

# The Last Indulgence



# The Last Indulgence

*a novel*

Antarah Crawley

Vesak Word House

Washington, D.C.

**THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF COPY**

**INTENDED FOR PROMOTIONAL USE**

**This text is based off of the manuscript  
and has not been professionally edited or  
corrected for grammar, usage, or spelling.**

**The intent of this publication is to attract  
the interest of agents, editors, and/or publishers.**

Copyright © 2013 by Antarah Crawley

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without prior written consent from Vesak Word House Publishers.

This book is a work of fiction. No part of this work is intended to slander or otherwise misrepresent the acts of living persons or entities as fact. Any resemblance to living persons, corporations, or entities is purely coincidental.

Published by Vesak Word House, Publishers  
in Washington, D.C.

Manufactured in the United States of America

# To the Reader

While neither the time nor the place, the Author would like to take this prefatory moment to identify and explain an insecurity of the novel. It may come off as a Science Fiction novel; but be aware, to your relief or disappointment, that it slowly sheds that mode as it progresses. This book is not a Science Fiction novel. But one should not interpret that dismissal as a condemnation of Science Fiction. It is the opinion of this Author that “Science,” “Technology,” and “Dystopian” “Futures” are indeed realities of the present zeitgeist; the time we’re living in is the Future that our literary forefathers have feared: Universal Surveillance, World War, Capitalist Dogmatism, Increasing Federal Debt, et cetera. So when Fiction’s mission is to represent “reality,” or show ourselves a more revealing part of human life, it has in this day and age become inherently Science- and Technology-infused Fiction. Our Modernist sensibilities condemn Futurism, where Joyce perfected the present and Faulkner the past. Yet in this time, in which the present is becoming more and more instantaneous, news goes out of date faster, Tweets become supreme, and the Past has been recollected to a noxious degree, the purpose of truly relevant and influential Fiction comes in anticipating the future. Journalists have the present. Historians have the past. Economists are overwhelmingly more apt to accurately assess the past and present. Human emotions have become fleeting and dull as a result of Artificial (Supplemented) Intelligence in Smart Phones and Computers. A Fiction that is purely an exploration of human emotion and memory has

become boring and extraneous. The literary novel is dead. These are frightening times we live in—Dystopian times. Thus, to represent “reality” accurately, the novelist must be inherently Dystopian and Technologically aware, and must always be writing ahead of the social/economic curve. Any contemporary novel that is not forward-thinking or at least forward-leaning in temporality, and which excludes the Technological present and future, fails its purpose. The Author thus feels that this novel should not be critically retarded by the “un-literary” stigma which may be imposed on it because of its futuristic/technological nature. It is a literary novel of the Millennial Zeitgeist, an inherently Futuristic time.

# I      The Breakers

(or, The Story After the Fact)

Considering recent developments, I guess you could say we got our "just desserts." Well, I can't say I didn't see it coming. I did want to see these scum perish. John Bird raped my aunt, you know. And all those Boyles were a disgrace to human life. I despised working under them. Well, anyway, seeing the way things are going right now, I don't think you'll be too preoccupied with the Breakers anytime soon. At least the bastards didn't get off scott-free, even if it was another clan of elitist gangsters who bombed them. Well, for what it's worth, I hope I've helped you all over the past ten years. We'll need a lot more help than I can give, though, if we're going to fight the Chinks. ...They've been slowly burying us for the past ninety years, I guess this was just the final coffin nail... Maybe it won't be so bad being Western China, anyway...



Well, for what it's worth, I got my hands on Akridge's report, attached. It has some useful observations in it, toward the end. I hope you'll find something there... Well, once again, it was nice doing business with you. I think it'd please you to know I'm living in Washington and will enlist shortly... Sometimes I can hear the drones all the way in Seattle... I don't want to think this way, but it all strikes me as a futile attempt at Salvation, as futile as this life here, but someone's got to live it. I knew, just from looking in Old Boyle's eyes all those years, that We were on our way out...you know, "We" ... "Us." Yeah, so, you're welcome for the document. Good luck, God Bless America ... God Save Us All.

—L.H.

20/3/2097

Attached:

Document Type: ThoughtTranscript®

Dates: 9/8/2096:23:09\_9/11/2096:08:46

Source: OGGLE© Supplemented Reality iOS.9

ECU (Embedded Computing Unit)

WARNING: This Document is licensed to the

Holder(s) solely for the purpose of professional use under the restrictions as stipulated in the Contract. It is illegal to share this Document with unregistered parties. This Document has been reconstructed from a Damaged Unit and may be erroneous. This Document is the sole property of Horizon TeleMobile Corp.©

\_Loading Document ...

[9/8/96:23:09] I sit in the bar drinking rye whiskey waiting for the call to come in.

[Aside] The investigative reporter has been hired by associates of the D'Urberville Foundation to investigate the disappearance of Julian Vaughn D'Urberville between the months of October and November in the year 2065. Last known residence: Bogota, Colombia. Last known whereabouts: an island off the coast of California operating as an exclusive resort called "The Breakers." At the time of disappearance, the island was not a formal resort but the private residence of two extremely High Net Worth individuals, John Andrew Bird and Jim Adam Boyle. It is believed that during the month of October one John A. Bird invited his friends to a party, from which none of them, including himself, ever returned—with the exception of one J. Adam Boyle and one May Broom. Mrs. Broom and Mr. Boyle then turned the island into an exclusive resort for the vacationing elite.

It is unknown why, upon the very time when seven highly important men were deemed missing, the remaining residents sought to open a resort upon the very same island.

This is what must be understood if we are to sufficiently investigate the disappearances of D'Urberville and his friends.

However, the D'Urberville Foundation, having partnered with parties representative of the other missing persons (Vishnu Mittel, Duke Wall, Noel Pierpont Gallagher, James Donahue, Pierre Delacruz, and John Andrew Bird himself) have been continuously thwarted in their efforts over the past thirty years to obtain any information, for their privately contracted agents as well as those commissioned by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, never returned from the island or were shot down in mid-flight.

It is therefore the duty of this investigative reporter to infiltrate the island incognito, making his presence as little known as possible, while gathering the maximum amount of information regarding the activities and history of the resort.

This investigative reporter, upon being contacted to do the job, inquired as to why he, an investigative reporter, was being contracted to do the job of a detective or policeman.

The contracting party responded that aside from the writing part, it is the same job.

This investigative reporter had no qualms with the opinion. This investigative reporter is now a *bona fide* detective.

The payment to be available upon completion was also a prime motivator for this investigator. The money, in cash, was indeed good. Six-hundred-thousand dollars, after negotiation. But the D'Urberville Foundation, along with their partners and their friends in politics, also offered to protect this investigator against certain parties who sought his death—to the tune of half-a-million dollars.

Over the course of this investigative reporter's career, he has been the catalyst for several militant insurgencies, assassinations, bombings, retaliations, and so on. As an excellent investigative reporter, he is contracted by parties, sometimes parties on opposing sides of a conflict at the very same time, to gather information of a variety of sorts. This information is then used by the contracting party to determine a

weak spot in their opponent, to determine if retaliation is due, to sabotage, undermine, or otherwise cause the downfall of the opponent.

The money is always good, excellent even, but the risk of death is equally imminent.

Parties having been compromised by the keen reportage of this investigator, as would be expected, have put contracts on his head.

Thus is protection a more valuable commodity in this field than cash.

Compounding that fact is that cash has lost most of its buying power except in regard to favors and bribes. While the majority of the American middle-class population has been swept from the street, subdued by Virtual Reality and Big Box Living, commerce and popular culture has migrated completely to the online platform. Consumer Spending has virtually evaporated. In the “Real World” exist only people integral to the function of governments and corporations. They have no desire for popular culture or material consumption. Thus, money has come to signify power in the sense that it can be used to influence, sway and acquire, but not necessarily to consume.

Protection, or one of the key ends to which money is used in the present society, is of more value than money itself.

And a certain recent enemy of this investigative reporter has made it clear that he will need all the protection that he can get.

Of course, it is the opinion of this investigative reporter that the various repercussions of the work are realities that one must not dwell long on, lest he be petrified from continuing his duty. But for the purposes of information: it was several days before being contacted to infiltrate the Breakers that this investigative reporter delivered to the Anonymous Group, a political and militant environmental anti-corporatist saboteur, a document detailing the projected crop fields of Genetically

Modified Agriculture firm Monsanto, a document which the Anonymous Group used to locate those same fields and deploy upon them firebombs and crop dusters filled with salt. As a matter of incident, one of the same crop dusters then flew into a nearby power plant also owned by Monsanto. The firm then hired private mercenary army Blackwater and pledged to destroy whomever authorized the attack as well as whomever made the previously undisclosed information about the fields known.

Thus was it a miracle that the D'Urberville Foundation, who kept associates in the top ranks of Monsanto, offered to relieve this investigative detective of his burden if he would help them bring those responsible for the disappearance of Julian D'Urberville to justice.

[9/8/96:23:11] The bar is called the Ugly Mug. Located in Brooklyn, several buildings down from The Fall Inn, a popular dive for elite businessmen looking to dine without attracting a lot of attention. It had once been owned by Richard D'Urberville, and, later, his son Julian.

But I will find no evidence of Mr. D'Urberville here.

A Reliable Unknown Source who I call RUS tells me that Lucius Lethe is a fan of this dive, and comes here often. Approximately two years ago, Mr. Lethe returned from the Breakers Island, where he had been a resident for eight years, to continue his position at Multinational Firearms & Warfare Services Conglomerate. RUS tells me that Mr. Lethe is now taking another hiatus from the company, leaving his brother Harlem in charge. He will return to the Breakers by way of a private jet from JFK Airport. I await RUS's call for the exact time of his departure.

In the meanwhile, RUS tells me that Mr. Lethe will spend his last hours on the mainland in The Fall Inn with his close friends.

[9/8/96:23:13] This bar is poorly lit. There are only three naked bulbs hanging from the ceiling above the counter. Two of them twitch. The bartender looks like Uncle Fester of the classic television show *The Addams Family*. Except that he has a patchy white beard which looks more like it was glued to his face than having grown from his skin. He has been polishing one glass for the past six minutes. The only other person in the bar is an old hatted man in a olive green overcoat who sits at the far edge in the darkness behind one of the twitching light bulbs.

[9/8/96:23:17] The bar's phone rings.

[Aside] The investigative reporter does not use his “Oogle” ECU for business-related calls, as it is too easy to track.

[Cont.] Uncle Fester answers, hands the phone to me. It's RUS. He says that Lethe will depart for the Breakers from JFK at 23:45. He will be at the Fall Inn until approximately 23:15, and will at that time get into a chauffeured Rolls-Royce automobile that will drive him to the airport. I will follow him there, park my car somewhere secluded, and enter the airport from the landing strip gate. It is advised that I use force to gain my entrance to the landing field, without making my presence too known.

[Aside] For the jobs he undertakes are muddled with risks, it is the prerogative of this investigative reporter that he keep his silenced Desert Eagle pistol on him at all times.

[Cont.] RUS continues: After getting past the guard, there should be little interference on the way to the boarding location. Although the Security State is especially vigilant around the airport, the darkness and my own cunning as an investigator should thwart them. I will then approach the jet

after Lethe and the crew have entered the cabin, and stow myself away in the baggage compartment. Good Luck and God's Speed.

I return the phone to Uncle Fester.

Tomorrow night is showtime.

[9/8/96:23:20] Before I leave I order another rye and down it rather quickly. Uncle Fester, evidently bored with the night's crowd, asks me who that was. I say it was a friend.

The old hatted man stirs. I glance over at him, his face still cut by the shadow of his brim. He slouches, coughs, swallows phlegm, and proceeds to push in his stool. I drink. I look back and see that not only has he pushed in his own stool, but he proceeds to push in every bar stool down the line.

I ask Uncle Fester if the old man works here.

No, Fester says, he's a looney.

Wealthy man, I ask. Only wealthy men are allowed to be loonies. Only wealthy men these days are allowed to be out in the streets. Seems to me he's a prime candidate Virtual Reality and Institutionalization.

Fester shrugs.

When the old man gets to me, his posture and hat still obscuring his face, he pushes in my seat with me in it. He continues down the line, then hangs his hat up on the rack and leaves.

Queer man, I say.

Fester goes back to polishing that damn glass.

I slam my empty vessel down along with a fifty and stand. Tomorrow, I say.

Sure, says Fester.

I put on my hat and I walk out.

[9/8/96:23:26] I stand outside in the darkness. The wooden door closes behind me and not long after I hear the strike of a lock. A street lamp before me illuminates the cigarette-speckled

sidewalk. I pull out one of my own.

It's drizzling.

There's always something falling from the sky. I light it and out of habit I hold it prison-style. Smoke rises from me into the light of the lamp, is pierced by thin pellets of rain, rolls over itself, disperses, and disappears beyond the light. I go stand under the light. Maybe there's some epiphany.

I smoke.

The rain drops hitting concrete, millions of instances of them, all blend into one continuous static.

Along this street are lined the types of buildings criminals envy. Every one has a fire escape. On the bottom floor is some abandoned locksmith or hardware store, five decades forgotten. Where's the everyman? He's inside sitting. Shitting where he sits. Laughing at the digital life. Laughing at a concrete wall.

A floating Bugatti passes. It's only rich people on the Outside these days. They're the only ones who live. The everyman confined to the indoors, to the internet. But can I complain? The rich are how I earn my living. We all have to live, either in front of a screen or otherwise.

I stomp the butt out and walk to my El Dorado. Yea, I still "roll on wheels," as they say. I still use fuel. I gotta be grounded somehow. Key in the ignition. Gurgle and spurt away.

[9/8/96:23:34] I pass Big Box Complexes on my way home. Sometimes four, five of them will be gathered in a court. They're so tall I can't see the tops. They just disappear up in the darkness. Whats that? like five or six thousand souls confined inside laughing, scrolling. Not aware of the life outside. Might as well call it hell.

[9/8/96:23:45] I live in a midtown hotel rented to me under the name "Almond Akridge." I am, according to the book, a



mid-level broker of furs. We sell to the Chinese. That's where the market is these days.

Other mid-level business types from Indonesia and India pass through these rooms, order a whore or two, run up their tab, cut a deal, leave. They've been doing very well these past couple decades. Manufacturing. Many of them own factories.

I park my car in the garage and head up into the lobby. Fancy stuff, at least by these guests' standards. Crystal chandeliers, decorated vases, Dom in the mini fridge, couches from who-knows-century God-knows-where. But I've been around real wealthy bastards. They'll buy a canvas some Twentieth Century peasant wiped on his ass for a couple hundred million. To them real luxury in intangible. It's power.

But let the little guys have their day. They'll realize eventually. Tonight, Indians with their arms burdened with blondes worth their weight in coke walk out ready for a night on the town. For them the night is just getting started. Fuck that, I've got a real night ahead of me.

Concierge greets me, Mr. Akridge.

Hi, Mort.

[9/8/96:00:00] I'm in my eighteenth floor room, in my nightclothes in my bed, falling fast asleep.

[9/9/96:22:02] I'm at the Ugly Mug again, this time I'm drinking gin.

I tried to get out of my comfort zone, but I don't like it. I order a rye whiskey.

Old hatted man is back. Looks like we're paying Fester's rent.

[Aside] This investigative reporter has wholeheartedly entered the mind of a detective. He is mentally prepared to embark on the mission, this infiltration of sorts; he has done it time and time

again. The risk here, however, is especially imminent. If caught, there is no way to escape the island. Judging from the fates of past investigators and officials, his prospective future will be dim. Just how he expects to gather information without making his presence known is a mystery. But that is the fun, is it not.

Perhaps the D'Urberville Foundation has something arranged.

He will travel light; he will leave no clues. His only tools will be his *Oogle*Glass contact lenses for notetaking and surveillance, and his silenced Desert Eagle.

[9/9/96:22:30] A call comes in over the bar's phone. Fester hands it to me; it's RUS.

He tells me that Lethe has finished his meal and is now drinking. His flight departs promptly at eleven-thirty, so he will probably leave the Fall Inn at eleven-fifteen. His Maybach—not a Rolls—is parked directly outside of the dive. It's a hover, so you'll have to keep up. He'll enter JKF through the landing strip gate entrance. The rest is up to you. Remember: dispose of any persons who may disclose your whereabouts. You may worry about them after sufficient information has been gathered and the D'Urbervilles grant their protection. Talking to ponies will be a key strategy in discovering information. You are wearing a suit?

I reply in the affirmative.

Good, he says, they may not know who is currently residing on the island. But that doesn't mean they will tell you anything outright. Coax the answers from them. Kill them when you are done; worry, like I said, after you relay your findings to the D'Urbervilles.

I ask him, when I think I've gathered sufficient information, how will I get off the island.

He says, a plane will depart at 12:30 on nine-twelve-two-thousand-and-ninety-six bearing Connor Bishop to New Jersey.

[Aside] The detective, as he know thinks of himself, is aware of Connor Bishop. Once the North American Vice President of Amauta Group, the banking conglomerate founded by John Bird's father, he disappeared to the Breakers Island and did not return for ten years. Everyone thought he was dead. Perhaps he knows what occurred when John Bird and Jim Boyle hosted that party. His own father was, after all, a close colleague of Mr. Bird.

[Cont.] You may stow yourself away in the baggage compartment of that plane, RUS continues.

What is the Security State like on the island, I inquire.

Lax. They expect no infiltration.

Hard to believe, I think.

I know it is hard to believe, he says. But I think you will have no problems discovering what you need to know.

RUS says this with an odd conviction, as if he knows that my work on the island will go smoothly.

I am inclined to think that this is a set-up.

But if it is, it will be a much more invigorating way to die than at the end of some Blackwater op's rifle scope. In this work, one's end comes sooner or later. How many more investigations can one stage? When in the final one?

If there is nothing else, good luck and God's speed, concluded RUS. He hangs up.

I give the phone back to Fester. Thanks Fester, I say.

What, he says.

If it is a set-up, then what? Depends on how long they let me live. But whatever. That is always the risk. Better to make the wage and retain the possibility of coming out on the other side a couple hundred thousand grand richer and free of Monsanto's wrath. There's always risk. In this life, death is imminent. If I stay on the mainland I'm a dead man anyway.

Might as well have an adventure.

I order another rye whiskey.

[9/9/96:23:00] I pay my tab and step outside before the old hatted man has a chance to touch my stool. I stand under the triangle of the street lamp's light and smoke, glancing over at the descending entrance to the Fall Inn from time to time. The Maybach is stationed where RUS said it would be. Soon the subject will show himself in the darkness. I simply have to wait.

[9/9/96:23:14] The subject shows himself, staggering quite capably out of the dive with another suited man. The subject wears a fine fitted suit and black polished shoes, clearly of exquisite taste yet not boasting so. The subject lights a cigarette and waists no time in entering the vehicle. His companion rounds the car and they furiously depart. I hurriedly get into my car. Wealthy people drive fast and insanely on these empty night roads.

[9/9/96:23:19] I am following the subject at a length of two city blocks. The rear headlights of his vehicle are clearly visible. If I lose him, I know the way to the airport anyway.

[9/9/96:23:20] I follow the subject to the landing strip entrance of JFK airport. I stop around a shadowed corner. The subject's vehicle pauses at the mechanical arm; the arm opens; they enter. There is a maximum of two security guards attending the gate, one probably in the booth which controls the mechanical arm. I can see the mid-sized jet labeled "The Breakers" across the way. They drive, stop in front of it, and exit the vehicle. At least five attendants stand around; two of them are pony baggage handlers. One looks to be wearing a pilot's cap. Perhaps the other two are airport officials.

I turn off the engine and exit my vehicle. I do not know

if this parking spot is liable to gobble up my car, but in the case that this mission fails, it does not matter. This is not a possibility which weighs heavy on my mind. I have accepted my duty. There is little time to think about it, in any case.

[9/9/96:23:21] I wait until the subject has entered the cabin, followed by the presumed pilot and one of the attendants. His driver remains, opens the trunk, and oversees the handling of baggage. When the subject's baggage has been emptied onto the runway, the driver gets into the car and drives back out the way he entered.

I creep into the shadows as he leaves the airport grounds and drive away.

The other attendant enters a coach and drives away. There are now only two baggage attendants on the runway.

The plane's nose faces away from me, so the pilot, if he is in the cockpit, will not anticipate my arrival.

The baggage attendants have opened the baggage compartment located under the plane and are now inserting the luggage. There is not very much of it.

I start on the move.

[9/9/96:23:23] {[ERR:Lost::Destroyed ...]}

[9/9/96:23:24] {[ERR:Lost::Destroyed ...]}

[9/9/96:23:26] {[ERR:Damaged ... ]} I promptly climb into the compartment and close the door behind me. {[ERR:Damaged ...]}

The thought that I am being set-up crosses my mind again.

I erase it. No matter. The duty. This is the job, risks or not.

[9/9/96:23:27] It is very dark in here. I feel that the air is thin. These types of planes, however, take little to no time in getting where they need to go, what with all the modern advancements in airfare. I have flown on some of them. From Washington to Dubai, ten minutes tops. It will be no problem getting to California. I have air enough till then. In the meanwhile, I will plot how I intend to covertly exit this baggage compartment upon my arrival at the Breakers Island. As a preparation, I move to the back, setting all the bags in front of me.

[9/9/96:23:28] The plane takes off.

[9/9/96:23:55] I feel the plane descend, the deafening rush of air as the landing gears engage, and finally feel the plane rumble to a gradual halt. I endure mild injuries from the jumping luggage.

[9/9/96:23:58] The latch of the baggage compartment opens and I see black arms in the darkness reaching for the bags just several feet from me. I pull out my gun and mentally prepare.

As the baggage clears there evolves a better chance that the handlers will notice my presence.

I presume that Mr. Lethe will have left already, and will expect his baggage later. That leaves only the baggage handlers—two of them from the looks of it—and the pilot, who may not be in a position to notice the baggage handlers. There may also be the presence of the companion who flew with Mr. Lethe. But I cannot think about that now. I have gotten myself into this situation, I will figure my way out of it. I have gotten myself out of tighter situations by use of sheer force.

I must assume that Lethe and whomever is driving him have left. Only the baggage handlers ...

I make my move.

[9/10/96:00:01] I crawl to the opening on my belly. Outside it is dark, but a spotlight on the runway illuminates the dusty ground beneath.

There is only one more bag. The handlers, presumably having gone to put the other bags in some sort of transport vehicle, will momentarily return.

Ah, here one comes!

I climb back so that I cannot be seen. My gun is cocked.

When he puts his arms up into the compartment to fetch the last bag, I grab them, slide forward, and shoot him in the head, then immediately pull him up into the compartment, trying not to get blood on me.

I hear his companion say, Sam, what are you doing? Why are you going in there?

I slide back, pushing the dead handler to the back of the compartment. When the second approaches and sticks his head in, I grab him by his hair and shoot him, then I scoot up, grab his arms and hoist him up into the compartment. Then I scoot back again and wait. I hear no more voices. I don't think anyone else is out there.

The plan henceforth: Should I change into the baggage handlers' clothes or keep my suit and trenchcoat on? It would look quite suspicious for a white man to be wearing a servant's uniform. Plus, I realize, there is blood all over them. I will have to keep my own clothes on. But I should lose the coat. If I am spotted by a pony, perhaps they will assume I am a resident. I take off my coat. Oh, but how will I conceal my gun? No matter, the point is not to be seen, thus the gun will not be an issue. For the time being, I stick it into my pants.

And so now what? I will jump out of this stuffy compartment, which is starting to take on the iron smell of human insides, close it, and run immediately into the darkness. There I will engage the "NightVision" mode on my *OogleGlass* contact lenses, and proceed to find a hideout. Then I will begin

my investigation. Covertly, I will assess the layout of the island, and find the ponies' quarters where I will first ask them what they know. Excellent plan. Well, as excellent a plan as any I will be able to come up with at this point.

[9/10/96:00:05] I jump out of the compartment and close it. Before me I see the car, the one presumably being used to transport the luggage. Ah! I forgot all about that. To leave it there would be suspicious. Perhaps I will take it. Perhaps no one will notice. Maybe they even left the keys inside. If not, I can hotwire it. (Admirable of them to keep wheels here.) But what are my other options? I check that my gun is securely in my pants, then I turn around.

[9/10/96:00:06] Fuck me.

It was a set up all a long.

[9/10/96:00:06] I am faced by Lucius Lethe himself along with a well-dressed black man who aims an AK-47 between my eyes. They are both smiling as if they've just trapped the ignorant little rat. I guess I am getting too old for this job.

Please don't kill anymore of my staff, says the black man, still smiling as if genuinely humored.

Lucius Lethe approaches me and pulls my gun from out of my pants, then steps back and points it at me, my own gun. Hands up, he says.

I obey.

Who set me up, I ask. I've been in these situations before. One has to remain calm, act like one is not shaken at all. Was it Monsanto, I ask. Were the D'Urbervilles working for Monsanto?

The black man replies in the negative.

Well then who are you, I ask.

I am Lawrence Hartfelt, he says, But you can call me



“Rus.”

Well fuck me again. It was a set-up all along, engineered by the party I was supposed to infiltrate. The person at the D'Urbervilles who gave me RUS's number must have been in on it, too. Damn it.

Are you going to kill me then, I ask. Is that why you invited me here? To thwart any possibility that the secrets of your island may be uncovered?

Why no, says Mr. Hartfelt, quite to the contrary. We invited you here because we knew you were hired to look for answers. Well, we will give you answers, Mr. Akridge.

Why would you give me answers if you have been working all these years to conceal them, I ask.

Hartfelt and Lethe exchange a queer glance.

There has been a change of faith, says Lethe as he pulls out a cigarette and lights it with a free hand. The time has come, he says.

The time for what, I ask.

They exchange another glance.

Come, says Hartfelt. Why don't you ask the man who invited you.

Christian Wright Boyle.

[9/10/96:00:10] Hartfelt and Lethe lead me to a black Rolls-Royce. Lethe puts my gun in his pants and takes Hartfelt's rifle as the latter gets in the driver's seat and the former nudges me at gunpoint into the rear passenger seat. Then we drive off, heading due north, I think, all the while Lethe is blowing smoke in my face.

May I, I ask.

What, he responds, still smiling for some reason, as if he likes to see me nervous.

A cigarette, I say.

Oh sure, he says. He pulls out his pack of D'Urberville

“Cohibas” and lights it for me.

It is too dark outside to really see anything; to my left I watch the dark impressions of trees rushing by in a blur, hundred, hundreds of trees. What lies behind those trees, I wonder. Graves.

What's in store for me?

[9/10/96:00:24] We pull in front of a lighted mansion. French Neo-Gothic, if my amateur architectural knowledge serves me well. It gives off the aura of some grim fairytale castle, perhaps something out of Poe ... House of Usher, maybe? And all of the windows are lighted, as if from outer space it wants its presence to be known.

Behind it I can see the ocean at the end of a long dock.

It may well be that if D'Urberville and the rest of the missing persons were indeed murdered, they were weighted and thrown into the water.

But even if this were the case, it would take an army of forensic scientists and deep-sea divers to uncover those innumerable bodies. It was hard enough to get myself onto this island, and look at what my fate has been. There is no chance in hell that anyone is going to gather enough proof about the disappearances. Any prosecution is out of the question. Based on hearsay, most likely, is how I will gather my information. That leaves the D'Urbervilles to retaliate based on a whim, a vague notion of conviction. Considering the validity of whatever information I uncover for them, they might as well retaliate now, and not even bother waste six-hundred grand on my puny observations. These people are too smart. They'll never let anything slip.

[9/10/96:00:25] Mr. Hartfelt exits the vehicle and opens the door on my side. Lucius Lethe nudges me out with the end of his gun and I silently obey.

Outside, Hartfelt says to me, We're going to see the Master, Christian Boyle.

You said that, I say coldly.

You may ask him anything you need to know, says Hartfelt. I suddenly hear the uncouth smacking of an animal's jaw, some gnarly crunching. I turn around and Mr. Lethe, chewing voraciously, has pulled from some mysterious location an apple which he holds in his free hand. When he sees me regard his manner with disgust, he holds out the fruit in offering. Repulsed, I shake my head. What queer people.

I turn back to Hartfelt. I don't need to know anything, I say. Considering my situation, I am going to be perfectly transparent with you: I was hired by the D'Urberville Foundation to continue a thirty-year search for their missing patriarch, Julian D'Urberville.

Of course we know, says Hartfelt.

They are paying me quite a large amount of money.

Surely, he replies.

So it must be obvious to you that I personally do not care whether I find out any information at all. This is a financial endeavor for me. I have no personal need to talk to Mr. Boyle. I would feel perfectly satisfied to leave now, no harm done, and we can all forget about this. If it is your wont.

Mr. Akridge, says Hartfelt, The harm's been done. You've killed two of my staff members.

I look back at Lethe, ravenously smacking with dull-eyed expression, then back at Hartfelt.

Listen, Hartfelt continues. We are not going to kill you any time soon. We set it up for you to fall into our arms, you see, at Mr. Boyle's request. Our people in the D'Urberville Foundation noted us that you were hired to embark on this adventure, and little to the knowledge of the Foundation we intercepted, as it were, your mission. Mr. Boyle has been wanting to talk to someone like yourself. Someone who will let

the world know.

Let the world know what, I inquire.

Well ... that's his bit, isn't it?

Well, why me, I question further.

Why you, he echos.

Why me, Lethe mocks through flying spittle and a half-grunted laugh.

Because, why not?

Well, I say, I thought you all wanted to keep this whole thing a big secret, right. It was a privileged party, so to speak, am I right. Why would you want to let out ... what you want to let out?

Hartfelt looks at his shoes and purses his lips. It is deathly quiet for some time. Eventually, he looks up into my eyes, almost through my eyes to my very emotions, and says: The Master feels that the game is over. It's lost it's fun, you see. The pinnacle of luxury, the orgasmic burst of excitement, has long retired, and we are now in a little death. We are tired. We want to sleep. It's all over Mr. Akridge. Mortimer Bird, John Bird, Jim Boyle, that time of great progress, frivolity, and folly, is ended. They knew, deep down in their heart of hearts, that it could not have lasted. The Occupiers knew it could not have lasted. History blared to us, that such greatness and progress always slows to an arthritic halt. My Master, Christian, feels that it's time to give it up. Fool ourselves no longer ... Come, he will explain better.

[9/10/96:00:36] I am led into the mansion through an extravagant foyer, crystal chandelier, oil portraits, ancient marble credenza, up the stairway to a mezzanine which is covered by a blood-red carpet, the exquisite softness of which I can feel through my hard soles. The wooden walls are finely detailed with impressions of ivy and leaves, little angles, fruits and berries, of Adam and Eve and fall of man. I am led to the right,

down a short and narrow hallway lined on either side by a closed door, and up another flight of stairs. At this next landing we arrive before a long airy hall, covered, likewise, by the softest carpet. Lanterns of polished gold line these walls, and they are strange because, although they are lit by oil, a flickering flame, they give off a most brilliant light. Hartfelt leads me to the first door in the hall, which is cracked open, and through which I can see the jumping light of a fire illuminate an otherwise pitch dark room. From it seeps a robust odor like fine tobacco.

This is Mr. Boyle's study, says Hartfelt. Enter. He has been expecting you.

He opens the door and I begin to go in. Aren't you also coming in, I ask him. I look to Mr. Lethe as well.

I'm going to bed, says Lethe brashly, and immediately turns with his gun to go back down the stairs.

I'll be right out here, says Hartfelt with a soothing calm and understanding in his voice. He opens the door a little wider and I walk in. Behind me I hear the gentle slam.

The odor is now quite pungent to my senses. My eyes feel as though they are being filled with dust and small wood splinters. It is very, very hot, and where I am it is very dark. To my left, two large smoking chairs separated by a narrow circular table sit in front of the licking fire. The backs of them are so tall and broad that I cannot tell which, if any, Christian Boyle is sitting in.

Then a very tired voice says, Come.

I walk toward the spot from whence that voice once came and see, when my angle improves, a thin, almost emaciated, man slouched in the cushions of the chair as if burrowing himself into it. He rests his arms on the armrests, and in one holds a tulip glass thinly coated with a burgundy liquid. He is dressed in a pinstriped vest, matching slacks, black argyle socks, and gold-buckled loafers. The sleeves of his white button-down shirt are rolled to the elbow and his tie has been

loosed. His face is that of thirty-year old prematurely aged an extra twenty. His eyes, nearly shut, are accompanied by deep wrinkles that seem to have been eroded over a number of centuries by the pattern of his tears. He wears a subtle smirk, as if that fate which clearly hunts him would be foolish to even try surprise him.

Sit, he says. I hear the slipping-up of his consonants. He is drunk, no, far-beyond. He is wavering in that middle ground between vague consciousness and incapacitation. No energy to act suddenly, but not yet at the point of repose.

I sit.

He doesn't look at me. He looks at the fire with that little grin as if in it lies his lover.

We sit like this for a good ten minutes. Sometimes he will struggle to bring his glass with its last bit of liquid to his mouth, but fail. He is weak; one would think cancer-ridden. But no.

Apparently, he is just tired.

I cross and uncross my arms and legs several times. I look around and see only impressions in the darkness, illuminated for a moment by a sudden blaze of a flame, but the flame always jumps back where it came and lights another part, and one can never get a good look at any given part of the room when one desires.

Later, Mr. Boyle stirs, says, faltering, Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Akridge.

You're welcome, is all I can think to say.

I know who has hired you and what they want.

I say nothing.

I understand their concern.

They only want information that may tell them whether D'Urberville is alive or not, I say. They don't want anything to do with you per say. They don't mean to impose upon your privacy.

Oh, but they are, he says with a surge of lively cynicism.  
I'm quiet.

No matter, he continues. I am not particularly offended.  
But ... I have things to say. Then Boyle looks right at me without lifting his head. I have things to say ... People want to know things. You see. We can help each other. They want to hear. I want to speak.

What do you want to say, I ask.

Hmm ... he muses facetiously. Well, Mr. Akridge. To satisfy your mission here ... and the foolish endeavors of the D'Urbervilles, let me give you that piece of information which your party foremost desires. ... You will never find Julian D'Urberville. He is dead. Along with everyone else who was at that party. They're all dead. But you're all smart people, you all knew that. No, what you all really want to know is who's responsible. ... Well, suffice it to say, that with your good sense, you can ascertain who was responsible. I'm not going to say who specifically took that life. No. It would be futile, worthless information at this point. But I will say this: that we are all responsible. We are all responsible for the deaths that occurred, and the deaths that continue to occur. ... D'Urberville has long been dead. Don't tell me, Mr. Akridge, that you risked your life coming here for those ... cocksuckers, the D'Urbervilles, to find out something so damn obvious.

I say nothing.

I know what you wanted. You all wanted someone to blame. And not only that, you wanted to be one hundred percent sure of who to blame. So that you all have a iron-clad reason to come here and tear down my estate ... and kill me for what my father did ... and what Bird did.

Well ...

Well, what, Mr. Akridge? Well ... Well ... Well, here's your culprit! I'm here! Go tell them. Go tell it on the mountain! It went down here on my land! We are responsible. So tell the

D'Urbervilles ... they can come and kill me! Kill me! Kill us all! It's thirty years overdue! No—fifty! One hundred! We've killed and ruined and pillaged so much, they should allow us to keep propagating, just so that they can continue to kill us for generations. I know what we have done. I know I'm a part of it. That's why I want you to tell them. Give them the proof. Straight from the horse's mouth. Tell 'em see me mono-a-mono. I'm waiting. I've been waiting all my life.

I think to myself, this was an easier mission to complete than I thought. But I also know that what's at stake here is not just the mission. This is sad man. This man is the remnant of once a great family—reduced now to a grieving pile of bones. I can't help but feel pity.

We're quiet again.

Boyle has that grin on. I know. I know what he's laughing at. He's laughing at himself.

I turn around in my chair wondering if I should leave.

Then I hear him say, But remember, Mr. Akridge ... although I know what we have done, and I know that our legacy has brought fear and loathing into the world, I will not just let this thing die. Traditions have to be respected, whether we like them or not.

What do you mean, I ask. You're going to fight them when they come?

No, he says. I won't fight them when they come. They can come, and when they kill me they can take my land or leave, whatever they want. The family tree will be uprooted. But ... right now ... you, you Mr. Big Shot Detective, you may not leave.

My heart sinks into my stomach.

You can call them on our phone tomorrow and tell them all about how we killed their dear faggot of a patriarch ... but you yourself may not leave this island.

I don't know what to say for a long time. But it slowly



comes to me—the legend. And I ask, Well, Mr. Boyle, just what happens to people after you kill them. I mean, what happens to people who stay on the island ...

One way or the other, says Boyle, they are wholly consumed.

[9/10/96:02:24] Lawrence Hartfelt enters the dry room after minutes which bleed like hours into silence. Somehow I feel that the spook of this place has taken me; I've started to drift in and out of consciousness, reality, just as, it seems, Christian Boyle does. And when Hartfelt opens the door, with that startling jolt from monotonous quiet, I feel myself plummeting from heights unfathomed by beings weighted by bodies, birds included, back into this dark and lonesome mire.

He asks, as if to the room itself, Are we all done here?

I look to Boyle. The man hasn't spoken in Heaven knows how long.

Hartfelt comes over to us, takes a look at the Master. He is still conscious, eyes still open. But something essential is missing from him.

Hartfelt chuckles at Boyle and then looks at me and asks, Have you found out your important information?

Reservedly I say, Some of it.

Well, he says, evidently finding some humor in it, Perhaps I can supplement your knowledge. When it is light.

Oh really, I reply.

Really. There is much to see, he says. Many sights, long hidden from the light, the unmarked spirit, that would seem suitable only for Greek tragedies and mythologies.

I've seen stranger and believed with less proof, I offer.

Then you'd be a perfect candidate for residency, he smiles.

I look up at him not knowing what he means.

He continues to stand over us for some time without

offering any more. I suppose that is their custom, to get the guest comfortable before making any sudden moves. But my mind soon returns to the mission ... and my own fate.

Mr. Hartfelt, I say, Mr. Boyle's said that I will be able to tell my employers that which they've paid me to discover.

Well, I don't think you've *discovered* much, Mr. Akridge.

I realize too late the soiled nature of Mr. Hartfelt's remark, but continue forthright, When will I be able to alert them?

Whenever you feel is a suitable time, Mr. Akridge.

Right. Right ... well then, afterward ...

Yes? Afterward ...

Mr. Boyle said I would not be able to leave.

That is correct, Sir. We have a room prepared for you.

I am deflated. There is no cunning footwork that will get me out of this one. Not that I can think of at this moment. Yet surely it will come. Ingenuity, some say, is my middle name.

I hope you aren't feeling too sour about that, Mr. Akridge, Hartfelt continues earnestly. It's just that, the party which has procured your services has a right to know what they've paid you to find out. And Mr. Boyle has made his feelings regarding this matter perfectly clear, I hope. But no one else, no one else, should know.

Oh, Mr. Hartfelt, you can trust me to keep a little secret. I have a reservoir of secrets and a fucking good dam.

No ... No, Mr. Akridge. This is a very sensitive secret. Very sensitive. Let the party involved respond how they will, but we will take no chances with the outside world. None. This is between the Boyles and the D'Urbervilles, Mr. Akridge. And since you've found yourself in the midst of it, your own freedom will have to be compromised.

I see, I say at length.

But fret not. You'll find your short remaining time on this island as pleasurable as you yourself would have wished it.

The women are loose, the nature is bountiful, and the food is to die for.

So I've heard, I say under a dark cloud.

Now, now. Be not so gloomy. Come, I'll show you to your quarters. This particular mansion is called the Abime. Here you will be staying.

Goody, I mumble as I stand and brush the creases of my pants.

Anything else, Sir, Hartfelt asks Boyle.

A listless Boyle struggles to shake his head.

Well then, good-night, Sir. Come, Mr. Akridge.

Am I to assume you still have my gun? I ask.

Now, Mr. Akridge, Hartfelt says swinging around to me. Is that any way to treat one's guests?

[9/10/96:03:04] I am shown to my room on the very top floor of the Abime, whereupon I am promptly bade "good-night" and the bolt to my door is locked. The room is quite barren, merely a bed and a chest of drawers. They did not even err to assume that I am so vain as to need a looking glass. These people take no chances.

I look around and observe that the windows are barred.

To what end? I think sarcastically to myself. If I were to leave, where would I go? Into darkness is the only answer, into a bleaker and even more unknown future. With this strangely comforting reality, I remove my jacket and undo my shirt buttons, laying down plank-like on the bed. But I cannot sleep; I have no inclination that sleep will soon befall me. I just lay, looking at the blank ceiling, thinking nothing, darkness. And it's good. There is no more mission. There are no more covert operations. There is only idle, quite at the mercy of the devil. And I feel a sublime closure in this cell. When one is in prison one has, at the very least, the guarantee of silence and mindrest, from a life of danger and folly, and the reassuring conviction of

an imminent, brooding fate.

[9/10/96:05:55] After several hours of infinite blankness I emerge from my dark hole to the sound of my door lock being opened. Within a moment, Hartfelt is standing smiling in the open doorway bearing a silver tray on which rests a cup of water, a bulb of what looks like cognac, and a bowl of grits-mired shrimp garnished with parley or some other piece of disposable relish.

Good-morning, he greets me as he enters and sets the tray over my still-clothed legs.

Thank you, I say, still a bit weary, but as of the first bit of delicious buttered meal and plump, fresh shrimp, my skepticism subsides.

Hartfelt stands over me while I eat, as if I am truly a baby-prisoner. He even strokes my hair, and I do not mind.

What would you like to do today? he asks.

At this point, albeit early in my tenure here, I consciously decide to submit to my jailer; thus I respond: I don't know ... Give me the rounds!

[9/10/96:07:24] I am escorted about the grounds of the Abime by Hartfelt and a woman pony. I must admit it is very beautiful.

Later, we take a car down the eastern road. Past one of the guest mansions there is a golf course and Hartfelt coaches my stroke for a while in the pleasant late-summer sun.

At one point he asks me when I would like to speak to the D'Urbervilles.

In due time, I respond, in due time ...

[9/10/96:09:49] We decide to walk back to the Abime from the golf course. During part of our conversation on the return, Mr. Hartfelt speaks very candidly to me:

You see, Mr. Akridge, while our legacy is built upon

pillars of violence, exploitation, and remorseless evil, there are pleasant times to be had in the now. If you were to exorcise the transgressions of the past from your memory, you would find the society we've built here to be near-Edenic. Indeed, you might even praise our forefathers for the sweat they've exerted to build this thing. You might even thank them, that they had the wherewithal to forsake "honest" and "just" practices to bring us the luxury that we have today. Surely, they were not purely evil or anti-social or ignorant of what is right and wrong. These words, "honest," "just," "fair," "extortion," "murder," these are social constructs. They are not the ideal in and of themselves. They are placeholders for actions. And when an action must be executed, which may digress from the *perceived* notions as represented by those words, well, it takes a real man of genius, a trailblazer, to show others the way, and to create a society as lucrative and bountiful as ours. The real innovators and movers and shakers were all perceived as lunatics when first they voiced their ideas. But now—look at the progress they've made us.

As I walk I only listen. I know this is propaganda. Sure, it's like honey to my ears; sure, I want to believe it, to live in this wonderful place forever, but can I let myself forget the truth?

And, continues Hartfelt, *Say* you were not able to disregard those actions which you hold as "wrong." Those past-committed atrocities ...

(It's like he is reading my thoughts.)

... Say that you could not live with yourself to enjoy the fruits of such rotten seeds ...

(I wait for an answer.) I say, Well ...

Hartfelt merely glances at me. Come, he says.

And what happens then I cannot even form wholly enough, though it faces me fully manifest in the real before my eyes, that I may construct some kind of opinion. What then I encounter is so massive that it transcends the comprehension of fallible human emotion. It must simply be marveled at, and then

tucked away into the little-trafficked caverns of memory:

Hartfelt led me into the forest, through a narrow clearing of trees near the grounds of the Abime, and about one hundred feet in, surrounded by the dense, rough, dark, foreboding trunks, the unforgiving Gaia, tapering columns of sunlight bleeding in as if shrinking from the darkness in which it knows it's not wanted, there was a clearing of earth as black as granite, a pit, more than twenty feet in diameter, surely fathoms deep, of which was filled hundreds of thousands of chalk-white human bones.

[9/10/96:10:30] Having returned to the Abime, in the midst of trying to erase from my mind what indeed I came here to find, Hartfelt instructs me to call the D'Urbervilles. I think it's one of his sick personal jokes—upon finding that the truth was too much to bear he instructs me to relay it to another person. I'm choking on the words as I speak to my connect in New York.

What? What? screams the man on the other end.

I ... I ... I don't know. D'Urberville's dead, that much is for sure. (I think I'll vomit) But, um, yeah, it looks like he was murdered alright. A lot of other people, too. Whatever you have to do, it's a green light from where I'm standing.

I hang up before I rush to the bathroom to vomit.

Then Hartfelt sees me to my room where I sleep the remainder of the day.

[9/10/96:18:12] I am called to dinner in the great dining hall of the Abime. There are not many people in accompaniment: myself, Hartfelt, Connor Bishop, and Christian Boyle himself. For some reason, I had imagined these dinners to be a grand, entertaining ordeal. But everyone at this table is silent, and they all look very tired.

I had also expected that there would be many courses, but in that I am also mistaken.

The women ponies come out bearing plates of

five-ounce cuts of glazed, perfectly roasted meat, dark veins of deep char running through a slate of succulent amber muscle tissue. The aroma, honey, spices, mesquite, coal, dance throughout the room and come to caress me.

In preemptive strike, my mouth waters. My heart rate speeds, I feel an animal desire come over me. Now I get nervous.

Christian Boyle, Connor Bishop, and Lawrence Hartfelt are all served, while I sit twiddling my thumbs, all eyes on me. I am suddenly urged into asking, to keep the overwhelming desire at bay, Where is Lucius Lethe this evening?

Hartfelt, with a sly grin immediately concealed by a face as hard as stone, says, Lucius Lethe went home to Jesus.

I don't know what to think.

But I don't have to, anymore.

The pony comes out with my plate, holding it at an angle from which I cannot see its contents. My blood vessels pump like eight-cylinder engines. I am frightened and intrigued, simultaneously and alternately, much like a small child lost in a circus.

And Lawrence Hartfelt says, So ... you wanted to get to the heart of the matter. Well, today's your lucky day! And he laughs viciously, spittle and food pellets flying, and Christian and Connor join in, and they're all laughing like maddening clowns as the pony sets my plate before me and I look down and there upon it sits like a dead thing something which looks suspiciously like a charred human heart.

And I think I see it beat.

I am petrified, my fork and knife in each hand. I can only stare at it. My mouth open, the aroma coaxing saliva from the edges of my lips. My eyeballs twitching. The dead thing sitting there, taken out of context, looks grotesque, and finally, as everyone has been watching me, waiting for me to take the first bite, Hartfelt finally says, What's eating you?

[9/10/96:19:05] There are so many things I am now trying to forget.

Wandering about the great halls of the Abime, aimless wandering. I walk without my feet touching the floor, gliding; I look at my surroundings without seeing. I hear without listening. Oh, my senses taunt me. I feel overburdened with sensation. I am like some ghost, some apparition, enjoying life among the living, yet already dead.

That meal festers in my stomach. I try, I try, but I can't ignore it. I hear its beat—*thump-thump, thump-thump* ....

I hear it's beat down in my gut, and I know .... I know.

And I'm trying to forget. I've committed the act. This is the payment.

And yet I understand all too well, that an indebted man repays the first installment of his loan with gratitude.

So thank you.

I wander to the third floor, past Christian Boyle's study, the fire going. Down the hall there is an open door into which I pass. And it is almost dark, lighted by a single candle, that is all. And what it illuminates is a form, not a person per say, but the form of one, withering away.

I glide in and come upon her—a corpse of a dame, wrinkled beyond salvation, like the bark of an old tree stump. Hair wispy as cobwebs, and if I were to touch it I'd think it would dissipate like smoke. Her arms and torso are bones wrapped tightly in molded flesh like a thin sausage, smelling of mildew. Trackmarks dot her inner arms like archipelagos. Liverspotted breasts, where they are bare. Her beige satin nightgown was evidently applied carelessly, and here she lays, covered to her midriff by the comforter, and left nearly exposed at the top. But who'd be aroused by the sight of this dame but Death himself.

I know this woman. She used to be a fox alright, I've



seen pictures of her in the early Thirties. She was something to behold, I tell you. I can see why one wealthy heir, and then another and then another, all fell for her. But now, eyes closed, mouth left open welcoming flies, she is like a sleeping beauty left to rest far too long. And yet it's a testament to her, her decrepit state, for she has outlasted all of them. Where are they, tell me? Dead. And here you are, hanging on by a thread, as if that is better than nothing.

They seem to have forgotten her, the dead and the living, made up their minds that she once was, and now can be left to rot, for her ideal exists in their minds; damn the real, they say. They've left her near her fate; she is of no practical use anymore, I guess. What she once signified died long ago, that innocence and purity, and so what now is needed of the signifier?

Dear Madame Broom, you were an idol once to me, too. Your chest rises and falls like the accomplishments of all the men you loved, but is there any *spiritus*, any life, left inside? I don't think I want to know. Oh, there's so much I don't want to know, but must! But no, I must leave that truth, and you, to ashes, dust to dust.

She opens her eyes then, as if my private soliloquy has summoned her from that dark place she lay. And she looks at me, here eyelids quivering, her muscles straining to execute this one last act. And she closes, then opens her mouth, trying to expel some last words.

What is it, I ask quietly. What do you want to say?

And she looks right into me, lifts her fragile arm; I take her hand. And she says, Tell them ... to forgive us ... forgive us ....

And then, by all accounts, though her eyes remained open, her grip as tight as it had been a second prior, she seemed to stop breathing, and I heard a hollow sound like a breeze of air down a long hallway.

[9/10/96:20:24] Before I go to bed I peek my head into Christian Boyle's study. I don't know what I expect to find. I don't know what I intend to say to him. I don't know if I should tell him ... I guess I just wanted to feel that eerie aura again.

I can't see him, but I know he is sitting in his smoking chair before the licking fire. And under the crackling of the flames, and the bright, exalted howls of all the nighttime creatures, I hear him lightly sing one of the songs from time long passed:

*Early Man walked away, as Modern Man took control,  
Their minds weren't all the same, so to conquer was  
his goal,  
So he built his great empire, and he slaughtered his  
own kind,  
And he died a confused man, killed himself with his  
own mind,  
Ohh ...  
We're only going to die for our own arrogance,  
So we might as well take our time ...*



## II    Wondrous Heavy

## Chapter 1

### Ennui

My mother is heavily sedated. Every morning and every evening Jackson administers her an elephant's dose of assorted opiates. After her evening injection he gives her her sponge bath. Father would, but he's tired, and he like the rest of us deals with his pain privately. The guests pay no mind; they've accepted that their hosts are a queer bunch, and of late have thought little more on the subject. They're tired, too, that's why they come here. We are all tired. We are all alone here and we are dead.

Jackson is my brother. Sometimes I have to remind myself of that because he is quite unlike myself or Clair or Father in that he tends to Mother almost obsessively, as if it was she who sprang forth from his womb. I suppose he's taken on the burden of the family, the will to act, if only in regard to Mother. Apart from him we Boyles are a listless bunch, a temperament that has perhaps been imposed upon us by Father in his incessant drinking and Mother in her psychosis. They, my parents, developed this coping mechanism as some strange effect of post-traumatic stress, but this is only speculation. What was the trauma? I can only guess. They don't tell us, they don't tell us anything, they're so tired. Surely their temperament is due, but what have we, the children, done to inherit this perpetual melancholy? Like the myriad guests come and gone, we simply accepted our parents' stasis; Clair and I, we tried to curb it the best we could. We cared for nothing but over-indulgence. Clair indulged in more promiscuous ways than I, who was enamored with simple food and drink, and who sometimes would walk into Father's study where he languished upon his smoking chair and slip the bottle of brandy right out of his feckless grip, and share a drink with him, a little father-son time ...

But I've long grown tired of this decadence.

I find myself in a wood. By the cluster of trees closest to

my father's mansion at the northernmost cost of the island, I am in aimless trot. Out here there is no over-abundance, just abundance. Everything is just the right amount, everything in its right place. Would one lament that there are too many trees? Deep in the forest it gets dark quickly. Sounds fall out like something from the bottom of the ocean. I look away. I can see Father's mansion, the Abime, we call it, far over yonder. This is the north.

On the eastern coast of this ovalish island there lie two mansions in which guests stay. Another such residence lies at the southern coast. At different times there may be one to five families occupying each residence. Although our guests are people who prefer privacy over commune, the sixty-room hotels provide more than enough space for them to stretch their arms. Clair and I used to play *The Shining* in the south mansion as children. When Father would send Jackson down to fetch us for dinner we'd pretend he was Jack, and oh how he could get so in character without even realizing it.

The summer is naturally the busy season. But it's fall now and only gray people take up lodging in out midst. The sky is a dusty blue, bleeding a little purple through lacerations in the clouds. It is the weather which overwhelmingly dictates the mood here. It's like we have no agency of our own.

Branches crack under my feet, trees beginning to die for the season, and send echos in and out of the forest. I turn my head and see the Abime recede behind me as I venture south along the western road. There is one more mansion on the island, about two miles south of the Abime on this side. That's the Old Bird Mansion. No one goes there.

It being about seven in the evening, the sun beginning to retire, having dawned its purple gown of dusk, I presume the dinner bell shall soon, beckoning all those illustrious guests wealthy 'nough to afford their stay here on Father's resort to dine upon

our most coveted and revered entree: a secret recipe of meat developed on this island over twenty years ago. It is our calling card, for any wealthy person can find serene and exquisite lodgings in any of the resort islands which populate the California coastline, but none of them can offer what guests time after time profess is the most delicious meal they have ever eaten in their entire life. It has made us extremely famous on the mainland, and even throughout Europe. Guests clamber for a reservation just to taste a bit of gravy. But of course reservations are hard to come by. We would not give them out like coupons. No, our prices and selective decision process filters out any undesirables. We even take our name from the old Rhode Island Vanderbilt mansion as a testament to antiquity: The Breakers. Having come from the best, created by the best, and serving the best in drink and cuisine, it is clear what our requirements must be for our guests. Only the best dine with us.

Dinners are a communal activity here on the Breakers Island. It's optional, of course, but while most guests keep to themselves for the greater part of the day and evening, they like to take an hour or two to converse and be merry with the others. And very interesting people come here, so dinner conversation is often lively. We once catered the former president of Russia. The executives of the New Standard Oil company often take their vacations here. Chinese businessmen come here to cut deals, and Louis Guermantes of the Guermantes Crime Syndicate often comes here to escape persecution on the mainland, for while we are proudly American, make no mistake about that, Father has made it clear that no federal authorities are welcome here. And what would the government do after such a bold assertion? Send twenty more of their spies to be shot down and never heard from again? Hah. With all the causalities they might as well by now call this a civil war. But the Senators would have none of that. They like to come here as well.

One evening about six months ago Senator Mark

Andrews of New Jersey had taken lodgings in the south mansion and enlightened us as to the nature of these federal visits.

"I'm real sorry about that, guys," he said, cutting his meat. "The Bureau's got it into its head that terrorist factions have killed a number of very important American businessmen."

"But that was twenty years ago, their disappearances," Father said tiredly as he sipped his cognac. He sat at the head of the long redwood table. Senator Andrews sat three chairs down to the right of him and I sat directly to the left of him.

"The investigation's been ongoing since '67. And even if they stopped their search, the families would be so appalled that they'd continue privately. But why would the Bureau give up their search? These are not just any men that have gone missing. CEOs. *Huge* corporations. It's not like they wouldn't be missed."

Father gave an unconvinced grunt of acknowledgment.

"Look, Boyle, I'm not saying anything. If it were up to me, then we'd stop bothering you. You run a nice, legitimate place here. But, I mean, they were last known to have come here for some kind of meeting with John Andrew Bird. You were there, too, right?"

"Whatever. It's over. Twenty years ago."

"I understand. I completely sympathize."

"It's very hard for me to think about that time."

"I know, I know."

"I just want to live in peace."

"I know. Look, I know. But the fact of the matter is that this island is in fact the place of disappearance of six very important individuals. Not to mention that the Bureau has been getting reports that several people known to have taken vacation here in the last ten years have also never come home." Senator Andrews then assumed a queer look of skepticism.

Father's eyes were closed.

Senator Andrews ate his meat. "This is delicious by the



way,” he said while chewing. “I know why people come here so often, now, despite the possibility that they may never return home.”

“Laugh now, cry later, Senator Andrews,” said Father.

Senator Andrews washed down his meat with the *Romane Conti*.

I had known about the disappearances, but in no way due to Father ever talking about it. Even when I ask him about it directly he doesn't talk about it. But every so often a helicopter will appear upon the horizon. Sometimes, on very rare occasions, it is allowed to land and an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation will come out inquiring as to the whereabouts of one Julian D'Urberville. I am in charge of greeting any guests at the airfield, wanted or unwanted. Most of the time I meet guests on my own but in these cases I am accompanied by a pony named Lawrence Hartfelt, the only member of the help who reports directly to my father. A very upright, refined, commanding yet gentle person, he would at this point touch my shoulder and tell me that my father had given him instructions on how to deal with the agent, and that I could go back to the house. They would then get into a black Rolls-Royce and the pony would drive the agent toward the Old Bird Mansion. Of course, neither the agent nor the pilot would ever be heard from again. I don't know why the FBI continues to investigate this matter. Most of the time the helicopters are shot down over the ocean by anti-aircraft rifles my father had installed before I knew anything about it. Now it seems normal to shoot down legitimate agents of the government. It's like we're our own country.

“These are the problems of big government,” said Father through a sigh.

“I completely agree,” said Senator Andrews stuffing his face. “But I can't tell the Bureau to discontinue their investigation. And, in fact, if I did, it would most definitely

make me look suspicious.”

“Well, as long as this goes on you're a party to murder, Senator.”

From his expression, this struck Senator Andrews as confusing.

“What are the papers saying about this anyway?”

Senator Andrews was amused. “The papers? That's to assume people still read. The papers don't report anything about this. They don't report anything about anything. Tabloids. The movies. I don't know. That's all they talk about. It's the 'Anonymous' groups that we've got to watch out for, though. Rogue journalists. We block them from the public servers, though. People can't access them through V.R. But the little fucks who don't wear their V.R. glasses, or who are accessing the internet through unregistered networks, they can get a hold of this information pretty easily. But what are they gonna do with it, right?”

I spoke up. “V.R?”

“Virtual Reality,” said Senator Andrews. “Most Americans live it. I don't blame 'em. It's a wasteland out there. Crazy *not* to wear your V.R. glasses.”

Father seemed to be dozing off at this point, so I took over the conversation. “So, Senator, you're saying that the people don't know or even care about these disappearances.”

“Pretty much.”

“Then why are you—well, excuse me, the Bureau—still investigating these cases.”

“The families want them found. Or at least they want answers.”

We were silent while Senator Andrews finished his meat and drank the last of his wine. Then, after wiping his mouth, he looked me earnestly in the eyes. “Listen, Christian,” he said cutting his eyes at Father, “Tell me honestly. What do you think happened to the missing cases?”

“I didn't know Mr. D'Urberville, or Mr. Wall, or any of those men.”

“But people have disappeared since then. You've known people who have just ... up and gone away. Vanished. Into thin air. Do you have any idea what could have happened to them?”

A smirk crept into the corner of my lips, not because I knew, for I didn't know for sure, but because if I had told him what everyone on the island *says* happened to the missing guests then he would have thought us all fools, and gullible recipients of Father's bullshit who all deserve whatever will happen to them. “Senator Andrews,” I said, trying to think of something that would keep the conversation from going where it should never go, “Sometimes people just disappear.”

The sky is darkening but there is light enough to see, so I continue walking. In these walks I always find myself heading toward the Old Bird Mansion. I don't know what I expect to find there. I never go in because of the legend, but its exterior alone fills me with something that I feel lacking in my daily life. Maybe it's fear. Maybe it's mystery. A testament to a past that's been concealed. Daily life is all too predictable. What happened before my time is a source of wonder and dread, the dread of knowledge. It's invigorating to finally come upon it and behold it in all its sublime wonder. But at that point in my walk, which always takes place in the evening before dinner, the sky begins to conceal again that great mystery, obscuring it in darkness.

I pass the big tree that lays on the outskirts for the forest, almost at the dirt road, upon which is strung a wooden swing and in the trunk of which is carved within a heart “CB&LL,” and think that maybe I'll at least reach the Old Cabin which lies about three-quarters of mile from the mansion proper. It also fills me with dread and wonder, for the legend of this island is said to have sprung forth from that place.

Coming toward me from down the road I see a figure

vaguely obscured by the twilight. His silhouette moves with great conviction and I think that maybe it's—. No. It's not. It approaches and I see that it is clothed like the rest of us, in a black suit and tie, so it cannot be—the monster.

It is Schlitz Koppenuck, and he passes by with with a flame in his eye, looking ever-forward, past me, as if I am not here. He holds his gun tightly in front of him. I turn to watch as he continues up the road toward the Abime, walking, as he does, with much purpose. I turn back around, and out of the evening air comes his familiar scream: “Revenge!”

Mr. Koppenuck is a man of little sanity. He walks the grounds of the estate with his finger on the trigger of a loaded Luger screaming “Revenge!” to no one in particular every so often and looking around menacingly. He came here with his wife some nine months ago intending only to stay a few months. He had just retired from his position as COO of Horizon Telemobile Corporation and wished to live in pure bliss and leisure for a while. But two months later as they were beginning to depart, his wife disappeared. He blames the monster rumored to inhabit this island. Every dinner he re-declares his vendetta against the monster, and will not leave the island until he had found and killed it. We all pity him, but leave him be despite his loaded weapon, because he will never find the monster. Though strange things tend to happen on these grounds, I do not think anything so silly as a monster exists. As long as he pays his weekly boarding cost we leave him be. He is quite wealthy, although, like I said, short of common sense.

The dinner bell rings throughout the island, a great resonating gong. Like Mr. Koppenuck, all the guests will shortly arrive in the great dining hall of the Abime and await their meat. But I think I shall not go in to dine with the rest this evening. I am too tired to entertain company. I'll keep walking.

I stray from the dirt road into a field knee-high with weeds, heading toward the Old Cabin; but night is falling fast

and I don't think I'll make it in time.

Within the Old Bird Mansion many dreadful things are rumored to have taken place, most supposed to have occurred right before my birth, but no one can agree as to which thing it is. But in the Old Bird Cabin, where once his pony servants lived, we all agree as to the dreadful thing it possessed. I'll tell you right now, people living insulated for so long a time can come to think strange, impossible things as true. Would you balk if I told you that from that very cabin sprung the devil incarnate himself? Yes, believe it or not. It is the result of niggers and their witchcraft. Supposedly, some poor misguided nigger wench summoned His Infernal Majesty, lay with him, and convinced a child. She was at this time in the service of Sir John Bird, who thought little of the belly, save that ponies are reckless in their promiscuity. But, alas, the child was born, an offspring of the devil himself, who proceeded then to murder his God-forsaken mother, her mortal husband, and all the residents of the Bird mansion—Mr. D'Urberville, Mr. Wall, Mr. Mittel, Mr. Donahue, Mr. Gallagher, Mr. Bird himself, and one Mr. Pierre, who was my mother's late boyfriend. Only my father and mother survived; in the chaos he lead her to safety in the Abime, where he was living at the time. And then, it is rumored, the monster left the mansion and went off into the woods where it has lived ever since. This is the story of the island that has both attracted the interest of adventurous guests and frightened them upon their arrival. Yet they come back for more. Funny how people indulge the evil with innocence of mind. The fact that the disappearances have continued through the years only corroborates the story and attracts more guests.

But do I really believe this? I think that Mr. Koppenuck and all of our thrill-seeking guests are mistaken; there is no monster. I should say that I do believe inexplicable phenomenon pepper this strange island, but I do not believe that the monster is a physical thing, rather some apparition or black hole that cannot

be seen. Its presence, however, is definitely palpable and I do believe that it originates in the Old Cabin. As one approaches one can detect an aroma of sulfur such as haunts the devil-begotten villain of a romantic German tale. It is appealing to me.

*Something* definitely exists here, for besides Mrs. Koppenuck, one-hundred twenty-three people, guests and federal agents alike, have disappeared from these grounds in the past twenty years, since my father impregnated my mother with Jackson, decided to marry her, remain in the midst of this evil, and invite other guests to share their experience. What kept them here? Why didn't they leave the moment they got the chance? What keeps visitors coming to this God-forsaken place? Perhaps evil is exhilarating. Perhaps they all want to die, to disappear ... I do.

Maybe I don't want to die, I don't know. Now that it's begun maybe I want to see how it will all end. It is the great story. Maybe you don't get the best story, but it's the most meaningful because it's happening to you. Or maybe the great story is not your own, but another's, one who is close to you. Either way, you want to see it play out. Maybe it'll get good by the end.

But if God said, Christian Boyle, you may dwell in the eternal blissful nothing forever, or be incarnated on earth where you will suffer, only salvaging scraps of bliss from heaps of bad, I would take the former. Who wouldn't? Who would rather live in the wicked world and fend for one's self rather than dwell in the womb with all that is needed provided? Who would *want* to work? Honestly. This country was based off work, way back when. This country preached work. But it was the bankers, the landowners, the heads, who lived in leisure off the work of others. Who really wants to work? I would rather dwell in the nothing, for it is there from which all things spring. Something spontaneously sprung from nothing. What was before the big bang? Where did the sun come from? Something could not

have existed forever, for all things come to an end, but nothing—you don't need anything to have nothing. Therein lies the simple beauty. I like to live simply.

Suddenly, at a pained howl from some unseen animal, my thoughts scatter like a swarm of locusts. I turn from the field back toward the trees beyond the road just as the last echoes of that dreadful scream subside in waves. A tribe of crows rise up out of the tops of the trees and pepper the purple sky then disperse, like smoke dissipated. They squawk their squealing cry, which echoes off the enclosed dome of the earth. It is like the ringing of an alarm; a multitude stirred all into one, a tempest of sound and fury, a war upon the ears. Then it stops, leaving me in breathless await of its return.

But it does not.

Nothing to something, back to nothing. Here is peace. I find myself in a meadow. It is quiet. Here is death. In the cry of a thousand black crows there is life, the exhilaration, the momentary rupture of monotony, and then, a moment later, there is silence, death, again. I don't think it's worth a thought whether I would rather live in silence than chaos. Sure, the squawk jolts my heart from somewhere deep deep inside and makes me feel alive, but when it's over it's as if it never happened, and I walk on into this great nothing.

Yes, sometimes I wish to perish, so that there may finally be true silence, utter nothing. I wish to emerge from my blank insides to die in another darkness. ... Not die, per say, but perhaps to languish at the hands of a calm and widdling carpenter, widdle me down to a beautiful corpse, or drown in the river Lethe, or something remorseless like that—let's not make this a scene when it doesn't have to be, rather a smooth transition—and if not that then to be suddenly consumed by some darkness, some abyss. It is apropos, monster, that you've found yourself begotten on my little island. As you were destined to terrorize, I am destined to be your victim. I want you

... er ... I want something ....something new ....release me from this boring decadence. Find me ....I'm out here waiting for you.

Eadg! Listen to me go on. Inviting an imaginary monster to chauffeur in my Armageddon.

I'm just so very tired, I'll take anything short of nothing.

Nothing ....or something?... Father, when he is sober 'nough to speak, says I don't know what I want. He says I am spoiled, that all of us are spoiled, that we cannot work for what we want, that we all want the world on a platter short of that which is unattainable. But he is also drunk and knows not of what he speaks. He should look into a mirror if he wants to see "spoiled." He's a man burning out on his own decadence. Like a bronze turned rusty green he fades day by day. He gives us no sense of hope. He gives us no part of himself now, when he's alive. What will he give us when he goes? The land? The mansions? He values them only as his tomb. He never said, Son, let's go fishing, or, Son, let's go hunting, or even, Son, this is how you love. He never taught us to appreciate anything, not this land nor humanity. He never taught us to love. Without love nothing holds value. This land means nothing. Jackson'll probably sell it. And then what? Not a colorful fart not a thumbprint.

I've seen old pictures of Pa. Since Mother is the way she is and none of the guests knew him in his prime, and he himself has drunk his memory from memory, I can only surmise what he was from his photographs. He was a thick, strong man. Smart. He has photographs from Harvard Compound back in the Thirties with his classmates. Donahue, Duke Wall, Julian ....now they've all disappeared and so has he. He used to be full, red-cheeked and robust like strong tobacco. He smiled. Only have I seen him smile in photographs. I'm sure I'd have liked him back then. But now, I don't know. Somewhere along the line, before we were born, he was lit, and slowly after that he has burned away. What's left now? The cherry approaches the filter



of the cigarette. Soon it will extinguish itself, and we will be left as ash.

Who values ash? Flicked, it is not even considered litter. We break apart and fly away, becoming what is essentially air already stained by pollution. We are all alone, and we are dead.

Mine is a lonely story, a narrow road aching to be split, a blue sky aching to gray, to thunder. A fat hog squatting on a little log. Mine is the story of a sad and barkless dog. I am china gathering dust in a cabinet, aching to be filled—used, not merely admired. I have seen so many riches in Father's mansion that emeralds now strike me as expendable as blades of grass, blades of grass yet precious, each one of them. Rubies are as lamentable as poisonous berries, yet that poison I wish to feast upon. A diamond would be of little more interest to me than a pebble scattered in the dirt road, yet in that road I clamber to find the smoothest rock. Of late, everything out *here* I fancy more than things indoors. It fills me with a great unnameable purpose, and though I am tired still, I have strength enough to wander, for I love being tired but I hate being bored.

The court is thoroughly deserted. The fields are choked with weeds. The granaries are altogether empty. Darkness falls and I know I will have to turn back now. But wait. What figure comes from over the field?

I stand still and find at length that it is she who comes. Renata.

As she approaches me her figure appears illuminated in the moonlight, as if she was the jazz singer under a lunar spotlight all her own. She appears as clear to me as if she herself radiates with such brilliance, and as she nears she smiles and whispers “Christian,” as if the monster were near.

I reply, “Renata, what are you doing out so late? The dinner bell's rung. Why don't you eat?”

She says, “I could ask you the same.”

"You know I don't eat in the dining hall all that often."

"I do know. I've come out to find where you escape to."

"You need to be with the others. I—I don't matter. I've lived here for years. There's nothing new for me to experience. But you, you should experience the things we offer."

"Nah, I'd rather just experience you." Then she smiles and touches her hand embarrassed to her cheek, and looks at me with one eye. "I mean ... you know what I mean. I just don't think the whole organized dinner is as much fun as others think it is."

I'm glad the night veils my blush. As far as I can tell she can't see the boyish change in my expression that Clair says comes so rapidly to light when I'm near her.

She's but a foot from me now and I can see her perfectly. Her hair is a red like rust. On her cheeks a fading rose. Her skin has the richness of freshly-uddered milk and her frame is as delicate as the high branches of the forest trees in autumn. My eyes fall down her subtle curves. Her breasts, sometimes I notice, are almost perfectly spherical, like two halves of a honeydew. To the touch, surely more like the meat than the rime.

I can feel my heart rate rising. It's pitiful when in the face of love a man becomes a cliché. *Sweaty palms. Heart rate rising. Blood rushing. A nervous tick.*

"What's wrong?" she asks touching my arm.

"Nothing," I say trying to keep my third leg from bending.

"It is dark, though," she says, suddenly resuming our previous conversation. "We should walk back."

I look into her face, which one could have mistaken as the moon itself. She has deep craters where her eyes are, which makes her look kind of emaciated, kind of dead. There's a lot of character in those depressions.

"So ... You want to walk me back to the Abime?" she

asks, and at this point I pick up that she has been asking me the same thing in several different ways.

“Oh, right, right. I was actually just on my way to where you were coming from. But it's gotten too dark anyway.”

She smiles and takes my hand, leading me through the field back up the island.

“What were you doing down by the Old Bird Mansion anyway?”

She rocks her head back and opens her mouth for a silent laugh. “I don't know. It's silly.”

“No, no, it's not. I go there all the time. Just to look.”

“... Yeah, I guess I do the same thing. It's just so spooky. Like, what really happened there? Did a devil-monster really kill everyone? And Sir Boyle and Madame Broom witnessed it with their own eyes? Imagine witnessing something like that. No wonder they're so ...” She looks at me then lowers her eyes.

“No, it's okay. They are ... whatever they are.”

“Tired.”

“Yeah, tired. Something like that can tire a person out.”

She's walking with her head down. I steal one more glance. Waify, nymphish, short pixie haircut, like those girls I'd read about in the early twenty-first century. But there's something distinctly natural about her. She is pastoral in her appearance, almost to a degree that is alien to civilized men. (But, to be completely honest, we here are all men so far now removed from civilization that nothing is alien; the sublime is coveted ... Like nature she resonates an unknowable truth. She is like what we call the physical world, which is not physical at all but illusory, merely quantum fluctuations in nothingness, she exists ethereal, as if on air. A space cadet, they say she's not all there. But what do you expect when her father disappeared two months ago. Nevertheless ... ) I find myself drawn to her like the wood.

We return to the dirt road and see the light of the Abime ahead of us. We walk in silence. Crickets stroke their hind legs nervously, the moan wind blows in from the static crashing of the ocean surrounding us. Our own feet hitting bare earth adds percussion to the opera of night. I listen closely to the forest ... perhaps from deep within I'll hear the cries of the monster. I wonder if she listens, too?

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

She looks at me with concern. "What?"

"Were you listening?"

"To what?"

"The forest."

"... Yeah. Why? Did you hear ... ?"

"Him."

"It?"

"Whatever he, it, is."

"You heard it?"

"Yeah, he said, 'I ... want ... white ... meat.'" I laugh.

"Shut up. That's not funny."

I shut up. It wasn't funny. "That wasn't funny," I say. We're silent for a while, then I ask, "Do you miss him?"

She turns to me. "Of course I do, what kind of question is that?"

"Sorry. You just seem so ... nonchalant about it."

She looks ahead. "Things happen."

"Not really. Not everyday that your father gets eaten by a nigger."

She's quiet. I might have offended her. But she continues to hold my hand. We're quiet for a while longer as we pass the northern edge of the wood. Then I say, "You hear that?"

She says, with a hint of annoyance, "What?"

"That." I stop and she stops; I still hold her hand. "Listen. It's very quiet."

In the darkness, I think I see her squinting. "What does

it sound like?"

"It says, *ummmmmmm*."

She listens. "I hear it. It's really low."

"Yeah."

"What is that?"

I think, then say, "Everything."

She lets go of my hand in front of the Abime and turns around to me. "Are you hungry?" she asks.

"What? Not really. Why would you ask that?"

"I don't know. If you weren't going to the dining hall, I was going to say you could come to my room. I have ... books and stuff. You know, or we could listen to records."

I can feel my heart beat rise again. I touch two fingers lightly to her hip and she grips my forearm. I feel drawn in ...

"Once a bitch always a bitch, that's what I say," I hear out of the night.

I turn my head, startled, and see Jackson's lanky six-and-a-half foot figure silhouetted on the landing at the top of the stair. His hands are on his hips and his biceps looks meatier than usual. The sleeves of his white shirt are rolled past his elbows and four buttons are undone at the top. He seems to look out past Renata and I and says, "Where's that little slut?"

Renata and I relieve each other of our touch. "Who are you talking about?" I ask.

"Your fucking sister."

I move toward him. "I'm getting tired of you saying things like that."

"Don't get mad at me, Christian. She acts like a slut, that's what she should be called. She's been out somewhere with that Lucious Lethe since before dinner."

"Lucious Lethe ..."

"Yeah, I saw them leave together and head south-east along the edge of the forest," Renata says.

I look at her, look at Jackson, then head back toward the wood.

“Wait, Christian ...” she says, but by the time she finishes the rest of her sentence, I’m out of earshot.

I find them almost immediately coming up the eastern road. She walks three feet from him, as if they’re strangers. That’s the way she is, the way she’s acted toward all of her “friends.” She knows they’ll leave or they’ll disappear, so she’s intimate when it suits her and distant at all other times. Lucius is a tall twenty-something with a scruff of beard and long black combed-back hair, just like his brother Harlem. They’re the twin sons of some top-ranking executive of the Arms Conglomerate and have taken a three-week vacation here. As they approach I see that she has crossed her arms and looks out into the distance as he flashes me a coy smile. I grimace at him and walk straight toward Clair. “What are you doing out here,” I scold. I grab her hand and lead her away; she follows indifferently.

“Having a fine evening, Christian?” Lucius says calmly.

I turn my head to him and he’s lighting a cigarette. “Lucius,” I say, and hurry on up the road.

When we reach the front steps of the Abime I stop and turn to her, placing my hands on her shoulders. They feel like metal railings. Cold. I look into her eyes, green, and smile, or try to at least. She says, “What?” delicately, like a child.

“You’re old enough to know what,” I say. “That Lucious Lethe. He’s, what, twenty-five, twenty-six?”

“So. I don’t know how old he is.” She looks away. I bring her back around with my forefinger on her chin.

“You attract scandal going out time after time with these men.”

“They’re harmless.”

“Clair, I am a man. I know how they think.”

“What are you saying? You’re barely a man. When was

the last time you were with someone. Renata? I know you haven't pulled that trigger yet."

She says this without malice so I ignore it. She looks at me like I'm her little brother when I am in fact her superior, and I feel somewhat castrated, but her gaze returns me to comfort, a sense of never having been a man, and thus never fearing to lose that sense of myself it entails; infantile, blissful, pure. "It doesn't matter," I say. "Other men see you so loose, they'll think that they can just take it."

"Take what?"

"That ... part of you ... what you give that is so special, that should be well-considered when brought out."

"There's nothing special about *that*. It's just a little fun, Christian. You know fun is scare here. And what if these men you speak of want *it*? I'm no stranger to philanthropy. I'll give it—I'll give it all up! I sure as hell don't need it."

"You must retain your innocence, though. At least your sense of identity. Think of what letting all these men into you does to your sense of self. You start to feel less like a whole person, like you need someone to fill you up in order to feel whole."

"Don't tell me what I feel."

"I just don't want you losing yourself ... as a Boyle. We are a refined family."

"Hah! This family? In action, there's nothing refined at all. An aristocracy founded purely on money is a peculiar dynasty indeed. It predicates nothing on taste. Nothing on culture or intelligence."

"What? The land. The paintings. The fine wine, the meat, for god's sake, if nothing else. We have class."

"*Psh.*"

"Whatever. That's not the point. The point is your innocence."

"I wish you'd stop talking about 'my innocence.' If

you're so concerned about it you should go out into the woods and search for it. But by now it's probably been consumed by the monster.”

“Clair ...”

“And don't try to tell me about rape, as you've tried to do in so many words, Christian. I'm in no danger. You know what you're afraid of? You're afraid that I have control. My actions are mine, and you as a man can't chose for me if I am already giving it away. You think penis has power over me? Hah! I've taken that power away. If I give it up willingly, in pleasure, then you can't hurt me because of it.”

I am speechless.

Then she replaces the anger in her countenance with seduction, and says, “You jealous?”

She draws me in—to those eyes—but I break free, let my hands fall from her shoulders and say, “No. You're sick, girl.”

She smiles at me with a deeper knowledge of myself then I myself possess. I think I am concealing something that I obviously let on.

“I don't mean to judge you,” I say with my head down.

“That's all I want.” She puts her warm palm to my cheek and I hope the darkness conceals my blush. “Just let me live. I already know what Jackson says about me behind my back. I need at least one family member who loves me unconditionally, you know? I just want to have a little fun. To salvage what pleasure's locked up in this dead rock of an island. How I go about it should be irrelevant to you all. You're the only one who takes concern, really, and I love you for it, but it doesn't matter. Ma and Paw are too apathetic and there is no god to judge me. So you can stop taking on the burden of these inadequate authorities. I'm the only one who needs to worry about it.”

She is much wiser than I, and I think I let that on. But I want to be her big. I want to make sure she knows I care,



because who cares anymore? "Maybe no one cares what you do, but you must hold yourself to standards."

"I'll decide what those are."

"Okay," I say. At the sound of footsteps in the grass I look up and see Lucius Lethe finishing his cigarette as he approaches. He tosses the butt to the side of him and I say, "Don't litter on my land."

Lucius smiles and says, "Oh, so sorry, Massa Christian. Won't happen no mo'." He looks at Clair who looks at him. "Late dinner?" he asks.

"Let's see if there's any food left," says Clair.

"I'm starved," he says walking between us and beginning to ascend the stairs. "That meat's got a hold on me. I go more than ten hours without a bite and I feel like some famished African. Or sheeperson for that matter. Clair, darling, you're good but I can't eat you."

"Get the fuck out of here," I say.

Lucius puts up his hands defenselessly and goes inside. Clair gives me a last lascivious look. I kiss her near her mouth and she follows him in.

I don't feel like eating right now. And I don't feel like seeing anyone, either. I walk around to the side of the Abime and look out past the dock and the yacht to the moon-lit ocean and the sparkling onyx night. They say you can't see the stars in the big cities. If I lived there I'd probably have to fling myself from the top of one of those office buildings of Babel just to get a better view and simultaneously stifle the feeling of complete nothing, for a life without human interaction may be sublime, but a life without light is an abyss. The ocean and the sky blend into one slate of rock, bright white veins extending throughout. That great body of water like an old man's wrinkly forehead. It surely possesses some great wisdom which, because I cannot swim, shall never be known to me. God hides all the world's secrets at the bottom of the ocean.

Few guests are still seated at the dining room table as I pass by on my way through the foyer. Lucius and Clair are eating voraciously. Mr. Koppenuck is lamenting the loss of his wife as he does every evening even though everyone else has stopped caring. Harlem Lethe comes in and out of the dining room holding a glass of malbec and Thomas Thompson and Aleksander Hortkva converse privately under the Pollock. I don't feel like talking. As I pass the entrance I look up and see Jackson standing on the mezzanine. He looks down at me and I return his malicious glare unknowingly. Then he slowly releases the railing from his grip and disappears through the threshold to the right. I feel like he's still there, though. I always feel his glare on me in this house.

I go to my room by way of the kitchen stairway just to avoid him. My room is on the sixth floor and has a view of the ocean. It is small, specifically because I chose it that way. It has a balcony, a queen's bed and a chest of drawers and that's all. I don't need much; I am a man of simple means. When this life is over for me, I don't want to have a lot of shit lying around for people to pick through. No one needs to know my business. On the floor next to my bed there is a stack of books, big books, because, like I said, I don't want a whole lot of shit to be bothered with. Five or six big, dense books can last one a lifetime, with the right writer. Infinite meanings can be wrought from a good big book, all the meanings one desires in one's life. I have a William H. Gass, a William Gaddis, a Douglas R. Hofstadter, a John Barth, the *Tao Te Ching*, the Bible, and a couple others. Words, pure, unmediated words, are all I need. I go to the bathroom which lies across from my bed and undress. I dawn my robe, read from *The Tunnel*, then decide to go down to say goodnight to Mother and Father.

The air in the hallway is cold. This house often feels like a stone tomb. I go to the main stairwell and descend three

flights to my parent's floor. Through father's study door I see him sleep in his chair with all of his clothes on. Poor, beautiful man. I pass down the hall and don't see anyone in their bedroom; I don't even see mother in bed.

The third room at the end of the hall is peculiar. It contains only a porcelain bathtub, arched like the body of some ship and supported on paws of gold. As I pass it I see Mother in the tub, naked, and she looks at me, or rather past me, with a gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun. Jackson is on one knee soaking her down with a sponge. He looks at me as if I'm some intruder, then sets his eyes on Mother's back. I look into her eyes. I can tell she is not registering anything that they behold. Then they slowly fall shut and her head nods back and forth as if she is waking from sleep or scarcely dreaming. The chill permeates by bathrobe again and I head back to my room, and past the fifth floor where Clair lives I hear the arthritic moans of bed springs. I drink a glass of single-barrel in my room, smoke a cigarette, and get into bed as the moon with the face of Renata Nigmedzyanova peers into my window like a smirking voyeur. They are equally present, and equally unattainable. Slowly, they both begin to fade from my consciousness.

## Chapter 2

### History I

In the morning I depart at ten-thirty with Lawrence Hartfelt and a crew of ponies to the airfield where I am to meet a new guest, Connor Bishop, son of Amauta Group CEO Alan Bishop. We take two cars, one for Mr. Bishop's luggage and the other for Hartfelt, Connor and I to tour the estate, describe to Mr. Bishop the history of this place to the extent that is necessary, and to show him where he will be staying. Registered guests are picked up in their home city and flown here in Father's designated jet. This is done to reduce the confusion between friendly and hostile airfare, and to avoid any unfortunate disaster that may arise as a result of that confusion. As Hartfelt approaches the landing strip, the second car of ponies close behind us, I see the white *Boeing* inscribed "The Breakers" bellowing toward us, the waves of the heat of its engines rising up off of it and rippling the yellow sun behind, and slowly reducing speed until it stops right in front of us. The second car pulls around to the baggage compartment as the cabin door opens and a medium-height blonde-haired man descends the stair. His face possesses a youthful innocence, yet his eyes anticipate some grave disaster. He puffs the end of a skinny cigar and then tosses it to his side. He looks around and sticks his hands in his pockets. He applies sunglasses, for the sky is clear and the sun seems larger than it should. He pulls out a cell phone and scrolls through it, then he looks up, into the tinted windshield of my car and waves disinterestedly. He looks back into his phone. I turn to Hartfelt and say, "He doesn't look to me like the kind of guy who'd disappear."

He chuckles like I've just told him a well-exhausted joke. "Master Christian, a man does not *look* like he will disappear. He acts like it."

"I'm sure you can tell a poor soul from first glance,

probably; seen so many people go in your time.”

He chuckles again. “Ahh, Master Christian. Even if I could tell between a fated soul and an unfated soul, it is not fate which dictates a man's tenure on this island. That is chosen almost arbitrarily.”

“By whom?”

“Why, but the higher power of this island. The supreme deity.”

“You believe in God?”

“Heavens, no, Sir.”

“The monster then? The monster chooses whoever happens to tickle his fancy at that time? It may be a plump one today and a skeleton tomorrow.”

“Yes, Master Christian, you could say that. A monster chooses. An all too familiar monster.”

I curl my lips up. Hartfelt continues to look at the new guest and smile to himself. He seems to know something I don't. I try to study him, the light in his eyes, that self-satisfied grin, the way he speaks in riddles. Queer man, I say. Unlike any pony or nigger I've ever known. I've often felt that certain niggers can possess deep knowledge of the heavens and the hellfires, and prescribe mens' fates if it suited them. Is it because they are base, barbaric? Closer to the earth than civilized men? Well, some are, the gardeners and the meat-smokers and the housekeepers. Those who speak little and keep their eyes low. But Mr. Hartfelt's like a white man; he has this ... way about him. He keeps what he knows unknown. He never raises his voice, he's never given anyone a malicious look, nor has he ever done anything crass, rude or particularly niggardly. Maybe he's been around my daddy so much over the past twenty years that some of daddy's refinement ran off on him. I don't know. If I am to be completely honest with myself, I think of Hartfelt as a more intelligent, refined man than Daddy.

I get out of the passengers side of the car and say, “Mr.

Bishop. Welcome to the Breakers Resort Island. You know your phone will have to be confiscated.”

Bishop puts his eyeglasses on his forehead and his phone in his breast pocket and says, “Yes, I read it in the agreement. Hello, Mr. ... ?”

“Boyle. Christian Boyle. I'm Sir Boyle's son. He and my mother Madame May Broom have been expecting you, and have sent me to welcome you to the island, show you where you'll be staying, all the amenities and all the rest of it.”

“Well, that sounds fantastic. I'm sure the reputation of this place falls short of it's real brilliance, if anything. You've all collected yourselves quite a buzz in New York.”

“The natural result of greatness. While I see the help are collecting your things there I'd like to direct you to the vehicle over here, so that we may assume our tour promptly.”

“Sure.”

“And of course I'll have to collect your phone and any other communicative devices you may possess.”

“Of course. Here, take it away. I'm glad to be away from gadgets for a while. Makes a man feel too important. Hah. I really want to experience the natural unmediated serenity of the island. The mainland is too wired for me anyway.”

“From what I hear that's the way a lot of people feel. Too much information. Too much abundance. Constant indulgence in the screen.”

“I mean, don't get me wrong, it's great for business. Its great if you want to make money. It's great if you want people to give you money. Infinite ad space, as they say. But, Christian, if I may call you Christian ...”

“You may.”

“... All that constant electronic indulgence has ruined what this country used to be. People aren't even people anymore. Their intelligence has be subsidized by a machine, like a robot.”

“Terrible.”

“All that technology isn't good for a man's self-identity, his identity as a human being.”

“No, Sir, it's not.”

“I wanted to come here, vacation from my position at Amauta. Experience unmediated life. Not be bothered by conference calls and associates.”

“Well, you've come to precisely the right place. But you must be careful. Some people love it so much on the island that they never get to leave!”

We laugh as I let Connor into the rear passenger seat.

“This is Lawrence Hartfelt,” I say, “Man of the House.”

“Good day to you,” says Hartfelt.

“You need anything, this is the man you talk to.”

“Will keep in mind,” says Connor.

“Hartfelt,” I say, “Let's show Mr. Bishop the southern mansion first, so he'll know where he'll be situated.”

“Yes, Sir.”

As we careen down the west road in pursuit of the sun looming just out of reach before us I relay to Connor Bishop the history of this island, how in 2027 my own grandfather Graham Pittsburgh Boyle and his close friend and business associate Mortimer Jebediah Bird developed this former chunk of California into a luxurious private vacation spot. Their unfortunate ends resulted in the inheritance of this land by my father, who retired from New Standard Oil to live here in peace and solitude. Soon afterward, Mortimer Bird's son John Andrew Bird, an old college buddy of my father's, joined him upon this land and in the very year of his arrival they had a party of all their old friends in a celebration of luxury, privilege, and camaraderie. “Well,” I say at this point in the story as we approach the south mansion, “That party ... well, it was a grave party. It is not certain what happened. I assure you if I knew then I would be more than excited to disclose that information. But only Father and Mother

know and they're ... inhibited from speaking on it. All I will say is that no one survived that party save the founders of this present resort. Not even the nigger help. Why, you may ask at this point, did my dear Father and Mother develop a resort on the pretense of impending death for our residents, for whatever ended the lives of those illustrious men that evening twenty years ago most definitely still runs about these grounds. Why come here, might you ask. Well, Mr. Bishop, why *did* you come here?"

Bishop only laughs.

"Of course I am asking you this in jest. Of course you are in no harm. This legend is simply propagated to incite thrill amongst our guests."

"I've heard there's more to it than legend," says Bishop. "It is in fact history. The literal history. Something did happen here, Christian, you don't need to patronize me. That's why I came. That's why all of your guests have come. They want to experience the nightmare. It is so much more exciting than banal business."

"Well ..." I say a bit stumped at Connor's presumptuous claims. "I ... I wouldn't say that, um, we have a ... nightmare here, Mr. Bishop."

"Why, of course. It is a living nightmare."

"It's just a little thrill ride, that's all," I say, becoming nervous.

"I know the legend," says Connor, "My father used to work with John Bird. I know some things about this island."

"Well, you haven't lived on it as long as I have so, maybe you're being a bit presumptuous in your comments."

"Oh, Christian. I think not. You've lived so close to the truth all your life that it appears as a spring rather than an ocean."

I notice Hartfelt cutting his eyes between us now, looking more uneasy than is his usual temperament.



“It's just a legend,” I say.

“History is the quilt of legends.” He lights a cigarette and takes a long inhale, then continues, feigning embarrassment. “Excuse me, fellows. I must admit I've stepped out of line.”

Hartfelt and I show Mr. Bishop his quarters, the amenities provided within the mansion, and continue with the history of the resort as of its formal incorporation in 2067, together with a little anecdote about how my Father and Mother got together; then we get back in the car and proceed up the east road, all the while I exchange skeptical looks with Hartfelt. From first setting eyes on Connor Bishop to this ever-fleeting present moment, I cannot discern his character. He seems to possess a wealth of knowledge, just like Hartfelt and my Father, which he holds over my head. Everyone these days regards what they know with such secrecy and mystery, I begin to wonder what it is that everyone knows but I. Furthermore, he strikes me overall as a pleasant fellow, someone I could potentially call a friend, and I have never really met a suitable friend on this island. (Besides a boy named John Cowley who disappeared with odd proximity to his arrival, and after that I never went out of my way to befriend anyone, male or female.) But this Connor Bishop is jovial and warm and can clearly deliver a joke. But he has that sense of self-importance which emanates from him and makes it hard for others to show him their true selves. One feels like one has to act *up* for him, in the sense that one assumes a more pompous and elite attitude than one may be naturally disposed to. I think of myself as a refined gentleman, but I cannot help adjusting my tie or my cufflinks at every available moment and checking my appearance in the rear view mirror. When talk of local history wears out I find myself attempting to pronounce the name of an Italian opera that he may know. Ah! he replies, and he vomits a long phrase of beautiful gibberish. Father had tried to get some of the Ambassadors to teach me the Romance languages and

even Greek, but I was unreceptive.

His age also makes me nervous. Not much older than I, twenty-five or twenty-six, he has the reserve of an old man and the observatory qualities of a seasoned physician. He seems to have a keen sense of character and I can feel him reading me. Not to mention that he is the North American Vice President of the largest bank in the world. Frankly, he intimidates me. Although it is customary to prefix all our guests' last names with "Mister" or "Missus" or "Miss," I cannot decide whether to address Mr. Bishop by his first or last name.

"So, Christian," says to me then.

I suppose he's assumed a certain familiarity with me based on age. Or maybe based on something else. Either way, I feel a private confirmation of kinship, and I smile slightly.

"This estate is quite a feat your forefathers have accomplished. The roads are smooth, the forest is well contained yet retaining of all its rustic grandeur, and the houses are so beautifully designed, inside and out. If ever there was a neighborhood on the mainland so well manicured and protected, it would be fit for a man of my father's stature."

"Why thank you, Connor," I say as one of the eastern mansions reveals itself down the road over the crest of the horizon. I feel a great warmth calling him by his first name. His stature is something which impresses even me as a descendant of oil royalty. "Tell me about your people," I say, genuinely curious.

"My people?"

"Your family. Where you come from. Of course I know all about your father, a great man. Alan Gorginsky Bishop. Sometimes, when my father is in a talking mood, which is rarely, he will recount stories about his old friend John Bird, may he rest in peace."

Connor coughs, but it sounds forced. Anyway, I continue, "John Bird relinquished control of the company to

your father. I'm sure it made him quite happy. Bird himself, like my father, had that nagging devil that is the bane of youth, the feeling of antithesis, not wanting to be one's father, so to speak. Of course, Bird and my father loved their fathers, but I suppose the weight of the responsibility got to them. That's why my father came to this island, of course. And he did play a shareholder's role in New Standard Oil, but he left it at that. These are complicated businesses, finance and oil. Not something everyone is predisposed to, and that's not a comment on their character, just of the nature of sons. But I admire a man like yourself who fills his father's shoes with such ease and gratitude."

"Oh, it's not all apples and plums for me either, or however the hell that saying goes. I feel a little nagging devil, too. Maybe I should have been someone else. A painter, maybe? An astrologist? A statesman? But no, I was a Bishop. I'm satisfied most of the time. I do my work. But I'm young, too. I want to eat of the fruit of life. I want to indulge. My father is understanding. He's allowed me a vacation, and thus I am here. Work is necessary, whatever path one chooses, but one must not shirk the finer, simpler things in life."

"That is what we aim to provide."

"Yes. Beautiful place you've got."

"And it's not a bad living. I think father makes as much from our guests' weekly payments as he would in any given fiscal year at New Standard."

"Got that right. Expensive."

"But all luxury is."

Connor laughs. Then I see him look out the window. The mansion has receded behind us and we now pass the golf course. Soon we will come upon the other eastern mansion, and beyond that the lounge, and then we will return to the Abime.

"My family," Connor says introspectively, "Have always been power brokers. Before my father assumed Chairmanship of

Amauta he was making his name on Wall Street as well as in the Senate. His father, my grandfather, Hopsin Bishop, was Executive Vice President of the National Rifle Association and a Virginian. He was also a House Representative for a time before he assumed his NRA position, but he remained involved in politics long after he retired. He was a good friend and entertainer of many Southern politicians. Of course you know about the ordeal on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2013 ... ?”

“ ... No, not really.”

He inhaled deeply, as if preparing to give some poor soul the honest truth about them. “They call it, in retrospect, the Second American Civil War.”

“Who?”

“The history-makers. The Northerners. But it's all baloney, all blown out of context.”

“What happened?”

“Well, several months before July 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, a Virginian disk-jockey announced to his radio listeners that they would be organizing a mass demonstration on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. They would meet just across the border in Arlington Cemetery, all armed and loaded and carrying their weapons in plain view, and march across the bridge into D.C., around the Capital, and back into Virginia. It was promoted as an act of civil disobedience since it was illegal to carry a weapon, concealed or not, in the District. So they knew they were in for a confrontation, but the march organizers would deal with that. It was the principal of the matter that drew the participants. This was not an official event of the NRA, but my grandfather, bless his heart, got his people in line and soon enough there were ten thousand registered participants, from Virginia to Louisiana to North Dakota, all ready to rally behind their Second Amendment rights. Now the Metropolitan Police released a statement around this early period that the marchers would not be let across the D.C. line, and that any attempt to

cross that line would result in arrest. But the march organizers said that they would deal with the police, and decided if and where this designated no-through line would be crossed. The MPD held their ground that no armed marchers would be let through. Well, my grandfather, sympathetic to the movement, talked to some of his key Washington people, and come the big day, July 4<sup>th</sup>, sure enough all the hotels in Northern Virginia were booked solid and some sixteen thousand armed Americans were congregated in Arlington Cemetery.”

“Sixteen thousand,” I say astonished.

“Surely. You must remember that the NRA's membership at this time was five million, so we're talking a pittance of the representation of gun owners. Anyway, there they were, ready to march, my grandfather at the head of the crowd with the radio DJ and the other top guys. And they're marching across the bridge, right, and up ahead they see the police blockade. Riot gear, tear gas, the whole nine yards. The Nation Guard is around as well. When you've got almost twenty thousand heads with weapons walking around the capital city, you're talking something serious. The turn-out was astonishing. But you've also got to remember all of the media frenzy regarding gun laws at that time. Obama wanting to take away their guns. They said, No, this is a right and I will fight for this right! So, they're out there, and the police and the military are there, and meanwhile my grandfather's pulled his stings in Washington. So the marchers march, with not intent to stop at the blockade. They get closer and closer, and sure enough my grandfather and the radio man walk right through the police. Then—all the marchers are walking right through the police blockade like water running through little rocks in a stream. And they head on with their plan.”

“Wow.”

“But the police weren't the issue. Keep in mind that this was a peaceful protest. Peaceful. We were just demonstrating

our right to bear arms to the fucks up in the Capitol who didn't think we were serious. It was a simple demonstration. Civil disobedience, yeah. But fucking Occupy was a movement of civil disobedience. You can't just loiter in public parks for months on end."

"Wait, so what happened next?"

"Oh. Well, like I said, the police were the least of their problems. On the Nation Mall were two, maybe three, thousand people protesting the demonstration. Riot police everywhere. National Guardsmen everywhere. They confined the protesters to the Mall while the demonstrators walked in formation in the streets around the Mall. The protesters were yelling their asses off as the demonstrators approached. But when the protestors saw just how deep the march stretched, when they saw all those guns, a deathly silence fell over everyone. It was so fucking quiet you could hear a rifle butt hit the back of a man's shirt. Something strange happened. Everyone was in awe. The protesters were in awe at how many armed demonstrators there were, and the demonstrators were in awe that they were actually allowed to cross the blockade. But this is a small militia we're talking about. They knew it and the protesters knew it, and they knew that if one small thing went out of line, if one mosquito buzzed too close to someone's ear, the gates of hell would open."

I am looking back at him now. "And?" I ask under my breath.

Connor looks at me with a coy smile. "Well," he says, "Turns out it wasn't a mosquito but a rock. I think it was a rock thrown from the crowd of protesters, but every paper ran a different story. Anyway, a rock arched overhead, landed in the demonstration, a shot was fired ... and then the Guard fired into the demonstration. My grandfather shot; he fired the first retaliatory shot, I know that for a fact. Then the Guard went crazy on the demonstration. Then the demonstration went crazy on the protesters. Granddaddy said there was so much gunfire

on the Mall that day that US troops in Baghdad thought the Iraqi insurgents had launched a strike.”

My eyes are wide open.

“Carnage,” he says. “Bloody carnage.”

I turn around in my seat. “Oh my god,” I say.

“My granddaddy got out all right. But I think something like thirteen thousand people were killed or injured.”

We are quiet for some time. I hadn't been paying attention to the road, and we soon pull up to the Abime.

Then I say, “So what did the country do about the gun laws. You say there were what? events that made people want stricter gun laws going on around this time. Well, fuck. What did this do for the policy?”

Connor smiles widely. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“The NRA, Christian, used to run America. If the entire state of Oklahoma was wiped out by a domestic terrorist group, the gun laws would not have changed.”

I am flabbergasted.

“You can thank my granddaddy for that.”

“Lord have mercy,” I say, and I think I am being genuine.

I take Connor on a tour of the Abime, then we return to the front yard where Hartfelt is waiting in the car to take him back to the southern mansion so he may get his things together before dinner. On the steps, Connor lights a thin cigar. He looks through slit eyelids at the forest before us and releases a peerless cumulus of tobacco smoke. I look him up and down. He is a somewhat portly fellow, but not enough so to be called “fat” or even “big.” It is a warm, fuzzy kind of size. I don't really know what I mean by that. But I like him.

“We've had quite a conversation today, I say to him. But it's time you go back to your residence so that you can get

yourself together before you return here to eat.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I've quite enjoyed our tour. I think I'll have a fine time here. It's good to get away.”

“Yes, and quite soon you'll have to tell me more about the mainland. I hear bits and pieces of things from the guests, but I don't have a whole picture, really. It's very interesting.”

“Shame that you don't know much about where you come from.”

“Well, living on this island, it's like living in a different country. It's almost like America is some cast-off nation, some third-world place.”

“It basically is these days.”

I intend to ask him what he means by that, but Clair approaches from down the west road.

“What have you been off doing?” I ask when she nears.

“Frolicking,” she says. She's doing the sultry thing she does with her posture, her bosom projected outward, her neck extended back as if she is unbearably hot. She casts her eyes off into the sky, then cuts them back at us. Her lips are sealed yet pouted. My eyes trail down her body and she notices me in the act. Then I regain my senses and turn to Connor. “This is my sister, Clairvoyant Boyle.”

Connor has a weird look in his eye. He smiles in a way that implies intimate relation rather than polite introduction. “Pleasure,” he says, delicately taking her hand. She gives him that look and it makes me uneasy. She likes it when a young one comes to stay. They are mostly old and a young one is refreshing for her. “Connor Bishop,” he continues.

“Pleasure to meet you,” she says boring a hole into him with her glare.

I don't like this one bit.

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

“Go read,” she says, letting go of Connor's hand. I believe he himself has forgotten to let go of the embrace; his



hand hovers momentarily in the air. Then he disinterestedly takes his cigar and turns it in his mouth.

“Well, bye,” she says and walks up the stairs. “See you latter,” she whispers, clearly in Connor's direction. He continues to look out into the forest.

At length he says to me, “Does she see anyone?”

“She sees everyone,” I say.

He smiles.

“She wanders off a lot. She never stays in one place.”

He puffs his cigar with his eyes cast down to his shoes.

“I'd say don't go for it.”

Then he looks at me and smiles with his lips sealed. “I'd say it's already been gone for.”

I roll my eyes. I think she's barren. With all the men she's run through, one'd think I'd have a niece or nephew by now.

Connor walks down the steps toward the waiting car. “I'll see you this evening, old boy,” he says without turning around. I watch him get in the car and soon disappear behind the corner of the forest hugging the west road.

At dinner Connor talks mostly to Clair. I am beside Father, who sits at the head of the table drinking more than he's eating; Jackson is sitting on the other side of him, across from me, and sometimes sends me messages of deep hatred with his eyes; Mother is to the right of him, asleep; Schlitz Koppenuck, Thomas Thompson, Alex Hortkva, Trimmer Jennings, and Elia Cohen are beside her; Connor, Clair, Lucius and Harlem Lethe, and Philip Cathcart Harmonic (nicknamed “Middle C”) are beside me. Clair and Connor laugh and touch each other's arms beside me and I want them to shut up. I rest my fist on my chin because I hate salad, I just want to eat meat. I wave a pony over and have him refill my wine glass. I watch Jackson scarf down his vegetation until he notices me and gives me a look like I've just picked my nose with the salad fork.

I down my wine and try to talk to Connor, but he is too enamored with whispering something into Clair's ear. I look over at Lucius who seems wholly unfazed by Clair's behavior. He's talking to his brother. Eventually I catch his attention and cut my eyes at the two fucking lovebirds. He looks at them and then gives me a shrug. I nod and he goes back to eating. I guess he expected this. I don't know why time after time I think that Clair might finally settle down with someone. But we all know that isn't going to happen. I catch a part of what they're saying. "... I love cotton much more than silk." "Are you mad? Silk is ... silky! It just feels so smooth and ... I don't know, it's like an orgasm to the touch." "But cotton is so raw. So earthy." "It's kind of like the difference between going shaved and going natural. There are benefits to both." "I like all things natural." "Then we should go on a trip into the wild."

I try to throw up. I really do. Just to make a point. But I can't because I haven't eaten anything.

I try to talk to father. "Do you recall the Civil War of 2013?"

"Who the fuck cares."

I try to pull my hair out.

I am so hungry. I need substance. I don't want leaves. I want meat. I need it. It's the only reason I haven't killed myself yet.

The ponies come out and clear the table of salad plates.

Yes, the real course.

They come back out and set down cream of muscles and oysters paired with water crackers and caviar.

Augh.

Why does one need three courses? Just give me food. Real food.

I suffer over the soup and through my neighbors' insufferable conversation, which has moved from the topic of fabrics to that of more favorable odors. "There's nothing I like

more in the world than the scent of a fresh Cohiba. Cuban.” “Yuck. I like lilacs.” “Rainfall.” “You should stand in the forest after a rain. The smell of the leaves and the grass ...” “The smell of an open book.” “Ohh, definitely.”

I put my spoon down and pick up my dinner fork, with which I continuously jab myself in the neck. After a while I see Jackson looking at me with what I can only guess is pity.

I glance over at Mr. Koppenuck sipping maybe half a milliliter of soup at a time with the same temperament with which he regards everything: remorse. Once the meat is in my belly, though, I can stop obsessively observing and just become sedated in gravy. Oh god, that time cannot come soon enough.

Connor interrupts his conversation with Clair for a moment to speak to me; with the same disinterest he has shown me over the evening I reciprocate. He says, “Everyone here says the highlight of the resort by far is the meat. True?”

“Yes. 'Course. The best.”

“I'm excited to try it.”

“I know. I can't wait,” I say staccato. He gets the message and turns back to Clair. I look at Mother, nodding off, and Father, sipping cognac with his eyes nearly closed. I take a deep, deep breath and let it out audibly.

Finally, the ponies clear our plates and bring out the meat. Everybody sits up now; Father's eyes open; Mother wakes; even Mr. Koppenuck reveals a dull gleam in his eyes. They set our plates in front of us and immediately we dig in. It is nothing extravagant; half a fist's size of browned red meat doused in a dark-red colored gravy and three pieces of braised asparagus. In two minutes, everyone's meat is cleared from their plate, and all the asparagus remain. We all recline or, for those of us at that point, fall asleep again. Sounds of finger-licking and groans of delight echo throughout the acoustic dining hall. Besotted we are in culinary ecstasy, an induced food coma. We are all satisfied. Even I am happy. At lest for now. But the

hunger will strike again.

I look over at Connor who, quite ungentlemanly, is running his finger across the plate to scoop up more gravy. He sucks it off like a finger-Popsicle and I can only laugh.

"I know, right," I say.

He looks at me with dilated pupils and a bewildered grin on his face. "I ... had no idea that anything could taste this amazing."

"I know."

"I feel like I could get addicted to this food."

"You will."

"It is ... I can't even find an adequate word to describe it. It's divine. It's ... god, it's beyond comprehension."

"It's amazing, I know."

"Jesus."

"It's our pride and joy. A recipe developed right here on this island twenty years ago. But it's a secret, kept from the rest of the world. Hell, even I don't really know what it is."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I ask the ponies in the smoke house sometimes, but they always say that they're not allowed to tell. To spill the secret is punishable by death."

"Jesus. No wonder. This meat ... it's worth ... fifty times it's weight in gold."

"It is spectacular."

He nods to himself, just like Mother. "I'm tired now," he says.

"That's what happens."

"Really tired. Wow."

"Yeah, they say that the first time you eat the meat, you lose passion for all other facets of life. You become enamored with the meat. You crave it all the time. It's the best thing you've ever experienced in life and you want to experience it again and again. That's why we all gather here to eat it. It's like

a communal food orgy.”

“No kidding. Everything is hazy.”

“That's the after-effect. That's the second best experience in life.”

“I feel numb and full all at the same time. I feel so good.”

“Welcome to the Breakers. You've officially been initiated.”

He reclines in his chair with his eyes closed, his mouth agape. I look around. Everyone is sedated. The house is quite save the scuffling of feet in the scullery.

Then Connor says, “You really don't know what this meat is?”

“Well ...” I say hesitantly. “Once I asked Father. He was drunk, but that's my only option with him. It's come to be that a drunk Father is a normal Father. Apathy has become his happiness. But anyway, one evening I asked him what the meat was. I am the manager of this resort, after all. I should know. Well, from what he said, I think that it's some unique variety of mutton. He said it's called Lamb of God.”

“Lamb of God ...” repeated Connor, half asleep. “We should all give thanks to John Bird, then, for providing us this treasure.”

“Bird?” I say. “No, a lamb.”

His breathing slows, and as he falls into a deep sleep he whispers, stressing every syllable, “Agnus Dei, que tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, que tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus dei, que tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem. Dona eis requiem. Sempiteruam requiem.”

Newbies to the meat often experience more intense reactions to its richness than seasoned diners. I myself, having been privileged to this delicacy since I was born, am able to enjoy it and appreciate it without over-indulging in the act or the

aftermath.

Bishop is fast asleep at the table when I finally retire to bed. The Lethes and my family have also left. The ponies are clearing the table and setting pillows behind the heads of the remaining guests. As I look upon him one last time, before I go up to my room through the kitchen stairwell, I see in him his innocence and his folly. He is the powerful gentleman that he lets on when sober, no doubt, but in moments like these he is vulnerable and infantile, and I like him a little more.

I go to my room, remove all my clothes, and have a single-barrel and a cigarette. At night the copper tonic is my muse, the eddies of blue smoke her sister. I like to linger in the tingling sensation, which compliments the meat-induced haze, and experience the arousal of all my atoms.

I read from *The Tunnel* then get into bed. With not a care in the world I am falling fast asleep, when, suddenly, I hear a pained howl out of the caverns of the mansion, as if the monster has made its way in here.

But no, it is a female cry.

I immediately dawn my robe and scutter into my hall where I see Hartfelt approaching from the main stairwell.

"Master Christian," he says. "Come quick. It's your mother."

I follow him with urgency to my parents' floor where in their bedroom I join Father, Clair, and Jackson, all gathered round her. She is in bed and awake. Rare. Her eyes are pried open as if by force and she is breathing heavily. I ask Clair what is going on and Jackson answers irritably, "She's having one of her episodes."

"He's lost his mind," she screams in a shrill voice; surprising, for she never uses her voice at all. "He's killed her. He's killed them all," she continues hysterically.

"Darling, no one's been killed," says Father calmly. He's in his robe as well.

"He killed her. He killed her."

"Killed who?" I ask.

"He's killed her," she repeats. "Wendy."

"Who's Wendy," I ask to everyone. I see Hartfelt's head lowered in thought. Father says nothing, but the purse of his lips shows that he may know.

"He's killed her and he's killed them all. He's a monster."

"Who? Who's killed whom?" I ask again.

"He killed my husband. He killed my friends. He's a monster. He's lost his mind."

"There, there," Father says. "He's long gone."

"Rapist. Murderer," Mother screams. "He raped her and his kin still walks these grounds. He is in the monster. He *is* the monster."

"Who ..." I ask, knowing what the answer may be.

"John ... John ... He begot the monster. He sold his soul to the devil."

"Everyone knows the devil is a nigger," says Jackson.

Mother grabs his forearm as if for dear life. "Yes. Yes. And they've mated. Begot the monster. John Bird. Raped her and begot ... evil. Destruction ... He tried to destroy us all." She suddenly turns her erratic stare to Father. "And you helped him."

Father's face is solemn.

"You helped him kill us all. We are all dead. Dead. He's killed us and you helped him."

"She's speaking crazy," Father says.

"No. No," she cried. "It is the craziest thing which happened, yes. Crazy. We're all crazy for what we are doing. Consumption. We are all consumed. Bird's consumption is our consumption. It continues to this day."

"Get her her medicine," says Father.

No one moves. Father looks up at Jackson and screams,

“Now!” Jackson goes to prepare her syringe.

“Now, children, go away,” Father says. He looks on the brink of tears. “Pay no mind to this hysteria. Your mother is old and senile. She knows not what she speaks.”

Clair and I look at each other.

His eyes cast down, as if to no one he mumbles, “John Bird was a good man. John Bird died for our sins.”

We look at each other again, then we look at him and he cuts his eyes at us.

“Go,” he says again more sternly. “Go back. Go back and forget all this. It means nothing. A tale told by an idiot. Go back and forget. Leave.”

Clair and I leave, and as Hartfelt closes the door behind us, we hear Father whisper, “Forget like I’ve forgotten.”

Now I definitely cannot sleep. John Bird has reared his spiritual head again. Begot the monster, Mother says. Oh, I can’t think straight. So may images flood my thoughts; Mother’s words—was she really speaking crazy, or was Father and John Bird, and perhaps she, all involved in ... whatever happened? Did they create the monster? Who is the monster? Do they know why people are disappearing? What do they know? They’ll never reveal. Maybe they’re the ones taking guests into the abyss never to be seen again. Ha. I just have to laugh at that absurd idea.

*Bird’s consumption* ... what exactly does that mean. Is he still alive on this island? Is he still *consuming*? No, it can’t be. But strange things are known to happen here. Maybe they are not inexplicable. Maybe the disappearances are not supernatural. They know the reason. I know they know.

*John Bird died for our sins* ...

I smoke a cigarette and try to put my mind on other things. I think of the meat, and how delicious and fulfilling it was; how there is nothing in the world more innocent than



eating. And I think of poetry, the words of poets lost. I think of Yassin Bey, then I get in bed.

There's just so much on my mind that I can't recline, start blasting holes in the night till she bleeds sunshine. Breath in, inhale vapors from bright stars that shine; breath out ... smoke retraces the sky line. I hear a howl ring out like an ancient mating call. I can't take it. I can feel this island breathing. My chest's heaving, against the flesh of the evening, a sigh before I die like the last train leaving.

### Chapter 3

#### History II

In the morning after breakfast I learn that Connor did not return to the south mansion the previous evening; he slept in Clair's room. I feel like I am supposed to be angry but I honestly do not care. I have finished my eggs and sirloin, and am sipping a thirty-five-year-old scotch for digestion, when he enters the dining hall in the same clothes he arrived in yesterday. He looks refreshed; he is glowing. He stretches, lights a cigar, and I see something angelic in him. He comes over and sits beside me and I regard him as a new brother. I ask if he would like some breakfast and he says that he takes his breakfast in liquid, so I pour him a scotch and we go to the veranda overlooking the wrinkly-headed ocean. I say to him at length, "I must say, at first you intimidated me, but now I feel a striking familiarity between us."

He does not look at me but he smiles through a cloud of smoke which is promptly whisked away to the heavens. "I intimidated you? You intimidated me, honestly. Your family is a dynasty. The founders of New Standard Oil. Not to mention that you surpass us Bishops in wealth by several orders of magnitude."

"What? No way."

"Yes. After it was determined that John Bird was definitely dead, all his assets, inherited from his father, passed to his only beneficiary, whom also happened to be his only true love." He looks at me. "May Broom."

I gasp. "My mother?"

He nods. "He had no latter wife nor children. Well, no legitimate children."

I ruminate upon this, but it is too wild for my mind to grasp. Think of it, young May and young Bird. What a couple. My father, then, was merely a runner-up. I do not think on it

anymore. "How was Clair?" I ask.

"She's a nice girl," is all he says.

We listen to the crash of the waves and then I say, "You seem to have an intimate knowledge of me ... of us."

He shrugs.

"It's kind of comforting I suppose."

He puffs and says, "It's an assumed familiarity. Genuine, surely. But it's the kind of comfort that exists between two people who are of equal status, more or less." He looks at me. "You and I. We are elite. It connects us and defines us, separates us from the others."

"The others?" I say. I have never met these "others." I've only known greatness. Could there exist a person who does not have all he needs and more? Tens of billions of people on the world, and I assumed we all were great. But that surely cannot be the case. The poor ... I thought them all a different species or something. Something not to be minded. Really, I never thought much of them at all.

Connor squints his eyes as if contemplating something profound, then he asks, "Do you consider yourself an American?"

I am silent. No one has ever really posed the question to me. "I don't know," I say sometime later. "I suppose ... this island is American land. But Father doesn't treat it as such. Federal officials come here all the time. But ..."

He's looking away. "The American people ... are a group from which you and I are exempt."

He looks at me and sees the confusion in my countenance. He continues, "Think of Mr. and Mrs. John Q. America. Think of their children, Average Joe, Jack a Dull Boy, and Suzie Q. America. They are a quaint little family. They're hard working nine-to-fivers, they pay their taxes, they watch the news. They try to stay informed. But they are insulated. They are a controlled species. They go about their lives like fish in

aquariums. Yet who tends them? Who takes care of them, these infantile citizens? We do. Your family, my family, the bankers, the oil magnates, and the rest. They know that gas prices are exorbitantly high but they don't know why and they can't do anything about it. What they pay for bread we dictate. Where their taxes go we dictate. They're pawns. They're foot soldiers of capitalism, and we are the generals. Fish in an aquarium ... Sometimes they catch a glimpse of the face that tends them, but it is always distorted. They don't really know what goes on outside those glass barriers. They know the fish food falls from somewhere but they don't know exactly where or how it was obtained or the price paid for it. We control their existence, like gods, while they toil about ignorant and content. We give them entertainment, we give them things to do with their time, and we profit off of all of it, and we keep that profit in the family. Why would we spread the wealth around? That would be like taking a hammer to the aquarium walls. The room would flood, the fish would die, everything would be out of order. It's better to keep them in their place.” He looks into my eyes. “You and I, Christian, we're similar. We have the power. Thus, we are brothers and we must stick together.”

He looks back out into the ocean. They—the fish—are just a couple miles away on the mainland. I say, “How must they live? All cooped up together.”

“Badly,” says Connor. “But it's like the serfs and aristocrats of the olden times.”

“Those times came to an end. French Revolution ... the nobility didn't stay on top for long.”

He's quiet.

I light a cigarette and say, “I know a lot about different things. Interest-rate swaps, congressional filibusters, the price of a yard of silk in Asia, the history of the Anglo-Saxons, the literature of Mexico, lots of things, all from the guests that have passed through here. But no one really talks about the mainland.

I know the early history, of course. I know how the government is run. But what about the people? For there to be so many of them, nobody really pays them any mind.”

“The people are foot soldiers, like I said. They fuel the system, but they don’t run it. We can always buy more fuel for the machine. But the people who run it are of most importance. They can voice their opinion on certain things, but as long as we run it we are going to do whatever we deem necessary.”

A pony comes out and refills our scotches. “Anything else?” she asks.

“No,” I say, and she goes back inside.

“See that?” Connor says. “From the pony servant to the bank clerk to the shopping mart retailer to the single-franchise owner to the street sweeper, they all work for the system; they all work for us.”

“I don’t feel that way,” I say. “If that was the case then I’m sure I would feel immensely guilty about it.”

“You’re sheltered from the reality of it. You think having this luxury granted to you is normal, and that people who aren’t in your grand position are doing something wrong or fucking up or are just plain stupid. But no, it’s just the system. It’s just the way it is, nobody’s fault.”

“Whatever. I’m not doing anything wrong on this little island. We aren’t hurting anybody.”

Boyle chuckles to himself.

“What?” I say indignantly.

“Nothing,” he says smiling as he puffs.

We’re quiet again. It’s nice to spend some time with a friend in leisure. Not to have anything to do, but to still be in the company of another. This is comfort. The birds squawk above. This is life.

Later I ask, “Tell me some more things about the time of your grandfather, those early decades of the Millennium. That story about the Civil War was riveting. I didn’t know such

casualty occurred in such recent history.”

Connor flings his head back and lets out a bellowing laugh which echoes off the dome of the sky. “Dear boy, the history of the Millennium is riddled with casualty.”

“Well tell me. I want to know. I want to know about the people. I don't want to be ignorant of the circumstances.”

“Tell you what, Chris, the whole fucking story of human civilization? Well, the West rose to power in 1492 ...”

“No, no,” I say, balking at his sarcasm. “The story of US, in a nutshell.”

“Oh, right, in a nutshell,” he says with further sarcasm.

“As economically as you can, hitting all the main points, you know. We have time. And I like a good story. One that happened, one that didn't happen, one that might have happened. A good story uses time wisely. Life is a series of good stories, even if they're tragic.”

“*Humph.* Well, then, let's tell a story. Umm ... Well, in terms of the recent chronology of things 2009 is when things really started simmering in the melting pot ... Actually, no, the real beginning is 2001, when the heads of several banks, oil companies, weapons distributors and manufacturers, US Pentagon generals and members of a militant Afghan insurgent group called Al-Qaeda conspired to wage an everlasting war.”

“Why on earth would they do that?”

“To make money ... and, in the long run, to build up a defense against China; a Second Cold War, you could call it. The insurgent group had worked with the United States before during the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, trading weapons and things like that. Plus, the founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, had come from a wealthy oil family which had dealings with American companies, so you can see that there were many sympathies which the US shared with this group. They had been planning to create an opportunity in which the weapons trade would prosper, in which the US could stockpile arms for the

foreboding War, oil would be in high demand, and finance for all of this would be needed. Plus, American Big Oil had had an interest in Middle Eastern petroleum fields for some time, not to mention the fact that the Middle East was a key military strategic point for battle with China. And the insurgents, of course, wanted to get a message across to the American people, even if it was staged. So everyone saw something they could benefit from this big war. So on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Al-Qaeda was hired to fly two planes into the World Trade Center towers in New York City. And they did it, and since of course a single plane could never completely demolish a building of that size and strength, detonators were also installed on the interiors of the buildings so that they would go down clean and fast. The point of this was to put the fear of god into the American people while the president at the time, George W. Bush, now had a warrant to wage the longest war in world history, which continues to this day. His Vice President Dick Cheney, who was also a key person in a huge oilfield services company—go figure—along with the Secretary of Defense further instigated the combat by facilitating any number of covert “BlackOps” operations and political assassinations to come. Unmanned drones upon civilian targets, mass, *mass* casualties, occupations of civilian communities. Nowhere was safe, nothing was sacred—except, of course, American soil. Thus was waged all-out warfare. The world as a battlefield, so to speak. First they invaded Iraq--”

“Wait, why did they invade Iraq if the attackers were, what were they from Afghanistan?”

“Well, since the whole thing was a ploy, there was no real enemy, so they could have waged war anywhere. But since Iraq was a key strategic point in the area, might as well hit there first.”

“Well this sounds down-right unethical.”

“Don't speak so fast, a certain chairman of EccoFuel oil company made upwards of three-hundred billion dollars off of

these operations before his company was merged with five others to create New Standard.”

My face drops. “Oh,” I say.

“Yup, Graham Boyle and Cheney were good, good friends. Anyway, from Iraq the US invaded Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and eventually all of the Middle East and North Africa, in what historians have come to call the World War of Attrition, World War III, or World War Z. “Z” as in last, because it is the last war that will ever be fought, because it is lasting forever.”

“We're still there?” I say gloomily.

“Sure. As long as money is being made, why stop?”

“Jesus.”

“And not only that, we have something to prove. For us, business, its money. But for the politicians, for the Pentagon, its money, too, but really, this is about American Exceptionalism. This is us fighting back an inferiority complex in the wake of rising China. We have to prove that we are still the big dogs, that all will prostrate themselves before the great American Imperialist Empire. The more battles we wage, the more there is to prove. We won't back down. We fight in a tautological cycle. I mean, if there was a war to win, we would have won it in 2002, 2005 at the very latest. I mean, let's be fair, we entered this war on false pretense: that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction. But they didn't. And even if that wasn't the reason for combat, even if we were fighting to stop Al-Qaeda, the war would have been over in 2011 when we got bin Laden. But was it? ... More war creates the need for more fuel, which creates the need for more finance, which enables the trade of more weapons which leads to more war. We fight and fight but there is no end. I mean, I'm doing great; Amauta is going great because of the war. So is New Standard. So are the Chinese manufacturers. The NRA keeps blood-hungry despots in US offices who will continue the war and keep guns in peoples' hands. Horizon



Telemobile is making a lot of money through selling systems and communications to the military through one of their subsidiaries. A handful of other companies are making billions upon billions. But that's at the control level. At the administrative level, the war is turning out great and we'll never have to stop. But the little fish? The foot soldiers? The people? It's all over for them. The politicians who stay in our pockets remain in power through our campaign donations, and they nominally represent their constituencies, but we are in fact the government. There is no Republican or Democrat. There is only the Private Party. The rest of world civilization is, on a citizen's level, at its end."

"Jesus," I repeat, for there's nothing else I can think to say. And in this moment I can see how so many millions of people over the centuries have succumb to Christianity.

"I recall the words of the Venezuelan President in the turn of the Millennium, Hugo Chavez. He said, 'The hegemonic pretensions of the American empire are placing at risk the very survival of the human species.' It's amazing what profound truths people can express when corporate money is not filtering their speech."

"... God, I had no idea the people were in so bad a shape."

"Shit, yeah, they're furious. But what can they do? Despite all their rage they're still just rats in a cage. 'The Masters make the rules for the wise men and the fools'; to survive they've got to play the game we made for them. There are no real industrial or labor-based jobs anymore because everything's been automated. There's no need for retail, janitorial services, plumbing, gas, heat, electric, construction, or any similar services. We have technology for that now; we have the robots. Ironically, the only people who can actually do anything of value now are artists, create something unique, and all that shit. Other than that, the only real employer is the Military Industrial Complex, for America's chief export is war."

“So what was the domestic landscape? You were talking about 2009.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, let's get back to that. So in terms of domestic socioeconomic relations, 2009 is when things really started simmering in the melting pot. The state of Arizona announced plans to instate a law called Senate Bill 1070, I think, 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 the illegals, but 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 that 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 little incident 'Bleeding Arizona.'

“President Bush was still president at that time. He, like you and I, was a man who had come from wealth and power; he knew who his friends were and he knew how to treat them right—he even gave them jobs in the oval office.”

“Right, of course,” I interject eager to contribute something. “My father used to often say, 'The comfort of one's friends is paramount.'”

“Right, same conceit. It was this tradition of 'helping one's friends', begun by the Federal Reserve Act of 1931 and later perpetuated 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 20<sup>th</sup> Century and into Bush's second term. Government came to exist solely to patronize the interests

of the private sector, masked under the veil of a democratic institution. I'm not going to patronize you. I'm not trying to say that we were saints. It was what it was. 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.

“When we first started the World War of Attrition, which at that point was not even called a war, we borrowed boatloads of money from China. As the government began going underwater in debt, however, the private sector continued thriving. I mean, we weren't dependent on the government to make money, but low tax rates and little government interference made for real easy business. In fact, the private sector got so comfortable with the state of corporate regulation that they even started skimming money that wasn't theirs. 'Skimming,' meaning they were taking hundreds of millions in bonuses off of interest loans and stashing it overseas so the government, oblivious, or condoning, as it was, couldn't touch it. Now, Christian, like I said, I'm not going to placate you. If I were talking to an average citizen I would lie, but we're talking as people who benefited from this. There's nothing to hide between us. It was what it was. ... Bush was a piece of cake, but the corporate hegemony knew that the next president wasn't going to be as playful.

“President Obama said that he was not going to play their game, but even if he wasn't, which he damn sure knew was a pretense, 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 constituency was 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 depression. 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 depression by saving the companies that were 'too big to fail.'" Then Connor gave a wide smile and two big thumbs-up in his direction. "Ironically," he continued, "The same Democrat-approved Bail Out that sought to repair the economy for the sake of the American people and their lifestyles, the same Bail-Out which asked the four major banks at the time to *buy their competitors*, thus eliminating any kind of democratic banking market, was actually the key to beginning a series of banking consolidations that would lead to the New World Order—the control of the world economy by the banking industry."

"And here it is in the flesh," I joke nervously.

Connor chuckles, then continues, "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 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. 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. 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. You know, of course, Amauta Group mainly facilitated this shift. 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; thus ushering the beginnings of the New World Order.”

I am entranced. This is the greatest story I have every heard.

Connor continues: “At this time, the Occupiers, who had first started making trouble in 2011 after the sub-prime mortgage crisis, 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, if I can recall correctly, 'These jobless scum will no longer be tolerated. If they sustain their actions, the US Military will attack.' This is what historians call the second wave of the Second American Civil War, but I don't buy it.

“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, China's position in the World War of Attrition had become compromised by the United States' support of Israel. On July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2027, the Peoples Republic of China called in the US's loan, which had accrued to the tune of a mathematical value referred to as ... one-hundred seventy-nine million-billion dollars. The US was forced to formally default.

“It has since been speculated that this 'defeat' was planned by both the US and Chinese governments and banking industries, all to the end of formally unifying the two biggest economies in the world at the time, and being controlled entirely by a company which had been quietly acquiring the banks in both countries, thus creating two economies under one system; that company was, you guessed it, Amauta Group International.” Connor then smiles a smile that I can only guess he reserves for his own self-satisfaction and the glory of his company.

I smile back, for this is an impressive feat. I knew that Amauta was big, but I didn't know that it included the United States government on its list of debtors.

Connor: “By this time American Purity had reached a point of support that resulted in a sort of over-speculated pride. To retain the loyalty of his constituency, President Gerber-Tall vowed to continue fighting in the Middle East. Officially, 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.

“Of course, this was also a ploy, for not only were the Chinese and American economies now controlled by Amauta, but that of Latina America, a merger facilitated by Amauta's South American subdivision. But this of course was not to be leaked to the public...

“President Hugo Chavez II compromised with the United States. 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 Argentinians 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.'

“You can imagine how this sounded to the Racist Party. By this time, the American 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.

“Number One: 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 were also imprisoned. The Miscegenation



Re-incrimination Bill also contributed to the elimination of the colored male presence.

“Number Two: 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 buses 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 quickly dwindling. Middle American cities and Southern towns 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 guerrilla 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.

“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, known now as 'Ponies,' 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. 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'. And in the meantime, the Occupiers and general poor continued to wallow in their squalor, and we the wealthy American hegemony continue with 'business as usual.'”

I take several minutes to digest all of this.

“That's the general scene up through the Forties. The real recent developments have been the *Oogle* virtual reality glasses, which have subdued much of the remaining population. The Niggerati still run about. Some wise-asses have also eluded the government mandate that all citizens wear their *Oogle* glasses, which are also called *Oggles*. But everyone else lives in the world of the *Oogle* glasses twenty-four-seven. These humaniods, I like to call them, live in what are called Big Box Complexes. Big, gray, windowless buildings, containing one-to-two thousand units. The units are all five-by-five feet. People don't need a lot of room to move around when they are immersed in virtual reality. They have one chair which is also a toilet, and one intravenous drip connected through a system in the Complex though which they are fed nutrients, liquids, and sometimes drugs, if they pay for it with their virtual BitCoins, which they earn at their virtual jobs. There's always internet and everyone who lives like this is happy. They can even have sex, meeting people in virtual chatrooms, and if they gain Consent they may 'engage intercourse,' by which a solution of endorphins is administered into their veins and straight to their brains. They don't go anywhere and they don't ask questions. The information they receive is censored, so no one knows anything that they're not supposed to know and no one knows that they are missing out on anything. This is called Big Box Living.”

I ask few more questions, then we part. Connor goes to meet Clair for lunch and I go to my room and lay down even though it is only just past noon. I can't think. I am burdened by a truth which seems to laugh in my face: there is just so much that I don't know.

In the evening before dinner I walk to the Old Bird Cabin. I feel it drawing me in, yet I do not know what I expect to find, nor do I know anything regarding my motive other than a naïve desire to know. Just to know.

As I walk down the west road, the nature of the island seems to speak to me. At the edge of the wood I see my father in a mangled faun. Some brute creature has conquered it, yet left it whole, a carcass ripe for decomposition. I see it's torso move slowly up and down; it's tounge hanging from its mouth like a doused-red gag. It's eyes look fearfully up to the sky knowing that nothing is there to save it. There is no hope for it. Death is upon this creature. I see that its legs are broken and its neck is wrought unnaturally to the left side. There is little blood upon it. Whatever monster did this to it certainly had no intention of consuming it or putting it out of its misery. The purpose was only to cripple it, leave it for the ants and beetles and the maggots. Control. To usher the Reaper a little quicker into this poor faun's lonesome life. Perhaps it was out of misery, I think. Perhaps the assailant pained to see a creature so alive, so sad.

We are food for worms. We do not matter. We are matter.

Farther down the road I see a sizable anthill, and near it, ants marching without order over a hog carcass, and it reminds me of the Occupy movement I heard about. Aimless scurry. They have not defeated the hog. Somehow the hog brought this on himself, having gotten out of the pen, and is now being conquered by these ants after the fact. Oh, noble hog. You were too cunning to get out of your boundaries. Now you feed the little ones. Of course, you would have been slaughtered anyway. Perhaps, again, death has been ushered in with urgency. Would you have lived to die today, or die another day? Would you have gained more from several more weeks of squalor life? Might as well break free and experience life accelerated, and die a noble death as a member of the cycle of nature.

I cross into the field and head southwest. I see the tip of the cabin summit the horizon. Black smoke bellows from its chimney. Smoke that has not ceased in twenty years. Is it really the birthplace of that devilish villain which stalks these yards?

Did John Bird really have some hand in its creation? If I enter, will I find some closure, will I be overcome with the truth?

I stop when the cabin is in full view. Behind the windows lies darkness. It is as intact as I imagine it was when Old Boyle and Bird and Mother and the rest of them were happily dining here. Oh, that happiness was too short-lived. Deary tire, melancholy, and wondrous heavy has taken its place. Perhaps it was a premature death as well. Perhaps John Bird ushered the Reaper in a little quicker, for he pitied the listless living of his friends. Perhaps he is a saint. But it would have done us all well if along with the rest Father and Mother fell, too. Now we are not dead but in limbo, ever near the presence of death. The Reaper lives among us, contemplating our demise. It will not be at his hands. No, it will be at our own.

John Bird set the gears in motion. We will administer the final chop of the guillotine, and execute our last rest.

I turn without going any nearer the sublime little house. I walk leisurely up the west road. I think of dinner approaching, the meat, that which will give me temporary happiness once again, a short purpose in life before I fall back into the abyss. That *petite mort* I feel in the aftermath, that is what I live for. Only two hours till.

*John Bird died for our sins ....*

After dinner, and that sublime transcendence, I join Father in his study and with him share a brandy. We are quiet for some time, only the cackling of the fire filling our consciousnesses. The yellow light projected upon the dark room lends the impression of being in deep space, staring right into the sun. It shimmers and jumps with sinister effect. And yet it is all the more homely and inviting.

I look over at Father, whose head is reclined back, his mouth slightly open, and his eyes nearly closed. His shirt sleeves are rolled up and his tie is undone; in moments like these

I like to imagine that he has just returned from a day at the office and is enjoy a due stint of relaxation. But in actuality, it is more like a relaxation from the troubled life he's led. Death is upon this man. He welcomes it like a stranger at some ungodly hour of the night. He's ready at any time.

I want to ask him things. I want to know what he knows, but he'll never spill. I'll ask him anyway.

"Father," I say, take a sip, "What happened with you and John Bird and Mother all those years ago?"

I hear his heavy wheezing breathing. Under his eyelids I see what little part of his eyeball is exposed shiver and jump with the reflection of the fire. He heard me. He's not so drunk yet as to be asleep. With his mouth open, I cannot tell if or when he is about to speak. But suddenly a gudder calls fourth from his pharynx, and that unintelligible groan sprouts sounds and letters: "That is not for you to know."

I respond at length, not wanting to seem eager. "Why?"

"It's in the past."

"But the past is inherent in the present. We cannot move forward if we do not know where we have been. How can I ... lead the island, if I do not know its intimate history?"

"Leave that to Jackson. He's already hardened, having cared for your mother all these years. He can handle the truth, for like it he is already grim. He'll know what to do when I'm gone. He'll know how to run things, he'll know about the meat, where to get it, how ... But you, you are innocent. You must keep up the innocent appearance of the island ... while he goes behind the scene and does what needs to be done."

"But I can handle it, Father. I can handle the truth. What happened? I should know the history."

"No. All you need to know is the legend. To tell the guests the story of what happened, a cute little anecdote. But the real, raw history, that is a secret. Only one person needs to know that, and that is still too many."

“The raw history?”

“ ... You don't think that events occur that are so far removed from reality. You don't think a real monster walks these grounds do you? You don't think some nigger wench begot the devil's kin, do you?” He looks at me.

“No.”

“It's all human, much too human. Human folly brought all these circumstances about. And we deal with them now. But privately.”

“It was John Bird ...?”

“John Bird died for our sins.”

“ ... But what Mother said last night ... He raped someone, didn't he. He killed someone, yes?”

As if listening to the song of the fire and the night, he turns introspective. He downs the rest of his brandy and refills the tumbler to its rim. Then he down half of that and says, “Yes.”

I lower my head and drink what remains of my glass.

“But it was in all of our interests. I see that now.”

I set the glass on the table and pour a shot. I drink it, and say, “Was this ... rape that John Bird committed ... Is his illegitimate offspring in some way related to the monster that we speak of today?”

“Ask no more questions,” he says then, clearly and sternly. He drinks. He pulls out a cigar, sets it in his mouth, and lets the flame of his lighter lick the end until the embers have sufficiently been ignited. He released a cloud of smoke and says, “The monster is human. We are the monsters.”

I listen to the night. Birds, ravens from the sound of them, carol to the stars above. The gentle crash of the ocean surrounding us is at times pulled out of monotony and becomes a disturbing static. The full moon, through the window, seems an omen. It is not purely white tonight. Certain fall evenings color it different shades. Tonight it is red.

“Is the monster really the one responsible for all the missing guests?”

Red-nigger moon, sinner. Blood-burning moon, sinner.

“A monster,” says Father, clearly beginning to doze off, “has done it. A monster. ... What you and the rest of the people regard as evil, as heard from the legends, is only a scapegoat, a veil to protect the real evil in our midst. It is a familiar evil that we choose not to see. Raw history will reveal the real monsters, but raw history is concealed.”

Red-nigger moon, sinner. Come out that factory door.

“Go now,” he says. “Ask no more. One day the truth may befall you. And at that time you will hate me. You will hate us all. You will hate yourself. But you will learn to live with it ... as I have. You will learn to drown it. But seek not. Don't go out of your way to learn what will kill you. Stay golden. Enjoy this island, enjoy the meat without guilt, while you still can.”

I get up to leave. I sway toward the door, and am suddenly overcome by the flood of artificial white light which floods the hallway. I shield my hands over my eyes and cross the threshold. But before I turn down the hall and head up to my bed, Father says one last thing: “Man is matter, my son. That's all it is, no morality, nothing hidden save by skin. There's nothing sacred about him. As fit to be eaten as any cow or pig ....Amauta .... the Birds .... the country ....us ....we will all go down as food for worms.”



## Chapter 4

### Ghosts

I think I am seeing things.

It has just now dawned on me that that phrase has a queer metaphysical ring to it. “I think,” indeed, I am. “I am seeing” is also true; I am not blind. That I am seeing “things” is also true; it is inconceivable to see nothing. Furthermore, “I think I am seeing” is true, truer, perhaps, than “I am seeing,” for it cannot be proven that what I behold through my two eyes really exists outside of my mind's interpretation of them. Close your eyes, enter coma—where is the world you thought you knew? But to think that you see, that is the truth of reality. You think before you see. The blank mind exists before reality. And reality is made up of “things.” I think I am seeing things; I think I am seeing what is real—but they can't be real, these things I see, or these things I think ... I see. Ah! Is my perception of the real skewed? I think wrong; I see now; I am corrected. But do I really see ... ghosts? Or do I just think I see them. Whatever the answer, they have kept me up tonight. Thus they are all too real.

It started when Connor told me about a part of his father's youth in Virginia. He had come home from college one summer. His father was a good friend of the judge in their small community, so he went to tour the courthouse. Passing all the attorneys and guards, he said hello to every one of them, and they returned the salutation for his father was a well-respected man in the community. All the blue and black suited lawyers, all the secretaries, all the smiling faces. Hello, hello, hello, welcome home, hello... He looked at the murals of the local lives, some of them fifty-to-one-hundred years old. Peaceful, serene, all smiling white faces, adults and children, frolicking amidst unpicked white tufts on prickly stems. He toured every floor of the building as if he were an administrator there. He felt at home. On one of the upper floors, lined with closed office

doors, he decided to peer into one of them; he thought he might see someone he knew. So he opened one.

Upon poking his head in, he saw that he was upon an assembly of figures disguised in white robes and pointed hoods, all congregated in front of one dressed in red at the altar. A figure near the door turned his head to the boy, at this time no older than nineteen or twenty, and peered at him through the small eye-holes in his hood, those hollow dark pools the only part showing of his human self, and the boy knew at that moment that they were his fate. They were his government. They were his justice system. They were his father's people. And they were him. And he came to embrace it.

Now I have these dreams, or maybe they're not, in which a clan of tapering white sheets whose wide translucent bases flow in the air as if their pyramidal apices were being pulled along by the pinch of God. They pass through these grounds led by the Red One, chanting what sounds like vulgar Gregorian songs. They call themselves the Knights of the White Order. They seek the monster. "Hang the cur," I hear them moan.

I find myself surrounded by them in a wood. They claim to seek the monster yet they flock round me wherever I turn; yet through their eyeless sockets they seem not to see me. They are almost twice my size, moving with the heavy coast of a naval fleet; they get close and I am paralyzed, and they pass over me with the ease of smoke rings passing through a screen door and dissipating. First the Red One does so, then the others, white, and with each intangible embrace I feel a bone-rattling chill. But I cannot escape.

Each time I awake, I am soaked in a pool of my own sweat.

Sometimes these dreams, waking or not, get out of hand. In the wood I turn and see my father as a vampire, head bent over the neck of some poor creature, a faun maybe. I turn the other way and see my mother as a zombie. They both eat of

flesh and blood. My father hands me some man's neck and I accept without a second thought. It has a familiar taste.

Before long it is morning, and my belly growls for meat.

Father died last night in his sleep. He drank himself to death in his chair in his study before the licking fire. Hartfelt found him and alerted me this morning after he told Jackson. Mother was already sedated by that time. Clair is nowhere to be found. The burial is to take place at noon, and the reception of meat will follow at four. In the meantime no one gathers. We are all alone here.

I go to the southern mansion and Connor expresses his sentiments. I tell him that it is like it has always been. He had always been dead inside. I feel no sadness. In fact, I feel relief. I feel gratitude that the Reaper has finally dropped his scythe. The man will languish no more. We are silent for most of the morning.

On the veranda we share a drink, smoke, and I ask him, “What is this thing, the human life? This painful self-consciousness. From whence does it spring, where does it go? Was it ever really there or was all this life an illusion, fabricated by neurons and stimuli?”

He thinks for a long time, then he says, “You are a drop of water, and this world is a glass filled with water sitting on a table in a room. You are just one drop surrounded by infinite other drops—other beings. They are indistinguishable from one another. They are a liquid whole, ebbing and flowing past each other, confined to the shape of the glass.

“There is the rim—the sky. And beyond that there is the table—the galaxy. The table lamp—the sun. And beyond that there is the room that the table is in—the universe. And beyond that there is the house that the room is in. And beyond that there is the city that the house is in; and there are many more lights in the city. And beyond that: there is the world that the city is in,

and the oceans...all of those drops of water...and then there is a whole other galaxy, another universe, outside of that. And that—the whole infinite universe—is one drop of water surrounded by an infinite number of other drops, ebbing and flowing past each other, sitting in a whole other glass, sitting on a table, in a room.

“The universe is simply a series of infinite points contained within one another: a Russian doll of existence: an infinite number of universes containing infinite space containing an infinite number of molecules containing an infinite number of atoms...and who knows how many infinite components make up an atom; they probably contain other universes.

“The fact that a mind exists to conceive of the universe is the reason that the universe exists. A mind is a singularity; it exists independently of everything around it. There is the interior mind and everything else—body, clothes, and world—is exterior. The mind is where the exterior universe ends (with the atom and whatever is within the atom), and where the infinite universe of imagination and impression begins. Scientifically, one could make the argument that emotions and thoughts are made up of physical chemical compositions, but the very depth and breadth of human emotion must far exceed the limited physical properties of molecules and atoms. The activity of neurotransmitters and sensors passing between synapses is what appears to trigger emotional response, but how do we account for the infinite nature of human imagination if these transmitters are finite. Science dictates that the combination and amount of these neurotransmitters passing between synapses may vary to such a degree that the possibilities of emotional response seem infinite. But it is in fact not the properties of the physical components themselves that create emotion and memory but the empty space between components; the mind exists within this interaction space ... There's a passage from the *Tao Te Ching* which reads: 'Thirty spokes converge on a single hub, but it is in the space

where there is nothing that the usefulness of the cart lies. Clay is molded to make a pot, but it is in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the pot lies. Cut out doors and windows to make a room, but it is in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the room lies. Therefore, benefit may be derived from something, but it is in nothing that we find usefulness.'

"Being thus exists within the infinite space between physical components. This model of being resembles that of the atom. An atom is 98% empty space; but it is not really empty. The empty space is really the magnetic field created by electrons, protons, and neutrons attracting and repelling each other. This magnetic field is energy, and this energy is equivalent to the nature of being, which is not physical, but which exists between physical components. The mind is where being begins, existing within the space between neurotransmitters and synapses caused by sensations from the exterior. If a human being had no mind to interpret senses then it could not interact with or even conceive of the universe and the universe would not exist. For the mind to interact with the universe it has to put itself in relation to something bigger outside of it; otherwise, interactions with these external forces wouldn't make logical sense. So: the universe is contingent upon a mind to interact with it and think of it to exist, and the mind is reliant on a universe to exist outside of it in order to make sense of its existence. The universe doesn't exist outside of the mind, but the mind needs a universe to exist inside of. So the mind creates the universe that it lives in, the universe under which its physical laws are based. The mind creates the place in which it puts itself in relation. So our lives have meaning in as much as we give meaning to our own lives. If we put the universe into context as a facet of our imagination, then we can change, alter, and even make up our own realities. The mind conceives of the universe and the universe cradles the mind. The infant conceives of the mother that carries it. For religion to

exist is for a person to be hidden from the fact that they give meaning to and create their own realities. It is for the top to be screwed onto the lid of the jar we live in, so that we forget that there is infinite space and infinite possibility extending from all around us. 'God,' the creator of this universe, exists within every individual.

"This is what is meant by the singularity of the beginning and the end. The drop of water contains the universe and is simultaneously within the universe. There is no starting point or end point, no life or death, no being or space, but a constant cycle of existence, where all parts of one's environment are contingent upon the observer to exist, and *vice versa*.

"We and the universe are one: a single entity: a point.

"All the world is an interpretation made by you, the observer; millions of different interpretations, millions of different realities."

I try to digest this. "So nothing is really the reality. A singular nothing."

Connor nods.

"I still don't really get it," I say. My mind drifts to Father's spirit ... where has it gone? Perhaps it left years ago, when the traumatic thing happened; only a shell had remained, a shell which has finally broken.

Connor goes inside. I am left to contemplate the waves. Soon I wonder where Clair is. Surely, if she were here, in Connor's room, she would have come out to speak to me. She is not that secretive about her trysts. I wonder. She doesn't even know yet about Father. She's a strong girl. She'll cope. We all cope.

Later Connor returns with a book which he hands to me.

"I don't need a book about grieving," I say coldly. "I'm not grieving."

"It's not about grieving," he says. "It's about existence. It may help you. Give you some kind of answer."

“What is it?” I ask. The hard-covered book has no jacket, no indication of its content.

“It’s a 2011 text by an American philosopher. It’s interesting. Weird. But interesting.”

I set the book in my lap. Silence. The breeze blows in from the ocean. The smell of salt and sky fills my being. The light crashing comes out of monotony again, natural static; soon it recedes back into silence.

Then I ask, “Where’s Clair. We haven’t seen her all morning. She doesn’t know yet.”

Connor looks away. “I haven’t seen her since the other day. She’s stopped seeing me after the night in her room.”

“That’s how she is,” I say.

“When I see her she looks aloof. She seems high, or something; she always has this little grin on.”

“Maybe she’s found some other love. Maybe she went back to Lucius Lethe.”

“I doubt it. I see her heading down the west road a lot. Maybe going to the Old Bird Cabin.”

I frown. Renata suddenly springs into my thoughts. I wish to see her. I wish for human comfort, human touch.

“I’m going,” I say as I get up.

“Read the book,” Connor says still looking away.

As I walk back through the house I say back to him, “You have to be at the Abime by eleven-forty. The procession starts at noon.”

In Renata’s room in the lower east mansion I lay in her arms and say not a word. She knows how to comfort someone who’s lost a dear relative. She knows it’s better not to speak. I gave her this comfort when her father disappeared. Nothing so intimate as sex is required for consolation, but we are naked. I like to feel her skin. I lay with my head against her firm breasts reading. Her nipple tickles my neck. She smokes above me and sometimes

gives me a drag. We'll do this until we need to go to the Abime. Hartfelt and Jackson are currently handing the preparations. I personally don't feel obligated to go. Is it wrong? No. Comfort is what we all need in times like these.

Besides the fact that he died peacefully and numb, we are all relieved that he did not disappear.

Where is Clair, I suddenly think. No matter, she does her own thing. Why bother her now with something so trivial as death. I go back to reading ...

\* \* \*

Jackson, Hartfelt, Connor, a sedated Mother, Renata, myself, and all the rest of the guests gather together in the foyer of the Abime dressed in our finest black. Nobody speaks as a nigger wench rolls in upon a purple felt-covered dolly the closed gold-detailed mahogany coffin. All in attendance have lowered their heads as the pall is wheeled into the midst of the crowd. The wench solemnly departs and Hartfelt and Jackson stand at the head, their hands cupped behind their backs. I lean over to Jackson and say, "We won't get to see him off?"

"You see him right here," he says coldly.

"I mean his face. This is a closed ceremony?"

"Yes."

"But why? It's not like he was shot in the face. Can't we just see his--"

"No," he says irritably, then lifts his head to the crowd: "Guests, family members, food and friends, we are gathered here today to celebrate the life of a father, to his children, to his wife, to his guests, and to his friends. He loved every single one of us standing here today. From the moment he was first able to love, he loved. He saw past all of our faults. In the past he sought only what was best for his friends. My mother likes to recall, when she can, my father's sympathy toward her in college, when she came to him upset about her boyfriend at the time, he loved her then and the love grew; and presently as the husband of that



very same girl, he loved her. That boyfriend of my mother's back in college was John Bird. Through all of Bird's ... quirks over the years, up until the day he tragically died of pneumonia, my father loved him as well. No fault was too great as to deter Father's love. Yes, as of the death of Sir Bird, up til now, he has been somewhat shut off from feeling. But underneath his apathy he loved still. What sacrifices he made back then for the comfort of his friends weighed on him until he could take it no more. Yes, for the past twenty years he has been cold, a numbing blizzard raging in him, but today we see him out of that winter and into an eternal spring. May he live in spirit as he lived in life, on this island of his father's, and Bird's father's, this island which he thought his home. Let him live among us, in the trees, in the dirt, fertilizing our ground and our vegetation so that he may live in our bellies. This man, my father, was a good man. He only wanted the best ...”

And then I see a single tear roll down Jackson's face. And I know in this moment that in Father's passing, some of his humanity has passed as well into his first-born son; so great a love that it could not be thwarted by Jackson's hard emotional shell. And I cry, too. I cry for Clair. I cry that, when he was alive, I could not see the love he possessed—hid under a river of liquor. I cry for all the cruel thoughts I have thought about him. I touch my hand to the casket. Jackson touches my shoulder. Mother, even in her state, has remorse in her countenance. I think, for the first time, that we are a family connected.

Jackson then moves to the top right-hand side of the pall; I take his cue and move to the left side, Connor behind me, and Hartfelt behind Jackson, and together we lift Father's last bed, exalting him. We procession out the open doors, Mother behind us, comforted by Renata, followed by the other guests in rows of two, and behind them the house ponies, likewise. We walk down the steps and to the left, down the road and into an enclosed garden filled with forsythia and geraniums, where in their midst

his tomb's been dug, a passage into the next life, and we lower him like a cradled baby back into the womb of the earth. The soil is rich where the spades have turned it, and its smell, accompanied by the geraniums and the ocean breeze, moves me again to silent tears. We step back, the four of us at each corner of the hollowed place, guests around us, Jackson now holding Mother, and I grab Renata's hand. With my other I grab a handful of soft soil from the mound and hold it, palm up, above him, letting it sift through my fingers. Jackson follows suit, and suddenly Mother starts to weep.

As Jackson leads her, wailing, out of the garden, each of the guests walk around the grave and toss a handful of soil into the opening, and follow them back toward the Abime. Each time dry dirt hits the hard wood of the coffin, I feel my heart stop, like it's the crash of a cymbal accompanying Hartfelt's incantation: "Lamb of God, you who take away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Lamb of God, you who take away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Lamb of God, you who take away the sin of the world, grant us peace. Pie Jesu domine, dona eis requiem .... Everlasting ...rest."

Renata looks at me as she throws her handful in, inquiring without words if I will accompany her back. I gesture for her to go on without me, and she leaves. Now it is only Hartfelt, the diggers, and I. I say to him, "Can I have a moment alone." Hartfelt nods to the diggers and they step out. Here I am left with father, he who left us but did not disappear. We know where he is.... Right?

There were so many things I had wished to ask him. Oh, how I took our time for granted. There were good things and bad things I wanted to know. Truths pleasant and revolting. No, the question was never "did he love me?" Despite his lack of showing it I know that he did. No, these were truths more stomach-churning. Truths that had the power to break my heart into twenty or thirty more questions than that simple question. I

look down at him and say, "Thank you. Thank you for trying to protect me." But I am a big boy now. I have a right to know.

There is yet one more question you can answer for me, Father. No matter the truth, I will be grateful for your response.

I jump down into the hole.

Carefully, I sweep the dirt off the surface with my palm, see my reflection in the fine lacquered wood. Hello, I see you in me. Now ... do I want to know what really happens to a man's body on this island?

Where do we go when we disappear?

I get down into the space between the coffin and the side of the grave, set my fingers under the lip of the cover, and hurl the thing open.

...It's like when you finally open the treasure chest, and a bright ray of light comes bursting forth. There is no body here.

"Touche, Pa. Touche ...."

I get into the plush, empty box and lay straight and still as a corpse. I think I will cry, but I don't. It's too late to cry. I simply remember what he had said to me all those years ago, and now I understand. "When the time comes, it is your responsibility to give yourself up for your friends."

I return to the Abime in time for the reception. All the guests are seated around the dining table; Jackson sits at the head, Mother directly beside him, and Hartfelt stands behind him. I enter tracking dirt through the room and take a seat at the opposite end. They look at me and give me a single simultaneous nod. They know.

I nod back.

Then Jackson stands. "As I said earlier, the only thing that my father wanted in this life was to make his friends happy, to make them comfortable, to give them what they desired. As we dine, let us remember his generosity. Let us remember how he introduced us to perhaps the finest delicacy in this world. For

this, we thank him. He had always said, 'It is paramount, when the time comes, to give ones' self up for the good of the party.'" Jackson looks right at me. "Let us meditate on his selflessness, as we enjoy the last of him."

He takes his seat and Hartfelt waves in the servers who set in front of each of us a plate beautifully arranged with a five-ounce cut of perfectly braised meat, seasoned to perfection, smothered in a cream of mushroom gravy and topped with a sprig of rosemary. As I cut my first piece, Jackson looks at me and smiles for the first time I can remember in years. It remains disdainful, but it is a smile nonetheless. Then he gets to his own plate. I look around the room and am further saddened that I cannot share this experience with Clair. But all of us who've fed now on Father's generosity are as close a family as I could ever hope for. And as I cradle the first bite of that plump, succulent meat in my mouth, I regard it with new delicacy.

After dinner I go to my room and get in bed. I feel like an anvil. An anvil is a solid block, capable of destruction and forgery, yet unassuming, inanimate, unmotivated, capable only of being acted upon, of shaping objects only by others' hands; but it is not the shaper, it is not the object. It does not change. I feel heavy. I don't know ... Yes I do ... Am I the guilty one. I took no part except in passing. But I enjoyed. Am I the guilty one. I don't feel guilty. But in retrospect, did I condone ... How could I, when I did not know what there was to condone. Ignorance as plea ... Could it be ... Such heavy questions weight my mind that they have ceased to be questions. One knows when and when not a question is stated. To thwart its inherent mystery with punctuation ... the punctuation is inherent. Overkill. Oh, God. Mortality descends upon me like darkness upon this island. It is abstract no more, it is not a intellectual game, it is not a romantic dream; it is a reality and it is condoned; no one stops it. It takes us all. Would I have happily gone down like Father.

Given myself up. Ward off, Reaper, a while longer. I do not mean to court you. But why, why be in our midst when we are trying to live happily. You being here makes this all a farce. You could sweep in momentarily. Why not now. Oh, no, stay away. But the question simply is why not; you have the power. Perhaps to exercise the power of action with inaction is the greatest feat of all. So we are not so great and daring to live. Life is not an adventure. And even when we think we've got it, we've got nothing. This is you placating us just a while, watching us get a little farther ahead when there is no such thing as distance. It is from one point to the same point somehow. And it is surrounded by you. Watching us like a biologist through a microscope; studying. Observing. It is amusement, I suppose. For what would you do out in the abyss. It is much more fun to watch us squirm. You sick thing, you. Watch us fabricate happiness predicated on a lie—that there is somewhere next to go. No. You are our destiny, all of our destinies. And as fate would have it, all our lives prescribed, no one wins. A fixed game. A market skewed toward the owners. We live and try to stay alive—medicine, exercise, self-improvement—to run right into your arms, our eternal Father. There is no getting out your way. Is this depression speaking. Or is it realism. Grim realism. Grim Reaper. If ignorance is bliss, then I am grim, thus I am you. And I do not fear you, now, for I know, we are one, just by circumstance removed, but soon to be reunited. If this knowledge is realism and realism is grim, I've been living in a myth for life, and I want to stay here a while longer; I can appreciate it far better now knowing what it really is. Let me feel, simulated as it is. Let me at least feel dread—at least that's something. Then do what you will. I am thine masochist, Master, Christ. Do we have an agreement. Or are you not the one I should be talking to.

A knock at my door. I haven't locked it. Maybe they'll take me now. Oh, but isn't it the case: you probably don't even

hear it when it happens.

Lucius Lethe enters. I turn my head toward the window. I hear him pull a chair up to the side of my bed and take a seat. I smell butane, hear the flick of a flint and a spark, and a sizzle. Smell of smoke curls my nostrils. I turn toward him, smoking arm on his crossed knee, looking daintily at me. I can't help but feel like Clair, or some woman, ready to be seduced by him. I am uncomfortable with my vulnerability, so I sit up and swing my legs to the side of the bed.

"Do you mind?" he asks, cutting his eyes at his cigarette.

"No," I say distantly.

"Want one?"

"Yes," in the same mousy way.

He takes his pack out of his vest pocket and holds it out to me. I look at him, and slowly take a cigarette as if it may be one of those old rat-trap bubblegum gags. I put it to my lips as he holds the freshly lit flame of his lighter to it's tip. I inhale—Ah, the relief, tightness of the chest, rush to the head, one feels the true lightness of body.

"Very nice," I say, even though I have smoked cigarettes many times and know this sensation. But I feel the need to say something. "Thank you," I follow up.

"D'Urbervilles," he says showing the pack to me like some sort of paid spokesperson. I squint at him through a trail of blue smoke.

"I know," I say. "I saw. I smoke the Virginians."

He looks at his own pack. "These are 'Cohiba.' Spicy and robust, it says."

"Yes," I say. "They are. Very curious."

He smiles, takes a drag, and returns the pack to its pocket. He looks up and beyond me and fixes his oddly pleasant gaze there for some time.

"What do you want?" I ask, when half my cigarette has vanished.

He looks right into my face with that same complacent smile. "See how you were holding up."

"I don't need to be checked upon."

"I know. You're a big boy."

I was honestly convinced that I would get to like him in this time, but I am mistaken, as I have been about a lot of things.

He continues, to my expressed resentment, "Jackson says you know."

I know? I am wont to yell at him 'You have no right to pry into family matters,' but that would confirm his distasteful implication of my boyishness, and also bring up the subject, which I am trying to forget; but it is clear that he will not let me. So I say, "You know?"

"We all knew."

I take a drag.

"But you and Clair."

"Because we're childish and *innocent*?"

He disregards my indignation. He gets the message. "Of course, we all knew before we came here."

I want to ask then why they came here, but fuck him.

"It was an agreement. We were tired, too."

You don't know me. You don't know how I feel.

But I need to know. "Does Renata ..."

"Yes," he says at length.

I look at his shoes. I want to jump into their shiny blackness.

"The world is sad. In this day and age, one wants comfort and security at the very least. We are all blessed to have those granted, when the rest of the world does not. But even the very greatest, like Mortimer Bird, goes down ... one would rather know that they will die at the hands of their friends, than at some brute awakening."

"Death is our friend," I finally say. I do not look at him. "He is our last resort when we are in need. He is always present

and always watching, always over our shoulder. Life abandons us at our worst moments, is fickle and unsure of our worthiness. Rarely makes us happy. But Death, he is our constant, our rock. And he will be the one knocking, the last we see.”

Lucius licks his finger and snuffs out the butt of his cigarette and stands. “We make our own bed.” He turns to leave, and over his shoulder he says, “Your father would not have wanted you to know the grave truth of our lives. No good father does.”

He heads toward the door and I find myself wanting him to stay. In him I see peace. To know and to forget, or at least disregard, these truths, to live as fully as possible in the wake of inevitable downfall. He is almost gone; I call out to him, “Wait.” He turns around, half his body out the doorframe. “Have you seen Clair?”

“No,” he says.

“Spare her,” I say.

He nods and walks in petty pace away, strutting his shadow upon the wall, and down the hall I hear a happy whistling which slowly fades.



Chapter 5  
The Pretense of Innocence

“You sad fucking bitch,” I hear through scattered dreams and the clearing fog of sleep. I turn over in bed and see in a blur which slowly clears, Jackson standing over me. “You’ve been in bed for twenty-four hours you little shit. It’s seven o’clock in the goddamn evening. You didn’t even see Trimmer Jennings off.”

I rub my eyes and try to sit up. “I ... I didn’t know ...”

“Shut up. Now you listen to me. I’m not having any more of your little depression-act. Grow up! This is the world! Deal with it. There are vile things which go on. But you suck it up, you hear me? I don’t want to see you moping around. I’m not going to placate you like Father did. You’re gonna do some work around here. You’re not just going to walk around and fuck that orphaned whore.”

“Whoa,” I start to say.

“Shut up, I said. I said shut your mouth. First things first: you’re taking care of Ma now, you hear? You are taking care of her. I took care of that corpse of a woman for fifteen years, when she should have been taking care of me. She’s pitiful just like you. Can’t handle the world so she hides behind a haze of junk. Now you’re gonna deal with it. See how she really is. I took care of her for too long. I took care of all you little shits, you lazy, selfish, entitled, cocksuckers. Every motherfucker on this island is sad and lazy and pitiful. But I don’t see you paying any rent here, do I? So you’re gonna work. You gonna take care of it all. And you can’t go running to Father now ...” He walks with his hands on his hips to the windows across the room, looking away from me. I’ll let him vent. He can’t make me do anything, but I’ll let him think so. I get out of bed and put on my pants, and I hear him say in a low voice, “I took care of that sad old man til the day he offed himself—and he did off himself.” I look at his back and feel tears welling up

in me. "I did all his horrid bidding. I bore the burden of his sin, sin which I had to inherit without any choice." He turns around to me. "You know what that means, right?"

I don't say anything. I want to forget.

"That means what I say goes. What I tell Hartfelt and those niggers in the smokehouse goes. Anybody I deem fit for the time. That means your little girlfriend's not excluded."

Next thing I know I am on my back, my head ringing, my heart racing, my cheek throbbing with blood.

Everything is double, and the two translucent Jacksons come and stand over me, his arms supported on his bent knees. He shakes out his fist. "Don't ever try to strike me again, boy."

As if I am an innocent bystander I hear myself say, "Don't you dare touch her."

He laughs, and the crass sound of it hurts me more than the pain in the side of my face. "Well, well, well. Look at little Christian. Standing up for something. First time in his life. That's how you become a man." He straightens himself up and walks over me toward the door. Behind me I hear, "But you're gonna be a dead man if you try to strike me again. Mother'll never know."

There is silence for a long time, but I feel his presence in the threshold. I can tell he is looking away from me. I can tell that he is too ashamed to look at me.

"You people," he says, "Act so oblivious. You all act like this kind of luxury doesn't come with a price. You all act like the meat just happens out of nowhere. Well ... we're all about to get a rude awakening to reality. You're gonna start doing some work, best believe that, you little shit. Now get the fuck up and give Ma her medicine. And like it. This mopey attitude of yours stops today. And that cunt of a sister of yours is gonna start doing some work, too, whenever she comes home. She can stop acting like a whore and start actually being one, bring in some income for a change. Maybe even work with the

nigger wenches in the smokehouse. Either way, you're all going to wake up. And you're gonna work till your time comes. Now go. Ma takes her dosage twelve hours apart.”

I lie to myself. I tell myself that I know he means well, but I know, truly, he doesn't. He doesn't care about me. He doesn't care about Clair or even Mother, although he cared for her for years. He was at the beck and call of Father, and now, free, he doesn't know what to do with all of that control. Once he only controlled Mother, now the whole island. That responsibility rushed to his head like water through a crack in a submerged vessel. Perhaps he'll drown in it.

But there is no use in dwelling on his situation. Whatever is going on in his head, it is no doubt as sad as what is going on in mine. Perhaps sadder. With great power comes great remorse; when that remorse is not plugged or temporarily satisfied by consumption, money, or flesh, it distills into depression, festers worms of hatred. Connor taught me that.

I go to the kitchen and put ice upon my face. The chill is so intense it feels like a knife has gone through the bruise. I avoid all mirrors and glass like some superstitious pony as I head out to the front steps. I have an overwhelming desire for fresh air.

Outside the breeze is going and numbs the rest of my face along with the ice pack. I catch that familiar whiff of salt water—I even taste it—then I realize it is merely tears. I wipe them away.

Oh, Renata, where are you? I miss your touch. What I need's your hand to clear these tears. What I need's your bosom to calm this swell. What if you go down tonight. Will I be able to stomach it. To sit in front of your roasted flesh as I did Father's, will I be able to forget again. Or will a will to power finally come over me. Will I renounce this lifestyle. Will I no more passively accept the violence inherent in this luxury.

What's worse, the loss of that delicious meat, the only thing I live for, or the guilt of knowing what it costs. Is a clear conscious worth the price of the loss of my life's only purpose. I wish I could give you more credit. I wish I could regard you as a person, rather than someone destined to be at my dinner table. Is it an excuse to say that circumstance has molded this paradigm of mine, that I cannot see a person more than as a living carcass ripe for death, other than my own sister.

Oh, Clair, and you, my flesh and blood, where are you out there. How can I comfort you when you learn of our family's sin, when I cannot even bring myself to articulate it. Forgive me, forgive us all. Perhaps it's best you never know. What will I say when the time comes ...

I look into the woods before me and wonder. What lies beyond ... what bitter mystery lies in the abyss of nature, surely atrocities more despicable and grotesque than those we've committed. But can they be that lamentable if they are the natural way?

Civilization—*that* is an abomination, that we've thought ourselves so beyond the realm of nature that we hold ourselves to such standards that even lions don't abide. Lions, kings of the jungle, sometimes eat their eldest son, for if it is not the right time, the little one poses a threat to the father's authority. Is there some connection in this? Why have we men forged this goodly pedestal. Are we and animals so different? Is it our mind, or intelligence, which separates us. What is a brain but a burden; what is intelligence but an inhibitor of happiness. Perhaps, moralless, we would not think twice about indulgence, and enjoy it all the more. Yet when we have indulged in all the earth's delicacies, what's left to indulge in but ourselves, and bring about our end so that we may not have to face the bleak and barren future.

Might the answer be in the wood? Might the reason for man's forged superiority lie in the brutality of animal? Or is it

innate in ourselves—yes, perhaps our own evolved minds led to their own destruction; it could not take the questioning. In the bitter apocalyptic wood, ostracized and left in the dark to brood, would civilization return to its humble root, or raze the last of Nature to raise its morals new.

Is it truly animal to continue this indulgence, to forsake intellect and moral for desire; is it man to take a stand, or is it folly. For death awaits in any case. Forget the afterlife; it's an excuse to wage the moral war. When all we have is this life, and this earth, is it so wrong to indulge?

The Reaper laughs that we think ourselves so highly. He does not think so.

*Live uninhibited*, he must be saying, *I'll be here in any case*.

We've forsaken our innate nature for a false civility.

Red-nigger moon, sinner. Blood-burning moon, sinner.

I hear movement in the grass. I turn but cannot see the source. But out from under the twilight's veil one approaches. Ah, it is she, her white dress smeared in dirt, from a long sojourn out into the world, come finally back to the civilized.

"Clair," I say as she approaches. I can see she's tired. She walks with a gracelessness, a limp in her gait. "Where on earth have you been? You're all dirty. What have you been doing? Living in the woods?"

She points to my ice pack and says, "What have you been doing? Playing with Jackson?"

"You never mind that," I say. "No one knew where you were. We've all been worried sick. Things have happened since you've gone off."

"I don't want to know," she says. I see resentment in her eyes. He lips, pouted, beckon me, yet ward me off like rose-stems.

"You should know."

“No. I'm done.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm done with this.”

“With what?” I ask as if offended, as if I could never fathom where she coming from.

“This family. This life.”

“What are you talking about? Where have you been, you've been gone for days. What makes you think you're done with all of us. What else do you know in this world?”

“I know damn sure that this, what we call our lives, is fake and messed up and propped up on pillars of lies and insecurity. I'm going to live in the woods.”

“The woods?” I say, too harshly.

“You will never understand.” She tries to walk past me into the house. I grab her arm.

“Wait, wait. Where are you going?”

“To my room,” she says pulling back, her temper rising.

“Stop. What is going on with you?”

“Get off of me,” she says continuing to struggle and flail her arms about. “I don't want to talk to you or anyone else. I just want to leave here.”

“Then why are you going inside?”

“To get some things.”

“Jackson has some nasty words to say to you.”

“Fuck him.”

“You're going to have to deal with him eventually. He's in charge now.”

“I said get off of me.”

“Father's dead.”

“Do I look like I care?” She stares straight into my eyes.

I let her go and she pulls her arms in. I look down at her. She's a mess. “We need to talk.”

“No.”

“What? You don't like me anymore?”

She sighs and mumbles something.

“What?”

“You're all conceited! You think the world is a silver platter.”

“No, no. That's what we need to talk about.”

“No, Christian. You mope and mope all day. You complain and go on long depressed walks and wonder why our family is so sick in the head ... but know that others have it far worse. Know that others have been abandoned and vilified and they try to survive all the same. I'm not going to be a part of this destructive dynasty any longer. Father's old oil mongering, destroyed the earth and now drinks to forget what he's done, your disgusting self-pity, mother's self-indulgence, Jackson's temper, his arrogance, his righteousness. And yet you all have everything you need. You are all sick and you're all grotesque and so, so oblivious to it. And I went along with it for all my life, but now I can see, and I don't want any part of it anymore!” Tears stream down her eyes. “Let Father die, it's what he wanted. Let Mother die, let you all go down, finally, so you don't have to deal with your own disgusting decadence.” She hurries inside and up the stairs. I watch her leave. What's been going on with her?

I look back to the wood.

What have you done to her.

I sit by Mother's side in the unlit bedroom with the syringe cocked in my hand. She's awake but she doesn't speak. She just stares up at the ceiling.

I don't know what to say. I've never really been alone with her. Now, with my own mother, I don't know how to start a conversation. A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun. All I can do is stare.

After several deathly silent minutes I take her forearm and turn it toward me. The neat line of trackmarks turns my

center icy cold. I don't know if I can do this. To sedate her even more. It would be more humane to kill her now. I know the silver revolver is in Father's bedside table. The revolver he's had since before I was born.

I look away from her face, and in the light of the doorway I notice Jackson's silhouette, which at that moment moves ghostlike away. I can't tell if he was really there.

She starts to moan. I look back; her head rolls slowly in my direction, but somehow she continues to look past me. I really see her now, her age, those wrinkles eroded by years of trouble and stress. All her hair is white. Her face is emaciated, cheeks like that of starved and abandoned dogs. I see every vein in her neck and every rib exposed by her night gown. Those liverspots, those unhealed bruised, all the wear and tear. Her breasts are leftover flaps of flesh all withered. Even her arm in my palm feels like a soft bone. The veins are boated and throbbing. She moans again: “ssllleeppp ... ssllleeppp ...” Her mouth falls slowly open, her dry purple tongue squirming like a slug. Her brownish-yellow teeth look ready to fall like stalactites from her receding blackened gums. A smell like burning rubber seeps from that cavern. “Sssllleeppp, give me ssllleeppp ...” Her spotted eyes roll backward. I can't take this anymore. I pull her arm on my lap and rest the needle on her brittle skin. Then, as I insert, she says, “Christian ... watch her ... don't let her do ... what I've let them do ...” Halfway in, I draw blood, watch the dark liquid eddy into the yellowish fluid, then I plunge it all in, and in half an instant she is a corpse again. I toss her limp arm back to her side, and out of some unforeseen surge of passion hurl the syringe at the far wall of the bedroom. For a moment its fragments sparkle in the moonlight like indoor stars.

I don't want to be near her. I feel ghosts all around.

I go into the hallway and the bright white light strikes me as especially artificial. I rub my hands down my face; even



though I have not slept well for days, I feel like I've just woken.

I walk down the front stairs to the mezzanine above the foyer and hear footsteps coming from below me. I get back against the wall, fearing everyone now and not wanting anyone to know my presence; over the banister I see Clair walking from the common room down the way and out the front door with a large bag. She's dressed warmly in all black, and walks with a sure conviction. The door closes, locks itself, and I rush down the stairs. Out the side window it is completely dark, but her little flashlight shimmers about down the yard. She is heading down the west road. I look down and notice that I am in loafers, for which I am quite grateful at this moment. I look back out the window and when I see her flashlight round the edge of the wood, I open the door and follow.

This night is like an ocean ... somewhat suffocating ... yet in small doses life-giving, refreshing. One can find in it all the fears and delectation of human experience, you would think it was modeled after blank vision itself, or that to close your eyes would induce the selfsame effects. Relish in it, yet be weary, for nightmares can spring fourth as easily as from sleep. The sounds seem to come from both without and within, the body knows not its own boundaries ... in total darkness. Yet I walk with all the assurance of a stream-of-consciousness; this darkness is mine, I find footing, yet where will it take me? I lead and am led ... I know this path, the west road; I know that which I seek—my sister ... but where I will end up, what I will finally find, I don't know. The sounds: crickets stroke their hind legs emitting terse harmonies, together a symphony; the wise owl purrs; the trees rustle against one another; I myself crack branches and kick rocks; all under the blanket of pitch dark. I come to think these sounds come from within me, that I imagine them in the comfort of my bed, but no, I am outside and vulnerable. The monster could spring. Oh, Clair, what are you thinking.

Am I a bit presumptive, or just ignorant. For who perpetrates these dreadful acts upon this land is not an outsider. It is ... oh, I know all too well. So why? why do I continue to blame the monster. Why do I call it that, when I know now that it has never done anything. Why do I give agency to a pretense, one which may very well not exist. I don't want to say.

Walking there is no visual gauge of how far I've gone, yet I know by experience that I am near the Old Cabin. This is the feeling of deep swimming, being submerged without drowning. This is the physical manifestation of imagination. Will it take hold of me?

I cross into the high grass and walk purposefully aimless. I've long lost sight of Clair's flashlight. She seemed so determined, so convicted of her exit, and what am I doing. I am a follower. One thing seemed decent for twenty years, I followed. Now her purpose seems equally valid, I follow that. But where is my conviction, what path do I walk with ambition. I am floating free, dragged along by the current. I am no great white shark or mating whale or even an idling school of fish searching for the next feed, escaping the last seathreat. I have no more agency than an algae. Fit to be eaten.

And I lament all this while taking no action, no stance, while making no attempt to change my ways. Did I muster a conviction? No, I didn't even admit to myself what was wrong. I never will. Man was once a keen hunter, a fair player, but a savage opponent in the wild. We had become supreme, but remained at the top too long, and thus became content. Now we're vulnerable. To the wild, sure, but most frighteningly to ourselves. Plummeted have we from the rank of gods we had occupied. Now we're all fair game.

So I'm surprised I'm still alive. I'm surprised the night has not wholly consumed me, by mere matter of principal. I would not shock if a monster did spring fourth unseen and maul me to bits and pieces. It would be fair. My heart rate quickens at

the prospect. Finally, a bit of poetic justice. You are monster, you are saint, sent to dish out nature's due course. Please, take me, I am not worthy to be your opponent. We have been fools to ostracize you. We should welcome you. Please, take away this guilt.

Above me the fogged moon broods over the abyss, and this pitiful little man walks along the way. It is white tonight. Pitch white. Something deep within the wooded island howls and sends an anemic shiver slithering down my spine, putting me in raptures. I stop. I feel a great loneliness and demerit. There—he goes again, summoning all the intensity of the collective *Spiritus Mundi*, with great inarticulate feeling, the only worthy kind. My heart jumps. I feel more base than that wolf which ached. At least he feels. What have I ... we become, when we cannot even feel. You are above me, animale; you know more that we think we do. To the moon you send your praise, not yourself. Exalt thee in thy praise, that you give all yourself to the nothing and the overthing, the singularity in the multitude creatures, the single breath of the wild. I want to join you. I give my all—and send a great howl up to you. Let me rejoin the animal kingdom.

I cease; it's echo seems to reverberated off of the earth's cosmic amphitheater. And I feel, I think, the residual effects of self-relinquish. Weightlessness. Disorientation. Am I floating, am I finally being set free, to mingle in the ethereal eddies of existence.

No. I fall to my knees, prostrate myself, grab at the earth. What do I want?

I stay backbent waiting, as if for some revelation, some touch of God, some moonshine. If I straighten myself back up, and walk back to the Abime, that false fluorescent sea of contrived existence in civilization, I will have to kill myself.

I wait, wait, wait for some confirmation, some stroke of the monster's paw ... but nothing tangible. I inhale the cool

scent of earth, linger in the tickle of the grass. I raise my head. Father, what now?

But He has sent something.

Over yonder, I see through the grass, there is a light. I spring upon my feet. It is the light of the Old Cabin, a fire kindled there, shimmering, jumping flame. I run, run, run toward it. I howl again to the moon, feel the shattered echo sounds rain on me. That deep-rooted wolf responds. I am affirmed. I feel you. I am coming, Father.

Moment by moment the light of the cabin grows as I stride toward it; I feel like some gazelle, or some tiger on the pounce, the victim and the predator at once. One.

The cabin comes into view, illuminated by its own light. I am near it, with each leap feeling closer to the Ultimate Truth, the *Spiritus Mundi*, and my heart pounds with each embrace of the earth. Finally I am upon it. I stop and rest my arms upon my knees and heave, drawing in the cold air. The flickering yellow light is fogged behind the windows, for they clearly haven't been cleaned since the days of Bird.

When I regain my breath I walk around to the front door and approach. I put my hand to the rough hickory. My heart chases my breath out. But no matter; I suck in all at once, and swing the door open. *What will I find? Clair...*

Inside a family may have been sitting peacefully, but did not. The single room, bed neatly made, kettle on, seems as domestic as a room of the south mansion. Homier, even. It looks as if real people actually live here, and not empty aristocrats.

I walk in. The bedding is a red hand-woven pattern, something that a Navajo may have fashioned. Upon it lies Clair's bag and flashlight. But she herself is absent. A round wooden table to the side, coupled by two chairs askew, supports a humble dining set. There is water in the ceramic cups. The kettle begins to whistle in the fireplace. Who lives here? A

pony? I had thought this place was abandoned.

I walk cautiously through the little room. It's warm. The fire crackles. Owls "who" afar.

And then, to the buckle of my knees and the final burst of all my arteries, I hear in a deep and foreign male voice: "Chris-tan."

I swing myself around prepared for death, at the back of my mind a little disappointed that when it comes I regard it with such horror; but death does not befall me. What I see instead is more unreal and inconceivable than being wholly wiped from the earth. It is a man. A ... black man, black as the night outside. He is naked, stands, toned and lean, seven feet tall; he almost touches the top of the cabin. His penis, I can't help to notice, dangles like a third, dwarfed leg. I scan back up his body. I envy his definition. His face is long, his nose wide, and he shines, though black, like polished ebony. His hair is most peculiar. It hangs in long thick locks like a white man's, almost to the small of his back. He looks at me and smiles. "Chris-tan," he says again, in English that has clearly been rehearsed in the past several days.

I feel a tranquility come over me. The energy of the cabin levels like the sea after a storm. He takes one step toward me and, strangely, I don't feel threatened. I see in his face he is thoroughly human and not that old; in fact, he looks about the same age as I. He smiles again, boasting ivorywhite teeth, and shows that he is not only man but attractive.

I close my mouth, which I realize has been hanging open since I entered. I straighten myself up and assume the posture of a greeter of this resort island. But I remain a bit ambivalent. "What are you?" I ask. After he seems not to understand, I ask again, "Who are you?"

His face brightens. "I ... I call myself ... Jebediah."

I instinctively curl my lips, for what kind of nigger living in the wild, not to mention speaks English, has actually read the

Bible.

He comes closer to me and I recoil, almost falling backward into the fire.

"No," he reaches his hand out. "Be not afeared. This isle is full of magic, great wonders and surprises, that if you give yourself the chance, will come to open up your world ... and eyes. Live in dreams no more, no more in fea'. For see what is in front of you, and judge it based on evidence, not myth. See me, Mister Chris-tan. See me hea'."

My mouth has dropped back open I cannot pull it back up. The only thing I can think to do is mutter, "Are ... you ... the monster ..."

He steps back, dejected; I have offended him. "That is what they call me."

I gather myself and move nearer. "You are the illegitimate son of John Bird?"

"I don't know. I been hea' all me life."

I set my hand on the wooden bed post, glance down at Clair's things. I look back at him, skeptical. "What have you done with my sister?"

He looks at me. "Who?"

"Clair."

"My love ..."

I don't even ...

"My love. Love. Teach me speech. Teach me English ..."

I feel like vomiting. I shove past the nigger and out the door into the sea of night again. "Wait, wait," I hear him call, "See me! See me! Tell them what I really am!"

## Chapter 6

### The Pretense of Righteousness

There are so many things I am trying to forget.

What trauma have I myself unbeknownst induced. How many have I hurt.

Are my enemies really my enemies. Are monsters really monsters. Or have they been constructed, having been bundled up in the self, a toxic tar sand of committed sins and insecurities, and exported onto a vulnerable other. Why hate sin in the other when there is much sin in the self. We perpetrate sin abroad to quell the selfsame sin committed. Oh, the dizzying spiral of blame, the folly of civilization, the cause of imminent downfall. What is terror really? Who has really harmed us? It is not them; there is no “them.” There is only action, our action, and that is terror. Only out of self-doubt do we fight, do we aim to prove. We are blind to our own evil and obliteration. We think the war is abroad. But sadly misguided, when we aim to extradite and eradicate terror, the undefined terrorist, we will really extradite and eradicate ourselves from the earth.

Who will laugh then.

Not us. Not me.

Godsent, our extermination, that we may terrorize no more.

Oh, Clair, thou art wiser than the Masters.

In the morning I give Mother her medicine, take some for myself, just a taste, so that I do not have to think about what we've done, then I go to the southern mansion and avoid Jackson until dinner.

Dinner ... the concept of it sends a chill down my back. Or maybe it's the medicine.

It's too late to turn back, there is no salvation at this stage. Better to burn out, fully indulge in the last act, no matter

how grotesque, how sweet.

I sit with Connor on the veranda looking out to the white-haired ocean, wrinkled sage. We drink cognac which compounds the medicine, and I feel oh so numb. Good.

Connor looks numb, too. What does he think?

I sigh, "When I was getting in the car to come down here, I saw the first bud spring from father's grave."

Sigh of the ocean.

"Regeneration," says Connor. "The way of the world. Thank God for it. But we, the civilized, are in Degeneration. That is the misguided aim of man. Regeneration. Soon to be rendered infantile again." He sips. "But this ... Regeneration ... is good. There is death in life. I like being near to death because in it I am near to life. This island, this nature, is good for me. For so long I lived in finance, in the sky, an ungrounded realm supported on fluffy clouds of interest and exchange rates. We could not have supported ourselves much longer. We will surely come crashing down to earth, left in rubble, of ash-heaps and millionaires, broken. But I would not go down with them, no sir. That is what I realized. I would rather go down at the hands of man, to be used and enjoyed, among friends, rather than at the hands of the brute God of Currency.

"Death gives the Corporation Man back his humanity. But wherein does he find it? in the office? Lord no. He has to seek it. And any self-proclaimed business man seeks not death of all things. Progress is the aim. But true progress, in nature, is regeneration, death, and rebirth. That is not good business." He takes another sip and lights a cigarette. Then he returns abruptly to speech, speaking from somewhere deep within him:

"Dollars and cents. That's not real. Technology, smart phones, virtual reality. That's not real. I wanted to return to the real, to step from that fluffy cloud and feel the cool, hard earth. I wanted the natural real—that's imminent death. I wanted that feeling. That's what gives life it's meaning, its exhilaration: the



possibility, at any moment, of losing it. I wanted to feel what the faun feels ... What we have built in the world to survive in it—banks, communication, value, agriculture—has grown so out of hand that we regard it as ultimate and invincible, not of the world itself. The world we regard as finite and dispensable. Our mortality we exchange for online profiles. We built a paradise in computer servers, forgetting that inherent tree of knowledge which will cause our expulsion. Our profiles will last forever. War, last forever. Finance, forever. Petroleum, infinite. America, the Great. We do not see an end. But it is there, ever looming, and it will come whether we regard it or not. It is just so sad to see the Corporations and the Pentagon going about as if they will last forever. I didn't want to live with that ignorance. I came here to seek the end.

“I wanted companionship with other mortal beings. Out there, money has skewed peoples' reality. Money's come to equate lifeforce. No. We are not greater with that intangible value we have forged from air. We are not whole. We are lonelier than ever. I didn't want to die wealthy and alone. I wanted to be with others, friends, who we close to death. Only then could we forge real meaningful relationships. Only then could we speak candidly.”

Back at the Abime, I go to Clair's room. It is banal like my own, containing only the bare essentials: chest, throwrug, books, a bed. All that really matters in on the inside. I go to that periodic tomb, that soft resting place, and put my face to her sheets. They smell, still, of sex.

At dinner I sit at the head of the table, opposite Jackson, and talk to Connor, who sits beside me, more than I eat my meat.

On whom do we dine tonight? The remains of Father? He was indeed a big man.

“Eat your meat,” says Jackson, audibly annoyed.

I disregard him. Out the corner of my eye I see him glaring down at me. Connor and I resume conversation.

Events seem somewhat displaced.

The table looks underfilled. Clair, Father, Trimmer Jennings, and, strangely, Mr. Koppenuck are absent. Mother is already upstairs in bed asleep.

But I pay no mind. I've told myself of late to stop paying much mind to things.

At one point Lucius Lethe inquires, "Has anyone seen Clair recently?"

No one talks, or they simply shake their head. Most have finished and are relishing in the afterglow. He looks to me and I shrug my shoulders. They aren't worthy to know. I am not even.

Suddenly, out of the night, we hear five gunshots which seem to come all at once. Birds aflutter, rustled branches. The island breathes heavily and moans.

"The fuck was that?" says Jackson, assuming his authoritative position.

Expectantly, no one answers, but they are all now more alert.

We are all quiet, inside our own fretting imaginations, and an ominous devil moves in over the the party, brooding, like stormclouds assembled in a hurry.

Then, several minutes later, Mr. Koppenuck staggers into the foyer with a loud crash of the door, turns into the dining room wielding a smoking gun.

He cries, in a booming yet cracked voice, "I seen him!"

"Who?" demands Jackson jetting out of his seat.

"I seen't him! ... I seen the monster!"

I turn round to him now. What could he really have seen? Now I am concerned.

"I seen't him wit' my own two eyes! The monster ... he's ... large! Seven feet tall! Black as coal, he is! He has ... long,

dreadful locks in his hair! He walks upright when idle and crawls when scared—as I did shoot at him—Revenge—but he fell then upon all four lanky paws and scuttered away into the forest. It was terrible, I tell you! That creature which killed my wife. Which took the lives of all our dear friends. Bastard! He was disgusting! A monstrosity! A lunatic! A nigger!”

“Motherfucking cocksucker,” yells Jackson so as to send echoes reverberating off of the dining hall ceiling as he walks around the table.

Hartfelt has entered the room from the kitchen, accompanied with a slew of trembling nigger wenches. “What is the matter?” he proclaims.

Jackson swings around to him, momentarily disoriented from the anxiety that he—surely we all—feel, and says, “Get me my machine gun!”

No one moves. We are all suspended in fear.

“Did you hear me?” he screams, spittle flying from his gullet. “Let’s get a move, people! Search party! We’re gonna hang a nigger tonight.”

With clear apprehension, Hartfelt looks on the erratic Jackson, then moves past the wenches back into the kitchen. “Everyone got their gun?” Jackson asks.

The party, still sedated from the meat, struggles to offer a response. “I don’t have a gun,” says “Middle C” Harmonic. “My gun is in the east mansion,” says Harlem Lethe.

“Shut up!” says Jackson. “Hartfelt will bring plenty of weapons.”

“I got extra ammo,” says Mr. Koppenuck.

“Shut up,” says Jackson. “Alright, lanterns, rope ...”

As he mentally catalogs the night’s necessities Hartfelt returns with the AK-47 from Father’s gun cabinet. Jackson looks up, relieved, and breathlessly retrieves it. “Okay,” he says, talking to Hartfelt like a child, “We need rope, several lanterns, and rifles for the guys.”

“Sir Boyle,” says Hartfelt earnestly and politely, “Do you think you're acting a bit presumptuously?”

And then it was like a desert nightfall. Silence.

The echoing *clap* of the cold palm against the side of his face crippled Hartfelt into a fetal position on the floor. “What did I tell you to do, nigger?” he scowls.

Hartfelt, holding his face, looks as if he's died, his apparition being the thing which rises at length from the stationary body and drifts from the room.

My mouth and eyes are pried apart as if by clamps. I fear that flies will find their way into my stomach or brain. But I know what he is feeling, and I don't want to be on the other side of that hand anytime soon. I close both an look away.

Minutes later, after Hartfelt has returned and set the tools upon the table amidst plates still coated with gravy, and Jackson orders him to bring the car around to the front, the Party members take up their arms with Koppenuck leading the way and depart furiously into the dark of the wood, and then it was all as it had been. The house silent. One'd think that Mother's breathing could be heard.

I stand up fearing Judgment and walk to the window, peer out. The car barrels down the east road, evidently per Koppenuck's direction.

In moments like these, one knows that something must be done, that passivity will yield destruction in the wake of more willed assailants. It is not some great and noble feat. It does not even register as action in that split moment when one's neurological networks start firing. It is simply duty. It seems a given; and you ask, Why did I not act like this before? But no matter; the time is now. In a moment one assumes conviction, where it once may have lacked considerably, for it will be much needed to face the worst of those passionately intense others.

For the second time in the last twenty-four hours, I leave the house and head down the west road under the sea of night.

I walk fast. I run. There's not much time. How will I tell Jebediah. How will Clair bear under this weight. I realize that I have no gun. Before Jackson and his bestial temper, Jebediah will for the first time in his life have to act like a monster. Someone will die.

I cross into the high grass and come upon the homely light. Star-crossed lovers deep inside know not the brutal fight to come. Life is never fair in dark moments like these. I know that evil generally trumps the good by sheer force of conviction. There's no stopping an insecure man.

Oh, Jebediah, may you not regret what might ensue. Give thanks that you no more have to live among us brutes.

I slam through the cabin door, Clair and he, arm in arm. She shoots up off the bed, exposed, and covers up her breast with arms. "What are you doing here?" she asks. Jebediah rises to his feet. "They comin' for me, aren't they?"

"Yes," I say, "We must retreat."

"You can't let them do this, he is harmless, Jackson in the vile one," says Clair.

"Tell that to him and his gun," I say. "Tell that to his incensed mob. Schlitz Koppenuck and his Luger. You can't reason with a grieving lover. You can't reason with these men. They think they know too much."

"Well what'll we do?" asks Clair as she puts on a shirt.

"This is my battle," says Jebediah. "I will take the blunt."

"They have guns," I say, exasperated. "You'll never make it out alive."

"This time is overdue," he says. "When they kill me for what they themselves have done."

I anxiously tap my foot. All look to one another. But no one has reassuring words. No one speaks.

"A-ha!" yells Jackson, suddenly barging in, "The party is

all here.” He cocks and aims his weapon as one by one the armed mob enters.

“Revenge!” growls Schlitz Koppenuck. “Finally, Revenge!” He points his Luger to Jebediah, who stands, eyes closed, stiff as wood.

“Stop,” cries Clair hysterically. “He’s never hurt a man.”

“He can plead his case to Satan, devil-nigger. Judgment is at hand!”

And gun by gun, one by one, the cocking of the hammers sound, and all sights are on the man.

Helpless, nothing left to do, I close my eyes and chant, “Lamb ... Lamb of God, you who take away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us ...”

Three shots ring from Jackson’s gun, horrified, I can’t bear to see. But when I open my eyes and turn, a grave surprise is upon me.

Clair lies riddled with bloody holes on the floor before the unmarked Jebediah. He looks down in silent remorse which starts to manifest itself in his trembling legs.

“Why’d she have to jump in the way,” screamed Jackson.

But he cannot get his weapon back up in time, before the furious Jebediah lunges at him and strikes his face with all his might—looking, I see Jackson’s eyes bulge at me as I hear his neck nap with a clarity which might accompany that of a tree branch.

But, again, I have no time to process any of this, for I jump out of way as a hail of bullets like raindrops pelt poor Jebediah.

And when all the magazines are emptied, all is quiet on the western front.

I unplug my ears, open my eyes, and rise from my fetal crouch. Turning around, I am wont to think that these walls were really painted red. I can only comprehend things superficially. There are three riddled bodies before me. Five utterly confused

guests. What ... what ... what ...

Hartfelt enters at dreadful length and says solemnly, "Alright fellows, time to go."

The party exits dejectedly, and as they reenter the automobile I hear Mr. Koppenuck say softly, "Revenge?"

Only Hartfelt and I are left. He looks at me, I him. In his sunken faded brown eyes I see the dully shimmering reflection of Slavery, Holocaust, Iwo Jima, Iraq, the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Palestine, and, now, this.

We exchange only the glance for several minutes, avoiding the carnage in our wake.

Then I say, "Jackson was only mauled. Lead poisoning has not contaminated his muscle. You know what to do."

He nods.

I dig a double-wide grave in the garden beside Father's. I say a prayer and toss in the baggage, baggage that these two beautiful spirits bear the weight of carrying no more.

I fill the hole back up and then go to check on Mother.

Beside her bed, I look upon her with a much more concentrated love. I touch her forehead and brush her white hair back.

She wakens, her eyes aflutter, like a baby, and I want to hold her in my arms. "What is it, Christian?" she asks. "Is something wrong? Is it Jackson?"

"No," I smile. "It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

"Oh," she says. "Thank you. Wondrous heavy."

### III Birds of the World

*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  
The Birds of New York

*An aristocracy founded purely on money  
postulates wealth in the particular.*

--F. Scott Fitzgerald  
*The Beautiful and Damned*

What would become of the vacant lot at 660 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, remained a mystery from the point it was leveled in 2014 throughout the 2020s. The general public considered it a blemish upon the fashionable corridor of the city as well as a social hazard, as it was consistently occupied by young homeless degenerates intent on making some sort of political statement. Through 2029 the office of Langley & Mitchell Development, listed as the manager of the property, was constantly berated with angry letters from 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 mayor 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 Fifth 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. Amauta's projected acquisition of the latter firms had been anticipated by

the most knowledgeable heads and pundits as the next logical move by the bank which had become infamous for facilitating large corporate buy-outs and monopolizing many industries, most notably, oil, firearms, and tobacco. This acquisition would make Amauta Group the largest financial firm in the history of the world. 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 chairmen 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. The principal figure, however, who captured everyone's interest was he who would supposedly become the new financial leader of the free world, the chairman and 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 cathedralic ballroom, centered around a frothing marble fountain and abounds with two hundred guests all darting to and fro to talk to this person and that, brimming from the doorways and spilling onto the balcony, reverberated with their collective chatter and laughter as with the hum of one thousand mosquitoes. At the front of the room lay a stage of polished redwood and along the left ran a bar of marble and glass; deep red drapery adorned the upper corners of the ceiling, hanging to the floor with a weary heaviness and tied back with gold tassels, while red and white lace detailed the bar, stage, and furniture. The air was humid without being damp 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 ballroom 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 a result of the oil runoff from daily pipe-bursts. 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 Manége 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 and out the door. There was a period of silence, followed by 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 Fugu water flowed in abundance, and ponies [a slur: “*poor-niggers*”] in white aprons 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; they bonded, ultimately, over their common elite reputations: 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 theater, 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 *caporegime*. 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 Fifth 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 be 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 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, who 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 ballroom. 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 onto the balcony 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 ostentatious 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.

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

"Ah, I've not. He's 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 coily 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 near 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 whom 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 unassuming 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 whom 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 of the Menage in a black Town Car; and, getting inside behind May—who continued to feign apprehension in an attempt to appear sufficiently ladylike (“Oh, you want me to come with you? Well, where on earth are we going?”), though it was not her wont—as he handed the driver a bill John told him “East 52<sup>nd</sup> and Fifth Avenue.” The valet then drove off into the night.

The ride was quiet in that intimate way which exists between two strangers, like a commute-long embrace of the shoulder between two travelers on the subway. The route was scenic in the way that only New York City could provide, with buildings that stretched up like redwoods and parks like small forests. These “natural” wonders of the city, more so than the people that inhabited it, never ceased to amaze May; and John was humored to watch her look out the window as the reflections of buildings passed her wondrous gaze, filled with innocent regard, like that of a child lost in silent awe at a carnival. The only thing May said as they turned onto Fifth Avenue was that it was curiously quiet this evening. In fact, the street was completely deserted.

The car finally stopped across the street from the vacant

lot at 660 Fifth 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,” getting feverishly out of the car with May following shortly behind. When she was on the outside, John was looking up into the night sky. She, in turn, commenced to match the arc of his trajectory, to discover what odd wonder lay at the end of its course, but there was nothing she could discern there but darkness.

“What are we looking at?” May asked.

In lieu of dignifying so petty a question, John continued staring up for a while longer before he silently pointed out to her a small solitary light.

“What, that star?” she balked. “Sure, it's rare to see stars in this city, but did we need to drive across town to look at it? I thought we were going to see the ninth wonder.”

Again, he did not answer, for the true source of the light would soon become apparent to her (it *was* the ninth wonder!), and indeed, as they continued to look on it, May fell deeper and deeper into silent awe.

What began as a barely-noticeable flicker, a lint-spec on earth's dark comforter, gradually grew bigger and bigger, until it turned into a collection of lights. It dawned on May that, rather than merely expanding, the cluster was in fact slowly descending to earth, and it appeared to be heading directly for the vacant lot. She looked over to John, who simply smiled up at it. When she turned back toward the sight, she was even more bewildered to find that the collection of descending lights 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 up the wind in a violent tempest was enough to blow away May's astonished expression. The helicopter lowered the mansion closer and closer to the ground until it nestled snugly into the lot at 660 Fifth 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 whom John knew to be the chairmen 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 entered 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 mouth remained agape, 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 began to pick back up along Fifth 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 whom 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 other 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 from 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 immense 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, boy,” 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, the shareholders reap considerable gains on their



individual investments, 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 now know why.”

“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—to optimize profits for my company—like I do with other companies now. But between you and me, the US government is no worthwhile investment. The product it supposedly offers it provides poorly and its three-hundred or so million shareholders appear largely dissatisfied with it. Of course, the point is not to provide the best possible product but to extract the optimal profit

for shareholders. And of course taxpayers are only nominally shareholders in the government; you can see how little they receive in return. I am the real shareholder, considering the amount of money I give to certain to-remain-nameless politicians, me and my associates, and we don't even pay taxes. Ha! It exists to benefit me—us. Damn the rest. But I'm getting off topic... The point is, dear girl,” he downed 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, when things were done right, 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 had just been 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 still had 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 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 glance 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 he were apprehensive of it. Then he looked back at May and the doubt in his expression lifted. “Sure,” he said. “Anything for you.”



## Chapter 2

### 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 who longed to be elite paraded their desperation, dressing for the position they wished 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 the 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, 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 possessed during that first part of that 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 oddly select for the amount of money it brought in, and its mythology probably stemmed in large part from its exterior. It was located at the northeast corner of 69<sup>th</sup> and Park Avenue and was built in the same French Second Empire-style 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 its 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 *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 simply 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.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to go to 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. They all 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 through 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 if that Occupier had succeeded."

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 did not entertain that.

The car finally pulled into an empty space, and as the chauffeur got out and began to open May's door, 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 narrow staircase that was padded with a carpet as red as John’s scarf and which smelled of wooden casks. They turned three corners and reached a door that opened into a dark, smoky room where a spotlight was being shown onto six ponies blowing their tops off 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 beamed brighter than the spotlight 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,” John 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.

Forty minutes into the set, when 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, then looked over at May who was gyrating in her seat like the ponies on stage. He thought that, considering the use of similar instruments and arrangements, this music was as foreign to the likes of Chopin and Wager, upon whom he’d been reared, as a McDonald’s hamburger to a cow. And they call this great music? 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, John thought, 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 a 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 they 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 restroom?"

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 feeling the burn of the onlookers' 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 saw that 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 that the vent must have connected to the ladies room. Their conversation ensued as clear as day.

"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 now owns 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 can barely keep up with my Twitter."

"Don't interrupt me. You should really read the magazines. They cost like nothing and you can read them on your iPhone while you get a mani-petti. 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 *that* rich 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 whom John recognized to be Jim, the son of Graham Boyle, an oil man whom 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 he also knew both of those men to be simple industrialists, and his father would say that 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 put one out to Jim. “John Andrew Bird.”

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

“Hey, same initials.”

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

“What are you doing in here? Reading?”

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

John smiled in acknowledgment. “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* were 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 of the seat instead of the far left 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 said.

"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 snickered as 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 of his thrusts pushed her farther into the room and each of her groans brought out his primordial aggression. He momentarily lost all 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 still posture and slow and steady 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 Fifth Avenue 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 without looking up.

John was caught off guard, but the old man in all his disgruntlement couldn't ruin his mood *this* morning. "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 my 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 its 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 haircut of her's, once so nymphish and cute, had turned from intriguing to just a little childish.



### Chapter 3

#### The Damned Youth

John sat in the back row of a large white classroom, with rows of desks which stretched back on raised platforms. Three giant sterile whiteboards and a lectern lay at the clearing in the front, with doors located on either side. 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 ten minutes later, 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 roused John from his nap. Opening his eyes he saw a boy his age fidgeting with the maneuverable desktop so that he and his books could fit in. The boy's hair was mussed, his Harvard sweater baggy and starch, his Sperry Top Siders flopping off of his feet. It was the first day of class.

"Hello," the boy said smiling 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. "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 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?”

Somewhere a girl mumbled “yes.”

“Ok, then,” the professor said, settling 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 evasive 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 debutantes 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-leafed 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 wannabe Birds, has actually resulted in 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 Three-thousand 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 180 inch “PaperThin” Vizio television, a Jackson Pollock, and other things that the son of an oil magnate would have in his collegiate residence. 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 stared 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 .0001 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 newspaper, “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 heard 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 Central Black Entertainment was waning, Waldo sold his share before the price dropped too significantly, while still making eighty per cent on his investment, 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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. 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 doorbell 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 mocked. "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 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.

“Okay. 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.”

“Okay, 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 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 said.

"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 just 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 signing "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 and 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? Worsen 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 alcoholic 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 turned 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, 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 not 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 and more alone. His thoughts felt as though they had transcended his skull and fluttered into the

starless 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—wannabe 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 equally, 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.” 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 upon which to base reality. He looked over and saw on a desk-clock that it was six in the



morning. 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 upon which to base reality.

\* \* \*

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 bourgeoisie 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 he 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. As with most of the bourgeoisie, he could be superficially described with fleeting 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 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 and Jim—everyone was more inclined to cater to Jim. Everyone, of course, except John.

About two weeks after the party at James', the two friends were at brunch. 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 whirled 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 had characterized the late summer, but its 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 have 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 due 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 to 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.

He stopped walking when he got to the other side of the street, perhaps for the same reason he had been looking through the crowd. He looked up and saw that 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, he 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 these 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 vibration 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, 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, a monopoly formed by Amauta 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 with whom John had partied 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, and when the call came in he 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 about his recent antics, 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.

"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 was 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—."

"Okay, fine, fine. I'll just leave you to 'studying,'" she said just as the phone disconnected. John, in disbelief, looked at the blank screen as if he expected the phone to produce May in person. Then he was reminded of his hatred of technology and he threw it onto the bed again.

He 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 he said that to her outright, then 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—his May. That conviction was the first of those warm summer feelings he'd experienced, the type of which one becomes aware 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 that balanced them, surely they were fair game. Why limit one's self? 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, dialed 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 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 introverted 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 usually just use the iGlasses with the 10G signal. 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, and 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 is 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

Tower on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street while working in a practical position at Amauta, and partly in Cambridge while finishing several courses, a living situation that catered to his “habits.” 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 said. “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 .... 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 thing Congressmen are asking, ‘What about the ninety-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 4

### The Graduating Class

Two things became immediately apparent to John on the sticky, humid morning of June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2035, as he was awoken by a 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 in general life, that inevitably 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, 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 patted 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 reality, contingent upon what one believes 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 New York City Militia had just quelled the violence moments before the call. The person on the other line, an Amauta executive named Alan Bishop, spoke 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 other C-levels, who stayed ominously quiet. When the conversation ended John Bird put the phone down, and 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. Overlooking Central Park, naked but for the silk undergarments covering his privates, May had gone to put on one of the Salvatore robes to show some decency for the situation. His trembling pale skinny back, the ridges of his spine showing through his skin, was turned on her as she reentered the living room. In the window's reflection, she could see thin streams of tears trickling down his long face. His oval glasses which he always wore were strangely opaque and his friends rarely saw his eyes; the tears were the first sign to May that any compassion even existed behind those lenses. She walked over 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. "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 said as 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 and he straightened himself and turned his head slightly toward 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 racecar 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 Sir 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 observe the pedestrian traffic that flowed up and down West 57<sup>th</sup> 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 three-piece slate billiards table 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, and a pony who had been faithful to the D’Urberville family for many past

generations stood behind it 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, Vishnu Mittel of Worldwide Steel Conglomerate, Duke Wall of the market retailers trust, May Broom of the Kennedys, and John Andrew Bird of Amauta Banking & Finance Group. 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 call them—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 health care, 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

rejoined 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 Central 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 as 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, 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 iPhoneX. I hear they're even changing their name to Horizon TeleMobile, 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 Porcelleana 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; sure, it’s not Park Avenue, but imagine if everyone we knew from Harvard heard about this place. If this was a thing, like back when we could all 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 at Amauta—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 help their trading. 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 observe 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 to 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 remaining vehicle on the street, 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 approaching departure, there was no movement. In the wake of this crossroad there was only indecision, suspended in mid-air like the humidity. Bird 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 to study the night sky, until he finally sighed, “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 57<sup>th</sup>, passing the crest of One57 looming over Central Park, May, a sleeping beauty, laid dormant at its peak. The car passed East 52<sup>nd</sup> 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. 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, 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 was 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 bodies. The Town Car turned onto East 8<sup>th</sup> 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, 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 Bank 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. Bird bid his companion the kind of silent 'Goodbye' that old friends exchange with the knowledge that they may not see each other for some time, yet with the conviction that whenever they do become reacquainted, that their relationship may resume as if there was 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 5

### 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 answered. "Hello," he said.

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

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 Bane of Capital. 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. An acquisition 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, then 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 to taxi.

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; 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 regarded with annoyance. 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."

Like that, 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 out of his seat 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, though, he would cut her a break. During the later portion of their time together, he would call on her in the morning to wear something casual and they'd take the chauffeured Bugatti out into the country side. It could reach two-hundred-forty miles per hour on the empty country roads, but even then they had to pick their courses 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 one of the last secure compounds 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 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 remained as calm as the river’s countenance and as distant as the purple horizon; he held an expression as placid as the river’s mere facade 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, fueled only 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 6

### Interim

Sir Bird lived for a month or two at a time on the various properties beholden of 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, ponies, and CATtle, those who are indeed integral to the function of a nation but who are nonetheless unfit to be acknowledged as such. 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 skilled biographer, a pseudo-Boswell 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, as if he were distilling from his chaotic mind the sharp, profound dialogue of some fictional character. 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 in any case. 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:

Bird,

You 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 tell you 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 my position in 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 dryness of 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 France 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 had remained 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 masturbating often, almost as if he were completely unaware of it. And in the aftermath, as one balks at the greasy plate one has 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 seemed to passively 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 witchcraft. 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. Toward 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 him. 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. What was he so worried about? 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 simply 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 gold-embroidered 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 its 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, 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, and, taking a breath deep into his lungs, 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 new 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 a 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 suit 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, unobstructed by clouds or the shade of grass or trees. Here, as he thought it a suitable location, 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 encompassed twenty-four hundred square acres upon which were erected five grand estates, 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 the coast of California in 2027. The Boyles and the Birds had 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 Mortimer 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, clean 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 overseeing the XL Pipeline maintenance, there was always talk of Occupiers just out of arms reach. Activists wanting to disrupt the oil industry for the environment's sake. 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 took 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 something 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 something 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 old dorms. “All the trendsetters were a little bit crazy. Darwin, Van Gogh. There are some others. That *Nee-chee* 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, patted his shirt pockets, and 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, inhaling and puffing.

“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 than 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 7

### 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. He noticed that they were the ones who directed the few other ponies that worked around the southern properties, and while those other workers were rarely seen, 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 possessed 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 was 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 onto the veranda where he found the wench lollygagging, looking out into the backyard where, hopefully, her husband was 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 considered this, he watched the wench as she stood there smoking with her elbows on the rail; she hadn't yet noticed his presence. 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 later 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 late 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 due 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 18<sup>th</sup>, 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 seven-thirty, 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 seven-fifty-five, 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. “Okay, 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, slamming it against the back wall and 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 toward him.

“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 as 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 muddled in complete disbelief, he calmly said, “Be in the kitchen in half an hour .... 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 at eight o'clock 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 its 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 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, 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, and 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 mens' 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 roused from her sleep. 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 jetted 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 through 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 had spent by himself in the mansion 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, tip-toeing 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 armchair 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 sound of 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 decide to buy it...but how many times do you look at a man before you decide to kill him?"

With that, Sir Bird fell sound asleep.

*That night, in a dream...* Sitting at a dinner table looking down at a plate, 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, the only sentient body on the plate, spoke:

"Brother," he said, "Have you returned for more?"

Choked up, Bird could not 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!*”

Shaken suddenly awake, Bird 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 groggily got out of his bed and saw that he was dressed only in his underwear and shirt. He walked to his closet to fetch his pants, and was beginning 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.

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 exalted when Bird arrived, as they all 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, and, turning to the wench, he said, “Stay here and don’t budge until I return.” He then left the kitchen.

Upon reentering the dining hall, 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 had just come out of, sprinting through the kitchen past the wench and running 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 former of these images on his computer. At his desk, in the dark, with the door locked, Sir Bird intensively studied Camera 41: the room in which May and Pierre were staying. The live feed read 7:22 p.m.; May laying on the bed fidgeting her toes; Pierre 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; all that could be heard 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 live feed read 8:40 p.m. Bird touched the hologram screen and dragged his finger across it, adjusting the camera angle to see over Pierre's shoulder. He was still writing. Bird tapped the hologram to zoom in; 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 .... and .....  
For when it over,  
they're so far gone the birds of young;  
a ~~family~~ flock he did not bother....

How bizarre and unintelligible thought the voyeur, yet his mind was soon drawn from its present occupation when he heard May's voice in the background. Bird quickly zoomed the camera out to pan of the entire room. Here: May 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 acknowledgment 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 remain seated. He almost felt his mind go completely blank—as dark as the room itself—as a result of not knowing what to do now. He was mired

by his own decisive situation, a crossroad. The four walls surrounding him were obscured by darkness. Across the room from him, the door to his study was marked only by the thin rectangle of light that shown in from the hallway. People existed outside of that door; grave decisions needed to be made; but only Bird existed in this room. Basking 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. He had been alone for so long that it almost seemed as though his mind was his world. Yet the recent contact with the base concreteness of the people he had once called his friends made him aware of to their imperfect situation—they all needed the meat. It made him aware of 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 suddenly 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 through a tunnel that separates 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 syncopated gusts of the wind. The sky howled out of its all-encompassing gray 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. He shook himself out of his stupor and withdrew himself from his desk, 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 makes in his poems.” Sir Bid shifted his hand from the glass to the lamp, silently astounded at its weight, and 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 moment. 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 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 desk drawer and was aiming it at D’Urberville’s head. The visitor, in startled 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 turned on the loud speaker situated on his desk and 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 then 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 that had 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 that 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 to pace 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 thought for a moment. "Yes," he continued. "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 round 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 fuck." 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 to me now 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 dear 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 as widows of the most gruesome result, 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. It 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 enough of them were collected, they went into 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. 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.

## IV *'Ecrasez l'infâme'*

*Man looks into the abyss,  
There's nothing staring back at him;  
At that moment man finds his character,  
And that is what keeps him out of the abyss.*

*--Oliver Stone, Wall Street*

[9/11/96:08:45] Morning, restless morning. I go to the dock behind the Abime, the sun is fresh. The morning light warms me. Looking out, nothing but sea. Look to the East. Sea.

As if entranced I remain here, looking out at nothing, nothing is so peaceful and reassuring, nothing like the wide expanse of world.

[9/11/96:08:46] Suddenly a rumbling. I think it be an earthquake. Terrified I grab a wooden post and hold on. Rumbling intensifies. A deep whirring emits from over the horizon. A mechanical growl, something from a monstrous heathen. I look up and see—to my awe—a swarm of winged things like locusts rise up and pepper the horizon. Birds? No they aren't birds. They shimmer in the sun. They approach, in some sort of strategic formation. Hundreds of them, blacken the sky. They're planes. Planes! Have the D'Urbervilles finally sent their fleet to destroy the Breakers?

No ... something much more wicked this way comes. As they approach, I see written on their bellies Chinese characters. These are unmanned drones.

They fly over the island, darkness drops. They agitate the waters and shake the very earth beneath them. Heading toward mainland. It's here, the tide had turned back for us. And now I know that six centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle. The white man's end cometh; early rise the East ... that rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

