

BIRDS OF THE WORLD

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Crawley



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*The antique Babel, Empress of the East,
Upreared her buildings to the threatened sky:
And Second Babel tyrant of the West,
Her airy Towers upraised much more high.
But with the weight of their own surquendry,
They both are fallen, that all the earth did fear,
And buried now in their own ashes lie,
Yet showing by their heaps how great they
were.*

*--Edmund Spencer,
The Commonwealth and Government of
Venice, 1599*

CHAPTER 1

JOHN'S AFFLICTION

John Bird stood upon the dock, which protruded from the back of the house down a long contoured path and faced west toward the mainland of the United States of America. He stood at the edge looking out into the pitch darkness of the abyss where he believed the sky met the bay. There was no telling for sure where the horizon lay; the faint glimmer of the onyx sea transcended the skyline, wherever it was, until it lent a faint glimmer to the stars in the deep abyss of night. It was dark. It surrounded him. That's all he could say for sure about it. Beyond it he believed there laid the Gold Coast of Nassau County, although he had never been there. He only guessed, when visitors of his father arrived from the mainland by boat, that they came from the west, so he could only assume that that was where the rest of the world must have laid, somewhere out in that darkness. The visitors, well, not really visitors, but associates of his father, when they arrived they came to the dock which led to the back of the house. He turned around and looked at it, its many windows shining the light of the known world upon the abysmal night. Then he turned back to the abyss itself, a perpetual void of knowledge. In its wake, John recited all that he knew for sure about his situation. All of the facts. "I am John of the Birds. And here I stand upon this island where I have lived fifteen years now. I am the successor to my father's company. I stand to inherit one quarter of one trillion dollars. I am my father's son." He said this to himself every night.

"Master John," said a voice out of the abyss, startling the boy out of his thoughts. John turned and saw that it was a pony named Sam, who polished silver. He may very well have come out of the darkness itself, for his presence seemed to materialize out of thin air. "What are you doing out here so late? Your father would be remised. You have studies in the morning."

John turned his attention back to the bay. "I come out here after the meetings. They go on so long. I need some time to myself when they go on that late. I come out here to think."

The pony turned his attention to the bay, where John was focused. "What do you think about?"

"It all."

"It all?"

The breeze from the bay whistled a high pitched tune. John seemed to be able to discern it as some kind of voice, or at least his concentration implied as much.

"You seem preoccupied, Master John. Often I wonder what exists within that mind of yours."

John hesitated before he continued, perhaps waiting for the bay to cease its cry. "The more pertinent question," he said then, "is what exists outside of it."

The pony took the time to lend his ear to the bay, which to it only emitted a silent crashing of the waves. Then he addressed John again, with a certain reserve for the voice in the sea. "Sometimes I see you standing out here very late. You stand so close to the edge, I get frightened that you'll fall off." He chuckled to himself. "From what I see, you have this preoccupation with the world, with what goes on out there rather than all you have to occupy yourself with here. I have seen the world, Master John. And I have known you from your birth. And I dare say from the circumstances that your spirit may be as extensive as the world itself."

"Perhaps. I wouldn't know."

The pony chuckled. The yachts, tied to the dock, waded there, ebbing with the flow of the water.

"If you have seen the world, Sam, could you tell me if I am particularly tall?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tall. Or handsome."

"The tallest. The handsomest, Master John."

"Don't patronize me, pony."

The pony paused. "Excuse me, sir, but what prompts these queries? You wouldn't know this of course, and your father probably feels this is beneficial, but you are very well known on the mainland as a boy of high status. And furthermore a successor to what your father has planned to be—well, I shouldn't say much. But much lies ahead of you. Those concerns of the physical nature only rattle the minds of superficial folks. They waste their efforts

on such concerns as ‘Am I pretty,’ and other nonsense. You have much more to occupy your time with.”

“See. There. You said it yourself.” John turned to the pony. “Supposedly I’m destined for this greatness, that’s what everyone says. That’s what my father says... I don’t know, I’m just supposed to go along with it. Because I’m a Bird, I have no choice. I have to believe it without any proof, you know. He puts so much of his energy into molding me. Taking me to the meetings and dressing me up like this. But I just feel like John. What do other fifteen year olds concern themselves with? Girls and the internet? I don’t know...” He turned back to the abyss. “Therein lies my affliction, Sam. A pharmacon of the spirit.” He stopped there. He and the pony waded where they stood looking out into the bay in silence for five minutes more, and then the pony quietly turned to walk back up the path. John stayed, suspended in his quandaries as if by the gravity of the night, looking out past the yachts, past the edge of the dock, into the unknown where the world began. He heard the whistling, the voice, again. It sounded as if it were in peril, tempting him to come to its rescue. He longed for that darkness to consume him, to pull him into the heights of the night sky or the depths of the bay, if only to prove to himself that he was not the same as a yacht, tied to a dock and never used or valued except for its equity. He suddenly had an image of his father, and he was reminded of the meeting that had concluded just three hours prior. He remembered that he had another to attend the next day, and he was still in his suit and tie from today. But he stayed put just a little while longer. There was a feeling that crept up his back when he stood out on this dock, something foreign to the atmosphere within the house. He dared not submit to it while still a son of his father, but he was quite aware, albeit buried somewhere within the unlit corners of his consciousness, that an abyss, similar to the that brute cavernous void where the sky met the bay, or at its most basic and most dangerous a fabrication of his mind, lay ever presently before him as it did now, waiting for him to fall into it where it would completely consume him and tear him limb from limb, leaving a shell impoverished of status and name.

But he turned away from it and started back up the path to the house. The fall would be natural; he had realized that some time ago. It would come.

As he paced up the hill, the light in the doorway at the back of the house became more visible, and a figure appeared standing in the light as if it had been there the whole time. John walked quicker now, up the stairs and over the veranda to where his father waited at the threshold, his eyes concealed behind opaque lenses, yet preeminent in their scold. His father said nothing as John approached the door, and the two Birds faced each other for some time, the elder looking down on the younger, who looked down at his shoes now.

“You have studies in the morning. At six o’clock,” said the old man.

“Yes, father.”

“And then a meeting.”

“Yes, father.”

“Have you forgotten?”

“No, father.”

“Then go to bed.”

“Yes, father.” John wedged between his father and the doorway and went up to his room.

The year was 2029. The time for frivolities had long retired. At his age, time wasting on the dock was inexcusable for, as his father would say, “a boy of his status.”

The next day followed the archetypal routine that John had gotten used to by now. Lessons in the morning—this lesson being cultural anthropology followed by calculus—and meetings in the evening, in which he accompanied his father at the head of the dining room table where the nameless slate-faced associates sat around. The conversations were varied in topic; the men were varied in their professions, but they all concerned themselves with one thing: acquisition. You see, John’s father was a finance man and a certain kind of business magnate at this time. He had raised an impressive amount of capital during the early part of the twenty-first century through various private investment ploys. He soon thereafter became a person of interest in the management of corporate investment portfolios, and much of his work ended in the purchase or absorption of smaller companies, so it happened to be

the case that he was responsible for monopolizing many markets. It was with this skill that John's father established Amauta Group, a financial management firm whose mission was just that. And the meetings that young John was forced to attend with the intent of "learning the family business" regarded just this matter.

However, it had of late been the case that the meetings concerned a specific type of associate. John had been privy to the likes of tobacco executives, shipping executives, and so on, all coming and going on different days, but always varying in profession the next day. Recently, however, the meetings had been exclusively concerned with bankers. John did not lend his attention so much to the features of each of their faces, but he knew that what they did, day after day, was manage money. His father used to handle many types of men, helping his associates consolidate their markets, but what he could not particularly discern at this time was why his father was focused so heavily on the finance market. Although it wasn't a weighty concern on his young mind, the source of this change would soon become apparent to John, but all he knew at this point was that the brooding agreement stood to make his father and him even wealthier.

John was the only nuclear family member living on the estate with his father, and also the sole heir to the Bird fortune. The absence of his two older brothers and his mother was a persisting mystery, yet their whereabouts were never altogether disclosed. From a young age, John was aware that he once had brothers, and he could even put together facial features that may have belonged to one or the other, recollected from foggy infantile memories, but he was also aware of his father's word as law. As sure as John had lived his whole fifteen years of existence upon this secluded island, whatever went on within the Bird household was accepted as "normal," and his father only needed to say "It is what it is" for John to stop his nagging about the subject and go back to his studies.

Notwithstanding this matter, hints arose, albeit they only served to further mystify the question. But on one evening, as another meeting was being concluded and the big-wig bankers and managers were departing, John, out of some primordial instinct, made a rare attempt to connect with his father.

“Dad,” he asked, “What’s the worst thing a man can be?” He didn’t know what prompted the question, but he knew it came from somewhere deep inside of his curious being, somewhere his father would rather he not explore.

The Old Bird seemed disinterested, staring intently at ambiguous papers, until without lifting his head he said, “In debt.”

It appeared as though he would stop there, but he suddenly continued with renewed interest just as John was about to leave the room.

“I mean it,” he reiterated, “Don’t get tied down to anything. Always be a free man. You know what that means. Focus on your own business and make very few emotional connections.” And then he turned his attention back to his papers.

“So then what’s the best thing a man can be?” John asked, more tongue-in-cheek than anything else.

His father replied immediately without lifting his head: “God.”

As the spring of ’29 marshaled onward, seemingly without regard for certain teens aching to salvage the last scraps of their better years, the meetings came to require John’s full attention. His father asserted that his studies could take a back seat to the practical matters of the family business, seeing as there was talk of a large merger in the near future. John sat at the head of the table slightly behind his father and lent his attentive ear to these meetings with the obedience he used in regard to all of his father’s commands, yet his interest in the conversation was still more obligatory than passionate. In fact, it might be said that John was genuinely passionate about nothing more than good food and fine drink. While still a young man, he had developed a palate for spirits no less than fourteen years old and entrees so diverse and rare that his dinners could have been a leading contributor to certain South American extinction patterns. To his father this was the least of John’s quirks; he was still a naïve, aloof teenager who needed to be wrought by the neck a few times, but at least he had redirected any compassion for humanity toward food and drink. A true asset to the successful business man.

Less and less time was spent at the dock, and John became more accustomed to the stuffiness of his house. He was, at the very least, content with his fate. On the rare nights, after a late

meeting, when his father was in bed or secluded to his study for the night, and the twilight was particularly seductive in its purple and orange nightgown getting ready for bed, John felt himself compelled to go back out to the dock, where he thought, in a blip of juvenile optimism, that the few stars in the sky might yield the unknown, inaccessible fruits of youth. Those were the nights he used to recharge his batteries, so to speak; to ready himself for another week of lengthy, dry meetings.

Yet it was when his father told him one day that they would be moving to New York City for business that John was reinvigorated with the optimism and sensitivity inherent in youth. Though it was mentioned in passing, the mere thought of the big city riled in him the excitement a little boy might experience when going to camp. His concealed tree of hopes and dreams sprang forth fanciful expectations of new experiences, new people, new loves perhaps. Or, at the very least, a first love.

He stood out on the dock that evening and looked out like he often did, yet this time it was with more of an expectation instead of a quandary. He even smiled to himself, unbeknownst to his own consciousness; but of course, there are many things one does with willful disregard to their own sense of self. It just felt right.

"I hear you will be leaving us," said the voice of Sam the pony, who once again seemed to materialize out of the night.

John had gotten used to that by this time. "I'm going to New York City," he said with a jingle in his voice.

"You're going to the big city now. You're going to be in the real world."

John took a deep breath and let out audibly with a wide grin on his face.

"What do you expect?"

"I don't know," he said with the same expression.

"They know who you are there, you know. You won't be alone like you are here."

"Perhaps. But father always says, I'm a Bird. And that puts me above all others. I'll be a man unto myself, he says. But still, I get to interact with other people my age. Other people like me."

"Almost like you."

“Right. Of course.”

“Remember, you’re very special, Master John.”

“I know, Sam. I know.”

John was sent off a day before his father left. The year was 2031 and he was going to attend his first New York gala that evening—a debut into the world of gentry and extravagance. Supposedly he was going to become acquainted with the kind of people that would surround him in his career, but his father gave him two warnings before he departed in his father’s favorite Town Car toward the dock, perhaps in the single longest amount of time he had ever spent talking to his son: “Only associate with people immediately below you. You’re a Bird, so there is no one equal to you, and the social night life of New York is filled with so-called aristocrats, but many of them are masquerading. I believe I’ve raised you to see through their masquerade. Many people in high places will say that they know you. People will try to befriend you because you’re a Bird, and you must be weary of them, also. They’re no better than sheeple or ponies. And lastly, be cautious of Occupiers. They run through city sewers like rats and can be as detrimental to you as aristocrats and their gossip.” John put the advice on mental repeat as the car then departed. He was as equally convicted of his duty as a Bird as he was with the idea that New York would be a new and exciting experience. Yet little did he know he had already managed a certain reputation among the circles of High New York that mattered the most.

CHAPTER 2

PROLOGUE

or, A Brief History of the Early 21st Century

The moment John's boat departed, he was immediately immersed in a place he had never before set foot in. He would be taken to Long Island where the Town Car, strapped securely to the deck of the boat, would drive him into the city. In as much as John recited his father's manifesto over and over in his head, he was confident; but he was also prone to remembering the words of his teachers, who came from the mainland. They knew all about it; and, to say the least, they depicted it as a place of chaos among the masses. A Mr. Zen, a particularly impartial but very intelligent man, put it best, in writing:

2009 is when things really started simmering in the melting pot. The state of Arizona announced plans to instate a law, Senate Bill 1070, that sought to get a handle on the Mexican problem. Constituencies in the South, Southwest, and Middle America voiced unwavering support for the removal of these "illegals," but unlucky for them, the rest of the American public stood in staunch opposition and the likes of the Federal Government and the Department of Justice stepped in and complicated things like they do. Not to mention the Representative and the Arizona Chief Judge who were gunned down in Tucson later in 2011. The Liberal Agenda started boiling the waters and every pundit in a blue tie began throwing around "injustices" and blame. Later, the historians would call that incident Bleeding Arizona.

President Bush (R) was like the Arizona debacle when it came to how the US would progress over the next fifty years. He was a man who had come from wealth and power; as president, he knew who his friends were and he knew how to treat them right—he even gave them jobs in the oval office. It was this tradition, begun by Ronald Regan in the early 1980s, that blended the state and private sectors in a way that put the corporate hegemony in charge of the public good; and as a result it further deepened the

schism between Americans with power and citizens without it. As corporate interest conflicted with public interest most of the time, the role of the state began to change throughout the late 20th Century and into Bush's second term. The 2000s was a good time for the private sector; we made a lot of money—a lot of money. Lost a lot of money, too, but the public didn't know that until 2008 when Bush had already left office. During his term, the US also started two wars in the interest of private business, effectively occupying the Middle East in hope of oil, weapons, something. Those wars—the Iraq and Afghan wars—cost a lot of money, but what kind of a man would Bush be to make his friends pay for it? The money for the wars was borrowed from China.

Over the course of the Bush Administration, the loan was never repaid. And as the government was going underwater in debt, the private sector continued thriving. Low tax rates and little government interference made for real easy business. In fact, the private sector got so comfortable with the present state of corporate regulation that they even started skimming money that wasn't theirs. "Skimming," meaning they were taking hundreds of millions in bonuses and stashing it overseas so the government, oblivious (or condoning) as it was, couldn't touch it. Bush was a piece of cake, but the corporate hegemony knew that the next president wasn't going to be as playful. "Playful," meaning that whoever it was, they weren't going to sit idly by as the hegemony sent the US into a recession.

Surely, President Obama (D) was not going to play their game, but everyone knew he couldn't do much about it, even with a Democratic Congress. He was inaugurated as the president of a country in debt, the inheritor of a house underwater on its mortgage. His supporters were so optimistic about how much this new face of hope could get done in office that they failed to keep in mind that Obama was merely the lease holder on the house of America. It was really the banks who held him (and the country) by the neck, and because of this he naturally fell short of achieving many of the things he set out to achieve on the campaign trail. During the first several months of Obama's administration, the Republican minority was so cunning that very little was done about the recession. Filibuster. Isn't that a great word? Filibuster. Still, through the trials and criticism, the president succeeded in passing

an admirable Health Care Bill and a Bail-Out Package that slowed the recession by saving the companies that were “too big to fail.”

Despite the president’s efforts to correct social blemishes like health care coverage and wealth distribution, the man himself became a vessel through which right-winged, white-minded politicians and pundits alienated the strong poor white Middle American demographic from the colored population. Starting in 2012, outbreaks of violence against young Black and Latino teens in the American South rose dramatically. The wealthy hegemony and their allies in media propagated the ideal that the poor white population should admire the extreme wealth that was present in the country, in the hopes that they would soon achieve similar success. The media also propagated the belief that colored peoples impeded this success and hostility between the two impoverished populations rose throughout the late 2010s. Such was the wealthy hegemony’s method of securing their constituency among the working class without actually patronizing their interests.

By the time the 2012 election cycle approached, the US had still never gotten around to paying off the deficit, and President Obama took the fall for that as well. Meanwhile, the private sector continued raging, and at the expense of those lower on the economic totem pole—jobs were drying up, being sent overseas, mostly to China and the South Pacific. But once again, the blame didn’t fall on the executives who made those decisions. The blame fell on President Obama and them Mexicans.

Obama’s successor, President Romney (R) put even more pressure on them Mexicans; and, like Mr. Bush, he created a nice government for his friends (the very same friends) to rest their feet on. President Romney got elected on the basis of his having “lived in the private sector” (as if it were a suburb of Boston) and of thus being knowledgeable of the way economies work. (That is, despite the fact that all of his business investments ended in drying up the business’s value and sending it to Mexico.) In fact, federal regulation of the private sector became so lax under Romney’s administration that an increase in corporate mergers, consolidations and coercions resulted in obscene monopolizations of entire markets. Amauta Group was the leading investment bank and wealth management firm that facilitated this shift. Its chairman and CEO, Mortimer J. Bird, was the first man to hold an

entire market at his fingertips since the Gilded Age; after helping several associates gain control of the major US markets, he successfully monopolized the Western banking system and became the wealthiest man to ever live.

Expectedly, the omnipresent (yet hereto underestimated) Occupy Movement became re-incensed. Portland and Seattle were the first camps to become violent. Upon Romney's second term, the Occupiers appeared to have lost all faith in democratic elections. Five major cities started burning. By the end of Romney's second term he had announced plans for the Mexican-American Border, referred to as "The Wall", which were carried out in completion by his successor, President Gerber-Tall (R). That election, 2020, was a major turning point in the American self-image. "R" became synonymous with the Republican-affiliated Racist Party, which ran on platforms that mainly revolved around American Purity and Class Inequality. American Purity beckoned the return of America in the sense that it had been created: as a haven for white-skinned peoples to excel with little government interference. The Republicans felt no need to sugar-coat anything any longer; and as the American voting demographic shifted towards a poor, white, Middle-American majority, Racism became more accepted as a legitimate political stance. The American Purity Bill was the main piece of legislation that allowed for the Wall to be built; it was signed into law in 2023. As the Racist Party continued to gather support among the increasingly populated Middle American demographic, the Occupy Movement intensified its reaction. Like a cycle, the escalating violence of Occupy in turn garnered more support for the Racist Party's Class Inequality platform. Gerber-Tall stated in his inaugural address, "These jobless scum will no longer be tolerated. If they sustain their actions, the US Military will attack." We were on the brink of 1861.

Like his predecessor, Gerber-Tall was a trickle-down kind of guy and he continued to let big business erode the working class economy by sending manufacturing jobs abroad while the US continued to become submerged in Pacific debt. 2025 marked the beginning of Gerber-Tall's second term and the completion of the Wall. Much of the action of the Occupiers became concentrated in Arizona and along the Southern border. Their clashes with the

Border Police, managed by the Department of Homeland Security, became so consistent that the media ceased reporting it.

Meanwhile, overseas, the US had been sustaining its presence in the Middle East. A radical insurgent named Juan Carlos Sikkafi had riled Palestine into revolt and the US began actively combating against them by supplying the Israeli military with funds and weapons (as they had been doing since the end of WWII). It would have been a one-day war—an immediate victory for Israel and the US and a burden off of their shoulders—if not for Palestinian support by Libya, Egypt, most of North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Europe had long since been absent from the world stage since its Euro began to crumble and violence spread though the continent starting in 2011. As a sort of substitute, however, another major world player, whose eminence had only recently been recognized by the US, had been making plays in the Middle Eastern chess game: China. While the US backed Israel, China backed the Palestinian support by The United Arab and Northern Africa Coalition, which encompassed 18 countries, and soon had a more imposing world voice than the United Nations, specifically upon matters regarding use and ownership of the natural resources in the area. In 2026, China issued a statement in conjunction with the UANAC that “If the US sustains their actions against the sovereign Nation of Palestine, the Chinese will take drastic measures.”

On July 29th, 2027 the US launched a preemptive strike of twelve unmanned attack drones upon Palestinian insurgent camps.

On July 30th, 2027, the Peoples Republic of China called in the US’s loan, which had accrued approximately \$179, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000 (a mathematical value referred to as one-hundred seventy-nine million-billion dollars).

The US was forced to formally default.

In that year, as China strengthened its grip on the United States, American Purity had reached a point of support that resulted in a sort of over-speculated pride. To retain his support base’s loyalty, President Gerber-Tall vowed to continue fighting in the Middle East. The US Government had run out of funds and, obviously, Gerber-Tall would not allow his friends’ wealth to be compromised for the greater good. The US clearly could not borrow from China, nor Europe due to the practical non-existence

of the Euro. Only Northern Africa was home to any kind of prosperity in its continent and they were backed by the PRC, so that was also out of the question. US pride was waning, but as Americans, they would go down kicking, even if it meant taking a minor blow. The only solution was the political equivalent of getting a hand-job while being kicked in the balls: The US borrowed from the only unbiased, independent, prospering Capitalist nation in the world: Argentina.

President Hugo Chavez II compromised. In a video statement, he declared, "We will provide the United States with a set amount that will be determined after the acceptance of the terms of the agreement. It will not be a loan; we the Argentines of South America see the US in turmoil and will extend a friendly hand. However, if you seek peace with us in the future, if you seek any kind of prosperity with the people of South America, our trade and cooperation, meet me in Mexico and see me, *mono a mono*. Mr. Gerber-Tall, open the channel between you and the rest of the Western hemisphere. Mr. Gerber-Tall, tear down this wall."

The president kept a superficial calm during the following months. The US presence in the Middle East was maintained, but fire had stopped on both sides. Israel was stripped of its most imposing military units, including its several atomic bombs. China and the UANAC issued a pact of peace for the time being.

US manufacturing continued to thrive in China through the interest of private business; the American working class, though they were hardly working anymore, continued to provide a market and big business continued to profit. By this time, the "working" class had a majority demographic of low-class white Middle- and Southern- Americans. The ratio continued to climb in their favor as a result of several post-Chavez bills that were strapped on the back of the Racist Agenda. With the concept of American Purity so undermined and seemingly hopeless after the complete destruction of the Wall in 2030, the Racist Party and their support base implemented and strictly supported two main bills:

(1) The Criminal Assimilation Amendment suspended due process of law and allowed anyone accused of committing or convicted of a federal crime at any point in their life to be imprisoned indefinitely. Eighty-Seven Percent of the Black population in America was swept from the street. Mexican

Immigrants coming into the States without proper papers (which were not available to obtain until the immigrant had a chance to secure an address and a job) were also imprisoned. The Miscegenation Re-incrimination Bill also contributed to the elimination of the colored male presence.

(2) The Burdening Unemployed Persons Removal Act imprisoned all homeless persons on the grounds that they were burdening the prospect of American Progress. This motion was primarily targeted at removing and disposing of the Occupy presence, but was also used a tactic to further eliminate the colored poor of the country.

These two actions, constituting what was called the "American Cleanse," systematically eradicated the Colored presence in the United States. Carrier units and busses rumbling through the city streets at night swallowed all persons who appeared to be homeless. The motion was largely effective, being implemented overnight and hardly publicized in the media. Not only did these measures insure a solid white voting demographic for the Racist Party, but they contributed to the amount of free labor that could be extracted from the ever-growing Prison Industrial Complex. The Correctional Conglomerate of America, a newly monopolized corporation by Amauta Group, offered industrialists a steady supply of free labor at the expense of the Colored population. Between the CCA and Chinese sweatshop labor, the corporate hegemony increased their profits with free-to-cheap labor and the working class whites in America soon found themselves deeper in a workless ditch. (The ironic thing is that the working class continued to blame the Colored population for their strife. Once again, it was the cunning of the large right-minded media conglomerates that perpetuated this phenomenon.)

The remaining Black and Latin American population, educated though many of them were, receded into small coastal towns where they lived in tight-knit communities off of the land as a way to protect themselves against the campaign of arbitrary incarceration. Large, central cities like Chicago, Washington, and New York were inhabited only by the wealthy white hegemony and, paradoxically, the remaining Occupiers, whose numbers were slowly widdling. Middle American cities and Southern towns, the

vast bulk of the American voting demographic, retained their strong poor-white population.

Police combat in Occupy camps throughout major cities raged in the early part of 2031. Though few in number, the Occupiers used guerilla tactics adapted to the city streets to inflict the damage of a small mercenary army; fires from IEDs and Molotov cocktails became so commonplace that in New York, the white hegemony began to consider moving the financial capital of the US elsewhere. (For even through the “American Cleanse,” business as usual continued with a market for products continuing to thrive in Middle and Southern North America.) But they had not yet settled on a decision.

The majority of Americans, dubbed “Sheeple” by the majority of aristocratic commentators, have been reduced to a chronic state of depression and alcohol psychosis. Small businesses deemed necessary to the present society by a House committee on the matter, being decided that they are bars and diners, have been subsidized by the US government. Those poor whites who did not become introverts in the drought of joblessness have become violent and many run in gangs dubbed by outside observers as the “Niggerati”. The spatially marginalized Black population, especially the Black poor (called “Ponys,” as in “poor Niggers”), have become the victims of violence and brutality by the Niggerati, who maintain a strong appeal for American Purity. The US Government moved a portion of its operations to California where signs of civilization still persisted, if but stoically. Technological development has become a sort of fine art, like poetry, a mystified activity done by strange, wifty people. Nevertheless, the US Military, crippled though it is, still contracts the work of such innovators. Commercial agriculture also subsists in California and the state has become a last resort for any straight-headed, progressive, “working” class person. The Californian Agricultural and Technological toilers have become known as “Cattle” (CATtle). And in the meantime, the wealthy American hegemony and the Occupiers and general poor continue with “business as usual.”

This was the world John Bird was about to enter. And it almost caused his fast beating heart to explode out of his chest.

CHAPTER 3

THE BIRDS OF NEW YORK

What was to become of the vacant lot at 660 5th Avenue, Manhattan remained a mystery from the point it was leveled in 2014 throughout the 2020s. The general public thought it a blemish upon the fashionable corridor of the city and a social hazard, as young degenerates made continuous efforts to camp there, intent on making some sort of political statement. Although the lot became more of a nuisance into the late 2020s, any inquiry into who the owner was or if he could take some action with it resulted in a dead-end answer. The construction company Langley & Mitchell was listed as the manager of the property and through 2029 their mailroom was constantly berated with angry letters by parties questioning the fate of the lot as well as people asking to buy it. The lot, the company responded time after time, had long since been acquired and the owner had requested that his name be omitted from public records. Even when the governor of New York questioned the company about the property did the company deny him an answer, responding that the man in question had authority over government officers and privacy concerns that transcended the accuracy of public records. This caused quite a stir among developers, government officials, and socialites alike, as they all speculated that the owner was of such high status that he could afford to maintain a vacant lot on 5th avenue for fifteen years without regard for the aesthetic of Manhattan. It was a topic of interest at corporate meetings and high-society extravaganzas for years.

One other topic of interest during late Spring of 2031 was the rumored merger between Amauta Group and several of the largest banks and investment firms in the West. The fabled meeting was intended to result in Amauta's acquisition of the latter firms, an unprecedented move by the bank that had become famous for facilitating mergers between industrial corporations

that resulted in a market-giant. This acquisition would make Amauta Group the largest financial firm in the history of the world and the mysterious meeting was rumored to take place on the night of the heiress Guinevere Duke Manchester's fundraiser ball for The Society to Eliminate Poverty. The guests of the ball were men and women of high status, no doubt, but their conversation more often than not fell upon the whereabouts of the five CEOs who were somewhere in New York for the meeting. They were all elusive figures, and as the social aristocracy tended to do they mythologized these mere men into a realm of idolatry and abstraction with their constant gossip, but the one man who captured everyone's interest was the man who would supposedly become the new financial leader of the free world, the CEO of Amauta, although no one knew his whereabouts or his whole name. He was referred to simply as Bird.

This evening, the ball for the Society to Eliminate Poverty was in full effect atop the Hôtel Manège. The high-ceilinged ball room was centered around a marble fountain surrounded by two hundred guests of relatively high status and various occupations. A stage sat at the front of the room and a bar ran along the left; deep red drapery adorned the upper corners of the room while red and white lace detailed the bar, stage, and furniture. The air was pleasantly humid and offered a slight breeze, so the doors were opened up to the balcony; and the particularly special thing about this hotel was that the entire top floor, balcony and all, slowly rotated, so that guests relaxing on the outskirts would eventually pan around the skyline of New York.

Three hours prior, the guests, all finely groomed and perfumed elites in their field, arrived in their vehicles to the blood-red carpet at the front of the hotel. Tonight, they were taking time out of their busy schedule to give back to the community. The cause was championed by Manchester and an old oil executive from operations in the Niger Delta who had of late "seen the light," and had been producing a film called *Black Autumn* on the crude practices of the industry in the region. After socializing in the second-floor ball room amidst the light, frivolous air of drink and small talk and "Who's your dress?" and "How are your investments?" the party moved to the third-floor screening room where they endured a two-hour exposé on the poverty-stricken

Delta, it's desolate futureless people, and their lack of clean water as all of the oil runoff from daily pipe-bursts seeped into their already-contaminated supply. The film, with its forty-foot projection of blue-black babies' wide lightless eyes, wrought the emotions of our guests and ripped their hearts right from between their Vuitton lapels; one or two women might have shed a tear and touched her handkerchief gently to her eyelid. The photographers in attendance would have died for that shot. When the house lights came back up, the producer with his wife, a lean, blonde, Coke-bottle shaped, (coke-riled nosed) debutant, got up from their seats at the front row and took the microphone, thanking everyone from the Manège to Battery Park. With every "Mr. Smith is here" or "Mr. and Mrs. Blank were gracious enough to donate...", another figure stood up and looked around meekly as if they weren't sure if everyone in attendance knew who they were. This went on for thirty minutes until the producer finally let his heart out to his audience: "I just want to express my deep emotional connection to this film, and I want to finally thank everyone who had a part in creating it. It had to be made. I've worked in the oil industry for decades and I just felt that I needed to give something back to the people—" (at around this time, the tears started flowing again, moved by the producer's anguish, but cautious not to stain the Chanel) "—So many of my colleagues in oil have felt this way, and this film is in honor of those people. I'm sorry," he said wiping his eyes, "I'm just so emotional I don't know what to do with myself. Let's all drink tea." And with that, he left the stage and walked down the aisle out the door. There was a period of silence, followed my murmurs of confusion throughout the room, until several guests, and then all of them, followed the producer out the room. At that time, they were led to the very top of the Manège where champagne and Fugi water flowed in abundance, and ponies walked through the crowd carrying trays of lamb-skewers, mini-cucumber sandwiches, water crackers and caviar, and the like. It was here that the somber air of consciousness lifted and the guests returned to their natural temperaments. The room roared with the collective voices of the guests in the manner that had proceeded the screening. There were notable figures in attendance; several C-level financial administrators, Broadway actors, associates of the Governor of New York, the heirs and

heiresses of fashion and media, and the kings and queens of gasoline, and the like, all mingling and smiling that practiced smile behind lipstick-stained glasses of champagne as exotic as the region itself. And then there were other folks—of equal status, to be sure—but who would not have it with the stomach-curling artificial fellowship and the strained smiles of the party inside, who instead stood outside taking in the seventy-story view of the city on the rotating balcony under the sparkling onyx night. This was where Charles Langley, a construction man, and Richard D'Urberville, a tobacco gentleman and patron of the theatre stood puffing on cigars and gazing at the haughty activity inside the doorway from their safe distance.

"It's a jungle in there," said Langley. "A lot of suppressed hostility behind those pearly white smiles. Earlier, I was walking by Jane Cheney hugging Clarisse Bordeaux and you could slice that tension with a butter knife. The very people who are so cordial tonight will be back to stabbing each others' back by dawn, I tell you. It's cannibalism. I love it."

"All of New York is a jungle tonight," said D'urberville. "There's a lot of dining going down if you know what I mean. A lot of men are being eaten right now."

"Huh?" Langley puffed.

"The Amauta acquisition. The meeting is tonight, so I've heard. Somewhere secret."

"I bet. That Bird is a peculiar fellow."

"Peculiar? I've heard he's a downright madman. People are saying he put a price on Zeitler's head just so that he could merge the prison industry. To get him out of the way."

"Well, I don't know if that's true. But it might as well be. I've heard the talk. All those Wall Street boys and finance guys are loan sharks and hit men. But if there's one thing that separates Bird from the rest of them, it's that he's made. A regular *capo don*. I know some stuff I can't even say aloud. But it's only because I'm doing business with him now."

"So it is the same guy who's developing 5th avenue."

"I wouldn't call it 'developing'"

"True," D'Urberville puffed. "What's he planning to go there?—If he ever decides."

Langley gave a boyish glance as he sucked his cigar. "To tell you the truth, the man has my hands tied. He's a very private guy and would likely have me thrown into the Hudson for even talking about it. But he's very gentlemanly, nonetheless," Langley lowered his voice and leaned in intimately, "and he could probably buy this hotel and everyone in it, including you and me, Dick."

"I don't doubt it. The numbers don't lie. Since he handled the oil consolidation project, he's been a person of interest. I'm not surprised he's trying to stay under the radar; these mergers make a lot of people very rich, and they also make a lot of enemies. And supposedly Bird is the new Rockefeller, so there. He's going to be bigger than Rockefeller, I think, with this new financial acquisition."

"What's he trying to do again?"

"He's trying to buy, um, The Bank of the Americas, HSBC, Stanley P Morgan & Co. and CG, and maybe one other Dutch bank. People are saying it would be the beginning of central banking across the world. But supposedly the man has bigger plans. If Amauta consolidates the biggest banks in the western hemisphere, he'll still be up against The Consolidated Bank of China. And even though we're on thin ice with them politically, Amauta is supposed to start talking about a trans-hemispheric merger. But it's all rumor. Amauta doesn't release statements, so..."

Langley pierced his brow. "Would that really happen?"

"Hey, supposedly this Bird guy is a master coercer."

"Well shit, if that's going down tonight in New York—five or six of the financial leaders of the world in one place...it better be happening in a bomb shelter under the subway somewhere. If the goddamn Occupiers ever got word of this, there'd be hell raging through the streets of New York."

"As if that weren't the case already."

"Well, the police are cracking down harder since the Times Square incident. But still, the goddamn Occupiers just scurry back into the subway system. It just doesn't look like progress is being made. I think they've got another attack planned."

"You're crazy for saying those kinds of things."

"I mean look at it, they've gotten more organized."

“Well, what are you saying? By the sound of it it seems like you’re on the Occupiers side.”

“I’m just saying if they had a target, then they’d probably be more focused and effective.”

“Well, that’s why he bought the militia. So that that wouldn’t happen. And besides, that meeting is probably somewhere virtually inaccessible by regular folks. You and me included.”

Besides Langley and D’Urberville, there were other scattered guests out on the balcony, but most of the party had transitioned inside as Guinevere Duke Manchester took the stage in the mousey way that she often would at these events. “Hello,” she said quietly into the microphone in the voice she used to politely compel people to stop what they were doing and listen to her. She wore a specially made diamond-embroidered Yves Saint Laurent and her hair up to show off the glimmering stone strung tightly around her neck. The champagne glass she rose as she addressed her guests was as thin as her figure. “I would like to thank you all,” she continued, “for attending this evening, and for your generous financial contributions to the Society to Eliminate Poverty. Your gifts will help us in our legislative quest to eradicate poverty from our streets...”

Behind the thick, eddying smoke of their cigars, Langley and D’Urberville exchanged a sarcastic look that indicated that both of them smelled the raw fish that was this gala. They had both contributed to the campaign out of social obligation, but in private their agenda was distinctly apathetic towards the cause of “eliminating poverty.” And in fact they were not of the party of the party, as it were. They were politically partial in conversation when they had to be, but they were privately indifferent, and the running joke between them was that to the political Racists, which made up the bulk of the attendees, “eliminating poverty” didn’t mean feeding or clothing the poor so much as physically *getting rid* of them. (Unfortunately, this was truer than either of them would have liked to admit.)

Just then, as they had stopped listening, thunderous applause rang out from the ball room. The two men wouldn’t have broken their silent commentary for Guinevere alone, but their attention was compromised as the young, pretty May Broom

stepped outside as Guinevere was leaving the stage. May was popular in the fashionable young social circles, but she was a distinct entity from them. In particular, she had Kennedy in her blood, which may have made her less inclined to displays of cars and jewels like her friends, and more involved with marginal political issues and lofty ideas (which leaned to the left, something to which, perhaps because of her lineage, people paid no mind). She pranced over, always looking out beyond everybody like she did, to where Langley and D'Urberville stood, slowly beginning to focus her gaze and smile on them as she neared.

"Hello, darling," said D'Urberville jovially.

"Hello Richard. Charles. Have you seen my father tonight?"

"Ah, I've not. He probably in there mingling."

"Yeah, perhaps, but I didn't see him," she said looking back inside. "Oh well," she shrugged turning back to the two men and giggling.

"How are you this evening," Langley asked.

"Oh, decent. Dad dragged me here along with him. You know how I hate these things. Particularly if they're Guinevere's. She's so fake it annoys me."

"Oh, come now," D'Urberville said facetiously.

May laughed in the illuminating way that was characteristic of her, shaking the blonde curled tassels of her pixie haircut, which teased her tiny ears and accented her angelic porcelain neck; that laugh that always made the present gentlemen blush. "It's all fun," she said. "May I have a drag," she then asked, gesturing to D'Urberville's thin cigar.

"Oh, now," he said, "What would your father say?"

"He doesn't have to know," she said, and it was evident in her tone now that she had had a couple of glasses.

D'Urberville playfully shook his head and passed her the blunt and she puffed on it tipsily, looking as innocent as she would be playing in a meadow, and yet still retaining the air of a seductress with those pouty lips that could have only been the product of good genes. "So what are you doing these days," he asked now cigarless.

“Getting into trouble,” she said coyly between puffs. “I’m actually getting ready to go to Harvard Compound in the fall for school.”

“Ah, my son Julian is doing the same thing for the MBA/JD.”

“Lovely.”

“Yes, he’s somewhere around here,” D’Urberville said looking around.

May crinkled her nose at the thought of seeing Julian tonight, for she knew his antics and wasn’t in the mood. She passed back the cigar and politely said, “Yes, well, I must be off to find my father,” curtsied goodbye, and wandered back through the crowd.

She waded through the waves of perfume and hair and the clinking of jewelry and the highfalutincy of the kind of people she did not necessarily care for, but who could entertain her for short periods of time. A man in outrageous cufflinks or a debutant in the latest Fendi who May would know by name and temperament, but not intimately, would call her out of the crowd and they would exchange regards, but she always kept on moving, as if on a cloud above them all. She felt closer to the chandelier suspended far above the party than to the guests themselves, and it may have been because the chandelier in all its glory was un-assumptive in its luxury; it just was, and she marveled at it for it. It was a sort of ecstasy for her to be in such a pompous atmosphere of celebration, and she could find pleasure in it like the lot of the socialites, but like a drug trip it was to be brief and carefully minded as esoteric, not real life. She was high in this sense, but only in that sort of high where one knows one is on drugs and that the out-of-place things are not the reality. But knowing that, she let herself fall into the trip and experience the excitement of it all. At the same time, though, she was all too aware that the partiers around her were junkies and could no longer distinguish real life from this drug haze.

May later found herself having drifted over to the bar, where she saw a young man who she had never seen before standing alone gazing at the alcohol selection. He appeared to carry himself above the people around him, his broad shoulders drawn back and his posture erect and standoffish like a young

cadet. Despite this May thought herself to have found another musing partner, a wanderer not headed toward any particular destination, so she walked over beside him. When she neared him, she saw that he had a grimace on his face which she found curiously appropriate for his aura. He wore oval-shaped glasses with gold wiring and opaque lenses that lent him the appearance of being clouded by some queer undisclosed temperament. She found his apparent dissatisfaction with all of the present goings-on intriguing and addressed him.

“What do you find so distasteful,” she asked.

The young man glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and his grimace lifted. “This selection is quite trite for the supposed celebration that this is supposed to be,” he said, so that the people around him could hear.

May lowered her head and smiled to herself, then leaned in at a casual distance: “I find most of these people trite.”

The young man turned around and smiled in a composed but interested way, as if he had heard a joke that was too good to laugh at.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever met,” said May.

“We wouldn’t have,” said the young man. “I’m new in town. My dad’s come into the city on business and I’m just here getting to know the social scene, trite though it may be.”

“What’s your name?” May asked.

“John,” he said taking her hand and delicately raising it to his lips. May blushed. “And yours?”

“May Broom,” she said as their prolonged gaze exchanged unsaid complements. “Where are you now living? Manhattan?”

“Well,” John said dropping her hand, “Not exactly at the moment. But my father is arranging that as we speak,” he smiled mysteriously. “Hey, how about I show you what I mean.”

May was taken aback. “Really? And just how will you do that?”

John quickly looked at his watch. “Come with me,” he said then, leading her by the hand out of the party.

Outside, the valet pulled around to the entrance in a black Town Car, and then he walked around to the back passenger door and John gestured for May to enter, after which he followed suit.

When the valet got back into the driver's seat John handed him a bill and told him "East 52nd and 5th avenue." The valet then drove off into the night.

The ride was quiet in that intimate way that exists between two strangers, like a commute-long embrace of the shoulder between two travelers on the subway. The route was scenic the way only New York City could provide, with buildings that stretch up like redwoods and parks like small forests. Those "natural" wonders of the city, more so than the people that inhabited it, never ceased to amaze May. John was humored to watch her look up out the window as the reflections of buildings passed her by like a child lost in silent awe at a carnival. The only thing May said as they turned onto 5th avenue was that it was particularly quiet this evening. In fact, the street was completely deserted.

The car finally stopped across the street from the vacant lot at 660 5th Avenue.

"So you were an Occupier all along," May teased him.

John seemed not to have heard her comment and stared at his watch a while before he looked up and said, "Come on." He got out of the car and May followed. When she was on the outside, John was looking up in the sky. She turned to look where he was looking but there was nothing in the sky but darkness.

"What are we looking at?" May asked.

John didn't answer her, staring up for a while longer before he pointed out to a small light.

John and May stared up at the light as it got bigger and bigger, until it eventually turned into a collection of lights. The cluster of lights appeared to May to be heading directly for the vacant lot. She looked over to John, who simply smiled up at it, and then back up at the sight. When she had turned back, she was even more bewildered to find that the collection of descending lights in the sky had turned into a house being slowly lowered by a helicopter. And not only was it a house, but as the object neared the ground, it evolved into a nine-story mansion. The mansion had all of its lights on and it appeared to be active inside. Not even the violent gusts of the propellers as they passed the tops of the surrounding buildings and kicked the wind up in a violent tempest was enough to blow away May's astonished expression. The

helicopter inched the mansion closer and closer to the ground until it nestled snugly into the lot at 660 5th Avenue and became a permanent address. The chains that attached the house to the aircraft relaxed and slipped out of whatever hooks were keeping them in place and the helicopter flew away.

The door to the mansion opened and a flood of light illuminated May's shocked countenance. Onto the porch walked seven men to John knew to be the CEOs of The Bank of the Americas, HSBC, Stanley P Morgan, CG Bank, Barclays London, Deutsche Bank, and lastly, his father, Mortimer J. Bird of Amauta Group. The men all shook hands and the six former names descended the short stairway and got into the six limousines that had pulled up while May and John were enamored with the flying spectacle, and drove away. Mort Bird, a man of about five feet and sixty years with oval glasses, little hair and a permanent grimace, remained on the wide porch. He made no effort to beckon his son, who at this point May knew to be the fabled John Bird, and went back inside leaving the door open. John then turned to May, whose agape mouth was becoming dry, and asked "Would you like to have a late dinner?"

John chuckled and led May, still unable to speak, by the hand across the street and into the house just as traffic was beginning to pick back up along 5th Avenue.

May Broom was the first of few and scattered guests to dine at the Bird mansion. And in her first meeting with the illustrious man and his son, she came to know more about the family than the history sites, rumors or folklore could ever fabricate. To be sure, those rare gentlefolk who had the pleasure of being in the company of Mortimer and John Bird would surely not have called them a "family," per say. At this time, John was nineteen and appeared to be more of a friend and acquaintance of the old man than kin. The other two children who May gathered once sprung from Bird loins were apparently outcast for their careers and spoken little of, and the mother was said to be of a very disreputable occupation and was not seen in the house, mentioned, or known to exist as far as guests knew.

The Birds as a whole were a peculiar duo. Their home, though boasting an unparalleled address and overwhelming French

Neo-Gothic exterior, was modest on the inside. There were no great halls filled with Rembrandts and Basquiats; there were no ostentatious displays of china or precious stones; there was in fact no single piece of luxury that would have distinguished the Birds as the unimaginably wealthy people that they were besides the house itself. There were mere millionaires May had dined with who wore their wealth about them like perfume, but these Birds, she observed, were, in a word, composed.

The diner conversation that followed the short and unenlightening tour of the nine bland levels introduced May to the temperament of the man whose surname populated the mouths of New York gentry like yellow cabs in Mid-Town seen from above. She got a chance, over a modest late night meal of almas caviar and Bluefin tuna with a 1985 Frapin cognac, to have all of her pressing questions answered—and they burst out of her like bubbles at a celebration.

She instinctively turned to Mortimer Bird, who sat at the head of the table uninterestedly sipping his spirit, and said with the eager reserve of one who is in the presence of someone she knows towers over her mental and social capacity, “How...how did you do this?”

Bird responded with the same apathy he seemed to have for his own wealth. “How what, child? How did I manage the acquisition?”

May, at a loss, looked to John who chewed his fish behind a knowing smile.

“So it went through,” John said.

“Of course it went through,” said Bird. “I made them an offer they couldn’t refuse.” Then, turning to May, he said, “I presume you mean how I managed to fly this house to this lot, which I’m sure you all have been curious of.” The tone of his “you all” seemed to be a jab at the meddling, gossiping aristocracy, but May paid it no mind and nodded vigorously in affirmation. Bird set his glass down and wiped his mouth. “It was built in the south of France by an architect who was known for designing several of those trite, overbearing abominations of a hotel that are so common in this city. He can cater to the needs of the bourgeoisie, clearly, but he has a grasp of the French Gothic tradition that I admire.”

"And...you flew it here?"

"Obviously, girl."

"This house can fly?"

"It can be flown. It is completely self-contained. I will not be at the service of the New York public sanitation system or any of those socialist welfare programs."

May was clearly overwhelmed and had not touched her fish since she sat down.

"If you don't eat that, we'll throw it out," said John with his mouth full.

Ignoring him, May continued with her host: "Did it really take you fifteen years to build one house?"

"The technology was being developed as it was being built."

"Eat your fish, May," John said again.

May shushed him. "Mr. Bird," she said turning back, "Do you know of my father? I mean, have you ever worked with him?"

"May, this is a casual event—."

"Shush, John," Bird said, newly intrigued, as if talk of work illuminated him more than talk of homes and status.

May shot John a cheesing grin and made herself more casual, crossing her legs. "My dad is Harold Broom. He's the CEO of the BroomBush Spirit Company."

"Not anymore," said Bird.

May's face dropped slightly and wrinkled in confusion.

"My dear girl, you've been quite distant from your family's work, haven't you."

"And why shouldn't I?"

"May, girl, the family business is the family business. You should know that your father has been subsidized, so to speak—his position, I mean. I handled his merger with D'Urberville Tobacco."

"D'Urberville?" May recoiled. "And so what's the result?"

"Consolidated Tobacco and Grain Spirits."

"Well," May said, her posture deflated. "That's bland."

"It is what it is. It is *the* tobacco and grain spirit corporation. The singular one. There needs no 'D'Urberville' or 'Broom' in the name to condition it. It simplifies everything."

“So who owns it now? Us or the D’Urbervilles?”

“Both. And none.” Bird sipped. “Amauta group holds it, but your father as well as Richard are still in the same administrative capacities which they held before the merger. Everyone does their duty as if nothing happened.”

“So why even combine the two?”

“For the sake of optimizing profit, obviously. That’s the only reason to do anything. My firm’s research concludes that people who drink smoke—to put it simply—and that nonsmokers are more likely to smoke when they’re drunk. Have you ever walked into a liquor store? They always carry tobacco products. So we can consolidate the markets and amplify profits by merging the two companies. We cut out the multiplicity, the small distilleries, by absorbing them, so that the cash flow goes to one place and the consumer can still buy their brand of vodka, you see.”

May crossed her arms adversely and pierced her brow. “So what, you’re of the old industrial mindset, then? Big factories, bureaucracy, and monopoly.”

“I’m not industrially minded at all, my dear girl. I’m above it. Industry is necessary for my work, but it’s low. It’s the old way, primitive work by poor people and narrow-minded administrators, like taking a bone hammer to a piece of stone. Finance capital is the new way. That’s how you make your fortune—the money is where the money is. And in fact it’s a whole different kind of capitalist mindset. The financial man feeds, if you will, on the industrialist. But he’s far removed from the working man of the same flesh and blood.”

“You’re talking about yourself,” May said, her arms still crossed.

Bird opened his hands as if to say, you got me.

“I thought John here to be a little aloof when I saw him at the ball,” she said, turning to the young man who was listening attentively to his elder. “I guess I know why now.”

“You want to know my philosophy,” Bird said, standing up. “It’s a whole new domain of humanity, financial capitalism, a whole new mindset—*homo economicus*! Where the poor are bent on bread and water, and we, having those granted, are bent on credit. Where the bourgeoisie are interested in politics and “social correction,” and I would be less concerned with *how* the

government is currently working that with what I could do to buy it and rearrange the leadership to make it more efficient, like I do with companies now. But between you and me, the US government is no worthwhile investment. The product it supposedly offers it provides poorly and its 600 or so million shareholders appear largely dissatisfied with it. But the point is, dear girl," he downs the last of his cognac, "that the financial capitalist is partial to no one, thing, or government, and he must hold high the viewpoint that all things can be taken, bought, and drained of their equity for profit. All things. Men and companies alike. Would you distinguish between flesh and money? I wouldn't. Way back when in this country, the more men you owned, the richer you were. It's all the same in banking. Buy and consolidate industry. Eat men for status, that's what I say." Bird then waved his hand dismissively and left the room.

May then, still processing what was just dumped on her, glanced over at John, who had finished his cigarette and seemed to be sizing up whether she was aware of the caliber of individual that she was in the company of. He smiled cheekily at her when he seemed to have ascertained the answer.

May and John's walk to the front door was leisurely and it seemed to May that John was elongating it with his trot. He walked at a distance that implied both a professional reserve and an interest in her company. He was cute in that way, she thought. But complicated. She began to draw closer to him as they neared the foyer, but she also kept her distance as she had still not been able to discern his humanity. (She was sure the old man had none.)

Then he said, "I like your hair."

May smiled shyly and John smiled back.

"Not many girls of your particular status wear it like that. You look like a nymph."

She gave a single laugh and shoved him playfully.

"But seriously, I like it," he said, trying to look into her eyes which she intentionally averted. And when she had decided that she had been ladylike enough, she paid him the compliment of a glance, which seemed to prolong itself in their walk.

"Well, I'm peculiar for my status," she responded.

When they reached the front door, they stopped and John took May's hand in his.

“Are you going back home?” he asked. “I can ride with you to wherever it is.”

“I don’t go home.”

John squinted his eyes in apprehension but his intimate countenance persisted.

“I mean, I like to wander. I like to be my own girl.”

What a girl, John thought. He caught her eyes again and held contact until he broke a smile and interrupted it, shaking his head slightly as if to a voice. “Well I would like to see you again,” he said. “Tomorrow...or maybe at Harvard in the fall.”

May’s mouth fell agape. “How did you know that, you stalker?”

“I know things,” he smiled.

“You’re not helping your non-stalker-ness.”

He laughed. “I’m going there also.”

“MBA/JD?”

“Oh, you know what I’m studying? Now you’re the stalker.”

“Hey, I could have bet money on that,” she smiled and then blushed in the silence that seemed to creep in whenever it could get a chance. “How about a walk?” she said then.

“Now?”

“Sure.”

John looked at the front door as if her were apprehensive of it. Then he looked back at May and the doubt in his expression lifted. “Sure,” he said. “Anything for you.”

CHAPTER 4

HOW THE OTHER HAVES LIVE

The summer before school was brief. The stints which they spent together were fleeting in the wake of John's commitment to his father's whim, but in the first weeks of June he did make it a priority to do all the things May wished, which seemed like all of the things in the world. There were secret jazz clubs and walks along the fashion corridor as the elite and those that longed to be elite paraded their desperation, dressing for the position they wished that they had. May strode above them all clutching John's arm when they walked these walks, and John simply basked in May's glow, for more than the knowledge that he was above all of the fashionistas and to-be-hedge-fund-gurus did he value the love of the one girl who all the other girls secretly envied from behind the guise of their Fendi frames. Their companionship felt truer to him than any since his father, and the love between them swelled. It surged when they were together, and doubled when they were apart. O how this feeling invigorated him, probably exacerbated by very rarity of the jewel he possessed. May spoke and he listened, for she was fond of literature and film, information that he had never bothered to toil with, but that had new intrigue when they burst from her lips. Perhaps if he had read the novels and poems that she spoke of, the classics Proust, Baudelaire and Lawrence, would he have known that the feeling he had during that first part of summer was not unique; but that reality of his was probably the thing that kept their love so fresh.

The early dates were characteristic of their first, which began in a jazz basement that was a part of The Austere, perhaps the most esteemed and selective social club in the city. Membership access was rumored among socialites to be determined by cult-like activities, but the aristocracy likes to mystify the things it cannot get its hands on. Indeed, even the likes of Richard D'Urberville could not manage admittance (probably for his reputation as a narcotics-user, unsubstantiated as it was).

Membership was also said to be highly select for the amount of money it brought in, and its mythology probably stemmed from its exterior. It was located at the northeast corner of 69th and Park Avenue and was built in the same French Second Empire-style architecture as the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. And though it had several legendary amenities, foremost among them was the Jazz Basement, where members and approved guests drank from the antique bar (both in the age of the wood and its spirits) and enjoyed what was rumored to be the most supreme jazz ensemble in the world. The only case in which the club had ever solicited the membership of someone was with Mortimer J. Bird, who declined. Like his father, John had no interest in socializing with so-called elitists and wasting time in basements for the sake of appearing important, but he knew May's taste in the music and literature of the twenties, so for him attaining access to the Jazz Basement was a matter of looking up the proprietor and telling him his name on the night thereof. When he told May where they were going, she jumped into his arms and that was the first time that they kissed.

"Do you know how long I've wanted to be in that club," she sang. "I had no idea you liked Jazz."

He knew nothing of the art. "I only knew that you liked it," he said. "And I want to get to know the things that you like."

"Oh," she sang again and kissed him with the enchanting vivacity of a siren's call. His lips left wet as she turned and pulled him by the hand into the Town Car that awaited them, he was like a sailor in control of a tempest, this girl; he knew that he had her.

The club was exclusive, alright. While there was a motley of "movers and shakers" outside, seemingly clamoring to get in, privately contracted officers of the New York City Militia stood at strategic spots around the entrance. On one occasion about a month ago, an occupier dressed in an original Lagerfeld—no one knows how he got it—gained entrance to the foyer and planted a small IED. Police intercepted the device immediately and swarmed several people in the vicinity. Several of them actually turned out to be regular aristocrats.

But that incident only served to heighten the club's reputation and more and more socialites attempted to get access, if only to the Jazz Basement.

John and May's Town Car pulled in front of the buzzing entrance and passed the Lamborghinis and Bugattis being valet, and were allowed to drive directly into the private garage. "We're not going in the front?" May asked.

"We don't need to. If the people outside aren't privileged enough to see the inside then they definitely don't deserve to see us." John could hear the voices on the street riling up behind him and he laughed. "It's amazing that all these folks get lined up and dressed up and then let down, all at the prospect of getting bombed again," he joked.

"John," May whined, hitting his leg. "Some people would die to get in here."

"Some people would have died."

She shot him a sharp look and then turned her head around. John sighed and rolled his eyes, still smiling to himself.

"You have no idea how amazing this group is supposed to be," she said.

"I hope I'm enlightened."

May didn't turn around. The car pulled into a space and stopped. The chauffeur got out and began to open May's door when John reached over and pulled it shut again. He touched May's chin and pulled it towards him and kissed her. "I don't mean to ruin this for you," he said. May tried to keep her stern face, but ultimately gave in and cracked a smile.

"I love you she said," as the brass cries of a horn ensemble began to drift into the atmosphere. John then waved his hand gesturing for the chauffeur to open the door and they got out.

They walked up a carpet-covered narrow staircase that was as red as John's scarf and that smelled like wooden casks. They turned three corners and reached a door that opened up into a dark, smoky room where a spotlight was being shown onto six ponies blowing their tops of at the climax of the first number. They had entered beside the stage and could see, across the room, the lesser guests being let in through the double-doors. A pony waiter sat them at a round table right in front of the stage and asked for their drinks. May's face was beaming brighter than the spotlight that projected above her as she looked over at John and then back at the gyrating, chipmunk-cheeked trumpet player who blew so soulful that his white suit may have spontaneously

manifest itself into a white robe, and the gold trumpet a halo. "Bring us something from 1928," Bird said, and when the pony left, he turned back around to the players and cradled May's tapping, rapping hand, hoping that some of the rhythm in her would transfer to him.

At forty minutes into the set, and John was remised to find out that they had only played two songs, he decided that trying to get "into the groove" of this music was pointless. He motioned the pony that waited on them to bring him his third cognac and downed it the moment it came. He looked over at May who was gyrating in her seat like the ponies on stage. Between the blaring horns, the bubbling bass, and the shuffling piano playing, the musicians onstage sounded like they were missing important notes—and on purpose. His bladder then began to cry out as sharply as the trumpet, and with good timing, as the song crashed to an end. "I'll be right back," he told May as he began to get up, when just then the piano player began to sigh three quaint chords that sounded like fall. Pleasant though they were they were not enough to keep him from leaving, but May aggressively grabbed his arm and when he looked back at her face it was brimming over with excitement. The rest of the crowd followed suit as they clapped with anticipation as the chords sighed on and the bass came walking in like a hipster down to Birdland on a humid, rainy night.

"Do you know what this is," May whispered, almost unable to conceal her happiness. "They're playing 'So What.'"

So what, indeed, thought Bird, and he broke away from her grip which she seemed not to mind and left her in her ecstasy.

As he walked around the tables and out of the double-doors, the walking bass began to speak through the trumpet, but the cognac was speaking, too. John walked down the short hall and up the stairs, which led into another restaurant-bar-sitting room which was filled with people. He accidentally slammed the door a little too hard when he opened it and everyone looked up at him. But instead of returning to their meal as would have in the presence of a waiter or pony, their eyes lingered on him. John composed himself as he turned around to a nearby waiter and asked, "Where's the rest room?"

The waiter pointed through two more double doors at the other end of the room and John walked around all of the tables, passed the bar and gently walked through the doors as he felt the persistent gaze follow him. The bathroom door was immediately to the right and he lost all composure as he slammed through them and recklessly undid his pants, embracing the urinal and finally let out a grumbled sigh of relief. There was only one other man in the rest room, who was reading a paper in the corner. John didn't catch his face but he was definitely not a towel-boy. It did not matter, in any case, while John conducted his business.

In the middle of his run, as the relief was washing over him, a sound like the opening of a door pierced his ears. He looked back and no one had come into the men's room, just that fellow standing there. Then he looked up and realized the sound must have come in through the air vent. Two ladies' voices then followed, and John assumed the vent must connect to the ladies room. Their conversation ensued as clear as day (a defect, John thought, of such a supposedly-secret and esteemed club).

"Have you seen? John Bird is here."

"I haven't yet, is he cute?"

"Gorgeous, plus, you know what he stands to inherit, right?"

"Um, I know he comes from high places. His father's that Amauta guy, right? I know they do something similar to Goldmans but I don't follow finance."

"Well, put it this way: his father bought Goldmans. They bought all the banks. Apparently their last acquisition was a night or two ago and now, you could say, Amauta is the banking system. And John's the heir."

"Ooh, hot and rich."

"Super rich."

"*How* rich?"

"Don't you read Forbes—?"

"Of course not. I'm a fucking fashion heiress."

"Don't interrupt me. You should really read the magazines. They cost like nothing and you can read them on your iPhone while you have nothing else to do. It's pretty much all I do. Anyway, yeah, they're like number one, now."

"Number one? Richer than Roman Ovich"

“God, you really need to read more. Roman Ovich is dead, stupid. And yes, he would have been.”

“Mm, hot and rich.”

“And here. They just moved to Manhattan, and this club hasn’t had a member of such a grand, majestic status since Ovich.”

“I thought Ovich was cute, too, in a way—when he was alive.”

“Shut up.”

Then the sound of a door closing rang through the vents again. John was tickled that the social elite fancied him so, but not flattered. Roman Ovich was the founder of the New Soviet Republic, its President and de facto Chief Executive Officer of all its industry. The NewSR formed as a competitive reaction to the monopolization of US finance and industry. With the country’s entire industrial and financial system being channeled to one place, Ovich quickly acquired a personal fortune of two hundred-ninety billion dollars, and he was highly esteemed by his countrymen for bringing Russia into the modern monopolous world. He was both fond and envious of American high culture and he was a frequent visitor of New York City and The Austere (becoming its wealthiest member when he joined it) but he and his family were killed a week prior by Occupiers. An IED under their stretch Rolls. So John was not smitten to be compared to such a person, but all he could do at the attention was chuckle.

He then heard the fellow behind him chuckle along with him. John zipped up his pants and glanced around.

“People poking their nose where it doesn’t concern them, huh,” said the guy, half to John, half to himself. He was a portly fellow who John recognized to be Jim, the son of Graham Boyle, an oil man who his father had helped gain total control of the industry and the market. So he knew Jim’s fortune to be impressive, almost as large as Rockefeller’s by modern standards, but John also knew both of those men to be simple industrialists, and his father would say he was above them. But that didn’t negate the fact that both of their fathers were on better terms as friends than Bird was with most of his business partners.

“You can say that again,” said John. They shared another laugh as John washed his hands.

“How’s your father?” asked Jim. “The last time my father and yours had dinner together, I was brought along, although I don’t think you were there.”

“No, I don’t think we’ve ever really met. Shame since our fathers are so close.” John dried his hands and then turned to Jim and put one out. “John Andrew Bird.”

“Jim Adam Boyle,” he said, shaking it. “But my friends call me ‘J.’”

“Hey, same initials.”

“Woah, yeah, how about that,” Jim smiled.

“What are you doing in here? Reading?”

“Oh, right,” Jim chuckled, “I’m hanging out with some friends from Harvard. Well, I guess not exactly ‘friends,’ but you know how it is.”

John smiled in acknowledgement. “So you’re in Harvard.”

“Well, I’ll be going there in the fall to get a business degree.”

John put his hands on his hips as if he had found some undiscovered oil well. “So am I,” he said, “So am I.”

John invited Jim Boyle back to the Jazz Basement that evening, and every other night after that the couple would go back to The Austere where May would get lost in jazz and John and Jim would drink and laugh until inebriation. It was perhaps his first friendship with a boy his age and it was almost as new and invigorating as that with May. It was almost as though he was dragging her to the club every night, and he didn’t mind the feeling of desperation that sometimes crept in when he was away from one companion or the other. Even though such an outing became routine, John continued to omit it when talking to his father about his nights. He’d come in at four o’clock in the morning, and stagger past the entrance to the dining room where the old Bid would be brooding over mysterious papers, his perpetual hobby it seemed. “Hello,” John would say loud and crassly, to disrupt any idea in his father’s mind that he had been involved in aristocratic debauchery (something teenagers often do with that misguided belief). Bird would grunt back and not lift his head. He might say something to the effect of “How are you this evening,” but still, it was rare. And whether he followed up or not, the conversation would last a minute at the most and end with John bidding

“Goodnight,” and then walking away silently cursing himself for not making his sobriety more believable. Such talks were few and far between them, but there were some things the old man just didn’t need to know.

It was the case, however, that one night in late July, John did not come back home from The Austere. John had left Jim Boyle to find his drunken way home and he and May gone down to the parking garage when May turned to him and said, as if it were an epiphany, “John you’ve never seen where I live.” She said it in a way that made his thin blood run faster, her lips but five inches from his face.

“I guess I haven’t,” he said with butterflies.

“Well,” she breathed, “Would you like to?”

He didn’t need time to think. “I’ll stop in on my way back.”

As if it weren’t clear by May’s tone, when they got into the Town Car, John got the idea that he wouldn’t simply be stopping in. She sat in the middle seat instead of the far left door seat where she would have. As the car pulled off, out the garage and down Park Avenue, she pretended that her head was somewhere else, looking in the other direction out the left window, but her hands had ideas of their own. Her right hand walked secretly on its index and middle fingers up to John’s knee. It traced the crease of John’s silk black pants, up the thigh and around the V until it met an obstruction.

The Town Car pulled up to 6 Columbus Circle. “You live in a hotel?” John asked.

“For now. Its small and quaint, and I like it and my daddy pays monthly. Does that bother you?”

“No no,” John muttered, and followed May out of the car. He didn’t stand fully upright, aware of his predicament.

“You seem a little bent over,” May said jokingly and she led John inside and waved past the concierge, who greeted her by name. She almost ran into the elevator wall and fell into a laughing fit before she pushed the “up” button and embraced John and they rolled into the elevator in an unbecoming frenzy. She kicked the top floor button with her heel and she and John almost fell onto the floor, although his posture braced them. “You seem bent out of shape,” she said between kisses.

“You said that already,” he said.

The elevator door opened and they rolled along the hall to the room at the far end where May interrupted him and searched for her key. John took her from the back and kissed her neck, prompting them to fall into the room when May unlocked it. There, on the floor, they began. Each his thrusts pushed her farther into the room and each of her groans brought out his primordial aggression. He momentarily lost any sense of his social Being as he gasped with brute, animal-like vehemence at each movement, and found himself in her, in and out of her; a somebody, and then merely some bodies together. They moved to the desk where he pulled off her dress and continued on her backside which arched and relaxed with sweat and vigor like a slithering snake in the drenching humidity of the summer’s heat. Then they moved to the bed where he flipped her over so that he could see her contorting face, her majestic gape and the bent-back shape of her wet neck—he grabbed it; he came.

Afterwards, they lay on the bed together, he on his stomach and she on her side facing him. Perhaps the intensity left him unresponsive, but she was awake and wanting—not necessarily for more or better—just for him. She ran her fingers along his back, she traced his spine, graphed his contours with her palm, as if to ask, “Do you feel me?” His slow and steady posture and breathing gave her her answer, and she turned over and went to bed.

In the morning, John awoke to a sleeping May beside him. She lay directly in the path of the sun’s rays coming through the window, in the light of all things new. This was the May he had never seen before, the one he had conquered. His virgin May of yesterday was somewhere in the past. He smiled at it, or either at the beauty of the morning, he couldn’t be sure which it was. He then got out of bed and composed himself. He did his morning crunches and push-ups, and then put on his clothes and left, expecting a call from her later.

When he got in to 660 5th Ave his father was, as usual, at the dining table. This time, John did not have to pretend to be sober; he was refreshed enough. But his father uncharacteristically called him out this time just as he was passing the opening.

"You are young, and a teenager, but you know you have duties to fulfill in the long run," the old man said, not looking up.

John was caught off guard, but the old man in all his disgruntlement couldn't ruin his mood. "I know," he said.

"I see the difference in your eyes. They yellow and dilate with the ecstasy of infatuation," Bird said, stressing the word "ecstasy."

"If you're insinuating that May has introduced me to drugs, you're mistaken," John said casually.

"Mm," said Bird. He wrote some things down on some of his papers. "Well, go along then, boy."

John hovered in the doorway for sometime longer, hoping to elicit a final glance from his father, something that said, 'You're still me son and I love you,' but none came. So John left the business man to his work and went up to bed.

May came over in the afternoon; Bird had left for a meeting in the Financial District. Despite his absence, though, John felt the man's presence bearing down on him.

"Wanna go for a late lunch at Masa? It's kind of dull but their sushi's decent."

"Let's not go out today," John said.

"Oh?"

"I feel like I should get some reading done."

"For what? School hasn't even started yet."

Silence seeped into the conversation. May immediately knew the source. "Does he think I'm distracting you?" she asked newly serious.

The quiet loomed on and May drew in and nestled her head on John's chest. Finally, he said, "It doesn't matter what the old man thinks." He touched her chin and lifted her lips to his. "I love you."

She smiled and he kissed her again.

"Well, I'll go then," she said. "Chelsea Bates wanted to have a shopping day, so...might as well be today, huh." She kissed him one last time and turned to leave.

In her exit it seemed to John that in so brief a time, so fleeting a summer, that that haircut of hers, so nymphish and cute, had turned from intriguing to just a little childish.

CHAPTER 5

THE DAMNED YOUTH

John sat in the back row of a large white classroom, with rows of desks that stretched back on raised platforms. Three giant sterile whiteboards and a lectern lay at the clearing in the front, with doors on either side from which he entered. He could see the entire room and the students that trickled in. It was still early, so he rested his eyes while he waited for the professor to arrive. He closed them as seven or eight students sat in scattered seats across the room. When he opened them slightly, the room was almost three-quarters of the way full; the professor had not arrived and John let his eyes fall shut again.

Some rustling in the desk beside him jolted John awake. He opened his eyes and a boy his age was fidgeting the maneuverable desktop up so that he and his books could fit in. The boy's hair was mussed, his Harvard sweater baggy and starch; his Sperry Topsiders were flopping off of his feet. It was the first day of class.

"Hello," the boy smiled as he nestled into his seat.

John smiled the smile he reserved for girls he would rank at a seven or eight, that slight one, out of one corner of his mouth.

"Are you a freshman also?" the boy asked as he pulled out his electronic tablet. He rubbed his glasses on his sweater.

"Somewhat," said John.

"Oh," said the boy. "So am I. My name's Larry," he put out his hand.

John began to lift his arm, and then retracted it to rub his hair back. The boy put his hand down as if no one noticed.

"How about you?"

John turned his head slightly toward the boy. "John Andrew. Of the Birds." The boy curled his lips down as if he was impressed at the information; surely, though, he did not know the significance. "Who's your family," John asked tiredly.

"Uhh, the, um, Johnsons."

John thought for a moment, squinting his eyes upward. “The Boston Johnsons? Microloans?”

The boy looked thoroughly perplexed. “No,” he said short of breath. “Of, um, Nebraska.”

“Oh!” John laughed. “I’m sorry, I was clearly mistaken.”

“Oh,” the boy smiled.

Later, John thought, he’d tell the story to Boyle. ‘How do you think sheeple-folk got into Harvard anyway? He must know someone.’ Boyle’d laugh his ass off.

“How did your folks manage to get you in here,” John asked.

The boy paused; he sniffed and crinkled his nose as if he had seen the price tag of the cognac he no doubt smelled on John’s breath.

“Well, my dad had been saving. A real long time—since before I was born. And I worked really hard during high school and everything. Really hard, too.”

John smiled. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Alright,” said a loud, static-drenched voice over the sound system. The professor had arrived some time ago and was now fidgeting with his clip-on microphone. “A-hem. There. Is that good?”

Some girl somewhere mumbled “yes.”

“Ok, then,” the professor settled into his element. “Welcome, class, to the freshman-level survey course. Um, Introduction to Microeconomics.”

*Freshman-level survey...Introduction...*these words ricocheted inside of John’s head until he realized he had come to the wrong class, though his decision to take a course of action was retarded by the fog of drink. He looked at Larry Johnson beside him who was vigorously typing notes into his electronic tablet. He looked around the room at all of the students bent over their screens, sporadically looking up at the professor to imply that they weren’t browsing the Tory Burch lookbook or the Givenchy shoe page or, he shuddered to notice, their Facebooks. The juvenile environment soon dawned upon John after the ricochet of those words pierced him. He looked at Larry Johnson again, the good student, who had not missed a single word of the attendance policy or the academic integrity code. John then riled himself out of his

seat and staggered out the row, down the room and out the door. He made no eye contact to avoid telling the people in the room that he was interested in their opinion of him, but he knew in his composed exit that he had drawn the eyes of all the trust-fund debutants and “gifted” youth from their own electronic self-indulgence, and that was a feat that even the professor could not pull off.

He walked out of Littauer Hall and into a sun-drenched quad which courted suit-and-tie devotees of upward mobility and bourgeois exclusivity under the verdurous milieu of its green-leaved pane-glass roof. It was the kind of loud brightness that the season cants before being usurped by fall. Something about it all, the sun and the people, racked his brain and he had to stand there on the steps for a minute. Perhaps it was the fact that he was in the epicenter of America’s upper-class childhood development center, and that it simultaneously felt so hackneyed, blaring its superiority like the sun. Four hundred years of higher education and increasingly tightening admission requirements, one would think would have filtered out the status-devout socialites, the money-backed daddy’s girls and the small-time wanna-be Birds, has actually resulted the onslaught of the overproud aristocracy upon the student body. It burned him to his core, as if the cognac were eroding his own stomach lining. He felt that all-too-common grimace creep back into his countenance, but he didn’t care if these Polo Ralph Lauren-clad to-be-VPs wondered about this strange student’s apparent dissatisfaction. He didn’t even care if they knew him to be the son of Bird, and subsequently wonder what he was doing in such a rut. These people—their opinions, their dreams, even being as aspired as they may have been—were beneath him. ‘This is the crest of civilization?’ he thought. If all of the world’s financial leaders and politicians and lawyers have sent their seeds here to grow, and this is it for future of this country and this world, then the year 3000 is bleak.

He stepped off the landing and became sickened still, with a feeling like old milk swishing around in his stomach. And then he became dizzy with the thought that he was in the midst of those who were supposed to be like him, and yet they all fell far too short. He needed to pee, as well as lie down. Harvard, you’ve been a façade, an ancient mystified crest that doesn’t fulfill its

legend. John pulled out his phone to call Boyle, whose townhouse was closer to the quad than his. His thoughts persisted still, as a group of girls who name-dropped “Mittel” and “Donahue” fluttered by on their cloud of youth. It was indeed the case that John was their age, but being tutored until he was seventeen on his father’s estate by private, well-paid experts—the authorities in their fields—elevated him in the eyes of the university to an advanced academic standing. A graduate student of the MBA/JD. He was above the geniuses, above the professors, above the pitiful aristocracy. Surely, it elevated him above the university itself, he and his father knew. But, as the old man also said, degrees can be bought and sold, but a future leader of the free world (or in the case of Amauta, the creditor of the indebted world) should have the authority of formative years to back him. Immediately, Harvard became a necessity, not for what it meant to John or his father, but for what it meant to everyone else. It sickened him further—why invest in the opinions of others when there is no equity in them? “God,” John accidentally said aloud. A waste of time.

“Hello,” Jim answered.

“I’m coming over,” John said, and he hung up.

Jim’s townhouse was located just outside the campus of Harvard and was modestly furnished with a flat Vizio television, a Jackson Pollock, and other things that the son of an oil magnate would have in his college-home. John arrived walking straight in through the unlocked door with the familiarity of a close family member and sat right down on the leather sofa, propping his feet up on the ottoman. Jim was sitting in his lazy chair reading the latest news, as always. He finally lowered the newspaper from his face when John did not say anything for a good five minutes. He looked over at his friend who starred with intensity at the bland white ceiling.

“You seem exasperated,” Jim said, “Or at least annoyed.”

John sat up at the acknowledgment of his attitude. “Jim, how do you see us?”

Jim squinted introspectively, then jotted his eyes around the room with the gracelessness of one who’s been approached with a queer proposition. “I don’t quite follow you.”

“I just had a sort of epiphany.”

“What of?”

“About the nature of...this place. I mean, all of the people suck. —I’m sorry, that was blunt. But to be honest, I don’t feel as kin to them as I thought I would have.”

Jim folded up his paper and set it down beside a magazine on the ottoman. “You thought you’d be equal to your fellow students? You, a Bird?”

“Well, I don’t know. I thought I would be able to interact with people like me. Like you and me—who came up as the product of refinement. I mean, how do you feel here? What do you think of these people? You went to the party at Oleana on the first night, right? Where May and her friends were celebrating.”

“No.”

“...Oh.”

“I know I’m an introvert, John. My job here is to prepare to take over New Standard from my father. And you’re here for the same reasons, you know. You can’t compare yourself—I can’t compare myself—to the students here who are preparing to break into an entry level position at Goldmans or something. It’s not fair to them.”

“I just thought this place would be a club for refined people like us. I thought it would have been more exclusive.”

“John, your father and you make up, I don’t know, the top .01 percentile of what the upper class itself considers exclusive,” Jim laughs. “You can’t expect all of the so-called upper class to be like you. You can’t expect anyone, really, to be like you. You’re probably the most peculiar man I’ve ever met.”

John smirked at the kind of compliment that only Jim could offer. Jim picked up his paper again.

“So I guess what I would say,” he said, his voice muffled by the news paper, “Is just focus on what you have to do. Isn’t that what your father would say?”

“Hmm,” John laid back on the couch in thought.

“Or you could just hang out with May and her friends like you have been doing.”

The grimace contorted John’s face again. “I would never. May’s friends are completely unbearable as people. All they talk about is fashion and cars and boys. They’re not even the type of girls who’d be focused on their careers.”

“So they’re hot?”

“That’s the only reason it seems appropriate for May to hang out with them. They definitely don’t have the same intellectual capacity. I would never hang out with them. I don’t really know why she does.”

“Well, you seem to be able to find fault with everyone.”

“It’s hard not to.”

“You could hang out with some of my close friends; good guys with their heads on straight and who are also in a similar position as us. My good friends James Donahue and Noel Gallagher are cooking in James’s apartment tonight.”

“I feel like I’ve heard those names.”

“Probably. Your father has worked with both of their families.”

“Hm.”

“And another friends of Noel’s, Julian D’Urberville, might come by.”

John balked slightly. “Hm...I’ve head of the reputation of the D’Urbervilles. The old man is a chain-smoking junkie and his son’s a sort of eccentric.”

Jim rolled his eyes and tipped his head as if he couldn’t argue with that fact. “Still,” he said, “he’s a good guy and is also coping with his position.”

“I still don’t think I’ll like him.”

Jim shrugged and covered his face with his paper again. “You don’t give many people a chance. How long have you been here? Five days? And already you’ve condemned all of Harvard.”

John twisted up his mouth in self-contemplation, almost as if he were beginning to reconsider his opinion of the college and the student body. But with the fabled Bird conviction he finally resolved, “A man in my position has no time to give common people the benefit of the doubt.”

John and Jim continued to read into the evening. Jim had pulled out a cognac on which the two friends sipped in content and intimate silence until about eight o’clock in the evening. Jim exhausted the *Wall Street Journal* and John read a copy of the *World Class* that was lying on the ottoman. Whereas most magazines of finance and luxury were read openly by the public and the lesser ranks of the upper class (perhaps because of their dissemination through the electronic tablet circuit), The Austere’s

World Class publication was available only through print and was only sent to those prominent figures who were members of the club, or who were known to be of an impressive status in New York. Damien Hirst designed the cover of this season's issue, which appropriately asked the headlining question "Will Amauta Finally Centralize the Banking System?" John skimmed through the article but had no inclination to dwell on it. He flipped rather quickly to the regular installment *Men of the Day*, which in this issue profiled Waldo Bird.

"Ha!" John laughed, "The *World Class* has profiled Wald in this issue. Curious."

"I suppose since the cover article is about Mortimer and you don't really hold your own except in regard to Amauta—and they already examined that in the cover story—maybe they wanted to profile another Bird. I read it; he's doing pretty well for himself."

"Is that so," John said beginning to read the article aloud. "Men of the Day number eighty-nine, Waldo Bird: 'While yet a young man, Waldo Bird appeared endowed with both unimaginable fortune and poor luck. Estranged from his father Mortimer J. Bird, CEO of the preeminent financial firm Amauta, for reasons yet unclear, he moved to California at the age of eighteen endowed by his father with a modest severance, as it were, of one hundred million dollars. With that money he put up capital to centralize several entertainment firms targeted at the general American public, and especially blacks...'" John murmured over a part of the article. "'After it seemed evident that the target demographic for CBE was waning, Waldo sold his share before the price dropped too significantly, while still making 25% on what he initially put in, and reinvested his money in the technology conglomerate Sunshine Belt Technologies, which had of late bought out Apple and become the preeminent Silicon Valley firm on communications and social software...'"

"Had you already known that?" asked Jim.

"Somewhat. I knew he was doing fine. Father had beseeched me to forget about him though. Abel, too."

"Why *did* he outcast your brothers, if I may ask?"

John sighed and tossed the magazine back on the ottoman. "It's tricky. It basically boils down to something he would always

say: 'The family business is the family business.' Wald and Abel wanted other paths. That wasn't acceptable."

"So you're the heir to his entire fortune."

It was only after some hesitation that John breathed, "Yeah."

"I know how it is," said Jim, flicking his paper to straighten out the folds.

Shortly thereafter, John and Jim left the house and embarked on the short walk toward James Donahue's apartment, which lay over a foot-bridge in what the locals called Allston Rock City. Like the city, which was more like a small town, complete with a modest general store and town hall, Donahue's flat was quaint and modest, although the presence of his father's monopoly on the pharmaceutical industry manifested itself in little instances like the 8th Century china and the gold-plated staples on his printed assignments. When they arrived, it was only James and Noel who were sitting drinking, something that made a curiously positive impression on John. Jim introduced them all and it was as though they were pleasantly acquainted right away. Although he came off as just a little bohemian, John knew that James Donahue was a man of distinguish and antiquity. For the mere presence of paper in James's apartment intrigued John to the point of inquisition. "James, I have to ask you—" he started before James interrupted him.

"Ah, before conversation can resume, wine for everyone!" he said jovially. He stepped out and returned shortly with a fine bottle of Romanée Conti. He poured John and Jim glasses and then said, "Please, continue."

John could not help but smile in the presence of such cordiality. His father had, after all, on many occasions professed, "The comfort of one's guests is paramount" (and though his guests were few and far between, he upheld that maxim without fail). And this was the first time that John thought a man had come anywhere close to showing the same kind of cordiality that his father had shown.

"Well," he continued, "I was just about to remark at the fact that you print your assignments. I was under the impression that professors only accepted electronic copies. And furthermore, I

had thought that the sale of paper had long since fallen out of the market.”

“Yeah, true, but my father has connections in the foresting industry, weak as it is. I print all of my assignments out on paper when I edit them; and then I scan the edits back into my tablet and upload them to the professor. I understand their position—consolidate all the assignments into the computer—but there’s just something about print that gives a piece of writing authenticity to me.”

John was slightly taken aback by the man’s admirable outlook. “Those are my thoughts exactly.”

Eating eventually slipped the minds of this new group of friends as they continued drinking and talking of such lofty and inconsequential ideas as people with no immediate concerns do. Sure, the topic of their heirdom came up from time to time, but it was regarded with a sense of being somewhere far off in the future, over the hills of experience, especially as the journey seemed to lengthen with every glass of wine.

Two bottles in, the door bell rung.

“Oh, that must be Julian,” James said staggering up and waltzing over to the buzzer. “It’s open,” he said.

A new wave of blood-rushing anticipation washed over John as he was soon to be in the presence of this illustrious D’Urberville. Well, the rush was either a product of the anticipation or the drunkenness, but either way John was happy and content in his present company. Almost at once, the door to the apartment swung open with the force of a formal introduction. Julian D’Urberville, as if to announce his own arrival, walked inside with a haughty swagger wearing a long gold-embroidered two-thousand-twelve Dolce & Gabbana cloak. He looked quite as if he were about to enter the court of King Louis XIV, only to be attacked by revolutionaries of the bourgeoisie and hanged in the town square.

“What are you wearing?” Noel laughed.

“Don’t be jealous,” Julian said walking into the room and removing his garment. “It’s a very rare specimen. I find it becoming to me.” He set down his cloak on a table.

John then rose with some difficulty out of his seat and put out his hand. “John Bird,” he said.

Julian took his hand, shaking it warmly, and bowed in a queer way. "Julian D'Urberville. I know all about you and your family. We are quite indebted to you, as it were."

Truly, John thought, your family owes its entire fortune to my father. John then took his seat and Julian walked around to an open chair and helped himself to a glass of wine. Definitely an eccentric, John thought, but he decided this time to heed Jim's words and give Julian the benefit of the doubt.

"Did you wear your cloak to classes today?" asked Noel, still jesting.

"Of course not. No one would be able to handle such fabulousness. It would distract the entire class."

"Your presence alone would distract the class," said Jim.

"Ha Ha Ha," Julian laughed mockingly. "Nobody understands a little bit of modest extravagance."

"Is that what you call it?"

"I'd call it being outstanding while keeping a straight head on your shoulders."

"Like a runway model."

"If you want to paint it in that light."

The image was then conjured to John's mind of Julian D'Urberville strutting down the runway at Fashion Week in some kind of black and gold coutour. With the lights positioned just right, he would be seductively rustic, with high cheekbones and almond eyes as blue as the sea off the Turks and Caicos Islands. The image became him.

"So," Julian said taking a seat, "How are classes?"

"No one wants to talk about class," said James, taking up the address of the group."

"OK. Well, then how are the girls?"

Noel gave a wide flushed grin. "You bastard," he said, "You're always fucking horny."

"Horny? How about I'm normal. You're the one repressing yourself. Look at you, you're like a boy who cowers and hides his boner during a sex-ed video."

"OK, shut up," Noel said wiping his gaiety away.

"Oh, am I the only one who notices all of the hot girls here?"

John then shot Jim a confused and disgusted glare across the room, to which Jim replied with a shrug as if to say 'That's Julian.'

"What about you, John?" Julian asked. "Seen anything you like. I'm sure you could pull any girl you want."

"I can, but I don't need to," John replied indignantly.

"He's got May," said Noel.

John tried to shoot Noel a glare to say that he should stay out of business that wasn't his, but he was too engrossed with Julian.

"Oh yeah," Julian continued. "I was just about to say, I have one course with her. By far the best out of all the girls."

"I wish you wouldn't talk about her," said John.

"Why? Just because she's not fair game doesn't mean I can't talk a little shit."

"Yes it does." The starch reply was followed by the quiet babbling of wine over tongues. Julian looked as if he'd been bested for a moment, but, John knew, an idiot doesn't know defeat.

"I like you," said Julian. "You've got the bite like your father."

"I'd rather you not talk about my father either," said John.

"Take it easy," said Jim. "We're just talking."

John looked at him, then around the room at the awkward expressions of his friends.

"Ha Ha," he blurted. "I'm sorry, I'm just a little tipsy."

Julian's expression lightened up and he got up to give John a little pat on the shoulder, and like that, the tension seemed to dissolve.

"May does sometimes say I take things a little too seriously," he giggled.

"Hey, we all do," said Julian as he gulped down the last of his glass. "So," he said turning to James, "Where's the rest of the wine?"

At three in the morning, John was drunk and Jim was tired enough to read one final chapter of Hardy before he dozed off. They left Julian and Noel laughing giddily to themselves in James's apartment and set off once again for Cambridge. Although John was a few sheets farther than his companion, the

kind of metaphysical connection that exists between two old drinking buddies persisted between them. They supported each other with a complimentary arm slung over each other's shoulder as if they constituted the two arms of some paraplegic fireman as they hoisted themselves over the foot bridge that connected Allston Rock City and Cambridge, all the while John singing "Ring around the Rosie" in a flat tenor while Jim smiled hazily in the wake of the music as if it were composed by Wager himself. From time to time, John missed a word and a step, yet his friend was ever by his side to help him up without judgment, and under the blanket of night that would otherwise amplify the gross antics of such young men of status, it erased their sense of responsibility, it helped them forget their names.

"I'm just a kid!" John rang out.

"Shh," Jim interrupted him, barely able to lend the effect through his laughter.

"I just want to be free. I just want to fly. My legs feel so heavy!" John swaggered out of Jim's reach and raised his arms to the unthreatened sky. "Why do I have to have a body?" he yelled to it. "I wish it would melt off of me and I could exist somewhere above the college and above the company—," he turned around to Jim, "—and away from May!"

"Shh," Jim interrupted him again. "Don't say things like that. Didn't you just yell at Julian for talking about her?"

"I can talk about her all I want. She's mine."

"Don't say things like that. She's perfect."

"She can't be perfect. She has a body. It's getting older with every second I talk about it. She's already old news."

"You're drunk. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I do."

"Well if she's old news then leave her."

"And turn to what? Older news? Worser girls? May is the most perfect a girl can be with a body. Ha! And it's still not perfect enough."

"Then leave her if you're so convicted."

"No!" John yelled as if newly irritated. "If she's the most perfect that there is, then I must have her."

“How can you have something and condemn it at the same time?”

“How can you reconcile your body and mind? How can you live freely when you’re born into a name and a status?”

The comment brought Jim almost out of his alcohol psychosis. “Are you talking about more than one thing?”

John shot him a glare that shimmered on the surface with resent, but that had sorrow in its depths; he turned around and kept walking forward.

The two walked on, in less frivolity than before, but being both aware of what was just expressed. They passed onto Massachusetts Avenue and passed the townhouses of their classmates, their windows dark and heavy with sleep. Two more blocks, and they arrived at Jim’s place, where John stopped and waited for his portly friend to catch up.

Jim approached him in silence, his eyes almost shut now. “Will you sleep here?” he asked.

John swayed where he stood as if he had an answer but was not quite ready to expel it.

“Well, goodnight then. Get back to your place safe,” he said as a farewell, and then he headed up the short walkway to the door.

“Jim,” John said before his friend had a chance to get over the threshold. “You can’t reconcile the infinite mind with the finite body—,” he burped, “But you can take all the bodies, as many as you can, and aggregate them—eat them. Consume consume consume. And maybe you’ll get just that much closer to being...God.”

Jim laughed out of no knowing what to say. “Goodnight,” he said, and closed the door.

John waited outside of the townhouse to see if Jim would come back out, but the lights in the windows remained dormant. He looked about him, up and down the empty street. Under the blanket of night, the five minutes he spent standing there seemed like days, and John began to feel more and more weightless as he felt more alone. His thoughts felt as though they transcended his skull and fluttered into the star-less night, and he felt himself rising with them. They scattered like birds to gunfire, became chaotic, and he became afraid of his own seclusion, even in the outside. He

began to walk away. The streets were deserted of all but his thoughts, above him now, and he looking up into the sky to find them, reminded him of his suffocation—the suffocation of the students, of the society. He was the only one in his head—the only person alive out here. All the other students—wanna-be Birds—were sheeple, essentially, and they were all asleep. He was alone in a crowd of sleeping sheeple, the only Bird.

Suddenly, a screech of tires from somewhere close by scattered his thoughts again and startled him so much that he fell down. He looked back and saw a vehicle in the dead of night careening toward him and he put up his arms in horror. But the car swerved onto the curb and stopped. John timidly put down his arms and saw who other than Julian D’Urberville crawl out of the driver’s seat and support himself on the open door.

“I thought you were mad at me back there,” he said loud and crassly, indifferent to the time of night.

John was at an uncharacteristic loss for words. “I—I was just shocked at your audacity,” he murmured.

Julian walked around the door, clearly equal, if not more intoxicated than John. He supported himself on the fence and helped John off the ground.

“I was going to say, you annoyed me a little bit.”

Julian smiled like a house-servant in the face of criticism. “I like you’re candid-ness.” A queer, lengthy silence stepped in before he continued. “Would you like to come to my place? The night’s not over yet.” And then he gave the most hypnotic of smiles that John had ever seen.

There was no telling what happened within those six hours, but when John awoke he had very little to base reality on. He looked over and saw on a desk-clock that it was six o’clock. Yet he knew not who the clock belonged to, where he was, where his clothes were, whose bed he was in, or who the naked girl beside him was. In the haze that lingered from the night before like morning dew on a shit-covered lawn, he clumsily, yet with that distinct Bird aggression, gathered his composure and his clothes, and left the place.

Something in him fell out of alignment, dropped and lost somewhere back in the abyss of that night. When he got back to

his own room and undressed, preparing to take a shower, he had begun to feel a now-persistent feeling that there was less and less in his life to base reality upon.

* * *

Human beings themselves don't know the depths of their own mind or the spontaneous nature of their own character. It's hard to place one adjective upon a man's temperament, because all that riles us, our emotions, our experiences, our neurological compositions, are all in a constant state of flux. There were days when Julian was particularly vulgar and loquacious, and days when he was sedative, so it could not be said that he was completely eccentric. But the bourgeoisie, and greater society for that matter, had a habit of placing individuals into boxes of adjectives that could be easily maneuvered and rearranged. It would seem that they felt this to be a task of utmost importance that must be assumed by the social body because, especially in the upper classes, you can't have individuals running round without name tags. They must be inhabited, as it were; indoctrinated. And that duty and all of its authority fell, although a bit presumptively, to the greater bourgeoisie. They were the choosers and play-makers of high society, the congress that dictated who occupied the public eye. They assigned the adjectives and the mythologies, defining bodies in terms of "x" or "y," even though the individual may have felt that "x" and "y" didn't apply to them. But that wasn't for the individual to determine. Some individuals, although they may have been of high status, were of little interest to the gossiping class and had very few adjectives attached to their names. Others, like Mortimer Bird and similar illustrious figures so elusive that all of what the society knew of them was speculated, had heaps of adjectives surrounding them, almost to the point where those fleeting, ungrounded words and titles—many of them being exaggerated or outright slander—began to cloud the person as a simple human being and turn him into an abstract entity. When the bourgeois and the tabloids talked about Mortimer J. Bird, they weren't talking about a father of three or a native of White Plains, they were talking about a concept of a man, an illusory idea of a wealthy individual for others to envy. Graham Boyle was always cautious of this as he transitioned into the chairmanship of New

Standard oil and became a part of the mysticized Illuminati. He had come from as modest a Texan oil family as you could imagine, and although he knew how to maneuver the New York social scene, he kept a Southern gentlemanliness about him. He knew the facade of the bourgeoisie and the frothiness of social talk and he stayed out of it whenever he could; he held on to his sense of humanity as if for dear life and ignored the *World Class* articles that put him on a social pedestal simply because of his position. Like Bird, he was a man of his work, and it kept him grounded, though not blinded. In the midst of the sweet-scented swamp known as High New York, whose quicksand of bourgeois gossip longed to pull under those few diligent pioneers who trod above the populous, he stayed vigilant of the leeches and avoided the treacherous pitfalls of the penthouse, and he communicated it to his son: when you take away a person's humanity—when you strip a man of his body and his work and make him an object—then you can do anything you want with him; you can make him a God, or turn him into dinner.

Perhaps Jim's father's down-to-earth temperament came from his time spent with Bird, but whatever was the source of it, it transferred to his son. With most of the bourgeoisie, they could be superficially described with basic adjectives, but there was one completely empirical fact that could be attributed to Jim Boyle. He only had one face. He never played social games of gossip or back-stabbing. When such conversations would arise, he would politely and inconspicuously excuse himself. When it came to his friends, he only wanted the best for them, but he also wanted the best out of them. It often became the case that his friends, especially Julian D'Urberville, would become irritated by his good-nature. He had the kind of character that was so honest—outright holy, almost—that one believed that it had to be underhanded. Yet even after he provoked his friends into a fit, and he finally gave them their space, they soon came to the realization that within this slippery-floored menace of a society, Jim Boyle was really the only one who didn't need to suck up to them. In fact when it came to the group—Julian, Noel, James, Jim and John—everyone was more inclined to cater to Jim. Everyone, of course, except John.

About two weeks after the party at James's, the two friends were at brunch, nowhere fancy. The night before, John had had dinner with May, a kind of date that was becoming less frequent. In its wake, there were short phone calls and "Hi, how are you's" in passing between classes. There were unexpected bumps at house parties, but none of it, May had been saying to Jim, seemed intentional. It was as if John was slipping away—away from her and toward Julian and "that lifestyle." Jim took her apprehension to heart; for it was the only place he knew where to put it. So he talked to John.

"How's it going with May?" he asked. They were out on the patio and the wind was blowing mildly.

"Perfect. What would you think?" said John through the thick coarseness of a hangover, attempting to hide behind dark glasses.

Jim sipped at his cocktail. An experienced mediator, he knew he didn't want to catch his friend off guard. "I mean," he said meticulously setting his glass down, "I've been seeing her around. In the library. And we've been talking..." He tried to peer into John's shades but they were as obstructive and opaque as his regular lenses. He had long ago attached that trait to John's emotional distance to everything. "She's just worried. She wants you and her to be close again. She's worried about what you're off doing with Julian all the time."

"I see that girl all the time."

"John, we both know..."

"Know what?" John said cutting the end of the word with his tongue.

The violent purr of a hard, diesel engine faded in from a distance, exploded beside the patio and then whirred into noiselessness again.

"Don't keep doing this," said Jim. "Don't lose May. You know you'll regret it."

John broke contact with Jim's gaze and looked out into the street. He could still see out of his dark periphery Jim's attention on him, and he tried to look indifferent of it. He would have seemed standoffish to anyone else, but Jim saw the slouch in his posture that implied some lack of dignity, and John knew that he noticed it. Then he got up. "I love you, buddy. But I have to

go. I have a lot on my mind.” He waved a weak solute and turned to exit back though the restaurant. “And don’t go sticking your nose in other peoples’ business,” he said as a last measure.

Jim picked up his drink and took one more small sip, and then he pulled out his phone and called May to see how she was holding up.

At this time, John was already two blocks away, walking with evident conviction toward the center of campus, yet he privately knew that he wasn’t headed anywhere in particular. The sun was now looming overhead with the same force of brightness that characterized the late summer, but it’s heat had subsided and the briskness of fall was blowing in from the east. He came to a red light where he fiddled in his shirt pocket for his package of cigarettes. He pulled one out and put it between his lips as his free hand pulled his lighter out of his front pant pocket. All of these were new traits, the ease of finding a lighter, the conveniently placed cigarette pack. He had taken up smoking even when not inebriated. Not on purpose, but then again, he found himself doing many things that he would never heretofore considered. He was forced to flick the flint several times before the wind allowed a flame to spark, and he hunched over with his hand cupping his face and sucked in. The first puff of smoke blew behind his sun glasses and irritated his eyes, making them water. The second puff, inhaled, washed over him and he was once again composed, even with the blur of vision that persisted as he walked across the street. The folks around him walked with a doo-diligence that exemplified their commitment to study or their eagerness to get to work. They walked past him in waves and their presence soon became as monotonous as the light crash of waves on a sea shore. John found himself walking slower, as if too wade through them. He looked around, trying to catch all of the stoic faces in their haste as if he were playing his life in slow motion. They were all bland, or at least filtered that way through his glasses and the lingering cloud of smoke. He looked out past his sheet of dulled impression in search of something. But he didn’t know what. He was perpetually in search of something. But all that resulted was nothing. Bland.

He stopped walking when he got to the other side of the street, perhaps because of the same reason he was looking through

the crowd. He looked up and he was under the university arch, which towered over him in a strange and menacing affect, like some foreign totem that stood for something he would never get a chance to discover. It began to fill him with dread, and he felt like he had to get out of there. He walked away, constantly looking back over his shoulder like someone was following him. But no one was following him.

When he got back to his room and slammed the door closed, he finally felt another wave of relief, and he turned with his back on the closed door and slid down to the ground like his legs had given out. In his room, his thoughts echoed constantly, much like they did that night two weeks ago when the first incident occurred, except here, they were contained within four walls instead of fleeting out into the night, and he almost liked it better that way. John, they'd say, are you going to see May today? And one other would respond, no, he's going to find some other girl to fuck. And then John would brush that thought away because he knew he didn't want it in the room. But within his four walls, it always echoed back and he had to address it. Some of this thoughts had Julian's loud obnoxious tone: John, let's get a drink and fuck some horny sorority bitches. Some had Jim's soothing tone: Don't lose May; you know you'll regret it. And then some, the rare ones that only came out when it was darkest, had his father's voice: The family business is the family business.

"Stop," he yelled out. The room was empty and quiet. Mockingly quiet. He tore off his glasses and let his head fall back onto the door. He didn't know what to do with himself.

A vibrating in his leg caught him off guard, but he soon realized it was just his phone. He pulled it out and saw Jim Boyle's name on the screen. John then looked away and tossed the phone onto his bed where it's muffled vibrating continued. There were eleven missed messages in it. Two were from a colleague of his father's. He had stopped taking calls from any of them as of several days ago, and was determined not to talk to his father until break. Three were from Julian. He had been calling John to come out to the parties since the incident. They had been getting with different girls all last week, but the kid never seemed to want to take it easy for a night. One was from Boyle, the only person John needed to talk to in his current state, and yet he couldn't bring

himself to it. And now there was another one. And finally, there were five from May. He had been lying to her all last week, saying he was having meetings with his father's people. He had been lying to everyone. He was a Bird, he kept telling himself, but he felt like he was cracking up. He didn't know what to do except stay in his room with his thoughts—they, sheltered him more than his own skin.

The girl he had fucked that night with Julian was Chelsea Bates, the daughter of some fifth avenue fashion czar. He knew her father through the fact that his company was acquired by Consolidated Luxury-LVMH, a monopoly formed by Amata Group about a year prior. It's chairman and CEO was Don Arnold, who had come to 660 on several occasions, and his son in turn was Bernie Arnold a Harvard boy who John had parted with frequently the week before. One would think that the heir to a luxury goods conglomerate might have more of D'Urberville's temperament, but in fact the boy was level-headed and refined when he wasn't completely trashed. May had mentioned Chelsea before, but in cuddle-talk (which John endured) it came out that Chelsea and May had a falling out over one thing or another. It was all trivial, anyway.

As John lay on his bed recollecting his sanity, he mused over all of the girls. Chelsea, Clarisse Bordeaux, Melissa Redgrave, Renata Chanel, Leah Carter...he realized, there were quite a few. Quite a few... Last, he thought of May, and on that topic, he fell into a sleep.

Later that evening, after John had woken up and finally gotten some work done, she called him. He was sitting at his desk at the time. He looked at the screen of his phone and knew—felt—deep down through some intrinsic knowledge that the call was prompted by concern, something that had been dwelling on her mind since summer, something that had been brooding for the past two weeks. He didn't know if she knew, but he knew he had to address it, either now or later. He answered, and her grievance was furthermore evident in the way she abruptly started with the meat of the conversation:

"I just don't want you to end up like him," she said when he answered.

“What?” John balked, slightly relieved that it was a different topic than he thought, yet still caught off guard. “What do you mean? Rich and successful?”

“No, John. Heartless. A corporation man.”

“So you want me to forfeit my seat at the company? To abandon my future?”

“No, no,” she said as if she were rubbing her hand over her face in frustration on the other line. “I mean, you’ll inherit his fortune anyway. I just want you to enjoy life. With me.”

John smirked on the other line, then regained his grave tone, “Need I remind you what happened to Abel when he tried to enjoy life. A Bird has duties to fulfill.”

“I just want you to be a person, John.”

“You’re not making sense anymore.”

John heard some sniffing on the other line. “You don’t make sense anymore. You never see me. You never come to my club events. You never ask anymore.”

“May, you have to understand. I’ve just been busy.”

“Too busy for me? What happened to the summer? You said you loved me.”

“I still do. But you know Mort—.”

“OK, fine, fine. I just leave you to ‘studying,’” she said just as the phone disconnected. John, in disbelief, looked at the blank screen as if the phone were going to produce May in person. Then he was reminded of his hatred of technology and he threw it onto the bed again.

John fell back in his chair in exhaustion and dragged his hands through his hair. The lies had piled up and now there was a more pressing issue than his cheating. May hated his father, he knew that; she only knew him as a financialist and nothing more. But John admired him as a role model, and why shouldn’t he? The girl would have to adapt, but John also knew that if said that to her outright, that she’d walk out on him. Best to just drop the matter until graduation. In his heart-of-hearts he realized, as he began to get more introspective, he didn’t really want to lose her. She was still—and would always be, he determined—his May. That conviction was the first of those warm summer feelings he experienced, of the type that one becomes aware of at the dawn of a relationship, one that lets a person know that they’ll be together

forever... *Forever*, he shook his head as he tried to pull himself out of emotional irrationality. Forever, in any context, is improbable; but the jest of love is often to distort what is probable and improbable. He began to fall for her again. There's no better girl, he thought. Clearly, although his father did not seem especially keen of her, his approval was evident in the fact that he did not shun her from conversation when she came in for dinner that first night. She was the closest mate he was sure he would ever find in terms of intelligence and status. She challenged him. But was fidelity to be a direct result of his love for her? There were other girls like Chelsea and Leah, with bluer eyes or smaller waists or richer fathers; and although no one of them possessed all of those traits in the same perfect way May balanced them, surely they were fair game. Why limit one's self, John thought. A good business man never puts all of his eggs in one basket...

The questions persisted, and every time he asked one to himself, a different voice in the room would come at him with a different answer. He thus decided to answer the question himself, with action. He went over to his bed and picked up his phone, pushed her number and put it to his ear. It went straight to voicemail. After the tone, he filled his chest up with air, his heart rate racing, and said "I'm sorry. How about dinner?"

* * *

By October, summer's pep had aged into a drag, and the fall semester soon passed with apparition into the spring. With a new summer approaching, John thought as if his dulling relationship with May might bloom anew, but with apathy he endured its perpetual boredom throughout the break. The second year of grad school came and went without much emotional summit except for annoyance toward repetitive calls from Amauta associates. John found comfort only in occasional debaucheries with Julian and quiet page-filled evenings with Jim. Presently, he found himself basking in the warmth of the latter. It was late April and the semester's workload was piling up, yet with the distance with which he treated everything John put it off as he finished his glass of cognac and waited for the next show to start.

"Where's Julian?" Jim asked as he poured two more glasses.

“Fuck if I know, he’s probably fucking Claire. Or on coke somewhere,” John said setting down his empty glass. “It’s gonna be a you-and-me kind of Friday.”

“Where’s May?”

“Some sorority shit. Painting banners or something, I don’t know what she does. She hangs around with those dreadlock liberals. What kind of a woman thinks it’s fashionable to wear those things on her head?” he laughed. They were already three glasses of cognac into the evening and the computer attached to the Vizio screen was playing the fourth episode of *How I Met Your Mother*. “This show gets better and better. Sometimes I wish I were born in the late nineties. I could watch it as a teenager and, like, get excited and everything for a new episode every week. It feels like cheating to watch all the episodes at the same time.”

Jim was introvert tonight—more than usual. When he sat back down he made sparse glances at John and jerked his head nervously from the screen to his cup, as if he were unsure if the man sitting on the couch beside him was his long-time friend. John however didn’t seem to notice. It may have been that he was a little too removed from reality while watching television, or either that the cognac was especially strong this evening. Either way, Jim gave up trying to passively catch John’s attention and left the weight on his mind to fester. “I don’t miss television,” he said. “Really, the only reason I’m watching this on a TV is because you’re here. I set up the iWatch thing with the glasses. You can attach these glasses to your watch through the 10G signal and watch anything you want anywhere. It’s so much cooler; it’s like you’re actually in the show.”

“You know I never liked all that fancy technology. My dad gave me his old VCR for my loft. The Upper Eastside one.”

“I didn’t know you got the place.”

“I did. It wasn’t hard to bribe the realtor.”

“Where?”

“One57 Tower.”

“Ooh, nice.” Jim then chuckled to himself.

“What?”

“A VCR in an eighty-eight million dollar apartment. You’re a weird one, Bird.”

“Whatever. I kind of like the grittiness of the image. Lets me know the actors are actors and their problems aren’t real. I like my realities and entertainment separate.” The show went to commercial. “Goddamn it, see. More of this stupid tech shit.”

It was a commercial for Sunshine Belt Technologies. A camera rolled over green pastures of California and panned to a glass building, a simple building, built like a box with a triangle roof. Rays reminiscent of those emitted from the sun shown from it. The camera panned along one of the rays into a Middle-American home where televisions and computers were on. It faded to white and text appeared: *No Wires. Completely Invisible Signals.* That screen faded to the logo: *Sunshine Belt Tech. “Our Best Machines Are Made of Sunshine.”*

“Gay,” John said dragging the syllable at length.

“Hey, doesn’t your brother work at SBT?” Adam asked.

“Fuck if I know, he’s a fuckin’ lunatic.”

The show then resumed and the two friends giggled at the archaic humor, sipping eighty dollars worth of liquor a slurp. Then it paused again and another commercial came on.

“Hello, my name is Bob Clark,” said a black man on the screen. “I want you to know...”

“Isn’t he the New York Representative?” John asked.

“I think so,” Adam’s voice echoed behind his glass. “Republican. He’s probably trying to get support for another anti-Occupy bill.”

“I thought it already passed.”

“Well, they’re executing another provision. I think they’re beating a dead horse, if you ask me.”

“Jesus...” John sighed as he sipped his drink.

“Yeah, feels like it’s all going to shit. Nothing was this bad thirty years ago. It feels like this country’s on a downward spiral.” The commercial was ending and Bob Clark began to fade out. Adam resumed, “My dad said Clark is a part of the Illuminati.”

John sloppily jolted his head around. “What? Nah, who said the black man was in Illuminati? Last time I checked that was the biggest Racist Party.”

“Don’t have to be white to be Racist. Remember the producer of that movie, *Black November* or something. He was,

like, Sudanese. You just have to run with the party, if you know what I mean. Look at Bob Clark.”

John mulled it over. “Yeah, I suppose not all ponies are *poor niggers*, haha.”

“Just like not all aristocrats are refined.”

“You can say that again.” John turned back around. The commercial ended. “My dad just got paid,” he laughed.

By early June of 2035, John was living partly with May at One57 on West 57th street while working in a practical position at Amauta, and partly in Cambridge finishing several courses, a living situation that catered to his habit. Apparently, the Cleanse had turned violent in Manhattan and Occupiers were retaliating; John was fucking Chelsea Bates in her dorm. She lay naked with the Tiffany’s necklace he had impulsively bought her around her neck, exhausted, smoking a cigarette inside, and John checked his phone from his watch. He saw that his father had left him a message, so he started to put his shoes on so that he could go back across the quad to his room. It was three in the morning.

“Where are you going?” she asked like a whimpering seal. “Can we cuddle, at least?”

“No,” he started. “May’s getting suspicious. She wants me to help her study.”

John left not expounding on the lie or realizing he had told one. He didn’t even realize how hard he had slammed the door on his way out.

When he got to his room he video-chatted his father from his watch. Father was in his office and he looked okay, though clearly distressed.

“What’s going on? I hear sirens,” said John

“Well, you know they’re carrying out the actions in the bills. And the Occupiers are acting like they bought the fucking street,” his father said. His tie was loosened, and his elbow was fixed to the desk, his hand on his forehead. “They act like they were just going to live in the street forever. Goddamn—” his words drowned out.

“Are you going to be okay?” John asked.

“Sure, sure,” he said, “We didn’t buy the army for nothing.”

“Well don’t you think you should get out of your office? They say that if the Occupiers *really* get out of hand, Wall Street’s the first place they’ll hit.”

“I will not be moved by *them*. Would an elephant yield to an army of ants? Absolutely not. Surrender is what they want—those fuckers can suck a dick, get out of my financial district, and stop talking about the economy like it’s theirs in the first place.”

John sighed heavily. “Well, just make sure everything is in order the way you want it. I mean...the will.”

“I know, son. Everything is written out as clear as you would write it yourself”

John smiled. “Good. So you’re just calling to say you’re okay?”

His father’s hand stayed fixed to his head; he sighed. “Yeah, I think we’re okay.” He turned his eyes to look into the camera—to look into John’s. “Just be conscious. This country isn’t what it used to be.”

“Tell me about it. You should see the chumps here. Harvard isn’t even secure of sheeple and Occupiers.”

“It’s a mess. Nobody knows where they belong anymore. The ‘Occupiers’—they don’t even know how insignificant they are to their own country. All they do is create a public nuisance and mess up perfectly good and expensive landscaping jobs. You think anybody in Washington listens to them? You think Congressmen are asking, ‘What about the eighty-nine percent?’ Ha! I own Congressmen.” He took a deep sigh, hung his head low. “But none of it matters. They’ll never get any leverage.” He raised his head again and looked John in the eyes. “Just remember who you belong to, John. You’re a Bird. Remember who your friends are,” he paused. “I love you. Bye-bye, son.”

“Bye, father.”

CHAPTER 6

THE GRADUATING CLASS

Two things became immediately apparent to John on the sticky, humid morning of June 27th, 2035, as he was awoken by a loud phone call that seemed in its incessant ringing to be urgent. The first was a notion that had been brooding within him for quite some time now: that people often have preconceived notions about what is “supposed to happen,” either in career, in marriage, or life in general, that inevitable get usurped by a much stranger reality. When he was young, he had but a father, and that was all that seemed necessary at the time. He knew that mothers existed, and that brothers did not just disappear, but he was devoted to his own quaint little family to the extent of whatever he father said to him. It didn’t hurt him and he did not fuss; it was almost as if the conversation about mother never occurred; it was just accepted as the reality. Indeed, it’s almost impossible to miss something one never had. Except for in one instance when John was about eleven or twelve, when, after eating a peculiarly delicious meal that evening, he had a sudden curiosity that is characteristic of little children and asked, “Whatever happened to Abel?” to which his father replied, “We just ate him!” After a look of utter terror exploded onto John’s young countenance his father then started laughing aloud and patting John on the back saying, “I’m just playing...” That memory was actually one that John kept as a sweet father-son moment. They were few and far in between, so he cherished them, overlooking much as children of queer households often do, including rumors of other little Birds in distant parts of the world.

More recently, it was evident that the idea of what is “supposed to happen” is really only a fleeting moment, lost altogether with the approach of the next; for on this morning, word had come by telephone that the Occupiers had finally gotten leverage. All of lower Manhattan had been burning since nine

o'clock the previous evening into early that morning. The person on the other line, an Amauta administrator, someone high up in the company, was speaking in hushed tones and long pauses. John could not see what was happening on the other line, but he knew that he was on speaker in the boardroom surrounded by all the C-levels, who stayed ominously quiet. The conversation ended. When John Bird then put the phone down, the second epiphany hit him: it feels like the wind gets knocked out of you when you lose your father.

May stayed by Bird's side after he got word of the tragedy in his penthouse at the top of One57 Tower. He looked over Central Park, naked but for the silk undergarments covering his privates, while May had gone to put on one of the Salvatore robes to show some decency for the situation. Bird's trembling pale skinny back, the ridges of his spine showing though his skin, was turned on May as she reentered the living room. In the window's reflection, she could see thin streams of salty tears trickling down his long face. Sir Bird's oval glasses which he always wore were strangely opaque and his friends rarely saw his eyes; the tears were the first kind of sign to May that any compassion even existed behind those lenses. She walked up to where he stood contemplating the ninety-story drop and wrapped her arms around his back.

"How could they even touch us?" his lips quivered. He snorted and straightened his back up again. "How could they touch us?"

May opened her mouth, but promptly closed it. He did not appear to be addressing anyone.

"Do they even know what they've done? Don't they know that they're the problem. They contribute nothing except ineffective violence. Believing unsubstantiated slogans—" He got choked up and his long neck lowered.

"Have you called your brother?" asked May.

"At least it wasn't Ponies. Jeez—," he wiped his eyes, "I thought we got rid of all of those bastards, anyhow."

May, as usual, kept her tongue. She walked to the bar and began to pour a glass of the *Clos du Mesnil*.

"No, no," Bird's voice waned. May stopped, shrugged, and poured what was in the glass down the bar sink.

“What is there to celebrate?” he asked coldly to no one.

May, at a distance, said, “I’m sorry, John.”

His back rose and dipped. He straightened himself and slightly turned his head towards the bar. “Was that the 1995?” he asked.

May glanced at the bottle. “Yeah.”

Bird gave a shrug and nodded. May poured two glasses of the champagne. He walked barefooted to the bar and scooped up the fragile glass. May picked hers up and they toasted.

“I suppose a Krug is as good a decision as any we’ll make at this point,” he said, and he sipped delicately.

He then got belligerently drunk and slumped around the apartment for the greater part of the morning, not so much in desolation, but resembling a child who’s had his favorite race car bed taken from him and replaced with a twin because ‘it’s time for him to grow out of that phase,’ his dad says. The boy begins to cry, but his father hits him and tells him he needs to act like the big boy that he is. The boy then walks around in a funk, looking through cupboards, kicking over a shoe or a chair, as if his racecar bed were hidden under one of them. Every time Bird passed the kitchen, he opened all the drawers and cupboards, haphazardly flipping through bowls and silverware. May had secluded herself to her novel in bed, having decided to leave him be since his third glass of champagne.

Later that evening after he slept it all off Bird sat down to contact his friends. They exchanged grievances over the loss of their parents; many of their fathers were on Wall Street in their offices the night the riot ensued. Over the next couple of days, the recently orphaned and now exuberantly endowed New York gentry made a collective decision to leave the country; many of them were splitting up for the first time since Harvard.

On the last night that many of them would be in state, the old friends of old money gathered in one of the more exquisite of the Brooklyn dive bars, the inconspicuous restaurants of exotic taste that only existed to serve the late elite and their posterity—the bars’ secluded locations were ideal for protecting the wealthy businessmen against prowling Occupiers. Their children, when they had come back from Harvard, found these spots to be the most exclusive of all the late night venues and they often gathered

there to drink and trade stories. This occasion in particular, however, had an atmosphere of both solemn and joy, as though the young billionaires had finally graduated to the class of leisure that their fathers had once occupied.

That night, a simple black Town car pulled up alongside the entrance to Sir Bird's penthouse apartment to drive him into Brooklyn. He and May were dressed in black and she took his arm as they processioned out of the tall glass doors. The driver stood holding open the car door and they silently climbed inside.

Across the street in the Park a group of gypsies had been secretly living on a self-cultivated garden-commune. They were a quiet group of people and stayed out of sight most of the time, but their location just behind the trees allowed them to be able to see the pedestrian traffic that flowed up and down West 57th street. Their appearance was fifthly and putrid, but they lived together in their secluded commune with warmth and caring. They did not disturb the public, and in turn, the public seemed to forget about them.

At this time, a gypsy and his young wife had been tending to radishes when the girl noticed two people exit One57 Tower and hop in a car parked along the otherwise deserted street.

"Who is that man?" she asked.

Her husband looked up at Sir Bird, who was just disappearing into the vehicle. "I don't know; must be an heir."

"How do you know he's an heir?"

"Because he hasn't got shit all over him."

The girl was awestruck. "How do you know he's not a successful broker or a socialite?"

The husband watched the car depart. "Because even they have some dirt on them. They had to play the field to get where they are. But that man has never played the field. He never had to. I've seen him before, I think. I believe he's the son of the Baron."

"Oh, so he's from the family that owns that building. The ones who work on Wall Street."

"No, baby; his family is Wall Street."

"It sounds like a marvelous life. To live at the top of that tower, and to work around all of that money."

"Don't think about that, dear. I've never known the names of any of those big families. It doesn't concern me. They

have the economy, sure, but I have this little garden. And I have you.” Then he went back to tending the radishes. His wife gazed up at the tower for a little while longer, and then went back to join him in the garden.

The Brooklyn dive that sheltered the friends this evening was called *The Fall Inn*. There was one oval-shaped table in the smoky basement, a billiards board in the corner, and beside it an antique trophy case containing the various toys and donations of past guests—the rarest Vuitton handbags, solid silver revolvers, family photos of the Rockefellers and Morgans, crown jewels, degrees, and a .90 carat chunk of the fabled diamond that was said to be as large as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. A bar ran along the wall opposite the table; a pony who had been faithful to the D’Urberville family for many past generations stood behind the bar polishing glasses.

At the table sat Julian D’Urberville of Consolidated Tobacco and Grain Spirits, J. Adam Boyle of the New Standard oil company, Noel Gallagher of Consolidated Firearms, James Donahue of the pharmaceuticals trust, Bernie Arnold of Consolidated Luxury-LVMH, Vishnu Mittel of Worldwide Steel Conglomerate, Duke Wall of the market retailers trust, May Broom of the Kennedys, and John Andrew Bird. Bird, naturally, sat at the head of the table with May at his side.

At the opposite end of the table, Julian D’Urberville pulled out a pearl cigarette case from his vest pocket, removed one, and put it to his lips.

“Turkish?” Arnold asked.

D’Urberville pulled out another unfiltered cigarette and handed it across the table. “Indeed. They don’t have the crest’s print, but that’s because I’d rather not inhale ink fumes,” he said. “They’re pretty interesting; instead, if you look closely, the crest is a watermark throughout the whole paper.” He inspected his cigarette before he put it to his lips again, the Zippo to its tip and inhaled. Arnold did the same. “Anyone else?” D’Urberville asked before he put his case away.

Noel Gallagher shyly pulled out one of his own.

“What are those?” D’Urberville asked.

Gallagher chuckled, “The Virginians,” he said.

“Ah, a good one. Can’t go wrong with that Virginia tobacco. When we acquired Altria Group, we even considered moving headquarters to the old Philip Morris building in Richmond. It’s a quaint little place. Homely.” He inhaled. “And I’ll tell you another thing; them ponies are like hard drives. They’ve been tending tobacco since the beginning and can still make a mean cigarette.”

“‘Ponies’?” said May indignantly, “Has tobacco got you backwards?”

Bird shushed her.

“What?” D’Urberville said. “They *are* poor as dirt. And dark as it too,” he and Bird laughed. “They should be happy anyway that we didn’t pack up tobacco farming all together and send it to Mexico. But then, of course, it wouldn’t be Virginian Tobacco.”

Donahue chimed in, “I don’t even know how you still have Blacks to work after those bills passed. The Racists basically swept the streets clean of ‘em.”

“Our Blacks are fairly straight-headed. Straight-headed as Blacks can be. And they won’t pull anything seeing as they’re allowed to live on the compound. They know they don’t want to be in the street without protection with them wildin’ poor whites running about.”

“Oh, yeah,” Bird said, “The Niggerati. I think they’re getting as violent as Occupiers.”

“And those militant poor whites—‘Niggerati’, you say—are even worse than Niggers and Ponies, because Ponies’ll work. You can’t get these spoiled whites to do anything now,” D’Urberville said.

“They complain and complain,” said Bird. “More social security, more this, more that. I stopped taking pity on them long time ago. Heh, the sheeple of the world! And really, it doesn’t matter that they’re part of the Grand Old Race, as my father used to say. They’re not good old boys like us, that’s for sure.”

“Fit to be slaughtered,” D’Urberville laughed and sipped his Dom Perignon.

Bernie Arnold, Mittel and Duke Wall were having a quiet exchange at their end of the table. Although they went into completely different ventures, they had always retained a sort of

intimacy, ever since Harvard. D'Urberville finished the last of the Dom and motioned the Pony at the bar for another two bottles. Duke Wall's conversation seemed to stop and they came back to the rest of the party.

"So, John," he said, "Where's Waldo? And what about the younger one? Abel?"

"Wald's long been over in California, but dad and I just left him alone. He wanted to go into entertainment and computer technology and that whole scene. Actually, he was just profiled in the *World Class* so hey, he's doing his own thing." Bird laughed to himself. "He worked with Consolidated Black Entertainment for a while, but that fell off, obviously. I think he's with Sunshine Belt Tech now; how does that jingle go?—'Sunshine Belt Technologies. Our Best Machines Are Made of Sunshine,'" he laughed again. "Technology. Complete nonsense."

D'Urberville got the joke a little too late and gave a loud quack of a laugh.

"Well, it's not at juvenile and ridiculous as you may think," said Duke Wall. "There's a lot of money going into virtual estate, ever since 2012 when they started going public. A lot of money. I mean, but now it's all about either staying private or merging, but the conceit is all the same. Virtual Property. Airwaves. Signals. Signals as invisible as sunrays, as they say, and still as powerful and life-giving. I find it fascinating. People are downsizing their lives and upsizing their internet profiles."

"Hm, you don't say," said Gallagher.

"Sure. Real estate's in the shit. I even have some guys—reliable sources—saying the federal government's gonna set up some operations on California and get in on telecommunications. It's a gold mine over there, and they need to try and make some money to give back to China."

"So pathetic," said Bird.

"I heard it's a go," said Bernie Arnold. "SBT is preparing for the coming of government internet by buying up a bunch of the airwaves. Trying to become the exclusive service provider for the iPhone-X. I think they're even called Horizon TeleMobile now, to look more like a telecom services firm instead of just software. You might've seen the ads. A picture of some silhouetted man

looking out into the horizon of this evening sunset on the river. And the slogan goes: ‘When destiny calls, will you have service?’”

Bird burst into laughter. “That’s even worse than the last one.”

“Listen Bird, you can’t *not* take technology seriously in this day and age. It’s all about virtual property, I’m telling you.”

“Well, I’m not going to let popular trends dictate what I take seriously or not. Invest? Sure, if it makes money. But I don’t have to respect it.”

Wall continued, trying to change the subject. “And Abel?”

“Oh, he was even worse. Poor fool...wanted to be—a poet! Dad and I took care of him. We weren’t letting the Birds name go to the dogs. We’re not entertainers. Our name wasn’t going to go to waste like that. And indeed, we fixed the problem, and not a cent of his inheritance or his honorable Bird muscle went to waste.”

Everyone at the table, save May who was busy in her head, had to smile to themselves.

“Grim!” D’Urberville yelled. “All for the poor fool expressing himself,” he chuckled puffing the butt of his cigarette.

“Well we weren’t going to let one of our own go into the public sector. We’re Birds. Members of the highest society. Unchained from the low animals, sheeple and trees and such things. If Able and Wald want to work with the poor, they can be poor. Computer technology and entertainment are for the military and the masses.”

The food came presently, after the party had been smoking, drinking, and gossiping for some time. The first course was a salad and almas caviar, then an ostrich pasta with pesto; after a bit more drinking the Pony brought out a fillet of bear and later a slow-cooked-then-deep-fried wild boar shoulder.

Over the dessert, Tahitian vanilla bean ice cream sprinkled with Amedei Porcelana chocolate and 24 karat gold truffle, the heavy conversation resumed.

“It’s nice to enjoy this meal with you all,” said D’Urberville; he lifted his glass. They all toasted.

“Yeah, the smoky basement is a nice touch,” joked Gallagher.

“Oh, you don’t like it?”

“I’m just kidding. It’s intimate, I guess.”

“No, really, imagine if our executives at the company heard about this place. If this was a thing, like when we could all still go out without any worry—with indoor smoking, personally customized meals, the most exotic foods, and a three hour wait—they’d be offering up a ball and a kidney to get a reservation.”

“They’d have to; you can’t buy this with money,” said Wall. “You can’t buy friends like these.” They all toasted again.

“True,” said D’Urberville, “It’s not like they’d ever find out about our rendezvous anyway.”

Bird chuckled. “One of the vice presidents—and it’s funny because he’s older than me—Larry Sheridan, used to try and invite me out to dinners like these to get in my head. He idealized my father. I think he wanted me to think he was some sort of godfather figure. But he wasn’t a Bird, you know,” he sipped his drink. “I can’t even let him touch me. He’s basically sheeple, even with his wealth. Dad always told me, ‘family is family.’ Ever since I was a kid. I didn’t understand then, of course. But I realized it’s like this: the family business is the family business. No one but family touches the assets.” Bird rubbed May’s leg; she ignored him, continuing to wander lost in her thoughts. “These young kids today always want to know the secret to achieving what we’ve achieved. And with the ones I like, I try and give them the tips to making their fortune. They try to follow my advice and everything, but they want wealth like ours. So I say to them, ‘Keep doing what I’ve told you and then talk to me in three generations!’” The table burst into laughter.

The party dispersed shortly thereafter, with Mittel boarding a jet straight for London where deliberations lay await at the Worldwide Steel executive offices; Gallagher went to Dubai where a weapons deal had already been proceeding; Arnold went to France to meet with the board; Wall went to China to learn sweatshop management up close; Donahue went back to Jersey, from which he planned to go to Brazil on hiatus from the company; D’Urberville passed out at the bar, which as of the night of the riot had become his property. May professed how the evening had tired her so and that she wished only too sleep. Bird and Boyle

saw her off to One57 in the Town Car, which left only the two old friends together outside of the Fall Inn, a rather appropriate ending to a night of drinking and fellowship, reminiscent of old Harvard days.

It was two o'clock in the dead of morning, and the part of Brooklyn they were in was pensively somber. They didn't speak for some time. Boyle's car, the only one left parked on the street now, waited patiently in the humid night. The gaiety that had taken the place of anxiety for the evening had now retired, and the feeling of having to make some inescapable and life-altering decision descended upon the two boys-no-more with a newly intensified gravity. Their feet, as if on their own will, would not be persuaded to detach from the ground. Gravity had locked everything into its place. In the wake of Bird's coming morning's trip, there was no movement. In the wake of this crossroad, there was only indecision—suspended in mid-air like the humidity. Bird only fed off of Boyle's silence as he contemplated his next move. This one was simple: to go home or to go elsewhere. It was the least of his concerns; a simple and inconsequential decision. But somewhere between indecision and decision, between the inert and the violent, there exists a vast abyss of immeasurable length and a bleak prospect of success; yet it is only by taking the first step—and falling in—does one come that much closer to a realization, to a decision. And when one emerges, if fate should have it, then they have finally attained their decision—the left road or the right road—and from there they can have peace of mind knowing that they have a path to walk, for walk they must down the dark corridor in the night into the next abyss.

For some reason, Bird expected daylight to spontaneously erupt from the dismal sky. But, of course, it did not, and the darkness loomed on, periodically interrupted by a streetlight. He looked down at his watch and it was now two-forty.

“What should we do?” Boyle asked, noticing this.

Bird continued studying the night sky, until he said, “Let's just drive.”

The driver had only one inclination of where to go when Bird and Boyle got in the back seat and did not say a word. He made his way, without any rush, back into old Manhattan and turned down Fifth Avenue at East 57th, passing the crest of One 57

looming over Central Park, May, a sleeping beauty, laid dormant at its peak. The car passed East 52nd where a vacant lot full of burnt rubble lay. Bird did not bother turning his head to look at the crispen remains of the house that could fly. That was as far as the damage stretched into the Upper East Side. As the car proceeded down the island, the landscape became more estranged. At every corner, a soldier of the militia stood erect and armed, his eyes shielded in black goggles, and his posture saluting the fallen soldiers of Old New York. Wherever a flag was not burned, it was lowered to half-mast. All of the store fronts including Barney's and Macy's were burnt crisp from the inside out, windows shattered. The Avenue all deserted but for the police, dressed in black; the sky, dressed in black; the hollowed boutiques, ravaged, and still, appropriately dressed in the scorched black of their downfall, adorned in white pearls of ash.

It looked like all of the bodies had already been cleared from the streets—or at least those that were still distinguishable as people. The Town Car turned onto East 8th Street and then pulled onto Broadway, which looked more or less intact, save the cloud of smoke that could be seen rising from a pile of burning Occupy camps and dead rioters in Washington Square Park. On lower Broadway, scattered pedestrians walked with the heaviness of war weighing on their shoulders, avoiding members of the militia. When the car reached Zuccotti Park pedestrian traffic stopped where the militia had blocked off foot traffic again, obscuring another camp—the central Occupy camp—being burned in the park. The car slowed as it pulled onto Wall Street, where the center stage of world trade was leveled, this time by a much more familiar terrorist. It wasn't leveled in the strict sense—the buildings stood erect, still—but decrepit, fire ridden, broken, uncanny. Bird could see the New York Stock Exchange down Nassau. The fires had completely stricken the American flag from its façade, and lay bare the high Roman columns that now looked as if, indeed, they had been erected two thousand years prior. The car turned up Williams Street and passed what was left of The Amauta Building at One Chase Manhattan Plaza. The first thirty floors were fire-ravaged and windows-broken, as if the Occupiers had been jabbing at the legs of some great giant for decades until they finally felled it. As the car passed the tower, and it became

eclipsed by Liberty, Maiden, and John Streets, it did not speak any last words of wisdom. It did not incite a feeling of freedom or greatness. It was only a reminder. Something outdated. Old. Bird did not look back at it.

Boyle, who had strained his neck to look back at the silent black monolith before it disappeared altogether from his vision, now pulled his eyes from the passing scene and looked over at Bird who was slouched in his seat with his elbow resting on the door handle and his hand over his mouth. His opaque lenses reflected, disinterested, the landscape of desolation.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Boyle.

“All of it.”

“All of it?”

All was quiet.

“You can’t process all of it. Not now. I can’t even—.”

“I’m not going to cry,” Bird said defensively.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, you insinuated it. When I ‘process it all,’ as you say, I’m not going to cry.”

“Okay.”

“...I just need to figure out what to do.”

Boyle glanced over. “You know what to do.” He waited for a response. “We have to do what we were born to do. It’s not all over you know. Sure, the buildings are rubble; it’s a post war zone. A memory now. But the company still exists. Amauta’s still running. The money’s still all there. Didn’t your dad always say that finance was supposed to outlive all things concrete, all things industrial? The money just cycles; migrates, like a flock of birds, to a new home, a new investment. They may have destroyed the symbols, they may have toppled the buildings, they may have even killed the deity, but they didn’t destroy its equity. ...Mortimer Bird isn’t dead, John. Not unless you kill him.”

“The company lives on...”

“Exactly. And you have to carry it on. What would mort say if he saw that you were about to flake out?”

John chuckled at the thought of it. “You’re right.” He turned to face Boyle. “Are you going to work tomorrow?”

“I have to.”

The car pulled up along the front of One57 and creaked to a stop. Bird bid his companion the kind of silent ‘Goodbye’ that old friends exchange with the knowledge that they may not be together for some time—yet with the conviction that whenever they do become reacquainted, that their relationship may resume as if there were no interruption. “Take Mr. Boyle home,” he told the driver as he got out of the car.

“John,” Boyle said before Bird shut the door. “Do you know what you’re going to do?”

Bird stood in the doorway for a while before he answered, “I’m going to France with May in the morning... I’ll figure it out eventually.” Then he closed the door.

CHAPTER 7

MIGRATION

Bird was already onboard the jet, with May beside him reading a pocket-sized paperback novel, when a call came in over the telephone. Bird sighed and let the phone ring four times before he picked it up off of the receiver. "Hello," he said.

"Hello, Sir? Where are you?" said the man on the other end. Bird saw Alan Bishop's name on the caller ID. Chief Operating Officer of Amauta.

Bird looked around the cabin. "I am, on a plane," he said.

"You know you have a meeting."

Bird said nothing and began moving the mouthpiece away from his face.

"Sir," Bishop repeated, "Your position at this company beckons your attendance. I'm with the boys from Carlton-Reed holdings. I have to go into the boardroom in two minutes. The directors are all here and as Chairman, you should be presiding over these proceedings. A merger is being discussed."

"Bishop, can't you handle this," said Bird.

"Sir, you're the Chairman."

"Well, tell the board that I wish to be left out of all this right now."

Bird heard rustling on the other end. Bishop spoke quieter now: "What are you saying, Bird? Listen, I know what's going on. I know you're grieving." Bird rolled his eyes. "Are you saying you're giving up your position?"

"No, you idiot. My seat at that table is preserved by antiquity. But I am saying that if you can handle this business yourself, that there's a raise in pay and position for you."

"So, you're not formally resigning, as it were."

"No, but I'm leaving you in charge, okay. All duties as CEO now belong to you as COO. If you can handle that." Bishop had already known that. The plane began revving its engine; it became hard for Bird to hear the man on the other line.

"I'll handle it, Sir," said Bishop. The line went dead. Bird hung up.

"Business?" May asked.

Bird closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "Not so much anymore."

The plane began taxiing.

As they settled down overseas, the young elite as a whole became accustomed to lives as private men and enjoyed the leisure their new wealth afforded them. Even Boyle and Mittel, who were more business-minded than anyone else, had become prone to being distracted. One thing, however, became starkly evident in the light of their newfound freedom: they were quickly enlightened to the very extent of poverty and decay in the world—London, Greece, much of Italy, Paris, in fact, many of the cities of old extravagance, were run down by rioting and much of the European countryside was occupied by poor young radicals. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the men put their wealth to work and, with the help of their acquaintances in state positions, they secured portions of land (often with military force) on which to live in privacy.

For a long time, Sir Bird and May Broom lived in Versailles, where the private man insisted on being reserved to his books and letters. Sir Bird was enamored with the romanticism of writing letters, the smell of paper, the clean run of ballpoint, the feeling of antiquity. The bookshelf in Sir Bird's study ran along an entire wall, with only one break in the middle that contained a painting whose artist was unknown to the gentleman, but whose price tag ran seven figures at the time he acquired it. The books were almost all of economic theory and early American papers including *Of Plymouth Plantation*; he had many archeological journals with which he found himself quite enthralled with; and he also possessed some literature that he kept only for conversation's sake. His letters to his friends were his main concern, and though they corresponded regularly, many of them were content with their respective private lives. D'Urberville was in South America and the two friends spoke once a week at the rarest. D'Urberville had a fascination with video chatting that Sir Bird put up with, albeit slightly annoyed by. From time to time, a call would come in on

the landline, which Bird kept as a slight to the Sunshine Belt Technology Corporation and their “invisible signals.” Phone calls were always about business, so whenever one would come in, Bird would try to put it off for as long as he could. But the picture of his father beside the receiver glared at him from the past and he would finally submit and pick up the mouthpiece. Still, those occasions were rare. Otherwise, Sir Bird wrote frequent letters to J. Adam Boyle, who was presently living in Mexico overseeing the construction of a new rig in the Gulf, and entertained his other friends by letter occasionally.

In between pen strokes, Sir Bird entertained his vast collection of champagnes and cognacs, with which he became more familiar as he maneuvered France’s upper class. It was rare for Bird to entertain guests, for he reserved such effort for his closest friends; but when the occasional visitor would stop in, they would often bring by a rare *grande champagne*, and, being the gentleman that he was, Sir Bird would politely comfort his guests to the fullest of his ability. In respect, he would store their bottled gifts in his cellar and reciprocate them with one of his own fine champagnes. His father, after all, had on many occasions professed: “The comfort of your guests is paramount.”

But guests were infrequent and Bird would enjoy his collection alone by old archeological journals and a fresh pipe of D’Urberville’s private tobacco selection. May had become a sort of fleeting presence, tended to when needed, but rarely seen. While Bird was drinking in the country in his own way, May spent her indoor hours consumed by the fantastic stories in French romance novels. But she was also a woman, and they often get restless. Bird didn’t venture out much and May would ultimately get bored with his shtick and explore, sometimes for days at a time, in the surrounding towns. Sometimes he would see her passing by his study on her way out. He would most likely have been drinking, which inclined him to call her out.

“Where are you going?” he would say, his words slipping up as they stammered over his wet lips.

“Out. Would you like to come?”

“You are such a busybody; why don’t you ever stay in?”

Then she would come into the room as if on a cloud. “Oh John, have you been around? These gardens. The country. It’s gorgeous. We need to go out like we used to.”

“And just where do you go anyway? Not Paris, I hope. There’s a reason we’re on this compound. We don’t pay these guards to let you go out and get yourself raped.”

May’s cloud would inevitably become heavy with rain. “And what if I did go there? I wouldn’t wear my jewelry. They’re people, John; they’re not animals. If anything, your types are the reason they’re violent. And not even that—they’re serene and humble most of the time. It’s refreshing to be around them.”

“I’ll tell you what’s refreshing,” he would say wetting his lips with the brandy.

“Oh, right, of course: your liquors. You’re always drinking your ambition away cooped up in this stuffy room, your alcoholic’s cave.”

Sir Bird would muster himself off his ass at this point. “Alcoholic? Sheeple are alcoholics, May. Your beautiful Parisians are alcoholics. Middle America is a pit of drunks! Only the likes of scum who drink whiskey, beer, and cheap wine can be alcoholic. This is a thirty-five year old brandy, my dear. *I* am a connoisseur.” He would rock where he stood with his glass in hand and a cheesy grin.

May would leave and Bird would slap the air in front of him or give the door just slammed closed the middle finger. That’s the way it went.

Some days, he would cut her a break though. During the later portion of their time together, he would call on her in the morning to wear something casual. They would take the chauffeured Bugatti out into the country side on warm days. It could reach two-hundred-forty miles per hour on the empty country roads, but even then they had to pick their course carefully. Overflow from Paris forced vagabonds and radicals into country societies. Roads along the Seine were a prime spot to observe the Occupiers. May would look wistfully out the window at them while Bird would think, “Like old New York. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

On particularly nice days, the couple would venture out to sail in the surrounding rivers; the Loir was May’s favorite. On a

good outing, May would beg that they throw all their clothes into the river, dawn a common man's attire and go out into Paris. This amused Bird and he would draw her to him and kiss her, but sure as Versailles was the last secure public compound in the world, Bird would always reject going into the claustrophobic city. Just being outside was enough; even then, poor were always within arm's reach.

One pleasant evening while fishing on the Loir River with a Krug and a jar of caviar, as the sun was just setting in a composed but vibrant display of reds and purples behind the trees along the bank, Bird proposed to May with a 12.69 carat raw yellow diamond. He was a bit sedated at the time, and although he had been carrying around the rock for weeks, he had been deciding on the perfect moment. It was shortly after he and May had left the States that he decided to stabilize their relationship (and as a side bonus, incrementally increase his wealth by acquiring the spawn of Kennedys). Even without her ancestry, there was no other more perfect example of the Grand Old Race—blue-eyed blonde—that he could imagine. His father would have been proud, he thought, as he lay back in the boat with her resting on his chest. With his fishing pole between in his right hand, he pulled out the imposing stone: “May, will you marry me?”

She shot up off of him and balked at this with a surprised smile and a shuddering laugh: “John, no.”

She explained: during her extensive outings, May had fallen in love with a Parisian. He was a strong-jawed worker, but by occupation, as May described, he was a poet.

Bird scanned away from May's wide, sympathetic eyes. His face stayed calm as the river's countenance and distant as the purple horizon. He held an expression as placid as the river's mere façade while, under the surface, all of this sudden information crashed like waves into him, as if he were a poor fish being helplessly rocked by the tides.

But he was a Bird. And as such, he turned his attention to the fish in the serene pond, unbeknownst to them that they would soon be killed and fried for the sake of the man's hunger. The two people continued to fish in silence and Bird did not talk to May for the duration of the evening.

The next day, he left May in Versailles.

He set off that morning in spring 2040. His heart was full of that which hearts oft forbid, his mind ablaze with rancor and disgust, only fueled by the decrepit state of the cities that once held riches and status brimming over like the bubbles of his finest champagne. Athens! Istanbul! Paris! London! His darling New York! All to shit. There seemed no place on Earth suited to his taste. Yet in willful disregard, his heart onward tugged like balloons, never balking at what they called their fate, and not knowing why, keep muttering ‘away!’ Away he went, his finite self awash on the infinite sea of the poor—lowest species in all the world—in search of those fluctuating and obscure delights, none of which ever had a name.

CHAPTER 8

INTERIM

Sir Bird lived for a month or two at a time on the various properties that belonged in the Bird Estate. It was a sort of getting to know his past, as it were, since he had of late lived exclusively in New York. The properties' upkeep was managed by crews of workers in their respective locations, paid in living arrangements and personal accommodations to the end that it allowed them to continue living so that they could manage the properties. Of course, the workers did not live on the Bird property itself; they had private quarters some distance from the main house. They, in effect, were a part of the estate and were passed down to Sir Bird after his father's death. Beside the sixty-seven private properties across the world, the Bird Estate included fifteen hundred personal workers.

These housekeepers were stock items to Bird, the likes of sheeple, ponys and cattle, who may or may not be integral to the function of a nation—that's a political argument—but who are nonetheless unfit to be acknowledged as such, whatever the case may be. He made a point to avoid contact with the help whenever he was in-house. His breakfast, lunch, and dinner may as well have materialized out of thin air right before his eyes as he sat at the dining table. Given, he was not as disgusted with these poor as he would be with other sheeple, only because, he thought, of the good nature of his father to groom and tend to his livestock. But he nevertheless reserved his social energies for his correspondences. Sir Bird let the help do their duties when he was in-house, and likewise, they appeared to avoid him as necessary.

During the beginning, Bird wrote letters with the reserve of a biographer, carefully choosing the most fitting topic for the time and constantly revising, as if the letters were going to be excavated hundreds of years later and complied as the culmination of the man's life. They were often short and extremely focused, like a transcribed excerpt from a phone call. On the jet from

Versailles to the British Isles upon his initial departure, he drafted a short message to Boyle, who was still in Mexico.

Boyle,

I hope your travels through the bowls of the Americas have been less brutish than I can only imagine here in Europe. I'm currently headed to the British Isles. Where specifically, I have not a clue. It's due to a complication that has arisen with May. She's in Paris at this time, and she may very well stay there. Old boy, I have a recurring feeling about it all—remember when I said nothing happens the way it was “supposed to?...”

Well, in any case, if you'd like to be indulged, you may ask, although I'd rather not, and I think you already understand anyway. You're the oil to your company's gears, my friend; continue to progress. Be safe in Mexico, and don't drink the tap water.

Bird

3 February 2041

Boyle responded promptly a week later with the habit of reserved responses that becomes gentlemanly correspondence.

Bird,

Your worry me. Please don't be brash in your actions. I've been telling you that, haven't I? It can only lead to accidents. I don't want to what to do, just like I didn't want to tell you whether to leave the company or not, but I want you to repair in your life what you think is broken.

Yes, I've also felt like what is supposed to happen somehow gets lost in the whirlwind of expectations. I'm feeling weary of this position and this company. I can't disclose certain things, not through letter, but I can tell you that I feel as though I've been disillusioned. Being in the company is

much...different than looking at it through my father's eyes. I May take a hiatus... I'll keep you updated.

J. Boyle

By the time Bird received Boyle's response, he had already attempted to make a new home for himself in the Isles. From Versailles, Sir Bird first moved to an estate in Baths, where this correspondence continued for about a month. However, despite the location's therapeutic reputation, the man soon became restless. From there, he travelled to homes in Italy, Spain, New Zealand, Turkey, and far beyond. And despite the great extent to which his wealth's presence reached within the world, all of Bird's estates, in the end, felt the same. His letters to Boyle described the same unplaceable emotion, whether he was burying his toes in the sand of his seaside palace in the Province of Ravenna, or walking the cobblestone roads in the Copenhagen country side. Hills of Tuscany offered no comfort; the man was filled with grief, from the dunes of Cappadocia, to the Great Barrier Reef. Thus he found himself cornered to his study for the most part of his stay in any given place, wherein he attempted to resume the life of leisure he had known in Versailles; the square room, the mahogany desk, the window behind it, the Persian rug, the moistness in the walls, were all the same in every home. There may well have been no consideration on Sir Bird's part of the beauty that existed out of doors and the varying landscapes he found himself in the midst of; he found himself consumed only with the inside space of his studies. And strangely, though they all resembled one another, no one study ever felt quite right.

It was late summer in 2052 and Sir Bird had been living in London, which had become a default for him whenever he could not figure out where to go. And so it was the case that much of his time was spent in London. Specifically, confined to the top floor of his Belgravia row house, where his desk was located. There he wrote Boyle for the second time within the week. His letters had been getting more frequent and eclectic, and his litter box was presently overflowing with crumpled drafts. Here, after he tore another bad draft up and tossed it, he started anew:

Boyle,

It is not merely an affect of obsessive nature that continuously drives me from place to place. I am overall unsatisfied. I try to live like I used to; I try to capture the same emotional content that I felt in Versailles. I smoke, drink, and write. That's what I do as that is what I've always done. But it doesn't satisfy any more. These estates are grand, but they don't provide the same pleasantries. What was it that made it so pleasant? What was different then, have I lost my youth? Or has the life of leisure grown stale? No—absolutely not...

Sir Bird went on like this over several bottles of cognac. Yet at the end of each melancholy soliloquy he tore the page away and discarded it, as if to brush the unanswered question away till it fluttered back. He started again:

...I feel my life becoming a cycle of perpetual solitude. I feel a void inside of me that cannot be filled with food or brandy as it used to... The abyss, I feel, approaches...

I'm reminded of my father everywhere I look. Memories of the old man permeate my study; they come out in the smell of mahogany from the desk or from the tobacco smoke. I never resented him, you know. He was all too absent, but I presumed it was so that he could provide a life of leisure for his son. For what other reason would he toil? I've been reading the old archeological journals. The domains of old humanity—*homohabilis* and *homoerectus*—struggled to survive and propagate; they had only bone tools and houses of wet clay and such things. For a long while they could not even straighten their backs. And yet through evolution they spawned a species of men who could build skyscrapers while seated at a desk, and who could connect with people across the world at the push of a button. Those

homohabilis and homoerectus, though stupid and poor, did not toil in vain. In the same way, Mortimer worked hard and the outcome was the illustrious Sir John Bird—a man born with wealth and leisure. He did not have to work for it. Isn't that, after all, what we were striving for all along? To have *it* without working for *it*? And what's "it"? It was once, say, a healthy immune system or the ability to process Calcium in the body. Today, it's a life of leisure. Occupiers and Sheeple envy it because they are still homohabilis. They're mad that they did not evolve like Sir Bird. True, not everybody gets the genetic material that separates the winners from the losers in the game of survival of the fittest. The game is based on chance; it was, admittedly, good fortune that put Sir Bird in his present condition. Nevertheless, the poor are wretched all the same. Those attached to the land will soon die off and only the birds of the world will remain...

Sir Bird then broke away from his train of thought as if it were not his own consciousness that was putting those words on the page. He looked down at them. They looked far away, as if he had been watching someone else write a letter about him. He tore the page off and threw it away.

At that time a certain pony named Mabel who did the laundry and linens walked by the open door. She drew Bird's attention from his writing and almost made him forget about his correspondence altogether. She had a habit of walking by his open door often. Bird had heard her walk by an hour prior. And she had been up there earlier in the morning. One day, when Bird stayed in his bed until seven o'clock in the evening, he saw her walk by his door eight times, as if to mock him. He began to see in her primordial sexual vigor, something he tried to deny his attraction toward; but she drew it out of him when she shook her hips when she walked by. He found himself masturbated often, almost as if he were completely unaware of it. And in the aftermath, as one balks at the greasy plate he's just cleared, Bird returned to his senses and felt immense self-disgust. He would

look down at his seed, soiled upon a bed sheet or floating manically around in the toilet. Then he would find a bit of satisfaction in both the afterglow and the knowledge that it was not at this very moment creating a new invaluable life.

After Mabel had passed, Sir Bird resumed trying to write; he continued as if he had been in the middle of talking about his brothers:

...father made the right choice to cut them out of the estate. Wald is making his private fortune anyway; Abel is not around to know that he has even been short-ended. But this is also natural, I think. Not all of the offspring get the coveted genetic material...

Come to think of it, there has to be offspring for there to even exist any possibility of continuing the species.... (I often attempt to put that concern aside whenever it pops up, but everywhere I go, it dawns on me like the inevitable sunset.)

Bird put his pen down and looked at the page. He nodded slightly as if he were convinced it was a good letter. Perhaps even the letter he would finally send to Boyle. And then he balled it up and threw it in the waste basket.

As Sir Bird moved from the eastern hemisphere back to the western wherein he took lodgings within two adjoining properties in Argentina, it seemed to him that the female housekeepers continued to mock him with their lure. They made no passes or acknowledgment of his domineering presence, yet they passively seemed to receive his lustful glances. He felt like there was a Mabel at every property, who possessed him with vicious animalistic desires through some kind of voodoo. He was now convinced that all nigger wenches had that power. They intoxicate and corrupt innocent, refined gentlemen who would have otherwise had a respectable wife and career. He often wondered to himself how his father handled these temptations.

One evening in his kitchen, Bird mused: 'There is no place in this base world for a man the caliber of myself. Evolution will eventually solve the problem, and do away with such low

temptation, but even I have needs. I suppose I can only do away with them by consuming them,' he thought, laughing at his own joke. Sometimes he killed himself. 'Yes, yes, eat the women,' he thought in tears. 'In the suggestive sense, first. Then, to kill the feeling of self-disgust I would ultimately feel, I shall eat them in the literal sense.' He laughed to himself out loud, drawing much attention from the maids as he descended into the wine cellar. After a while at the Argentine estate, this became an ordinary occurrence for the help.

Julian D'Urberville was living on an estate in Colombia where he had been exchanging video messages with Bird since Versailles. Being in the same continent now, the two men corresponded more often. Towards the end of Bird's stint in Argentina his messages became shorter and more exasperated. Bird could see that D'Urberville was becoming concerned with his friend. He had said in a recent message, "John, you look like you're being worn out." Indeed, the aging Bird was losing the sparkle in his eyes and the vibrancy in his hair. As Bird recorded his messages, he watched himself on the screen becoming a disgruntled old man. Such was his realization that he became all too aware of it, and became even more annoyed when D'Urberville brought it up. "Have you been living?" his friend would respond, "Have you been having fun? All these years in exotic places and you've never mentioned one young lady or being in beautiful nature? What has your life become?" D'Urberville's concern weighed on Bird, in effect producing the opposite effect intended. D'Urberville was annoying him, but Bird never expressed his true sentiments. He felt that D'Urberville had become a different person; estranged. Something was off about his personality. He talked much of the arts and a bohemian lifestyle. The effects of his open-mindedness became written upon his countenance, evident in his pupils which seemed to grow with each message. In his recordings, Bird would notice an easel in the background or paint in the man's fingernails, as if he were becoming an artist. And although this concerned him, Bird continued exchanging messages, as if he were trying to further asses if there was any bit of decency left in the man.

The last message Bird sent to D'Urberville was a short one:

Something new...something new...let me out this wretched guise.

[call ended. 00.00.05min. 11:56pm. 7-30-64]

D'Urberville's response came back promptly. In the recording, he was dressed in a silk robe; it was dark in what seemed to be his loft:

John, come to Bogota. I think you need a change of place and a new lease on life. I have a safe place here. The only kind of wretched scum you'll come across are those with accounts like ours. And your run-of-the-mill sluts. The girls are gorgeous; the food's exquisite. You won't be in harm; Noel and I have been working with the cartels. Weapons, et cetera, so they won't interfere with good business. Come. It's been decades old friend. (sniffle).

[call ended. 00.00.46min. 2:24am. 7-31-64]

Did Bird really appear so distraught to his friend? Had he almost brought his friend to tears—of what source was that constant sniffing?

Bird got up from his computer desk after seeing the message when he awoke the next morning, and walked over to look in the mirror at himself. He thought his reflection might lend some hints—maybe there was something in it that his friends noticed, but that managed to elude his own scrutiny. But it was the same stud he saw in the Harvard townhouse mirrors. Some wrinkles had managed to corrode the edges of his lips and eyes; there are always some wrinkles the cream doesn't get. His hair, though, was combed back jet black, just like that young stud. His blue eyes shimmered with ripples like the reaction of a pond from which a duck had just departed. He was the same Bird. Only should he fall to the depths of such lunacy that he ripped his perfect hair out, gouged out his eyes, and lacerated himself, would he stop being a man of status. Not even fucking a poor nigger

wench would take away his status, he mused. What was he so worried about? So he decided one more trip couldn't hurt.

When he left, he packed nothing. He said nothing. He left the help to toil his ground in his absence as they had done before. Sad creatures.

* * *

"We can have a *lomo al trapo*. It's just beef tenderloin, but it's very good," D'Urberville said lying back on his sofa, contemplating what to eat for dinner. He seemed aloof. The position of his silk robe was almost scandalous, but it had been made clear that scandal had no muscle in Bogota. Even the embroidered-gold box of *cocaina pura* on his ottoman would have attracted a virgin's blush more quickly than the manner of his dress. That is, of course, if there remained any virgins in the city.

"That sounds boring," said Bird.

D'Urberville jolted his head toward Bird. "You've never even tried it." He swung his feet to the floor and straightened himself upon the edge of his seat, cracking his neck in a violent way.

"And yet I find it bland. I taste it's mediocrity from here," he said.

"You are a sad sack," D'Urberville said. He picked up the gold box and offered it to Bird.

Bird shooed it. "No, no. I would never."

D'Urberville shrugged and dropped the box back to the ottoman, knocking out some of the white power. He brushed it off onto the rug and laughed. "Did you see what I just did?" he smiled. "There's probably fifty grand worth of coke in this carpet." He looked around. "Plus the carpet itself is sixth century Persian. I could sell this room alone for twenty million dollars."

His joke did not elicit any type of joy on his friend's face.

"Well, what are you going to do, huh," D'Urberville said laying back down. "You're in a sad state, I've noticed. You can't seem to find joy in anything." He sighed waiting for a response. "You can do what I do and enjoy the finer things in life. Move somewhere exotic. Stay put for a while and drink in the beauty of life. Me, I love it here. The women, like I said. The food. The

business is great. And all of the coke I want. I could die here. I probably will."

"So you're happy," said Bird.

"Fuck yeah."

He crossed his legs and removed his glasses, polishing them on his jacket. "Well I, however, am dissatisfied."

"With what?"

"With everything."

"John, you can't just condemn everything. There has to be some specific thing you're dissatisfied with."

"No. It's everything. What I eat, what I drink, where I live... It's all old and boring. I know there's something else. Something new. But I traveled the entire world and found the same old shit. And you, you're basically in the same place as me. You could die. I could die now; why not? Release me from this boring decadence."

"You sound like a true poet." D'Urberville said facetiously.

Bird rolled his eyes. And then he began in a more sedative tone: "I feel that the last frontier is death. That's the last experience—" he cut himself off, assuming that natural look one wears when aching to say more.

D'Urberville gazed at his box, sniffing.

"We should eat somebody. A whore. Anyone."

D'Urberville then looked up at him with solemn eyes wider than any drug could induce.

Bird steadied his focus on cleaning his lenses. "It doesn't have to be *our* death. Not yet."

D'Urberville turned his gaze to the ceiling. He swung his feet back around and sat on the edge of the sofa. He took a breath deep into his lungs and started slowly: "I think you're losing it... I can't say I've ever come to that conclusion about anything. Not even the slightest thought of suicide..." He stopped.

"You're just content. You need to live—and I don't mean in this filth-hole. There are still so many tastes to explore. Tastes so rare that they're vilified. You can... We can. We can do anything. We're rich."

"John. Who have you become? Being rich doesn't mean being fucking crazy. We're not eccentrics. Millionaires are

eccentrics. You don't just go around murdering. And I would think it's funny, but I know you're serious. You're losing it. I could see it in your messages. You left May, for God's sake! And walked around the globe alone, because you could. You left a beautiful girl."

Bird was silent.

"You know she's come here a few times. And that husband of hers—"

Sir Bird uncrossed his legs.

"—He's nothing like you, and yet they're perfect together. He has culture. He's come here and we've written poetry together. He's painted me. He's human. And what do you do? You come here and ask me to murder, because you're bored." D'Urberville swayed, then flopped back in his sofa with his arms out. "I'm sorry to be judgmental, old friend. It's the coke speaking."

D'Urberville lay for about half an hour more in that ridiculous position under some sort of psychosis. In the meantime Sir Bird quietly left the man's home careful not to disturb him. He walked from the mansion, out the gates and down the dusty hill past shacks with tin doors and plucked, hanged chickens strung from wooden awnings. This was the fate of his friend. To be reduced to drugs and the arts. This was the result of forgetting when you come from. You end up anywhere.

D'Urberville realized, after he had come too, that he was alone in the room. He was in a cold sweat and shiver rippled through his body. He had a feeling that someone had been there, but all he could remember was doing his third line the day prior. It was a strange feeling, as if some winged thing had come into his study and blown his papers around with the gust of its wings. He resolved that the coke must be taking a toll on him. He seemed to be hearing things. That rapping in the downstairs hall. "Tis some visitor," he muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—only this and nothing more..."

* * *

Bogota was now behind him, but the dust from its street lingered on Sir Bird's person as he waded through tall grass in the

outskirts of the city. At last he reached a vacant, yellow-grassed clearing. The sun was weighing down on him now, unobstructed by clouds or the shade of grass or trees. He stopped in the midst of the clearing and called in a pilot. There was but one place Bird had the desire to go. Only one man could restore his hope or any sense of himself. After he gave the pilot his location and hung up, he called Boyle to make his visit known. The plane wouldn't take more than ten minutes to arrive.

"Hello," Boyle's voice came in over the watch.

"Boyle, old boy, it's Bird."

"Hello! It's been ages. Where have you been all this time? How have you been?"

"You'll soon be indulged, fellow, I need your coordinates; I'm flying out to you."

"Wow, well, this is certainly a surprise. Why, might I ask?"

"I've got a proposition for you. Is it a problem, buddy?"

"No, no, no, not at all. I'm still living off the coast of California, an island about 90 miles from the coast near the Bay Ruins. I'm sorry; I don't know the exact flight coordinates."

"No problem, we'll figure. I hope this is okay, I just want to see you."

"No, no problem at all."

"Good to hear it, old buddy. I'll see you in thirty minutes."

Sir Bird hung up as he heard the roaring of the jet engine sound over the horizon.

The island was only about twenty thousand square acres wide. There were five grand estates on it, Boyle living in the northernmost mansion by the beach. The other four were never or very rarely occupied, although they were completely furnished. This largely unknown plot of land was developed shortly after it broke off of the coast of California in 2027. The Boyles and the Birds put up equal capital for the estates to be built. Graham Boyle used the northernmost mansion as a summer home from time to time; but Mort Bird rented his share out year-round. It was too close to Cattle culture for him.

Sir Bird landed in a grassy clearing around midday during a sweltering August heat. Stepping out of the jet, his dirty, crusted

shirt sticking to his back and his jacket sleeves feeling two sizes too tight, he saw his old friend's homely three-pieced figure making his way toward him. Boyle stopped just outside of the grass-circle the jet had made. Bird walked tenderly, feeling his heart rate rise with each step. At only twenty feet's distance Boyle said with a grin, "You look like shit."

Bird shown his yellowing teeth and gave Boyle a warm handshake.

"Let's get you out of that suit," Boyle said.

"And then we talk some business."

A pony brought the two men champagne on Boyle's veranda. The view of the ocean was bland and white with froth. The sound of gently crashing waves soon became the sound of silence. Sir Bird rubbed his palm on the crisp silk pants and fingered the crease along his knee as he watched the pony retreat back into the house.

"Can you believe they're only ninety miles away?" said Boyle.

Bird sipped half the contents from his glass. "Who?"

"Culture. Everyone."

Bird squinted his eyes across the short beach. "It's not far enough." He saw Boyle's studious gaze out of the corner of his eye.

Boyle looked out again. "Maybe," he said. "I've just been thinking about how close we really are. I've been here for five, six years. No one has bothered me. I don't really see anyone like I did living on the mainland. When I was in Colorado, there was always talk of Occupiers just out of arms reach. Sheeple all around. Now, it's like, I'm still the same distance from all of them as I would be on land; it's still just a boat ride away. I could be in a bar with sheeple in ten minutes. And yet they have no idea that I'm right here. We're more akin than we think."

Bird finished his glass. "It's pretty sad that we—you and me—are still so close to them."

Boyle chuckled up a dry laugh. "John, I would have thought you'd be feeling the same way as me after all these years in," he thought, "exile."

"No. No, exile was a blessing."

"I don't feel that way anymore."

Bird shook his head as if to a voice in his mind.

“Sometimes I want to be in a bar with sheeple and cattle. Regular people. I want to be near their souls, I guess you could say. I guess I want to be with, I suppose you’d call them, my fellow men. At least with the time I have left.”

“You can’t,” said Bird.

Boyle gave another dry laugh and a sip. “And why is that?”

“They’re not your fellow men.” Bird turned his body fully toward Boyle. He put his elbows up and leaned in. “It’s simple. I’ve realized—we’re better. You and me. The old Harvard crew. We’re just plain better than the poor. It’s like we’re not even the same species.” Boyle kept his eyes fixed on Bird. “I mean, look at us, and look at them. They struggle towards no end except to die. They work and work and for what? Cattle—they farm and sweat in the sun, and all it’s for is to send their work off to our corporations in exchange for a little piece of change. And they’re not even satisfied with that. They want higher pensions, higher wages, better social security. They go begging to the government and then the government comes begging to us. They’re like dogs. They’re base. Now look at you. And me, here. Look at how we live.” Bird gazed around at the setting. “It’s all so effortless. It’s like somewhere along the way our species split in evolution, like the monkeys who evolved into homosapiens and the monkeys who stayed as monkeys. Sheeple and Occupies—all the poor, even the socialites of old New York—are all monkeys and we’re the next level in human evolution. Wealth and genetics are one in the same, it seems. We were born this way, as a better species. We carry this kind of status-genus that we got from our fathers and our fathers got it from their fathers. Sure, a straight-headed man can become rich with hard work, but true wealth—the stuff of leisure—runs in the family, like light blue eyes. Sheeple will never be like us.”

Boyle lowered his eyes. “I hear you. I know it’s true. I can’t help but know. But sometimes I have moments of empathy. I see them so angry. They’ve been so angry for so long. It makes me feel like I’m doing wrong.”

“Sure,” said Bird. “I feel empathy when I see a mangled dog. But that doesn’t mean I lie down with him. Maybe you’re

right. Let's just say you're right, and we are doing wrong for being wealthy, for being men of status. What are we going to do about it? Huh? Give all of our wealth away? Just give away everything our fathers have worked for? Does that make sense? Does it make sense for the homosapien to tear his own brain out because he's sad for the little homoerectus who can't think like him? You could say it's kind of extreme to disdain Sheeple because they're poor. But really, Boyle, that's all there is to it. They were born into bad genes. Should I pick the homoerectus over the homosapien because the former is pitiful? No. And really, Boyle, it's just like that. We're the next stage in human development. A new family, a new genus, so why should I pity or toil with an inferior species? They're homoerectus and we're homosapien. They're the mackerel and we're the birds of the world."

Boyle took a deep sigh, and then laughed like he was brushing off an insult. "I don't know about you Bird. You have it too figured out." He pushed a smile out of the corner of his lips. "I can't say you're wrong but I can't say your right."

"I've always been a trendsetter," Bird grinned.

"True. But you may be losing it."

Bird laughed heartily, like he did when he watched *How I Met Your Mother* back in the dorms. "All the trendsetters were a little bit crazy. Darwin, Van Gogh. There are some others. That Nietzsche fellow."

Boyle downed the last of his champagne. "Well, crazy or not, I'm glad you're here. It's good to see old friends."

"Yes, it sure is. I just saw Julian. He's going a little crazy too, but it was good to see him, anyway. We should all get together again. The old Harvard crew. I think it'll put things into perspective for you to be with people who are the same as yourself. We should have a big dinner like we used to. We should have the most outrageous dinner party we've ever had."

Boyle opened his mouth then stopped like the enormity of his words couldn't fit through his teeth. "Yeah," he finally got out. He had a look of epiphany on his face. "Yeah."

"Huge," said Boyle. "With the best entrees you or I have ever seen. It has to be something completely new and amazing. It could be the last great party."

Boyle laughed, "But what have we not tried yet?"

Bird laughed and reclined in his chair. He took in the salty air and something about the gently crashing waves brought them out of their monotony. "Do you have a cigarette?" he asked.

Boyle rolled his eyes upward in thought, and then patted his shirt pockets. He pulled out a case containing D'Urberville's special blend and handed one to his friend. He reached into his pant-pocket pulling out a gold lighter and pushed it across the table. Bird flicked the flint and let the flame linger on the fresh tobacco. He inhaled and puffed.

"You've been so inviting," Bird said. "This is how friends should treat each other. My father always said, 'the comfort of your guests is paramount.'"

"Well, that's what friends do," said Boyle.

"You know, I would like to return the favor. I know my father had renovated some of the houses on this island. I'd like to host the party. I'll shack up in one of the old mansions and have the help cook the greatest meal we'll ever have."

Boyle rubbed his chin. "Hmm, that would be nice. You used to throw the nicest functions back in college."

"Yes, I'll need some time, of course, to get settled in here and to get acquainted with the help."

"Of course."

"But around, hmm, early October, we should sit down and send word to all of the old buddies. It'll be really nice, I think."

"Yes, yes, definitely. Are you going to invite May, also?"

"Oh, of course. We have history. It'll be well to see her again."

Boyle chuckled to himself under his breath.

"What?" asked Bird.

"I don't know, John. It's good that you don't hold any grudges against her."

"Oh, of course not. And that lovely husband of hers is more that welcome. I'm sure he has that savory personality I hear about."

"Yes, he's nice."

Bird puffed some more in thought. "This party should be several days long. With many, many different entrees and *hors*

d'oeuvres. And our guests can stay in the other mansions. It's perfect."

"You know, John, with all your talk about continuing this new species, I'm surprised you didn't come here with a pretty woman and a kid. I mean, if you invite May, I hope you aren't thinking about making any moves."

"No," Bird laughed, "That period is over. She's a friend; and this is the time for old friends," he smiled. "And anyway, if I were going to make any move, it would be on that husband of hers—what's his name again?—Pierre! I've heard he's quite the specimen."

The two friends laughed. "Quite," said Boyle.

"I have time, you know, to secure an heir and everything. But right now, I don't think is the time."

"Sure," said Boyle, as the waves began to subside.

The two old buddies sat on the veranda for some time afterward telling old stories. They parted ways early in the morning. Boyle went to bed and Bird took one of the cars back to his father's old house. He called in some of his things from various estates and began making the place homely. He got aquatinted with the help here significantly more so than at his other properties. His conversation with Boyle that first day got him thinking more and more about the disparities between him and the very people that worked for him. Every couple of days, the friends would exchange verandas on which they'd sit, smoke and talk. They'd talk about clothes, women, and champagne; and about old college secrets like Jocelyn Reed.

"You fucked Jocelyn?" Bird screamed one night in drunken hysterics. The two men were almost rolling on the flood of Bird's study.

"You have no idea," Boyle said between yelps of laughter. "I saw her almost every day since I had Bio and Chem with her. I must have sized her up a million times. She had the best tits, oh man."

They laughed into the salty night through the open window. Boyle was doubled-over, probably from a mixture of the story and the drunkenness. Such was his present temperament that he did not notice his friend's distraction. A male pony walked by the open door and caught Bird's attention. They made brief eye

contact before the pony was out of sight and Boyle began talking again.

Drawing back to the conversation, Bird resumed laughing, for he thought it was funny how Boyle always sized up girls before he fucked them. I always just took what I wanted, Bird thought. He, Boyle, Donahue and the rest of the guys used to go to the parties in May's townhouse and Bird would be the one to pull three, four girls a night—all under May's nose. Sometimes, the crew would go to the Brooks Brother's that was just two blocks from the compound (police were so prominent in Cambridge that Occupiers and other troublemakers were scarce). At the Brooks Brother's, Boyle was usually the one to size up a three-piece suit for twenty to thirty minutes, and then not even decide he wanted it, while Bird pulled ties and button-downs from the shelves after glancing at them for a split second. They would go to that particular department store weekend after weekend and Boyle would still be deciding on the same suit. He was always like that. Bird used to sneer at how people would look at a coat three times before they'd buy it, yet he was now starting to develop that same kind of reserve, a kind of hesitation before making any kind of decision. You might look at a girl three times before you fuck her, like Jocelyn Reed; yet as he continued to live in the house, Sir Bird was finding himself more concerned with these same types of questions. With the same youthful lust that consumed Boyle in biology class, Sir Bird continued to watch the help as they toiled for the most part unsuspectingly from day to day.

CHAPTER 9

THE AUTUMN OF THE BOURGEOISIE

The Petermans had not introduced themselves as the managers of the housekeeping staff, but it nevertheless danced across Sir Bird's mind that there was something peculiar about these ponies. As September began, he noticed that they were the ones who directed the few other ponies that worked around the southern properties. Those other workers were rarely seen, while the Petermans appeared to be the only ones constantly occupied with tending to all of the property maintenance. The male, John Peterman, was a light-skinned pony, tall and lanky and who had a strange air of distinguish. That, and the striking similarity of the help's first name to his own almost unleashed Sir Bird's disdain, but he knew that his father must have had some good reason for hiring the man. And of course, it would have been unwise to bite the hand that feeds him; so Sir Bird swallowed his pride for the time being, or at least put it under his tongue.

Wendy Peterman was a dark-skinned pony. She did much of the cooking, washing and cleaning while her husband tended to the garden, the livestock, and did most of the heavy-lifting. It was a funny thing to watch: livestock tending livestock.

The ponies went about their routine as if the house were still empty as August passed timidly into September. Over this time, Sir Bird became restless confined to his study with all of those old magazines. All of those archeological reports of homosapiens and homoerectus became shadows of the present set of specimen in the house. He observed them from the crevices of every corner that they passed, and the ponies soon began to get the feeling they were under constant scrutiny. Bird appeared to be an observant introvert when he was not scolding them, almost to the point of voyeurism, and this caused concern within the nigger wench.

She found her husband one day repositioning one of the grand pianos in the great hall. She approached him, weary that her master might be somewhere near, and spoke quietly: "What are you doing, baby?"

Peterman paused what he was doing and wiped the sweat from his brow. "The man has asked me once again to move this piano into a different corner of the room. He's concerned with the *feng shui*, he says."

She handed her husband a glass of water and kissed him. He drank it aggressively, as if it were the secret to completing the rest of the day's tasks, and then handed it back to his wife. She then spoke again, looking about her: "He is peculiar, that man. He's nothing like his father."

"He's of a different time. All those heirs, I've noticed, lack that focusedness that I found admirable in their fathers. Even Sir Boyle, though I admire him more. But what are you gonna do about it? He's the boss now."

"I suppose," she said, "but he still should not be looking on me the way he does. I can see sin in his glances."

Peterman put his hand on his hip. "He seems lonely. He's approaching fifty and has no wife." He thought for a moment, and then turned to her. "If you feel so threatened—"

"No, no," she interrupted. "Not threatened per say." She looked around again.

"Well nonetheless, try to stay in my sight," he said, and kissed her, then turned back to his task with the grand piano. The wench stood there while he worked, smiling at her husband's ethic. She fiddled with the empty glass as she began to leave the room, walking down the adjacent hall still enamored with the simple glass in her hand, when she clumsily met an obstacle.

"Oops, I'm sorry," said Sir Bird as he placed his hands on her hips to brace her from falling. "You must watch where you're going, wench," he said, and then passed her by. The wench was still so startled that Sir Bird appeared to come out of nowhere that she stayed where she was before she was sure that the only sounds she heard were the rolling of the piano's wheels on the marble floor.

Since the Petermans were the most active members of the help within the house, it was in early September that Sir Bird decided to call them into the kitchen for a meeting. He stepped out on the veranda where he found the wench lollygagging, looking out into the back yard where, hopefully, her husband was out doing some work.

Sir Bird searched for the words he needed. Since he had met them he had never actually called on them by their names and he was now considering whether they were called the Petermans or the Petermen. As he pondered this, he watched the wench as she stood there smoking with her elbows on the rail; she hadn't noticed his presence yet. Her hips shifted position in her cotton dress as if she were anxious about something. Under the coarse white fabric, he was sure there was a smooth bottom like a polished ebony figurine. He watched her for some time, and decided that what they were called was inconsequential.

"Peterman," he said.

The wench, with a startle, jolted around, stomping out her cigarette. "Yes, Sir Bird."

"Where's that husband of yours."

Fidgeting her little hands and looking back out over the field she said, "Over yonder. Plucking chickens."

"Get him and come inside. We have plans to...plan." He lingered on her a little longer. Her eyes were as brown as the lids surrounding them. He began scanning down her nose to her soft lips before he interrupted himself. "Well!"

The wench, an easily startled creature it seemed, hopped up and scurried off into the field in search of her husband.

The ponies assembled promptly and came into the kitchen where Sir Bird waited. The wench and Peterman stood swaying back and forth, jolting their eyes around like outcasts at a high society party. Peterman was as tall as Sir Bird and could look him in the eye if he kept his pupils still. But he, like his wife, appeared to be a nervous fellow. "You can sit," said Bird. The two ponies obediently sat down on the barstools around the kitchen island. Sir Bird began to speak, but then, with a close of his mouth and a reposition of his stance, changed his discursive direction. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

The ponies looked at each other, exchanging silent comments about the strange man. Peterman spoke up: "What do you mean by that?"

"I *mean*, how long have you been working on this island? Where are you from?"

Peterman shot his wife another perplexed look. "Well, sir, I was born in Trinidad. But your father brought me to America to work under another woman on one of his estates. I mean, supposedly, I've always worked for him. I was born, like I said, in the Caribbean, on his sugar plantation. But in the states I worked on his properties and then I came to this island when he was building this here estate. And my wife here came here later, also as a worker. She was getting out of Louisiana due to all them Niggerati. We fell in love on this island."

"You don't know what family you come from?" Bird interrupted.

"Not particularly. It definitely wasn't a Trinidad family. I'm sure too light," he laughed. "I don't have their features. According to my boss—your dear father—it never really concerned me."

Sir Bird scratched his neck. "I was just wondering. Not that it's any concern of yours. You people just strike me as strange."

Peterman was unsure if he should feel offended or otherwise, and did not know where to focus his eyes.

"Anyway," said Bird, "You will both be very busy for the next month. I will be having a gathering, a party, here in early October. Over the next three weeks, I'll be giving you a list of tasks to complete at the beginning of the day. I hope it's in your capacity to follow orders." He paused. "I actually thought there was more to say. But I suppose that's about it for now. Report to me tomorrow morning at seven and every day after that. You're dismissed."

Still lost in bewilderment, the Petermans awkwardly got up and left; Bird watched them walk out, the male's bulging muscles shifting through the back of his shirt and the female's curves dancing in their cotton dress. Then they were out of sight. The private man continued to lean against the counter, looking at his shoes. Those five disconnected seconds he watched them

leaving, he mused, were quite possibly more informative than the preceding conversation.

Throughout September, the Petermans were loaded with tasks that often rolled over onto the list for the next day. Still, save the ten or fifteen minutes Bird saw them every morning, they were mostly out of his way. During one of his brunches, he said to Boyle, "These are a rare breed of ponies. They work without complaint and take anything that's thrown at them with doo-diligence. I guess father sure knew how to pick 'em."

During these middle-month days, the two private men began preparing recorded video messages to send to the party members as invitations. Noon of October the fifth was the set date on which folks were scheduled to arrive. By September 18th, the list was finalized: a positive RSVP from Noel Gallagher, James Donahue, Bernie Arnold, Vishnu Mittel, Duke Wall, Julian D'Urberville, of course, May Broom, and not to mention the most anticipated guest of them all, Pierre...Something.

As the days grew shorter, the help came to their daily meetings with Sir Bird with less and less enthusiasm (if indeed that was the right word for it in the first place). The male's posture was crippling, and the female's eyes were looking dull and dry. Their reverence had diminished, and Bird couldn't decide if that was tragic or reassuring.

On the first of October, Sir Bird walked into the kitchen to see the two pitiful ponies crouched over at his table.

"You're looking weak," he said. "What's the matter?" The tone in his voice could not have been mistaken for sympathy.

"Nothing, sir," said Peterman. "It's just getting to be a bit much. It's a good thing the event is just some days away. Then we can rest, assuredly." He gave a smile.

Sir Bird was taken aback. He walked slowly over to the pony with a grave seriousness that turned Peterman's content face into one resembling that of a neglected pup. He leaned down but three inches from the pony's nose and spoke with a tone that would have turned running water to ice: "What did you just say?" he said. "Are you telling me that once my guests arrive, you are going to stop working? Who do you think you are?"

Peterman started trembling.

“You will work as long as I tell you to, as hard as I say you need to. And I thought you ponies were a strong type.” Bird then whipped a piece of paper out of his back pocket and tossed it on the table in front of the wench. He backed off slowly and left the room with the two frightened ponies still sitting at the island.

“Sometimes you have to be stern,” Bird said to Boyle over lunch later that day. “Ponies or not, the poor have to be gripped like a horse. You give them a little slack—you be nice one day—and they’ll run with it a mile.”

Boyle stuffed his mouth with pasta.

“And then, when they’re not useful anymore alive, you cut your losses.”

“What?” Boyle spat.

“Huh?” Bird said in a daze.

“Oh,” said Boyle, brushing off what he thought he had heard as he continued to load up his fork. Boyle had become aware of moments like these, Sir Bird’s stints of introspective psychosis, wherein he would speak ecstatically and laugh to himself almost as if he thought that no one could hear him. Boyle didn’t know exactly what to make of this and more often than not he dismissed it.

October the second, third and fourth, it was clear that things were falling behind schedule, and Sir Bird began to drink when he was alone and smoke more often. Boyle had become preoccupied with managing the housekeeping staff of the other mansions in preparation for the forthcoming guests and was almost completely out of Bird’s reach. The ponies began to arrive later and later to their morning meetings, until a point on the fifth of October when they did not come in to meet at all. On this day the first of the guests, James Donahue, was due to touch down at noon. Sir Bird was overdue to finalize the menu for the next five days. Neither the wench nor her husband had arrived by 7:30, the wench’s absence being a more imposing matter since she would be doing the cooking. Sir Bird paced the kitchen floor feeling his chest heat up as the cognac bottle on the table diminished at a similar rate. At 7:55, he called Boyle:

“Boyle?”

“What is it, Bird? Make it quick.”

“Dinner preparations need to be made and the help is not here. Someone needs to be whipped into shape, so don’t be alarmed if I don’t make it to see Donahue and the others as they arrive.”

A pause on the other end indicated some nervous hesitation. “Ok, Bird. Just be courteous, you know. Keep your priorities straight.”

“Of course, Boyle; the comfort of our guests is paramount.” Bird hung up and left the kitchen, out the back door, towards the ponies’ cabin which was far down the estate.

He walked deliberately down the field. In his haste, all of the thoughts he had mused and all of the scenarios he had considered during the past several years on his own all flooded his mind at once in a frenzy. His cold stare lifted and he began to grin with anticipation. The anticipation of what, exactly, what something he did not admit to himself; but he knew in his stern heart-of-hearts that he was finally going to prove to himself, to the ponies, and to his guests that he was a man of the most exotic tastes. He laughed out loud as the cabin came into sight. Quickly, he concealed his excitement as he came upon the door. The leaves on the trees surrounding the cabin had turned to oranges, yellows and reds; fall was here.

Bird kicked the ponies’ wooden cabin door wide open and it slammed against the back wall, causing the entire house to quiver. He strode across the threshold to see a sight that reassured him more than it angered him: the male was lying on the bed with his eyes struggling to stay open; the wench was rocking back and forth in a chair beside the bed like an old bitch. Upon spinning her head around at the sound of the slam and seeing her master standing in the doorway, she shot up and took a timid step towards Sir Bird.

“Sir,” she said, “I couldn’t—we couldn’t come in today. My husband seems to have broken his back wrestling with the pigs. He was working, you see, trying to prep them for slaughter and they got rowdy and he slipped and messed up his back. I found him lying in the pen yesterday; I had to carry him back here. I didn’t know what was going to happen so I had to watch over him. He hasn’t been walking or talking. He was working

diligently just yesterday and now he's had a terrible injury. But the rest of the crew is preparing, sir—"

"Shut up." Sir Bird stepped toward the wench and looked at the male on the bed. He had heard of Niggers losing their strength; at that point they were of no use, like an old horse. "Get up," he screamed at the petrified body; Peterman's face was as unresponsive as the surface of a shallow pond, his despondent gaze as lifeless the disinterested reflections of the water beneath. "You can't get up?" he screamed again. Peterman said nothing and did not stir. Sir Bird rubbed his hands over his face in apparent anguish and inhaled the dry wooden air of the claustrophobic cabin. "We have work to do," he said. The wench, like a soaked rag-doll, flopped down onto the bed.

"We just need a break," she said almost in audibly. "We haven't had a day of rest in a month."

Bird turned his attention to her. He squatted down so that he could see the wench at eye level. "No," he said calmly, "I need a break. I have no one here to comfort me as you do, and I have been busy since I've arrived in this house, and you all are now taking valuable time from me." He straightened himself back up and looked over at the man in the bed. "It's long overdue, Nigger, that I now take something of value from you." Sir Bird then grabbed the wench by the neck and pushed her into the center of the bed. She squealed, "John," but the word got closed up in her esophagus. Bird climbed over Peterman's still body, kneeling his stomach and groin, and snatched the wench's weak cotton dress off, revealing the dark, milk-smooth mounds that they had been concealing. Petrified, the wench stared at the ceiling as if it were the lid to her coffin, unable to make any more cries of distress, while Sir Bird recklessly opened his pants and thrust his half-hard cock into her reluctant cunt. He grabbed her breasts, soft as pig fat, and pinched her chocolate chip nipples. He took her motionless lips in his and shoved his tongue down her neck. He rode her as if he was the bull in a mechanical bull ride, smirking at her blank expression, now devoid of any indication of consciousness. He looked over at John Peterman whose paralyzed countenance had not changed, and through each of his brute thrusts and the pig-like squeals of the nigger wench, he saw a single tear roll out of his eye.

He finished inside of her and then regained his composure, taking shallow breaths as he stood up again and fastened his pants as he made his way toward the door. He stopping at the entrance and turning around to the sprawled, naked woman who was still lost in complete disbelief. "Be in the kitchen in half an hour," he said calmly. "Or this will not be the thing that you most regret today." He then left, leaving the door wide open.

The wench returned to the mansion in an emotional state that hung heavy above her like storm clouds, but that were too far up for her to grasp. She began working out of a mechanical habit, but she was not completely conscious of her movements. Following the orders on Sir Bird's list with stoic countenance, she maneuvered the unrelenting kitchen. The master of the house did not appear to be in when she arrived and he remained absent all morning.

Sir Bird returned around noon. The wench was washing dishes, waiting for something to boil. She heard the back door open but she didn't stir, keeping her attention focused on the sudsy, steaming sink of water in front of her until a raw fleshy smell grabbed her attention and she was forced to look up at the source: Sir Bird standing in the doorway holding a burlap sack of freshly skinned meat. The wench hurriedly turned her focus back to the dish that she was washing. Sir Bird walked over to the island table and plopped the meat down. "Cook this for dinner this evening," he said. "You may not go back home tonight; you must finish cooking. You have the list." He then walked out of the room and the wench went back to scrubbing the grease out of an iron skillet. Her eyes were so focused on her task and her hands were working so fast that it looked as if she weren't going to stop until the black iron itself had been rubbed from the skillet. Her back towards him, Sir Bird eyed the wench with a contemptuous and sympathetic squint. Then he left the kitchen to go meet the arrivals.

By this time the entire party had arrived and settled into Boyle's living room in wait of the host. Pierre was sitting on the couch with his right hand on May's knee. Donahue, Duke Wall, and Noel Gallagher were conversing by the globe mini bar. Mittel and Arnold were sitting in adjacent chairs to one side of the room,

talking to a standing Boyle; and D'Urberville, judging from the way his back was turned to the others and his hands folded together behind him, was contemplating the plunge into the deep purple sunset as he gazed out the window at it.

Not pronouncing his arrival—for he didn't need to—Sir Bird walked into the room and over to the couple on the couch. He stretched his arm out and said, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Pierre."

Pierre rose with a pretty smile stretched between his sharp cheekbones. "Same," he said shaking hands. May rose after him; she and Bird hugged at the collar and exchanged kisses on the cheek.

"Wonderful to see you beautiful people here together. I already know it will be a fine week," Bird said to them. He addressed Pierre specifically: "I look forward to enjoying you." Sir Bird then left them be and went to where Boyle stood. "Mittel, Bernie," he said shaking their hands. "Welcome."

"Everything in order, old boy?" Boyle asked.

"Sure, sure. There's a breathtaking meal in the works by the lovely cook, Mrs. Peterman."

"She is wonderful, isn't she? I've had the pleasure of enjoying her pot roasted boar many a-time."

"Ah, tonight she's cooking something none of us will forget. A first meal to rule them all," Bird said; he turned to Mittel and Arnold: "It's to die for."

Sir Bird left Boyle's group and moved throughout the crowd catching up with friends. They toasted over and over and became sufficiently tipsy before they all migrated to Sir Bird's mansion, where they gathered in the foyer before heading to the grand dining hall.

As dinner progressed, the wench sat in the kitchen having not eaten or gone home for the entire day. Merry laughter and booming voices seeped in from the dining room as the party entered its third hour. The wench looked at the clock and rubbed her belly as the groaning of something sinful echoed from it. It was eight in the evening and all of the entrees had been served, the last being Sir Bird's dish. Several cuts of the meat he'd prepped sat marinating on the stove top, only two feet from where the wench rocked back and forth on her chair enduring the laughter of

the company in the next room. She heard traces of “Oh, John, this is delicious. What is this?” and “Oh, I’ll never tell. My own personal recipe,” and more laughs. She heard, but disregarded all of it as she simply rocked back and forth rubbing her empty belly. She later decided, after refilling his glass seven times, that Sir Bird was inebriated enough for her to have her own evening meal. She helped herself to the savory bread pudding, a shrimp casserole, turkey with gravy, lima beans, and the meat that Sir Bird had brought back. She started with the bread pudding because she knew it was her specialty. She played with the sour notes and the creaminess contrasted with the savory pork. She tasted the thyme, fresh from the garden. She added some of the turkey to her palate. It was moist, cooked paper bag-style like her aunts had taught her decades ago. She ate a bit of the shrimp casserole and lima beans. The shrimp was all right. Lima beans a little under-cooked, but that could easily be fixed for the next day’s meal. She moved from the lima beans to eyeing the glazed, smoking cut of meat on her plate. It was garnished beautifully, with rosemary and savory and sea salt. She inhaled the aroma, notes of honey. It was almost intoxicating. She whiffed the sweet scent into her nose and her eyes lowered in ecstasy. She started to drool and her body trembled like her center had turned to ice. She finally cradled the juicy tenderness between her lips. The meat was like a moist, seasoned narcotic, warming the icy feeling in her body and sending tingles of gravy goodness all throughout her. She shut her eyes and shuddered as if she was having an orgasm; she couldn’t control her movements or groans of enjoyment. As the bite finally hit her stomach, she felt reverberating flavors echo behind her closed, chewing lips. She swallowed the last of the gravy and opened her mouth to whatever god was above.

The lingering flavors suspended her in ecstasy. She was entranced in that position as if in the midst of a prayer for some two and a half minutes before she regained her senses and pulled herself from the table, forcing herself to make her husband a plate, which she prepared with all of the sides and garnishings and set down on the stove. Then she stopped what she was doing, for a paranoid feeling filled her being and she felt compelled to check on her master’s party. She wrapped the food up in aluminum foil and placed it in the oven, and then she walked out the kitchen in

short, quick movements with her hands crossed in front of her toward the dining hall, whereupon entering the room she found the party in a state more alarming than her own. If she herself had not tasted the meal they had just eaten, she would have thought they had all been involved in a narcotic-induced orgy of consumption. They were all slouched in their chairs, eyes half closed, murmuring sweet nothings about the meat. They rubbed themselves like animals and gravy covered their faces. The men's ties and pants buttons were undone and even May's undergarments were peaking out. The wench stood at the doorway and clutched her belly as if something inside were kicking. She whispered to herself, "This is some kind of devil's food." She jerked her attention back to the kitchen, then back to the party, or rather, what was left of one. Her eyes trembled on the scene as she lifted her hand to her mouth and licked the gravy from her fingers.

The wench hurried back to the kitchen in a frenzy she could not exactly explain, yet the urgency of whatever it was almost tripped her up on the threshold. As she gathered herself, smelling the aroma of her husband's plate, she looked up and saw, past the kitchen island, past the sink, out of the bay window, the beginning of a blizzard. The purple-grey sky felled snowflakes the size of quarters, and the wench was suddenly petrified to consider the state of her crippled husband in this storm. Shaking herself out of her stupor, she immediately rushed to the oven, grabbed the plate, and scattered out of the house clutching the neck of her dress, scrambling over the veranda and out into the white, lightly covered field. She walked the mile with the veracity of Bach's string ensemble and came upon her little cabin, its chimney crying black smoke. Opening the door, she felt the warmth of the crackling fire, but no body to enjoy it. She looked around the two rooms but could not find her husband. The bed in the main room was neatly made, as if he'd gotten better and stepped out. Her heart was now beating faster than the snow was falling. "Gather yourself, Wendy," she said to herself, "just take a deep breath." She set the plate down on the table and rested herself in the rocking chair. Her belly full, she closed her eyes for a little bit. Perhaps John had gotten better and gone out; he would surely be home any moment...

Some time later, the wench was startled awake. She looked about the cabin, but saw no presence of anyone having come through it. She was perplexed and slightly annoyed at this—until she looked down and found the source of her disturbance.

The urge that woke her up from her sleep was the same feeling that filled her with despair. For when the scent of that sweet meat drove her from her nap, she was remised to look down and see that there was no more meat on the plate. The aluminum foil had been pulled off and nothing but those several cuts had been eaten. Wendy looked around and saw that everything was the same as it had been. Her husband didn't appear to have come back and she began to get paranoid again. She licked her lips in nervousness and tasted the sweet gravy. Her mouth dropped in fear as she clasped her cheek and her hand got gravy all over her face. She shot up from her chair in fear at her realization: she had never eaten a meal that was intended for her husband. With her heart rate speeding back up, she jettied up from her seat and stormed out of the cabin, practically running back to the mansion through the pitch dark and raging blizzard. She had completely forgotten the weather, but the worry now of how hungry her husband must be was a more imposing feeling than the fear of not knowing where her husband was at all.

The wench reached the house, ran up the veranda and crashed though the back kitchen door, where she was almost shocked to death to see the entire party hovering in the middle of the room with trance-like faces and gravy on their lips. Sir Bird squeezed through the crowd. "Ah, wench!" he greeted her. He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "Wench, might you make us another batch of that delicious meat," he smiled.

The wench looked out of the bay window rubbing her arms. Through the cascading white sheet, she saw that it appeared to be past one o'clock in the morning. She looked back at Sir Bird, who was jumping up and down in anxiety.

"We need you to prepare another meal, Mrs. Wendy," he said.

The wench was quiet. "Sir Bird," she murmured, "I can't find my husband."

The searing sting of the cold palm against the side of her face crippled the wench into a fetal position on the floor. Sir Bird

slapped her head again and kicked her. "Cook the fuckin' meat," he screamed. He reached down and grabbed her by her collar, hoisting her up. "Cook, wench." He threw her back down and squeezed back through the crowd of people, who looked upon her with wide eyes of prey.

The party left the kitchen behind Sir Bird and the wench forgot about what she was worried about before. She dutifully prepared another course of the meat—just the meat. By three o'clock in the morning she had another batch prepared and, saving two cuts for herself of course, she served the meat before the party. They descended upon the dish like feeding vultures and consumed it all within a matter of minutes

Now satisfied, but too full to venture back to their residences in the storm, the members of the party spread out among Sir Bird's mansion, leaving their greasy plates and empty bottles behind in the quickly emptied dining hall. Sir Bird staggered to his room and prepared his night clothes on the bed. Now, as he was alone and engorged with all of his guests quietly secluded to their quarters, a silence more solemn than was present during the time he spent by himself in the mansion had made itself apparent. Like the meat, or the liquor, or the combination of the two, it filled him with solemn. Out his bedroom window, he could see the snow beginning to absorb the low branches of the trees. The chill from outside seemed to permeate his quarters, and Sir Bird began shivering. He decided to momentarily step out of his room to venture down the long hall in search of Boyle. He checked all of the doors on either side of the hall. There were many closets that he had forgotten existed. Upon opening one door he saw Mittel sleeping soundly in all of his clothes; Bird quietly closed it back. Upon opening the next door which led into another guest room, Sir Bird saw May and Pierre asleep in each other's arms. He hovered in the threshold for some time, swaying quietly in drunken stupor. A bedside lamp was still on and he could see Pierre's crisp snoring face. He began to walk in, tiptoeing on the balls of his sock-covered feet, when he heard a whisper: "Bird." He poked his head back out of the door and saw Boyle standing at the end of the hall by the stairs. Bird looked back inside at Pierre one last time, then he quietly stepped out of the room and closed the door.

"What are you doing at this hour," Boyle whispered, his eyes half closed.

"I was going to turn that lamp off," said Bird. "But my room is—hic—lonely and cold. Would you like to talk in my study for a bit?"

"Sure, I couldn't sleep either," Boyle said. "I've been having the most disturbing dreams."

"Come then," Sir Bird said as he led Boyle to the floor below where his study was the first door on the left.

Boyle sat in the arm chair that rested in front of the grand mahogany desk while Bird removed his pants and lay down on the reclining sofa adjacent to it. They sat in quiet for some time before Boyle, breaking the silence, said, "You quite outdid yourself this evening."

Bird grumbled as the alcohol began working more effectively on his reclined body. "Indeed."

Boyle was hesitant to get out his next sentence: "It was so tasty and exotic that I'm almost afraid to ask what it was you had Mrs. Peterman prepare."

"Indeed," Bird said again, his eyes now closed.

The wind blowing through the trees whistled in through the window.

"It will be hard to top tomorrow," Bird sighed. "How does one top the most exotic delicacy in the world?" It now seemed as though he was talking in his sleep. "I remember a while back, in Africa. A long time ago, when my father was alive, he and I ventured into the jungles with nothing but a Jeep and a .44 caliber Magnum revolver. We were going to kill a rhino. Their horns go for one hundred million on the Chinese black market. Or they used to. Anyway, it was a peculiar feeling. We weren't going to eat the thing; all we were killing it for was one practically useless part of its body. And it wasn't even us who were going to use it. We were due to sell it for huge amounts of money. The life of an innocent creature in exchange for millions of dollars. The life of an innocent creature, taken by men who weren't even going to use it, who were going to sell it across the world. Sometimes I wonder: for what *cause* did it die? The result of its murder was so far removed from its being that it may as well have been killed for nothing. It was the kind of dilemma that troubles a young boy."

He sighed deeply again. "It's like, you're looking a living thing in its eyes before you slaughter it for personal gain, not for survival. It would trouble a man of any class. If I weren't with my own father, who had done this many times, I probably couldn't have gone through with it. It's like deciding to buy a coat. Naturally, you might look at a coat three times before you buy it...but how many times do you look at a man before you kill him?"

With that, Sir Bird fell sound asleep.

That night he had a dream. He was sitting at a dinner table looking down at a plate, with a fork and knife in each hand. On his plate lay three men: Abel Bird's body fried and covered in gravy, Waldo Bird—stark naked but competent—and John Peterman, who was severed in two and his bottom half was missing. Wald was the only body still alive on the plate, and he spoke.

"Brother," he said, "Have you returned for more?"

Bird got choked up and couldn't get his words out.

Wald continued: "Well, aren't you going to eat me? Aren't you going to eat your brothers? You've already started on one of us."

Sir Bird felt like he was going to throw up. "What?" he said, "What are you saying?"

"Be done with us, already," Wald said. "We're at the bottom of the food chain."

"What? No, no, not you, Wald. Them," Bird cried.

"Them who, John?"

"Them." But Bird couldn't say anything more.

"We are them, John," Wald said.

"No," Bird said, but he couldn't let go of his utensils.

"Aren't you at the top of the food chain, John? Didn't you say that? Answer me, John Peterman," said Wald.

"Peterman?" said Bird, "Who are you calling Peterman? Peterman is there on the plate."

"Him?" Wald said looking at the top half of the mulatto beside him, "No, this is John Andrew of the Birds, the son of Mortimer Bird,"

Confused, Bird looked up. There was a mirror in front of him and in it he saw that his skin was as dark as the pony's.

“Eat us, John; eat your brothers,” Wald smiled. “As half or as whole as we may be!”

Sir Bird was shaken awake. He looked around and saw that he was alone in his bedroom; Boyle was gone; no one else was present. He tried to remember what Wald had said in the dream, but after ten seconds it began to fade altogether from his mind. Now too awake to fall back asleep, he timidly got out of his bed and saw that he was only dressed in his boxers and shirt. He walked to his closet to fetch his pants, and began to put them on when he felt a burning in his stomach. He felt the hunger—a growling hunger like no other. He tried to dismiss it for the moment, buckling his pants and pulling his belt through the loops. He then glanced at the clock on his dresser and noticed that it was five forty-five in the afternoon.

Bird trampled downstairs wondering if the wench had prepared any breakfast—some eggs to pair with the meat, perhaps—but all throughout the house was quiet; the guests must have ventured back to their respective dwellings to rest more, he thought.

If only. Upon entering the dining hall on his way to the kitchen, Sir Bird was almost shocked to death to see the entire party seated at the table: same clothes, same dirty faces, same dirty dishes.

“Wonderful, you’re here,” cried D’Urberville and Gallagher collectively. The others’ spirits seemed to heighten when Bird arrived as they straightened up in their chairs.

“We’re starving,” said Gallagher.

Boyle got up from his seat and started towards Bird. “Old buddy, no one could get back to their places last night. The snow has blocked all of the entrances. We’re desperate and hungry. Terribly hungry. We need meat.”

“Okay,” Bird yelled. It was a yell that implied that he already had a plan, but he hadn’t any idea what to do after he said it. He looked around the room at his hungry guests, at his old friends. He saw them giddy, like small children at the prospect of going to the park or eating ice cream for dinner. Bird’s father’s words then entered his mind again: the comfort of your guests is paramount.

Presently, the wench appeared in the walkway between the dining hall and the kitchen. Bird pointed at her, prompting her to go back into the kitchen, and he walked after. "I'll be back," he said to the party. "Just keep your pants on."

"Sir Bird," the wench said when they got out of earshot. "There's no more meat."

Bird stopped in his tracks. He quickly turned and closed the door that separated the dining hall from the kitchen and turned back around: "What do you mean there's no meat?" he said in a hushed scold.

"You musn't have skinned it properly, with all due respect," she said, turning to sit at one of the stools surrounding the island. "My husband," she mumbled to herself, "Has been alone in that cabin all night with no food. What am I to do—?"

"Right," Sir Bird said, beginning to pace the kitchen floor. He passed the bay window which was completely obscured by snow.

"It's so strange," the wench said. "It's never, ever snowed here before."

"Probably global warming," Bird muttered. He stopped pacing, his hand still pensively rubbing his chin. Turning to the wench, he said, "Stay here and don't budge until I return." He then left the kitchen.

Upon entering the dining hall again, his party eagerly awaiting his announcement, Sir Bird calmly proclaimed, "Friends, no need to worry. We will dine soon. Lovely Mrs. Peterman is in the works right now. I'd advise you all to disperse and occupy yourselves until I send word that the dinner is ready." Sir Bird then turned around and promptly exited the dining hall by way of the threshold he just came out of; he sprinted through the kitchen past the wench and ran up the back stairs to his study. The party, though expressively disappointed, got up and shuffled back to their quarters to wait.

Bird's study, dry and cool like a cave, was the epicenter of the estate's security system which broadcast twenty-four-hour footage of every square yard of the mansion and the surrounding property. Naturally, the only thing the outdoor cameras were broadcasting was a screen of white snow. The indoor cameras were broadcasting images of people pacing around their beds or

empty rooms. Sir Bird was studying the later of the images on his computer. At his desk, in the dark, with the door locked, Sir Bird intensively studied Camera 41: the room May and Pierre were staying in. The live feed read that it was 7:22 p.m.; May was laying on the bed fidgeting her toes and Pierre was at the desk, most likely scribbling some of his ridiculous poetry. The audio feed was a bit extraneous for the time being since no one was talking; the only thing sounding through Bird's headphones was the scribbling of pencil on paper. And so he waited.

The little bit of twilight that had shown through the study's large window had now faded, and the only light source in the room was the iridescent hologram of the computer screen. The forty-eight inch image being projected from the quarter-sized computer in front of him encompassed Sir Bird's attention. The top corner of the screen now read 8:40 p.m. Bird touched the hologram screen and dragged his finger across it, thereby adjusting the view of the camera angle to see over Pierre's shoulder. He was still writing. Sir Bird tapped the hologram to zoom in on Pierre's paper. The new, intimate image was blurry at first but instantly depixelated. On Pierre's paper read a poem of some sort, though it was obscured by an abundance of scribbled-out words and erasures. Bird ventured to put the words together:

What happens to the birds of old...
Who...waste—squander their seed and waste their
gold
....fly so high that they forget
to find a and
For when it is all said and done,
they're so far gone the birds of young;
a family—flock he did not bother....

What was written was bizarre and unintelligible to the voyeur, yet his mind was soon drawn from it when he heard May's voice in the background. Bird quickly zoomed the camera out to the pan of the entire room. May was on her feet at the foot of the bed, stretching. "I'm going to chat with Boyle; perhaps he knows what's the source of John's foolishness," she said. Pierre gave some grunts of acknowledgement and May left the room, off

camera. The sound of a door close rung through Bird's headphones. Pierre was now alone, unto himself and indulged in his writing. Sir Bird then calmly removed his headphones and shut down the hologram screen which disappeared back into the quarter-sized computer. The room was now completely dark.

For a moment he sat still in his chair. He knew not what occupied his mind but it compelled him to stay seated. He almost felt his mind go completely blank—as dark as the room—as a result of not knowing what to do now. He was bogged down by his own decisive situation, a crossroad. The four walls surrounding him were obscured by darkness. Across the floor from him, the door to his study was marked only by the thin rectangle of light from the hallway that shown behind it. People existed outside of that door; grave decisions needed to be made; but only Bird existed in this room. He basked in its darkness, contemplating the absence of status, decisions or consequences, letting his mind abstract until it felt as though it transcended the boundaries of his skull and the darkness inside of his head seeped into the darkness of the room. Sir Bird had been alone for so long that it almost seemed as though his mind was his world. Yet the recent contact with the concreteness of the people he once called his friends alerted him to their imperfect situation—they all needed the meat. It alerted him to his own feeling of imperfection. He touched his belly and felt its grumble, its longing for the meat, and he slowly began to feel like the meat was the only thing left that attached him to his own body, that returned him to the status of every other person, sheeple and aristocrats alike; he was suddenly filled with one basic desire, and he craved it. His thoughts, once fleeting, were now tied only to the prospect of satisfying the hunger. The meat festered in his stomach, sending the rumblings of its chemical breakdown throughout his body, and soon would turn into the elements of his own flesh and blood. Suddenly, it was as though his consciousness plummeted from the heights of gods and returned to his body with such a force that it weighed him to his chair with intensified gravity; the two components of his self were reunited. But how long had they been separate? he asked himself; his thoughts momentarily scattered from the meat like flies on a carcass and hovered above it. He could finally see the carcass now. He could smell its rotting stench. And he began to

wonder how long it had been there. Had he been a resident of his own mind this whole time, abstracted from the reality, unable to smell the carcass of his own existence? He had not interacted with a real person since he left May. Had he been a man alone in a dark room for twenty years? What will happen when he leaves the room? What happens when the private man confronts the public? How will he satisfy them? He could stay cooped up in the dark, but a real world decision has to be made. The people want action; the people want meat. And he, Sir Bird, has to do something about it. He can't stay in the dark. The time has come.... The distance from Sir Bird to the door felt like an immeasurable distance across a room that stood between a man and his last great accomplishment, a long canal into new life as in a womb, or post-life as in a tomb. Tree branches gently rapped at the window behind him with the syncopated gusts of the wind. The sky howled out of its all-encompassing grey mouth and Bird was once again drawn from his own mind into his physical situation: as a man sinking deeper into the darkness of his room when he has to take action on the outside. Sir Bird shook himself out of his stupor and withdrew himself from his desk. He walked to his study door, unlocked it, and left.

Pierre heard a knock on his door. He closed his notebook and swiveled around in his chair. "Come in," he said.

The door opened slowly and Sir Bird stuck his head in. "Hello, there," he said, presenting the rest of his body.

"Hello, Bird. Come in. How are you?" Pierre said with jovial expression.

"I'm doing quite well presently. And yourself? How are you this evening?"

"Good, I guess. Not great, not poor. Sick with the hunger for that delicious meat, mostly. So I'm definitely not on fortune's mind."

"But you're healthy, right. You don't look to be of those trampled under fortune's feet."

"Not quite."

"So you're in the middle. By and by, as it were; doing okay."

Pierre considered this present exchange and smiled. "Indeed. I'm in her middle, her privates, you could say. I am the slut of fortune's cock."

Sir Bird laughed heartily. "You are indeed quite the poet."

"Yes," Pierre went on gaily. "Thoroughly fucked by fortune, especially now, with regard to my hunger. But on most days I try to find pleasure in the situation."

"Yes," Bird laughed, "Or rather, it may be more appropriate to say you're the fucker of fortune, for *she* is a slut."

"Indeed, Sir, you have a wit about you."

"I try, I try. Listen, if you're not busy I would have you in my study for drinks. I have a fine grand cognac. I know your people are keen of it. We can make more wit while we wait for dinner to finish."

"That sound wonderful," said Pierre. He got up from his seat and Bird courteously allowed him to cross the threshold first before he followed. They walked down the flight of stairs to Bird's study; he let Pierre in first and then closed the door behind as he entered.

"A fine study you have here," said Pierre. "It's dry and homely."

"Thank you," said Bird as he motioned for Pierre to have a seat on the couch. A book was sitting on the adjacent table beside a brass Turkish lamp.

"I see you read Swinburne," said Pierre picking up the dusty book. Sir Bird walked over to the bar behind the sofa and pulled out a Remy Martin *Grande Cognac* called Louis XIII. Pierre continued, "The prerequisite to Swinburne is of course Baudelaire, a man of my own creed. I don't know if you read him." Bird poured two tulip glasses. "I much prefer Baudelaire to the former, and not just because of my own biases of him being French..." Sir Bird walked over and placed one tulip glass beside Pierre on the table. "Swinburne is much too heavy for me. Baudelaire has a great mastery of his words—his French language—that creates the direct, profound observations he talks about in his poems." Sir Bid shifted his hand from the glass to the lamp, silently astounded at its weight. He reared it back... "But Swinburne is profound in his own way, however; as I learned

English I came to marvel at the beauty of his—.” And careened it into Pierre’s skull, sending blood and fragment all over the immediate surroundings. The body slumped over on the couch, unbalanced by the weight of the lamp sticking out of its head. Sir Bird picked up the freshly placed glass of cognac and downed it in one gulp. He then walked over to the bar, picked up the second glass and walked back to his desk.

He sat down and began to relax for a quick second. Thoughts of another batch of delicious meat filled his mind and watered his mouth. He began to sink into anticipation—but he hardly had time to revel in the thought of it when he heard the door to his study click open. He had forgotten to lock it. And who was presently in the doorway but the coked-up scoundrel Julian D’Urberville. The visitor had hardly recognized the brutal scene in his wake as he closed the door behind him. As he turned around, Sir Bird, in frenzy, had already drawn his silver revolver from his bottom desk drawer and was aiming it at D’Urberville’s head. The visitor, in startling confusion, could hardly get the word “What?” out of his face before it was entirely demolished.

The smoking gun hovered in the air for some time as if on its own will. In its wake, two bodies of the goriest description decorated the room, adorned by the fragments that once made them human. ‘Once,’ was all that echoed through Sir Bird’s chaotic conscience. Once, they were human. Once, Pierre was a basic sheeple, not even fit to be in Sir Bird’s mansion, and now, strangely, he fit the *feng shui*. Once, Julian D’Urberville was a respectable private gentleman, but he became a bastardization of luxury; now, likewise, he was fit to join the party at supper once again. This was for the best, Bird thought, as the hunger ravaged his body and mind. It was always inevitable that one private gentleman should rule them all. It was inevitable that the fittest should survive. We as wealthy men once rose up among the poor scum of the world, the ponies and cattle; we, the elite, were once the *crème* of human civilization. It is only fit that of us, the *crème* should rise to the top, and we will soon decide who indeed is the fittest of us all. Bird’s stomach growled again. Looking at the fresh meat laying on his couch and floor, he stood up and shoved the revolver into the back of his pants. He clicked on the loud speaker situated on his desk that broadcasted throughout the entire

house. He spoke thus into it, hearing the echo of his message from the hallway: "My friends, dinner is served." He walked around his desk past the body of Pierre. His guests, he reckoned, would be eager to dine and would be at the table promptly. Sir Bird thus stopped in front of the body of D'Urberville and lugged the guts aside. He opened the door and poked his head out. The rustling of feet going up and down stairs rung throughout the house like the banging of a drum. His friends' desperation was almost palpable in the air, when suddenly, all the rustling stopped. Sir Bird drew his head back into the room, hoisted D'Urberville's limp feet up into his hands, and dragged the body out the door, down the hall, and down the back stairs to the kitchen.

Thump, thump, thump, went the body. When they reached the landing, Bird dragged it around the corner and through the kitchen, only at that moment noticing the trail of blood it left behind. Bird's heart was tranquil as he dragged the body through the hall to the dining room, where upon entering he heard a hush fall over the party. His back still turned, he felt the silent spotlight of fourteen eyes glaring on him. He reached the table and hoisted the body up and over the head of the petrified Noel Gallagher, slumping it into the middle of the table. He then, without making any eye contact, especially to the wench who was standing near Boyle, calmly walked to his seat at the end of the table.

There, he first lifted his head to the sea of tombstone eyes that sat in utter disbelief. May, who was sitting beside Noel Gallagher, looked as if she had finally discovered some grave truth that she had been awaiting her entire life, a truth which would either give complete meaning to her existence or incense her to kill herself, and that the answer she got was utterly incoherent.

Boyle spoke first, tentative, slowly and stuttered: "What have you done?"

Sir Bird pulled a loose cigarette out of his vest pocket and lit it. As he inhaled he made eye contact with the wench: "Wendy, come here beside me."

She stared unsurely. She looked to Boyle, who in turn was looking at Bird as if he were planning to bore a hole through him with his gaze.

"Wench," Bird yelled again. "Now."

The wench stammered timidly to her master's side and he swung his arm around her, drawing her close. The look in her face was like that of a small child who had gotten lost in a fair and who just stumbled into the clowns' dressing room.

Sir Bird looked down at her smiling and blew smoke in her face. He then turned his attention to the general party: "My food and friends: Judging by the outdoor conditions by which you've found yourself at the mercy of my hospitality, I would advise you to let me explain."

"Where's my husband, John?" said May with a surge of emotion and anxiety. She was beginning to get restless, twitching and scratching at the acne formed around her mouth.

Bird paused, taking a puff of his cigarette. "He is in a similar state as the late gentleman here."

May's twitching became spasmodic.

"Yeah. They're both dead, but, don't get so surprised now. Lesser men have been slain for the comfort of this party. You would have never known there was chaos in this house had it not knocked on your door. There was a man of flesh and bone just like D'Urberville and Pierre who is no longer alive. His absence and your satisfaction have not been coincidental occurrences."

The wench's face slowly dropped in pure stupor.

Boyle shot up from his chair. "What are you talking about?"

"Easy old boy," Bird said to him. "Easy." Sir Bird let go of the wench and began pacing around the table. "I think you know, Boyle. You all, as men of business and status, know as well as I do that luxury and leisure come at a price. But I don't think you all can handle the knowledge of what exactly that price is. You all want status and decadence but you don't want to know what's at stake. Let's see: You have all tasted the rarest and most delicate of all meats—at the expense of the life of Peterman, a Nigger, but a human nonetheless." The wench presently fainted. "He's gone mad," said someone. "Mad? No," Sir Bird continued, "But I've had a lot of time to myself to think over the past several years and I have progressed in my reasoning about this sort of thing."

"About Cannibalism?" yelled Boyle. "You've decided to eat your friends? And that's Progress?"

Bird stopped and paused musingly. "Yes," he said. "That is progress. And I'm the only one who could have seen it. We all needed something new. We were becoming stagnant waters in our little reservoir. May is marrying foreign nobodies. D'Urberville is fucking pigs and doing narcotics? Is this what the highest class of the world has become? I don't fucking think so. This lifestyle is not going down in rags. Let America go down to the dogs, but I won't have the upper class following. I would try and keep my status and my sanity even if it meant eating my own heart out. D'Urberville, being a friend as old as he's been, has become a martyr now of how exuberance can kill us if we are not constantly progressing in taste."

"You mean *you* killed D'Urberville," said Boyle. "*You* killed John Peterman and fed him to us. It was all you. None of this has to do with *us*. You're the ambitious one. And you've tainted us all with you fucking lunacy. I was happy where I was. We were all happy."

"You were becoming cattle," said Bird. "You're all just like drunk sheeple; where's your initiative? I'll tell you where—dried up, like the Fed. Yes, it was me. It was all me. I dare say it: but I'm the most progressive man here. You all would have been content with having eaten almost everything in the world, and then settling with second-class luxury. I, however, am the only one brave enough to try the unknown. I took the stretch, but you all tasted him and you all liked it."

"There's a reason you haven't called for help. There's a reason you're still here in my mansion." The party members exchanged guilty glances. "You want more. You all want more. But it's okay. So do I—and can't you see what a saint I am, bringing you more of what you want," Bird gestured to D'Urberville. "Am I the criminal?" The party's eyes lowered and turned reflexive. "You need this. You need this meat like you need to hang on to your status. Sure, Peterman wasn't a person; for him it was basically like eating a horse. But what's to say for D'Urberville? How can we eat our old friend? Because, my guests, how else will we satisfy the hunger?" The eyes looked around at each other. Bird smiled to himself in the shadow of his own conviction.

"We kill the wench!" said Wall.

"I will do no such thing," said Sir Bird. "I mean...she's the cook." He turned to look at the wench's unconscious body.

Presently, May Broom shot up out of her chair and ran around the table and out of the dining hall wailing in hysterics.

"A given," Bird chuckled. "Some people will not be able to handle the truth. And in any case, that one's been hiding from herself for a long time. Let her cower." He began to turn around again and head back to his seat.

"So we'll all end up on this table one way or another," Boyle said quietly.

"It's survival of the fittest, my friend. It always has been." Bird said walking over to the table between Donahue and Gallagher. "There is a difference between us and them. Us and poor. Humble though they may be, they're savages. To be blunt, I killed Peterman with a rock and Pierre with a lamp. Really grueling shit, I admit. But we, as men of status, we are civilized men. And with this gun—" he drew his revolver, pointing it to the sky, "—We will progress evolutionarily. Survival of the fittest. We will produce a new breed of man. Homohabilis, homoerectus, homosapien... Homosuperior! After everyone else has turned into savages, and the civilized men have tasted all of earth's delicacies, the last thing to do is to eat the civilized themselves."

Just then, Noel Gallagher rammed his elbow into Sir Bird's stomach. Dropping the gun onto the table, Bird doubled over and Gallagher and Donahue held him steady at each arm as Boyle grabbed the gun and walked thunderously around the table as the rest of the party followed closely behind him to confront Sir Bird where he was contained. He struggled pitifully, but ultimately submitted.

"I knew you were full of shit. I knew something was going on with you when you came here," Boyle said. "You brought this upon yourself, Bird. You haven't proved anything. This whole nation is in the doghouse. And we'll fight to survive. But it won't be towards progress or evolution, you fucker." He pointed the gun at Bird. "This is the fall of Western Civilization. And you, you bastard, are the omen. Murder and eat as many people, rich or poor, as you want; you still didn't prove anything."

Sir Bird, having been exhausted from the sudden surge of action and the very proof of his theory, bit his lip and smiled. "Maybe not, old friend...except that...we're all just full of shit."

When the wench came to, she was ordered to prepare D'Urberville and Sir Bird's meat and freeze it in the basement for the time being. In the meanwhile, she prepared and cooked Pierre for dinner; his meat lasted about a week. After Pierre was exhausted, Julian D'Urberville was thawed and eaten, and next was Sir Bird. Even in the death of the private men, their spiritual presence in the room was significant. Over their marinated muscle, stories about the deceased were exchanged like old times. The first night the party feasted on the meat of Sir Bird, this conversation occurred between Boyle and Gallagher:

"...It may not be that the birds are the epitome of all creatures, or in this case, if you'll allow me to continue the metaphor, of all men," Boyle said. "It's funny, Bird was always eating or drinking. He did love exotic foods. And ironically, in death, he stays at supper. His bones and scraps will be thrown into the garden, and there he'll be at supper for worms. You and I both will end up at that grand table, Noel. The fattest king and the frailest beggar are but different courses, all to be reduced to food for maggots. Hmm, it seems that those worms have an even more luxurious palate than our own. We may eat of the finest meats, but the worms eat of us. And even more: a poor man may fish with a worm that eats of kings, and then he will eat of the fish that has eaten of that worm."

"And so what's the jest of this rambling?" asked Gallagher.

"Nothing but to show how a man of status is nothing but a small part of a journey through the guts of beggars. Even the mightiest dinosaur, now that I think about it, went down as mere meals for those tiny maggots. So then is it really 'survival of the fittest?' I suppose every dynasty goes down at one point or another as food for worms."

The death of Gallagher was a sad one, and it was unfortunate that it had to happen so soon, as he was Boyle's best

friend after the demise of Sir Bird. But he did pick the shortest straw, and there's no reason bickering with things of chance. As he drew it, that feeling of battery acid that one gets upon receiving a grave surprise surged throughout his veins; but it subsided into a sublime numbing sensation. With one tear rolling down his face, Boyle aimed the gun at his friend as he stood against the study wall without anyone having to hold him. Gallagher set a precedent for how it would be done in the future. Every great man, he believed, has a duty to die for his people. In a time of need, he must offer himself up to his friends, for the comfort of one's friends is paramount. Noel Gallagher went down with dignity if nothing else.

Over the next several months, Bernie Arnold, Vishnu Mittel, Duke Wall, and James Donahue all went down. After the exhaustion of private men, and after the snow had cleared and the help came back to work, all of the workers of the estate were stealthily captured and consumed. Wendy and May, who had grown close in their respective situations—one as a widow of the most gruesome result and the other as the bearer of an ill-conceived bastard son—had developed interesting and innovative methods of preparing the muscle, cartilage, and entrails of man. They skinned, washed, and fatted each man with the compassion they would have had for a muskrat caught overnight in a trap. Deciding the victim, of course, was the party's job. The cooks were only responsible for the slabs of meat found in the ice box the next morning. Shoulder became a dinner staple, the main course. When that ran out, the upper arm and then the lower arm were a favorite for their tenderness. In terms of the sweetness of meat, the buttocks were the most prime of all the parts, and the two friends kept it a personal secret. The thigh was a perfect meat for the midday meal. They went great marinated in soy sauce or BBQ and slapped on sandwiches with fried onions. Fried ears and noses were a salty snack—anything with cartilage became a fried *hors d'oeuvre*. Eyeballs were frozen, and when they collected enough of them, they went in a soup; they tasted like salty dumplings. The pectorals weren't a rich source of meat, and these private men weren't known for their toned bodies anyway. Ribs were an occasional delicacy. And finally, when the man was exhausted as thoroughly as they could try, the party was alerted and preparations

were made for a new cow. It was only on one occasion, during the spring when all the snow had melted, that the party requested that the late Mr. James Donahue be split down the middle, entrails removed, and smoked whole over a pit. The BBQ was complimented by a dry red wine from the cellar and baked beans and slaw. That was a pleasant afternoon.

One evening, in late spring, while drudging through the old rooms of Bird's mansion, Boyle came upon the late Pierre's finalized poem:

What happens to birds of old,
Who squander seed and waste their gold;
Who fly so high that they forget
To find a mate and make their nest?
For when it is all said and done,
And they're so far gone, the birds of young;
A flock he did not bother link,
Birds of the world become extinct.

EPILOGUE

In June 2066, the wench died in labor. As the party felt that her pregnancy was of the most tragic conditions and that dying in labor soiled her meat, they did not eat her. (It was partly a cunning tongue on May's part that saved her dear late friend from being eaten.) What was left of said party—Mr. J. Adam Boyle and Mrs. May Broom—made private arrangements of how they were going to sustain their lifestyle. With no meat and no prospective options, grave decisions had to be made between the final two guests.

But what was even more peculiar than the details of their agreement were the circumstances of the wench's death. Her pregnancy wasn't talked about among the party while she was alive, and when May, her wet nurse, announced that the wench had died in labor, the one concern shared between them was the loss of a dear friend. May Broom's conscience, however, was being bogged down with something more dire. She saw something the night of the delivery. In the night, through the dying wails of the wench's labor, she witnessed with her own eyes the birth of a child black as the night and covered in black hair like some kind of wolf. It clawed itself out of its mother's womb and howled into the deaf caverns of the old mansion, hungry for meat. It scurried on all fours, leaving behind a wet trail as it disappeared through an open window. Mrs. Broom had a moment of clarity that she had not had in nine months, a feeling of fear and guilt about the creature that she had just let into the world.

