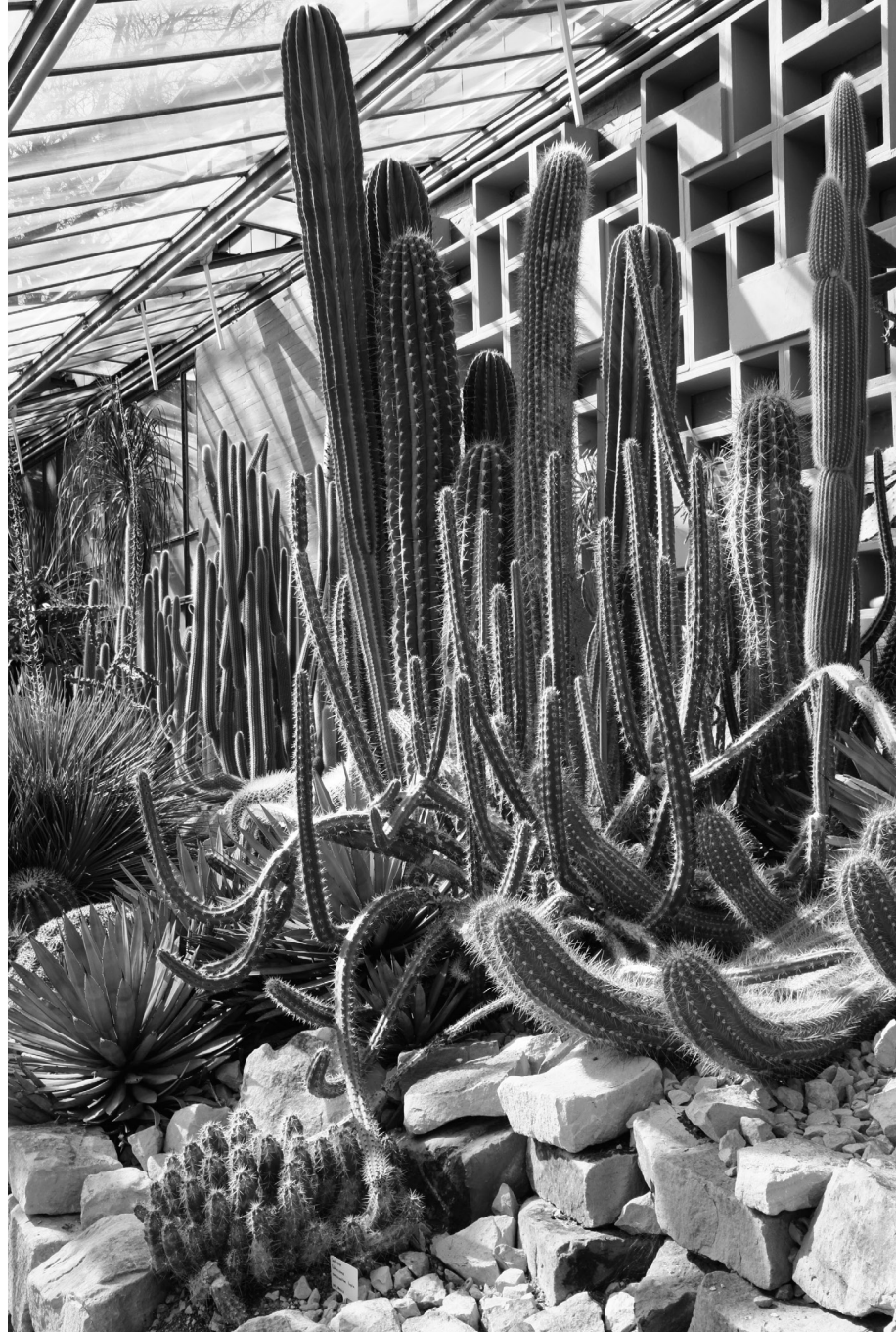
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SEL

**Adrian Williams**  
**COUNSEL**

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Amy's stomach had made her intolerable. It wouldn't stop growling, not when she ate, not when she slept, not when she emptied her bowels and started from scratch. It didn't matter what she ate or how long she chewed, if she drank or didn't drink with her food. It was something else, something within her that sat like a stone stuck in a tumbler shinning itself on her insides while the rest of her took the beating.

She cut meetings short to use the toilet, or drink a gallon of anise tea, or lie down on the cool linoleum floor under her desk while Connie took her calls. Amy couldn't listen to anything anyone was saying, she literally could not hear them. So, in cutting people off, in letting her thoughts wander inevitably down to that hollow, searing place, she came off as rude.

Jim thought her symptoms arose from their anniversary trip to Malaysia last year. But the tropical clinic at the University hospital, after taking vile upon vile of blood, found nothing in her body that could have been responsible for inciting such extreme discomfort. In so many words, they'd said, it was all in her head. This nagging, throbbing, plate-smashing pain was in effect, an utterly appalling prognosis, all her own doing. Their conclusion was that she alone could find a way to set herself free, and that she seek counsel.

If she stepped on her left foot with her right foot with all her weight, for one brief moment, she could make the pain stop. Every chance she got, every line, every still upright task she undertook, she stood on her own foot, stopping the pain with such abrupt relief that it was almost a pleasure. It was her new stance, the balance, that made her totally unable to move forward.

It was in this position, one foot on top of the other, while standing at the curb waiting for the light to change so she could cross the street, that she forgot which foot she was standing on and when the light changed, she lifted, or attempted to lift the anchored foot and pitched forward. Her mouth was closed but she could taste the asphalt as a rush of pain filled her face. With her cheek on the ground the world shifted and cars scaled the horizon as she realised that that other pain was gone. Slowly she lifted herself, pressing her flushed face briefly harder against the asphalt before she rose and turned her head. Licking the sour street from her lips, and spitting it out again she stumbled into traffic.



It was a chance to think, in the car on the stretch between home and office, of this dream of getting something for nothing that was actually coming true. The word “sweepstakes” was both too big for itself—so big it was almost disorienting—and yet somehow handleable, within reach. This enormous magic God hand was hovering over a crowd, sweeping past head upon head upon head, then slowly, gently plucking one up out of the mass to carry it above and beyond to some better place.

All she’d had to do was write down her name with a phone number, and then wait.

She’d forgotten all about it when they called, forgotten that she’d subscribed to the chance as she folded the paper she’d slipped in the box-slot, the box that was adorned with pictures of palm-trees.

She had always lived just north of fair weather. To her, palm trees were just pictures of paradise, not to be confused with real trees, or real places. The idea of going to a place like that, not unlike the prospect of traveling to the moon, was completely absent from her inner-life of wants. It was the sort of want that other people had, a want that she had lived without.

When she got time off work, she went to the lake house that her cousins shared where she drank instant coffee by the big picture window, and watched the ducks land on the still lake at dusk. A place where she was just unbothered. Cleaning up after herself, and the twenty she left in the phone book for utilities was as close as it ever got to getting something for nothing. But now was her chance to fall into that unshaped want, and really get something for nothing. To pack a bag with light clothes, and get on a plane to Miami where a ship waited with a windowless, interior room cabin,

and private facilities, nurturing the laden promise of all-you-can-eat, twenty-four hours of every one of those 10-days of good weather that had her name on it. The “nothing” she’d give up was simply the unbothered time she might have spent in the dilemma she always faced when returning small objects to their proper place in her cousins cabin. Her suspicion that there was a catch made the prize almost impossible to enjoy. And as she signals for the turn, idling at the stop light, she studies the faces of drivers in other cars moving past for some indication that she should feel lucky, because when the lights change, it’s her turn.

It was Zac’s sense of humour that Hella had been faithful to all those years. It was the lightheartedness that she married. His careless ability to fix things that broke, things that sometimes weren’t even things but hearts, minds, and circumstance. He could fix anything with that weightless personality. It lifted her up, and carried her along with such authority that she forgave what didn’t work for his word that surely something else would. He knew when the time came, that it was coming. He asked Hella to do it one morning over breakfast. He told her he was serious.

“I want you to do it. Please.” He said, and he wasn’t pleading, or angry, or sad, just matter-of-fact because right then, he wasn’t asking.

That night he brought a cassette recorder up from the basement with a blank tape, and set it down on the night-stand that flanked his side of the bed he shared with Hella. She waited till his breathing changed, and his head leaned off to the side. As his mouth fell open out crept the soft jagged snore she’d nodded off to for years. Hella reached over the lump of him, pressed record, and fell asleep. The tape ran through, took note, and switched itself off without them.

Now that it was done, she couldn’t argue.

“I want you to do it.” He said. “It’s better this way.” His only reason.

And as his silent body lie there in that open box, tape player resting on the chest of his best blue suit, snoring mildly, everyone they’d ever loved looked down on him with a smile, and she knew, and hated the fact that he had been right.







Roger couldn't sweat. It was hot, and his body stewed something nasty but still he could not sweat. Nothing made its way out of his skin. Something was wrong with the air conditioning in this movie theatre. He felt the giant actors' hot breath emanating from the screen. Adjusting himself in the worn velveteen seat he considered the possibility of a move to the cool empty seat on his left. That would have put a little space between them. Sitting there beside Hillary was like sitting next to a potbelly stove.

The first time he'd gone to her house he was wrought with uncertainty about whether or not a grown woman should keep a guinea-pig as a pet. Sitting next to her now as she let off that sweet, dry hay smell from the stuff she stuffed its cage with, he agreed with that uncertainty.

The longer they sat, the hotter it was, the stronger she smelled. The guinea-pig was called Nugget, and it was fittingly brown, and small, and round. It squealed from its cage from time to time to be let out. When Hillary introduced him to Nugget, holding the rodent up for him to stroke, Roger made the mistake of asking how long guinea-pigs live. Hillary answered by silently returning Nugget to his cage, hastily putting on her coat, and walking out the door.

"Did I say something wrong?" Roger followed her out to the car. She walked fast.

"Let's just go out, and try to have a nice, peaceful dinner." She said, while arranging her heavily adorned key-chain to expose the car key.

"I didn't mean to imply that Nugget should die anytime soon." He said.

"I think that is exactly what you were implying. If not, why then," she rested her arm on the top of the

car, and squinted at him, "tell me, if that wasn't what you meant to say, then why would I think, no, why would you think that I think that that's what you intended... if you hadn't really thought it?"

He followed the logic but missed the sentiment. Regarding the rat, he didn't really care.

"Forget it," she said, "I just want to eat something with a side of mashed potatoes. So let's go." She opened the door to her car. "You know what," she said, "why don't you just follow me in yours. Then we can just go our ways from the restaurant." Which is how in two crappy cars, things got started, and how they now went on, and on, and on, and on.



He'd forgotten his beer on the bench outside, and now it was warm. Wolf grabbed some ice cubes, and a tall mug from the kitchen to cool it off. They never let him have Tuesdays off, but he'd filled in for Greg over the weekend so now he had the day, and the house to himself. What with Kelly at work, and the kids in school it was sweeter than any Sunday. He unplugged the television set like it was 1993, the one they'd retired to the kitchen when they bought the flatscreen, and set it out on the porch rail hooked up to a fat, orange extension cord, that plugged in around the side of the house. Wolf had to finagle the satellite cable through the front window to make it reach, but it was worth the trouble. He could already see himself in the barcalounger out there on the porch, his feet kicked up on the rail by the box with the mug in his hands.

But there was hardly anything worth watching. MTV aired a re-run of a 70's rock tribute, and the drummer from his favourite band was there, talking into a microphone about recording contracts in a voice so off pitched and feathery that Wolf had to turn up the volume to catch it. Wolf had never heard his voice before. He knew only the slamming, mechanical rhythm of that gargantuan drum-set that seemed to rise up out of the dark. The drummer's voice felt wrong. Somehow, Wolf thought, if the drummer had had the exact same voice as the lead singer it would have made more sense. That that high-cracking whisper didn't quite sync as it fell from his lips and he laughed like a randy Turkey.

Wolf was disappointed. His beer was watery. After he turned off the television, he closed his eyes to finish the beer, and heard it still, this gobble, chasing the tails of other thoughts on his only day off.

Nick was out till four celebrating the new job in the new city that would put him on the 7:15 flight out of Boston that morning. He closed his eyes for a few minutes, but he didn't sleep. His apartment had been cleared out a week already and he was living from his suitcase at John's till he split. He had a shower, put on a clean shirt, and emptied the remains of the little Zip-lock baggie that got him through the night on the face of his iPhone. He scraped the meagre excuse for a line together, cleared his iPhone, licked its face and searched the place thoroughly, for anything he might have left behind.

If it hadn't made that cold pea-soup sound, he wouldn't have even noticed the dog-shit all jammed up in the workings of his wheel. The suitcase appeared to limp as he rolled toward the bus stop. His first concern was to get the shit off as quickly as possible, and that it seemed unavoidable that he would have to clean it off himself. There would be no quick fix, and that if he couldn't find a thin stick strong enough for the job, than he would have to resort to some other method of removal, which frankly, he didn't even want to imagine. His other concern, and it was latent, because the shit stank, and he needed a stick like, right now, was airport security. He suspected, and with reasonable concern, that they might not let him board the plane with shitty wheels. He wasn't planning to check any baggage, he'd sent everything with the movers, this was a carry-on. The sun wasn't showing itself yet, but night had drawn back and the sky was a broad flat grey. He doubted that he could sneak this odious case past anyone.

Nick found a white metal, L-shaped shelf bracket on the street beside a dumpster and checked his phone for the time before he turned over that beautiful Rimowa

trolley (his college graduation gift), and held his breath while pursing his lips in a half-frown, as he had at the wheel with the sharper edge of the shelf brace. It was hard to get behind it with the wheel moving. He tore the edge off a plastic sack from a trash can to hold the wheel steady.

Hadn't he gone to law school to avoid doing the shit work? If he had seen a dog right then, even if it had been a fluffy broad pawed puppy, he would have strung it up from a fence post.

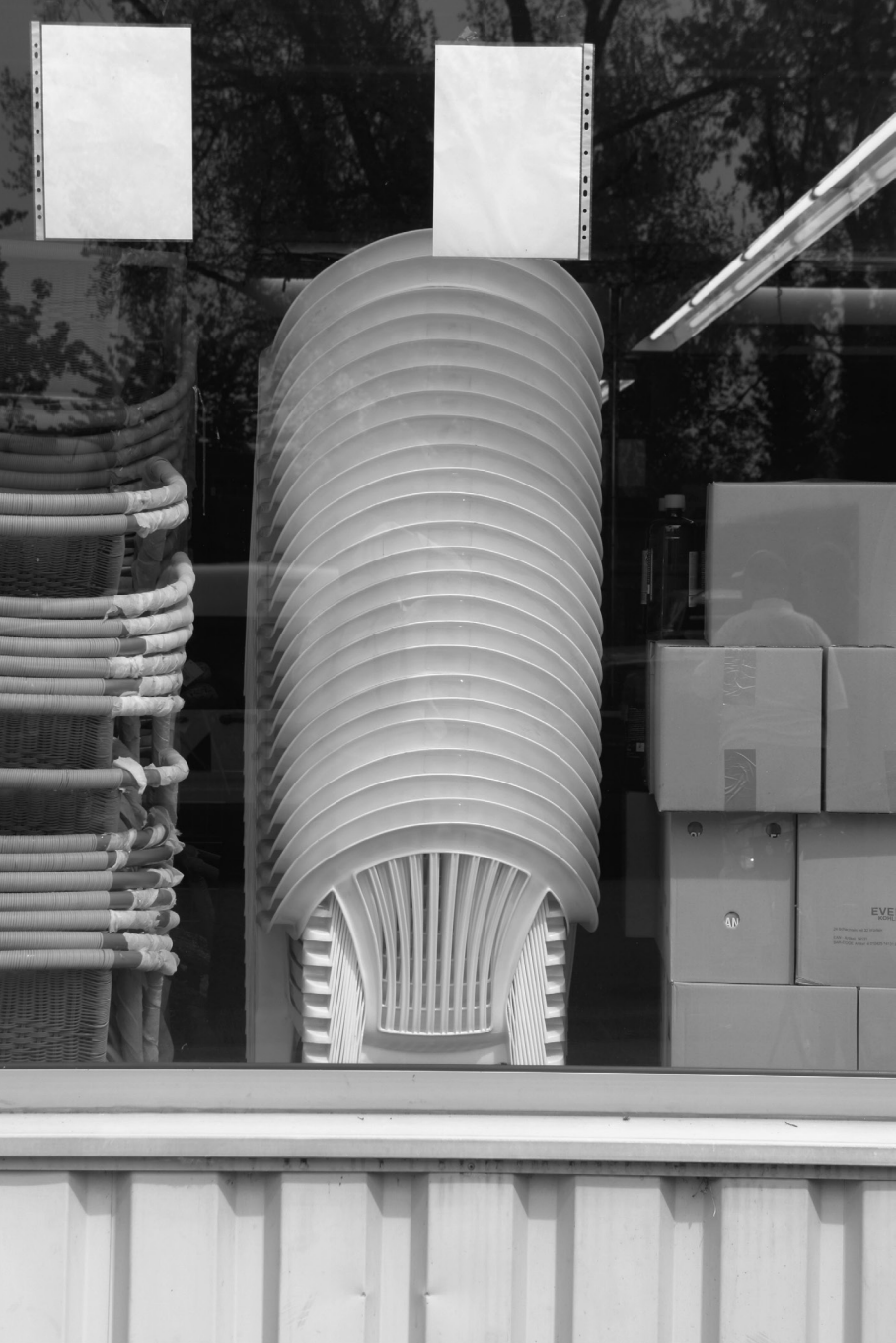
He needed water. He couldn't get behind the wheel. The shit was smeared, and clinging, as shit does, to the weak dark unreachable corners. Near the bus stop there was a bodega. He got an egg on a roll, black coffee, and a large cup of peppermint tea. Outside he doused the wheel with tea as the bus turned the corner, and hopped on with the genuine hope that he was moving on. He'd already checked-in online, so he rolled right on through to security without a second thought.

As he stood there checking the news on his phone, wafts of that smell caused inadvertent, indignant, facial expressions. Two dogs were posted on the other side of the body scanner, a Beagle and a Shepherd. The dogs perked up as Nick pulled his trolley off the belt.

"Excuse me sir, ... would you please step aside." The Beagle was all over that suitcase, clawing at the wheel, nuzzling the spoke. The Shepherd had his big scary nose in Nicks pocket, and the tip of his pink erection was just starting to peek out from his furry underside. Nick was asked to empty his pockets. They ran the phone through the chemistry scanner. Reasonable suspicion led to a property search, followed by a strip-down. The anal exam took place behind closed doors. Nothing he said could

make them stop. In fact, the more he pleaded, the more eager they seemed to follow through. So, Nick, undressed, and in a room full of men, cried a little as they disassembled his suitcase. Freshly showered, he was coming down and his blood slowed as the plane took off without him, and he, bare as birth, prepared himself for a new life, and he knew now that he'd left nothing behind.





He knows it's spam but Nick doesn't delete it. Not right away anyway. There is something about the possibility promised in the subject header that he finds so intriguing, he can't stop himself from constantly pulling up his e-mail and staring at it, from thinking about what it is exactly that tempts him to open it, if only just to see where it leads. But he knows, both deep down and superficially exactly where it'll lead. Virusville. Or maybe, and this is why he doesn't delete it straight away, maybe it really would reveal answers to all the pressing questions on his mind about hot chicks and chewing gum. And maybe, just maybe, they'd posted this video not as a viral mask, but—and he knows this theory is a total sham but he entertains the thought anyway because he just can't help it—as a promotional framework to target a very certain audience, like himself, to reach them and offer them something that perhaps they truly need, because that, surely that, he could live with. He is bothered by his curiosity. Nick knows what it means to be a victim, he knows what getting fucked over feels like. It has formed this scar of reason that he wears tirelessly day-in day-out, never giving in to the curiosity, that he thinks some people might even mistake for wimping out on the desire to see it through.

Kyle picked up the sword that afternoon at a garage sale. It was more of a wall-less carport than a garage really, but Kyle wasn't one to split hairs with a man in the position to be selling a lot of asian weaponry wearing a glass eye. The sword was lodged in hard soil alongside the remains of a cactus. Kyle had drawn it slowly with two hands like Arthur, putting on a show for Tina at the card table who was turning an air-popper over in her hands, looking he supposed for a reason to buy it.

Kyle had paid a crisp five dollars for the sword, and when they stopped off by the river later so Tina could have a pee, he walked on down to the water to swing it around and watch it shine. He needlessly forged a path with his blade then dipped the long metal into the river to test the waters depth.

The river shook like carnival pearls in the hard sun. A tail flipped out of the water, and he saw them then, moving in slow motion. Big postpartum mother fish. They'd dropped their eggs and were now too weak to continue.

Tina parted the brush, tucking in her shirt around the waist with both hands. She blinked at the sight of him.

Kyle, knee deep in the river his shirt tied around his head with a giant limp salmon hanging off his sword. It was beautiful.

Phillip stood up front, his eyes a warm draft that swept the room of the shot nerves and stale habits that brought him there. They'd closed the furniture factory after the lawsuit, and now everybody—out of work, and poisoned to the bones from bad ventilation and sharp glue, stiff legged some, whose nerves stopped listening—had more time and good reason for coming to church. Phillip, moved to Dawnsville from Yule for the job and the landscape, and managed to see hope in all those drained faces. Janice took his words home, in quotes that tangled with her thoughts—so much so in fact—sometimes she thought they were her own, and she shared them without citation at dinner, or in group, and sometimes as a good clear phrase to post on her Facebook page. This week something he'd said made more sense than usual, it hit home as Janice reversed, her eyes framed by the rear-view, from the gravel lot outside of church. She was on her way home. "God writes crooked in a straight line," she told herself. "God writes crooked in a straight line."

"I don't feed the birds because I like them," she said,  
"I feed them because I want them to like me."



The woman in the blue vest at the counter two stools-down was reading the business section of the day's paper. Sam excused himself, then asked her if he could borrow the sports page. She didn't respond. Sam spoke up, and asked her again if he could borrow the sports page. It was folded by her plate within reach, untouched. The woman continued to look at her paper, but answered with a sideways, "No." Sam thought she was kidding so he reached for it. Her hand slammed down, picked up the sports page then set it on the other side of her empty plate. "No." she said again calmly. The waitress filled the woman's coffee, and cleared the empty plate. She went back to reading her paper. Sam finished his breakfast, the waitress refilled his coffee three times, as he watched her read everything but the sports page before folding it all together under her arm. She left cash on the counter as she walked out, and stepped into the sunshine.

After they'd done the count they started looking around the room, under pamphlets and baskets for more. Last week the sermon, and it had been nothing spectacular, had brought in nearly eight-hundred dollars. That today's collection was so much less was odd. No one said anything, but there were a few, "hum's" and "ah's". Caroline thought she saw James bite his fingernails while they were tallying the collection slips, and wondered, suspected, that he might be nervous. Even on rainy days those congregation numbers were constant. Either something big was going down, or there was a thief among them, and something big was about to.



Katie didn't decide to stop wearing shoes. One day, she just didn't put them on. There were some practical aspects to her bare feet like rain that you could just towel off, and the way she could feel oncoming traffic at the crosswalk without having to look both ways. Her house looked better for it. There was no grit on the kitchen floor, and the braided rug in the hall was taken outside and got shook out a little more often. Her husband didn't even notice at first, then in the car one day, he asked her what was with the shoes. "No need." She said, breaking at the corner with a gentle arch flex, for a pack of school kids loaded up like Sherpas.

She worked at ARCO in reception, only half a woman really, to the rest of the office. And in all those weeks of sweeping in *a pie* commando, not one word had crossed the desk about her feet. For the most part her interactions were by phone, whatever trips she did make to the break-room or the ladies, didn't seem to raise a brow as far as her feet were concerned.

Where Katie did run into trouble was the post office. Standing in line there with an armload of packages from work. The lady behind her, an audible breather, tapped on her shoulder and pointed to the sticky foil regulations, that appeared from the inside, backwards on the sliding glass door.

"You can't be in here with no shoes on." Katie looked her in the eyes, said nothing, and turned around.

"I said you can't be in here with no shoes on. It says so, right there," Katie could hear her pointing, "in plain English. Clear as day. Right there. Hello? *Hablas Inglays?* I'm talking to you, Miss."

And though she could feel the woman wheezing behind her, to escape the vile energy tanning her back,

she silently took leave of her body, closing her eyes as the woman behind her attempted to gather a mob using words like “sanitation,” and “canine faeces.”

What both pleased and amazed Katie about the post office was the fact that the postal workers, stationed behind bullet proof glass, went on with their business despite the elevated voices, and obvious upset. They continued to weigh, and stamp, and make change, while visually registering the foray and doing absolutely nothing about it.

When Katie arrived at the counter the postal clerk rolled up the little package reviving window, took on the packages, called out the price, collected the cash, and slid the little receipt though the metal drawer with a look on her face that described a mind miles away.

Katie’s husband couldn’t believe that it had been weeks since she’d worn shoes. He could have sworn she had them on at the movie theatre the week before. But he couldn’t be sure, and it was summer, and eyes do after a while lose interest in the sight of skin.



Everybody in town was scared of that gangster in the Dutch clogs. You heard him coming, heard him going, heard him stop. It was the sound that scared them, this clip-clopping under his weight. People said he'd killed with those clogs, smashed a face right in, then clippety-clopped off like it was nothin'. It was a time when everybody was used to the slick guys in suits, a time when the gangster should have looked tough, but this guy was weird. With his soft fluffy shirts, and his tight jean-shorts, he looked like a retired tranny from a second rate cabaret club. He braided his long white beard and always carried a plastic water bottle that he crunched in the fist of his right hand for effect. In restaurants he drank from his old wrinkled bottle and set it up on the table, clicking his clogs below to the rhythmic beat of whatever they had playing on the radio. Sometimes, if a waitress was new, she'd bring him water in a glass, once a girl even tried to pick up the crumpled plastic bottle to throw away, but he caught her hand with a napkin wrapped around her little wrist, and he let his heels go click, click, click.





The pond was frozen but you could see things moving below the surface. Ricky broke a stone through the ice and watched it sink. Tasha laughed. Something about the way he'd done it, picked up that big rock and slung it in, it was scary, almost like he'd done it to a cat or would, or could, or already had. Tasha wanted to take the trail back to the cabin.

"Check this out." Ricky said, as he bent down to pull a cracked pane of ice from the pond and held it up between them. He was out of focus behind the bubbles. He held the pane with both hands, counted backwards three to one, and smashed the ice on his forehead. Tasha laughed again.

Larry picked up the phone, dialed, waited. It rang. Nobody answered. Sometimes when nobody answered Larry thought, because he couldn't be sure, that he might have dialed the wrong number. If nobody answered, how could he know? He let it ring a few more times. Still nobody answered. Now, Larry thought for sure it was the wrong house, or maybe Cal wasn't home. There was no answering machine. Larry thought he remembered Cal having an answering machine, he was pretty sure about that. He let it ring a few more times then hung up. He looked at the number again. He could have dialed wrong. Nobody ever picked up when you needed them, and Cal owed Larry thirty bucks. Larry wasn't even after the thirty bucks. At least that's not why he was calling. Larry looked at the number in the book. Cal's name was right next to Cathy. Larry kept things simple, he lived on a first-name basis. Sometimes he got confused in apartment foyers at buzzer nameplates, but he'd become skilled at the educated guess as well as holding all the buttons down at once with his forearm. Larry thought about calling Cathy. He leaned back, uncrossed his legs, then re-crossed them in the other direction, and reached his left arm out toward the phone when it rang. He froze. It rang again. Maybe it was Cal. It rang again. Now he didn't want to spend a half-hour gabbing with Cal. He was all set to call Cathy. Larry stared at the answering machine and let it ring, and ring, and snap on, "Hey it's La..." click.

She was the one on the other end of the phone when they called the number listed on the bank's website. All she ever did was answer that phone from her pale corner of the office, listen to complaints, and try to calm them down. But it was always so personal when they called the bank. And no matter what happened or who was right, they always felt cheated. She could say anything, it didn't really matter. She was nice regardless of the tirade, sorrier still that all she had to give them was a voice thin as an empty paper cup.

"ALWAYS THE BEST CONNECTION," was painted in bold black, four-foot letters, on the facade of the Plumbing Works Parts Distribution Center on the industrial corner of Brisbee and Pine.

That kids liked to spray their initials, and declarations of love below it wasn't unusual.

When the Plumbing Works Parts Distribution Center relocated to an office park in the suburbs, where employees could finally enjoy a variety of cuisine at the nearby strip mall, and the parking lot had trees—granted the newly planted alders offered little shade, they at least promised it. The twenty-five year old entrepreneurs moved into the old plumbing works building to start a night club, they left those bold black words exactly as they had been painted below the ten-foot mouse in patched overalls holding a monkey wrench in pink Mickey gloves.

It wasn't until the first few couples were removed from the dance-floor in trance-like states for public fornication, and hoards of young people lined up outside in sparse clothes, freezing for the chance to get inside, that it became stunningly clear that the sign defined the building.

Moving in  
and out of conversation  
you hold mostly  
with yourself  
about winter tires  
the price of almonds  
and the asthmatic cat  
your sister stuck you with  
while she's in Cabo.

You maintain eye contact  
with people  
always  
getting tired of the listening  
you silence with chatter  
that rolls in like fog  
and holds them  
keeps them  
looking  
for a safe way out.

The cat likes to be  
scratched  
between the ears  
for about twenty seconds  
and that's key  
because he  
hasn't been de-clawed  
and you've got  
the armchair to prove it.

She has promised to bring you  
one of those blankets  
and a bottle  
with the real worm inside  
and to have your prescription filled  
two-hundred dollars worth  
because  
they do things different  
down there.

That's so.







Rainer and Nicole were good tourists. Not like Betti and Frank. Rainer and Nicole could get excited about a garbage can in the shape of a peanut. And it took them five minutes to take the picture. Betti thought they must have a place for all those pictures in albums, on a shelf somewhere. Frank thought they just liked taking the pictures. Rainer and Nicole, all smiles and talk of weather, are tickled pink over the cruise. They haven't left town yet, but are already in his and her fleece, all weather, Jack Wolfskin coats, passports neatly tucked inside on neck-strings, vacation mode.

Betti is a little bit embarrassed, and a little bit jealous that she and Frank don't revel in the journey like Rainer and Nicole, darting after details big and small, happy for the things that they don't know. The weird toothpaste, and breakfast cereals you just can't find anywhere else. Betti knows you can't always be the happy one, and she's okay with that, with being, in Rainer and Nicole's company, something like a mope. So off they go together, eight ears, eight eyes, and four mouths, hungry for everything, and revelling at last, in the company they keep.

She's got her hair  
pulled back  
but loose  
living the dream  
she's always wanted a horse  
wide streets  
cobble alleys  
she rides the echo  
two steps at a time  
and takes no sugar from strangers  
high on its warm back  
in that uniform  
those boots  
She's always wanted a horse  
gets paid to ride this one  
crowd control  
park service  
that bright yellow vest  
those reflectors  
they're a team  
her and that horse  
they chase runners  
stop traffic  
straighten up lines  
they wait  
under the gas station overhang  
tunnel  
driveway  
hotel awning  
till the rain stops  
or the hail or the snow  
they don't mind the cold  
Saturday night she watches a crime show

with a woman detective  
and her old dumb partner  
she always watches that show  
the horse watches  
the woodgrain  
of his stall door  
she makes an online appointment  
at the shooting range  
during commercials  
braids her hair  
every night  
living the dream



They met on Schmilinsky Street at the dog boutique, standing in front of that polka dot facade on a mild Tuesday morning. Felix was admiring a driftwood dog-bowl stand, and Sven was admiring Felix.

The sun cut in through the buildings and sharpened the shadows on the sidewalk. It was too early to browse for four-armed cable knit sweaters, and diamond studded leashes. But the display was rich, and pledged the same sort of allegiance to reciprocal high-class loyalty that all dog boutiques promised. Felix stood there, gazing through the window while his Springer Spaniel rubbed up against every foul smelling object within leash-length. Sven's dog, a Pug puppy, he called a "Puggy" snorted at his heels for attention. Sven quieted him by rustling the empty treat bag in his pocket. The Pug sat at attention.

"Beautiful stand, isn't it?" Sven stepped forward and leaned toward the window beside Felix. He held the leash behind his back, the unrewarded Pug pulled. "I was thinking about getting one of those expanding leashes." Felix said to the stranger without lifting his head. "But it just worries me, the thought of her running off in the street."

The bored Pug sniffed around the Springer Spaniel who'd taken a seat between the men. Sven was glad he'd brushed his teeth before taking the dog out. Some mornings, he didn't bother.

Felix had this careless, noble quality as he tilted his head and examined the display. Sven hadn't seen him around the neighbourhood before, and wondered, without asking, if they might be headed in the same direction. A direction that Sven now concluded, would be determined entirely by them.

The Pug was hyper, and Sven was distracted. The Spaniel warned the puppy by getting up and stepping aside, but the Pug followed, which led to the Spaniel's low volume growl.

The gentlemen didn't have time to turn before the fight broke out. The Spaniel snarled and bit. Then Sven, in shock and squealing, reached down for his puppy and caught his bare arm in the Spaniel's jaw. Numbers would have to be exchanged.



It was hot to sit there in overalls crouched between the cacti with a thumb cramp from the 10-inch tweezer she used to extract sprouts from the sandy soil between the vicious plants. The room never fell below sixty, and climbed over ninety on most summer days. The triangular window in the roof sprang open when it hit ninety-five, and closed again automatically when the temperature fell.

Bea wiped her forehead with the back of her arm, dust mixed with sweat streaked her face. If people only knew how things worked (she had this quiet conversation with herself while she worked) then maybe I wouldn't be bent over this cactus pulling sprouts from the sand. It had gotten to the point, and she was almost ashamed of doing it, that she was reprimanding mothers for feeding their sweaty, touch-it-all, loud-mouthed children in the greenhouse. And it wasn't just the mothers, she snapped at an Octogenarian with a multi-grain roll to take it outside just last week, and then stood there waiting for the old dame to wrap it up in a napkin and limp off with her snack on a single crutch.

It was the food that brought the mice, and they had it good in that hot house in their subterranean maze. They lived off crumbs and left their droppings to decompose and sprout at the warm heels of the cacti. It was Bea's job to extract the sprouts because there was no getting rid of the mice. So she bent and twisted, knelt and crawled in and around those piercing plants to maintain balance in that glass house, because to show nature properly, to achieve a realistic rendition of the pure, honest landscape, you really couldn't leave it up to nature.

There is nothing darker  
than a pocket  
with a hole  
you didn't know  
was there.  
Things fell through  
you didn't know you lost,  
things that you forgot.  
But you can stick your finger through it.  
Only you,  
can stick your finger through it.

As if it wasn't dramatic enough, Lars leaving her like that. Crammed between commuters on the train he just out and tells Anni that he's in love with Laura. They exit the train. Anni gasps, briefly desperate for air. The station is nearly empty. She feels the walls recede. She won't face him on the escalator, and pulls away as he reaches for her elbow.

As they rise from underground at the theatre entrance, strings come in bold from the marquee speakers, the climax of "Rocky," the musical, swelling in the street. She sees blood, and fists, sharply lit, thrown in slow motion, pictures carried by the heart wrenching chords that scoop out her insides. She hates Lars. And she feels something sink below the surface, warm, wet, and comforting. She somehow likes that feeling, hating him as she walks alone into the dark, and the music fades.



He's in no hurry to get to work. Stopping to read the posters. Standing still to peel an orange. When he gets there he'll have to do something, and most likely it will be something that has no end, like news, and regret, and the snowballing possibility of elsewhere.





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