



# WHAT WE ARE

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PETER NATHANIEL MALAE



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*Alas it is delusion all.  
The future robs us from afar,  
nor can we be what we recall,  
nor dare we look on what we are.*

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—Byron

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Acknowledgments

# WHAT WE ARE

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# I Try to Figure out My American Life

I TRY TO FIGURE OUT my American life on a lightless corner of a four-stop-sign intersection in a rainstorm, 3:42 A.M., Friday. I could go forward, backward, right, left; it doesn't matter. I have nowhere to go, really, but around the city, and have wandered along on foot all night.

I dropped into a dive bar called Blinky's Can't Say Lounge for a drink and a Johnny Cash tune on the juke, ducked past the flashing neon signs of the Blue Noodle Cabaret Club to watch the beautiful Maxine do acrobatic flips on the pole, smiled my way to a table surrounded by fake bamboo and ceramic dragons and ate kimchi and kalbi and poke sashimi and drank Hite beer and Japanese sake in a Korean-owned sushi bar called Ga Bo Ja, hustled down the aisles of a twenty-four-hour Longs Drug and bought candy and condoms and a discount umbrella with Pokémon dancing on the latex, and am now peering up beyond the BBs of rain to the mad gray mass of clouds above, not in wonderment or gratitude or even some momentary bout of depression, not in any poor man's version of self-condemnation, neither contentment nor elation nor anything within that emotional range, but in a strange kind of nothingness that sat somewhere between my head and my heart and had bothered me for much of the day, like a facial tick you're conscious of but that won't go away.

I sit down on the curb and try to chill a bit; no melodrama in this empty hollow of the city. The rain morphs into silver glitter. It looks like the mist of a late-night horror flic on the tube, the haze of a northernmost California lumberjack town. The sheen on the street is oily smooth, black like the shine of leather, slick like a duck's wet back on the pond. I can see the streetlights flickering past Lawrence Expressway and through the little borough of Cupertino and shrinking into dots at De Anza College.

I'm big and brown enough not to have problems on the streets that I don't create myself. I could be Mexican or Brazilian or Creole or Persian or mulatto or Afghan, or of darker Mediterranean blood, like Sicilian, Moroccan, Greek, or maybe Serb, and I'm tough to peg with this black and logoless beanie on my head pulled down to the brow, the stalker's knee-length jacket, blue jeans, and slippers. People can't figure me out on sight and I'm not sure I could either in a first-ever mirror shot.

What I am, by blood anyway, is half Samoan—I'm certain of that—and half American white, which means (if it means anything) that my mother is of your typically mixed brew of Euro descent: English, Irish, Pennsylvania Dutch, Italian, and a smattering of French.

My father used to take my sister and me to the Samoan churches up at Hunter's Point, a fifty-minute drive from our house in San Jo. This was just before he left for the islands, when my folks were staking cultural claims on their children, like Soviets and Americans planting flags on the moon. I remember one funeral, a big gala affair. Five days long with hordes of big silent men in black polyester ie lavalavas standing stoic and strong, their mitts crossed just under their bellies. I remember the acreage of carnations and roses in the aisles, right out of a *Godfather* movie. Whenever someone with your own last name would die, you had the responsibility to prepare your cousin or uncle or sister-in-law for the outer realm with the Good Lord. I remember wondering who would send me or my sister off sixty years in the future, if the event would die out first. If Samoans would even be around.

I always felt alone in those churches. I knew that the kids my age and the parents who paid me any attention thought I was diluted, watered down by my mother, too much white blood, an *afakasi*, a half one. Certain things you can't reverse, and genetic inheritance is one of them. I couldn't do much

anyway, except be a follower, which I wasn't about to do, even then. I only knew rudimentary greetings like *Talofa, fa'a fe mai oi?* and bad words like *ufa kefe*, and any time I'd hear some—elocutory wisdom kicked off in formal Samoan by a visiting high-talking chief *matai*, his deep, husky, oracular Polynesian voice somehow gentle in its tone, the pews full of three-hundred-pound ladies cooling themselves with woven palm fans, bone-thick youngsters leaning against the walls in red sweaters with red hoods and red picks and red bandannas stuck to their wild black wiry 'fros, my mind would go to my mother, the one person who was more outside this scene than me. The pure foreigner, slight 140-pound white woman from the Northern California suburb of Campbell, California, lost in the unknowable zone of natives. But she was already long gone by then, had bugged out.

My sister, a year older, looked Samoan as a girl, still does now as a woman. She even got a Samoan name, Tali. I remember her making fun of me: "Paul! Paul! What a white name!" She used to blend right into those occasions. I remember thinking the obvious back then: They like her because she looks like them. Deep down, and maybe not that deep, we're all phrenologists who fear the albino chimp. How much of Tali's simple and predictable personality developed in response to their acceptance? Because she had a group to claim in her formative years, and vice versa? At twelve she was wearing T-shirts that read PROUD TO BE SAMOAN, and I always felt embarrassed at her obviousness. How she could wear something like that around our mother, who had entered those churches with the restless yet timid face of a dog seeing the doors of the vet.

Being a half-breed must be part of my problem. When I applied to college out of high school, I didn't know what to fill in under the category of race. Long distance from American Samoa, my father said over the phone, "Mark Polynesian," but I couldn't. Neither could I mark white. I just left the damned thing blank. And that's exactly how I felt about it: blank. Still do, actually, don't care either way. By now I know that every culture in the world is equally beautiful, equally ugly. The few years college I could stand convinced me of that. The few years of prison, too. In either place I was an English major with lots of reading time, lots of watching time.

I quit the daydreaming. I see him spot me from a bus stop across the street, posted up like a light pole. His hightops are out of the 1980s, Velcro straps around the ankle, big Nike swoosh on the tongue. He's got a hood pulled up over his head, and I can't find his eyes until he pulls it back and shakes his pointy head in the sprinkling rain. The red and green hair stands out on the ends like a dandelion. From the shoulders up, he looks like a miniature Christmas tree. He looks off and then back at me. He's on his way over and I don't move. The distance doesn't matter; I know what I see way before he reaches me: another suburban zombie on crystal meth.

He's violently itching one hand and then violently switching to the other. He's gonna rip through his own damned hand, insane. Sort of sad. Not even within five yards he says, "Wassup, brother? Wassup, brother? Wassup?"

I say, still not moving, "Wassup, man."

He looks around again. I shake my head. I've never used the shit, but I've known more than my share of cranksters. Suburb, city, high hills, country, plains, it's just standard American protocol to see, know, love but never trust your average tweaker. These cats'll steal from their own mothers, and even if you know one who won't, he's still looking over his shoulder like he already did. Always peeking out blinds, hiding behind dumpsters, hanging up the phone in the middle of a conversation. Hooked on an injection of paranoia. He can't even lie down in the familiarity of his own bed, close himself off from the world, and trust the blackness behind his eyelids.

I say, "You want something, dog?"

He hunches his shoulders, plays the mendicant. "Can you help me with some cash? I'm dying over here, brother, I'm dying."

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He's husky-necked, sufficiently fat in the cheeks. Early into his journey to the pit. He smiles humbly and has all his teeth. Cauliflower ears, former high school wrestler. A car drives by and he whips around and then back again. In the glare of a struggling moon, his eyes are spinning like a top, but he's focusing the best he can to press the sincerity of the issue.

"Come on, bro," I say. "You ain't dying."

"I'm dying, brother."

"Yeah, dying for a fuckin' fix."

"No no no no." He grabs his balls, as if he's forgotten they were there. He thinks I said *fixed*. "No, no, brother. It's okay. I'm all there, man. Right there, that's right, all there. Everything's cool, brother."

"Then you don't need me."

"Trust me, brother, I'm dying. I hear the tinny chimes. Help me! I see the reaper, brother."

"It's in your head, dog."

"No, no, no, brother. I'm dying!"

I sniff in some air, indicating a step back from the conversation. Somehow he reads the insinuation and does just that: one step back, though he doesn't leave. He's balancing on the curb, heel to toe, and I'm waiting for him to spill over, then jump up and go sprinting down the street. This is the point where anyone else would leave. Not him. Me.

"What the hell," I say. "I'll get you some food, man. Come on."

He thinks it over, as if he has a better offer. Then he says, "Okay, brother. Okay. Where do you live?"

I laugh out loud, it feels good. The rain comes again, in one big orgasmic gust. As it is, I'm probably broker than this cat. "Hey, bro," I say. "Gimme your money."

He steps back again.

"Nah. Just kidding, man. Let's get to Jack in the Crack, dog. I'll buy you a burger."

"So you got money then?" he says, and right there I know that unless this crankster has a midnight revelation, we'll be fighting soon enough over the \$3.68 in my pocket.

I say, "Follow me," and he does, staying a half step to my rear.

We walk through the rain toward El Camino Real. I remember the Pokémon umbrella, pull it out of my jacket, and hand it to the crankster. I don't think about why it's taken me this long to use it. He doesn't say thank you, doesn't grunt, nod. Doesn't pop it. He jams the umbrella into the pocket of his pants, a future tradeable good, and looks behind him for the ghosts of the past. All he finds is the Vuong Vu Video Outlet, an Afghan grocery store called House of Khan, and an Exxon station patched with the lights of skyrocketing prices. Each one closed, each empty of bodies. On the horizon the stars glisten behind the blur of the clouds, and if anything opens up tonight, I will welcome whatever comes.

He pulls out a bottle of good vodka from his pocket, takes a shot, repockets it.

I don't think on his hoarding selfishness. Ravished by greed and cowardice, a man of the streets gets villainous with needs. Breathing in the cool wet air, I drift into the warm realm of remembrance. The earth water seems to stimulate the senses: sky water, ocean water, river water. The Ohlone, I learned in fourth grade, call it the blood of the mother. I always thought that accurate. Just to be there with her, or inside her, at the tips of life's fingers. Back then, at nine, I used to stand under the apricot tree in our yard and ask the big questions of God. I'd let the rain mix in with my tears. I'd address to the vast angry hanging sky those problems which my Sunday School teacher couldn't ever answer in front of the class. She'd always wait for the good kids to leave and then take me aside ("Now listen here, young man"), max out on the intimidation of adulthood, buttress her arguments with size and force and a mysterious alliance with my parents. When my folks split and my mother started taking us to the grand old Catholic Church, I addressed those same problems again at confession with Father McFadden, Papa Mac, a real gentleman, cool cat. He'd cleverly reverse the burden of doubt into ten assigned Hail Marys ("Salvation comes from within, lad"). But the core of every question I had was the rational position that I didn't believe.

My namesake, Paul, had died alone, sanctified in a Roman dungeon, and I, at nine, was certain to the point of excommunication that one either sank or swam when traversing water and that if five thousand people were fed by five fish, four thousand nine hundred and ninety-five people had died and been left hungry and that dead was dead, however you looked at it and that some people who still live in grass huts and sat naked around a savage fire at night had never even heard of Jesus. And I'd felt self-pity over this, over my fakery in the face of God.

When I wasn't struck down by lightning for my lie, the internal lie, the worst kind of lie, my living in itself was the true indictment of holy scripture, tangible proof of my doubt. Though I didn't know it, I was beginning a fifteen-year journey whose days began and ended with the same longing. The minute you eliminate God, everything else comes down like dominoes. I can see tonight without the haze of zealotry, yes. But I'm not thankful or stupidly proud. The cost for clairvoyance is high and personal and ironical: I yearn to harness the pure, blurred, blood-rushing ecstasy of my species. I desire belief, faith. But I feel nothing worthy of a golden book chalice to save us. My psyche is fine and undaunted. I'm an anti-epiphany, ultra-knowing yet ultra-nothing, the new American.

We reach Hamsun Park and quiet desolation. Streetlights dwindle in number. I imagine them from above: little matchsticks in the ocean waves of darkness. We cut across the grass and beneath the conical pines and through the piles of needles collecting in the puddles. Sand in the playground clumps like cafeteria oatmeal. At the barbecue pits is a scattering of empty Budweiser boxes, some intact and tossed to the side, others torn in half and smashed, a few shredded into strips, red and white tiger stripes on the lawn. Broken glass crunches under our feet. I slap at a piñata dangling from the branch of a dead birch tree. It's been split down the middle in one swift Caesarian whack, barren inner wall lined with newspaper. I remember a line from Hemingway: *The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty*. Little piles of streamers are spread across the grass: red, green, white. A few eggshells pool in dried yolk. Popped balloons, colorful scraps of rubber, all kinds of fiesta debris. There will be ample labor in the morning for the green-T'd park worker with a generic tree on the pocket.

The crankster speeds up so that we're side by side, and as I say, "What's your name, dog?" he shows me the blade, his hand jerking worse than his face.

I shrug, half smile. The tempests are loose. He's picked the wrong night, the wrong knife, the wrong person. A box cutter the size of a Pez dispenser won't break leathery skin like mine. And even if it does, who cares? I won't die on site. And even if I do, it'll be long after the fight is finished. And then the question is: What will I lose? It's not bravado; it's a desperate longing for happening:

something, anything. I almost want him to stab me, just to see how the thing turns out. Just to act without these strictions of conscious thought. Just to act.

---

His one eyebrow which still has nerves rises in apprehension. If he was hard-core or hard up, he would have stabbed me in the back to take my wallet. In fact, he would've done it before we'd ever talked. That he shows me the weapon means he doesn't want to use it, and it's that simple. He sees I've done the math, and suddenly his other eyebrow comes to life.

By now, at twenty-eight, I've been in a dozen situations twice as perilous. He couldn't know this, but he should've guessed. It's always best to keep wild cards like me in the public eye so that the mind, facile in darkness, doesn't wander into the isolated quandary of justified self-defense. Isolated violated, I now have the right to kill this crankster, to leave his corpse to that same park worker for a life-changing discovery at dawn.

I say, "You're gonna get your burger, bro. Just take it easy."

I turn around and start to walk. From behind, I hear, "Hey, hey. You. Hey." I stop. He's poised like a half-ass wrestler, the knife loose and limp in his hand, not sure if he should get down any lower.

I spit into the ash of a barbecue pit. "So you wanna do something, homie? You wanna go there, yo Christmas-tree looking mutherfucker?"

He doesn't move, but looks over one shoulder, then the other. This kind of language he understands, a simple proposition grounded in threat. He pockets the knife and his shoulders rise: the friendly beggar again. Walks over to me, stops at three yards, leans away as if he's about to race in the other direction and is waiting for the starting gun to fire, asks, "Is it okay?"

All huff and all puff but no blow.

"Yeah, man," I say, reassuringly. "Just quit with all that stupid shit, man. Let's get you a burger so you can be on your fucked-up way.

"Okay, brother. Whatever you say, man. Anything you say, brother."

## The Teenage Boys Are Shooting Blanks

THE TEENAGE BOYS are shooting blanks against the wall, spit wads that dribble out their straws. The happy crankster and I are at the Jack in the Box on El Camino and Lafayette. I'm watching him eat his three-dollar burger. I didn't have enough cash for both of us, but it's cool. I may be doing myself a favor being broke. Saving my gut the unenviable job of processing dressed-up shit. When I get back to the motel room, I'll cook some Korean top ramen.

Two of the kids are blue-eyed blonds, the other a black-haired Southeast Asian, all in football jerseys big as gowns, sagging jeans with pockets down the leg, black and powder-blue baseball caps crooked on their heads. Gangstas without street cred, hard as steel out their two-story cribs with the four-car garages, a phat ride bought with Mommy's credit card. One girl emerges from the bathroom—one girl—and all three boys get immediately elbowy with one another. As she slides into the booth paying none of them any attention, it's easy to understand why women are taking over the western world. Suddenly they just look dumb, these boys, court jesters kept around to entertain the queen.

I am worried about our boys. They have identity crises worse than domesticated lions. My sister is raising one now, poor little Toby. He may be the only person on the planet more confused than me. But he's just four, man, not enough mileage or damage to wonder why *cogito ergo sum*. He's supposed to be reckless and intrusive, bold and free with his body and mouth, but he just sits there, hungry or not, will wait till he's a teenager to eat, even talk. It's like he was lobotomized at birth. Tali looms over his wet little ass, and the kid keeps looking over, under, and through her for his father.

Where is the man I come from? he wants to say.

I want the damned kid to crash into walls and hang from bars on the swing set. I want him to take his tricycle to the creek and pedal right to the edge of the water, a narcissistic peek at his image, then howls of laughter as he jumps in feet first. I want him to climb the eucalyptus in the yard and scratch his elbows and knees on the bark and throw footballs in the rain, resist the peace of dryness. None of it will happen. His father is probably the very crankster sitting across from me now who masturbated into a test tube in a sterile white-walled room with a stack of *Penthouse* for forty lousy bucks and a red, white, and blue I JUST GAVE SPERM button. Poor little Toby doesn't have a father, and nobody, not even the father, cares.

In a lobby of after-hours drifters, the fifteen-to nineteen-year-old Helen in high heels has got everyone under her spell. Even the crank-impaired. If I cared and if I could, I'd die in a big epic war to reclaim her from the hostile shores of the enemy. How refreshing it would be to play a role with absolute clarity like my Aegean homie Achilles, to know exactly what you get from the king if you live: forego the harems and cities and treasure chests of gold. I'll take this Jack-in-the-Box vixen in the white cotton form-fitting sweater-skirt with a blue stripe at the turtleneck, the tight hem at the thighs, thick-and plump-hipped, clean- and supple-faced, long blond hair to the bosom, aware of so much more than we adults give her credit for. The smartest person in this room, too, by far: she knows what she wants and can get it.

The crankster interrupts my thoughts. Of course. He doesn't like the silence between us; it implies a threat, even though he's eating on me. He's way past being concerned about implied judgment. The crankster looks over at the kids in the corner, back at me, thinks he knows what I'm thinking, risks it, and slaps my shoulder. "You ever hit a vrank shot, brother?"

Got no clue what it is, but I don't say so or shake my head. I'm about ready to go. Did my good deed for the day.

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“Viagra and crank. You hit 'em both. Fuck for five hours straight, brother. Rub your shit raw.”

This time I shake my head.

“I'd love to take that into a stall right there.” He's pointing at the restroom. “Fuck that sweet little thing right up the ass, brother.”

“Ey,” I say. “Ey.”

He's got a frown on his face, gritting his teeth, as if he's in the act. “I'd drill that bitch for half a day spun on a vrank shot. Beat it up, brother, beat it up. Stretch that bitch out so bad she never take a shit again.”

“Ey, man. Ey.” He looks up at me, breathing hard, face still in mid-frown. “Watch your fucking mouth, man.”

He takes a casual bite from his jalapeño burger, as if I didn't say a word. Just like that, I'm up on my feet, reaching across the table, an index finger in the wrinkles of his dirt-encrusted neck. I snag the burger out of his hand.

He doesn't say anything. Not with his mouth, anyway. He says something with his eyes, though—*Not afraid of you, brother*—and I slap it right off his face. He falls off the chair and catches himself. The vodka bottle flies out and rings dull through the restaurant. One of the boys at the other table shouts, “You see that, Bojeezie!” The crankster twists and looks up from the napkins and splattered ketchup.

“Hey, brother,” he whispers. “I'm sorry, man, I'm sorry.”

I throw the half-eaten burger at his face. “You *are* sorry, you punkass mutherfucker.”

“All right, brother. All right.”

“Don't call me brother, you fucking crankster.”

“All right, all right.”

I turn around, wipe the smiles off the faces of the boys. Scan for any adults I've missed. At the corner table, there's a paisa in a black-and-tan cowboy hat, dark green flannel, and a Pancho Villa mustache thick as undergrowth. He's chewing on his fries, as if this is just what he's expected out of us all along. Either that or he knows it may soon be time to take his green-cardless flight from this once-safe spot. I don't know why, but I love the hell out of the guy—or I love, anyway, what's on his face: silent immigrant in the silent corner who's seen worse, probably done worse, and knows a ten-cent sideshow like this ain't worth his time. He's got real business to worry about. The hombre intrigues me.

I reach down, grab the vodka bottle, say, “You gonna go for your little Swiss Army knife, you piece of shit?”

He's coming down off the crank, talking to himself in our mess. I'm already turning away, as he utters, “No, no, brother,” and then, calling out after me, “It's cool, man! It's cool! God bless you, brother! You can have the liquor! It's okay, okay?”

I'm walking right toward the table of boys and not one of them can look me in the eye. For once,

it's exactly what I want: it's how it should be. All I get from the paisa is the top of his hat. The girl watches me—I can feel it—out the exit and back again into the darkness of night. If I hear the whining sirens of authority, I'll run. But if she sheds the boys and follows me down the street, then for the sake of her courage, or her lunacy, we'll split a free bottle of blueberry Stolichnaya as I escort her highness wherever she wants to go through the shadows of this valley.



## I Can See Through the Fuzziness

I CAN SEE THROUGH the fuzziness of hangover a sliver of light behind the morning clouds. The Stoli is right there beside me, and I wince at the thought of my liver, heavy with labor this morning. I guess it's good that the empty bottle is upright, uncracked, but it still feels like someone busted it over my buzzing head. The girl's nowhere to be found. She may have never made it here, I don't know; she may have been shy about drinking in the heart of a Christian mission. I remember saying, "It's a school now, don't worry, been a university for a hundred and fifty years, I know, I went here for a while, trust me," and her insisting, "You did not have to hit that guy in the Jack in the Box."

I look up at the bottom of Jesus' palms, his forearms laced in flowers and rosaries. In the midnight hour my freshman year at the University of Alviso, I used to sit at the feet of this chiseled statue. The courtyard would be drowned in the kind of layered silence that seems to let out the tiniest of sounds, soft whistle, beaded in the center of your ear. Now I push up to my elbows to see why I hear Spanish everywhere, Mexican Spanish, mixing in with the symphony of blackbirds and finches.

About twenty paisas are standing, hands in pockets, at the base of the mission steps. They're wearing variations of the same threads: Pendletons, paisley flannels, L.A. Dodgers baseball caps with little Mexican flags in the mesh. A couple in cheap rodeo gallon hats. All with breath clouds coming up before them, a few sipping coffee, their long mustaches steaming at the wet ends.

I gather up the last thread of spittle in my mouth, aim it at the bushes, and let it fly. It's like I sucked on cotton all night. I hear from behind, "This is going to be a beautiful day."

I rub the crusty sleep from my eyes and find Father McFadden, my old priest, standing above me. Been almost ten years. He's got those same clover-green eyes, a little tired now, but still alive and jovial behind the thick black-framed militaristic glasses. He's completely bald, pink and beige sunspots mottling his scalp. He's reaching down, lightly clapping my shoulder, almost with felicity, saying, "Paul. Paul."

There's a young student in the gathering, model-thin, almost-white-haired blonde. She's very clearly undamaged and clean, healthy-pored. On her hands and knees etching into a cardboard sign with a big black marker. She hasn't done a thing to me, but I already know I don't want to talk to her and that I may soon, and that she'll do most of the talking, and at length.

This must be a march: they're about to take to the streets, starting here at the Alviso Mission. The blonde is nearing. You can see it in her eyes: she's a believer. Nothing else in the world matters at the moment. She's probably a poli-sci major, minoring in sociology. Maybe a leader here, an organizer.

Father McFadden says, "I'm proud of you, Paul. You've done the right thing."

I say, "I was trying to pray at the shrine last night. I fell asleep I guess."

He puts his hand up to stop me from self-indictment. He wants to believe in me with the same desperation that I'd wanted to believe in God as a kid. I feel bad for him, for his calling, for the sadness he must feel every Sunday when his master's beatific house of stained-glass splendor is four fifths empty. I can see the refracting light of blue and red tickling his trembling cheeks at the altar, the imported marble saints collecting dust in the crevices of nostrils and armpits, in the four corners of the crucifix.

But he must be used to the faithless by now, to his flock being daily lost to tech and science and genetic manipulation, MTV and the Internet. An electric ocean of amorality. I can see the struggle in his face as he's retrieving for the first time in many years certain failures in faith that I'd had as one of his lambs. Things that seemed harmless then, perhaps even endearing and precocious, but blasphemous now, as a man. I'm not the prodigal son this father's looking for.

Still, he gives it a shot. "God watched over you."

I smile.

"You're a lucky young man."

"Yes," I say, "I believe that, Father. But it doesn't help."

"Hungry?"

I don't want an allusion to the bread of the Lord. "Well."

"Here." He hands me a Sausage McMuffin. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Paul."

I don't say anything. Like, for instance, that the first thing out of my mouth this morning was a lie. Passing out drunk and delusional doesn't pass for devotion at the shrine.

Shit, man, I wish a drop of the old demon water was all I needed. If I could find God in liquor or weed or any other hallucinogen necessary, I'd be the first to volunteer at whatever Monte Casino the paltry handful of priests of this valley begin their training, AA and NA be damned, the health of my body temple be damned. I'd be just like that crankster, wandering the streets for my next fix. I'd be a son of Jameson's whiskey just like I know the good Father is, or I'd be a reefer like a Rastafarian. I'd make premium boc in the Belgian lowlands, a monk's brown hood and brown frock and how to brew good German beer my only earthly possessions.

But any altered state I've tried just seems to induce sleep. It's temporal, flighty, and I become an eyesore to myself, can't look in the mirror at the broken-down man. And I don't forget a thing about this life, and the dreams—even as I'm dreaming them—I know to be false. That's perverse, pointless. Like telling the punch line of a joke not last but first.

"You know," he says, "this beautiful mission came to life at the hands of a people in toil. Today we're going to get them what they deserve."

"Father, I—"

"God's children endured true pain for their heavenly rites."

The blonde has arrived, observing me as if I were a colorful anemone on the reef at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. With curiosity, yes, superior spinal cord curiosity. This close I see that her legs are crisp with blond hair, having recently changed her mind about shaving. Now she's straight barbarian/bohemian.

I sit up, shake my head out, rapidly blink to rejoin the world.

She shouts out, "And what is your purpose here?"

Verbal judo, just like I predicted. Father McFadden nods so I relax a bit, leaning against the rainworn pillar of the shrine. Her sign reads, HOY MARCHEMOS, MANAÑA VOTARAMOS.

I don't like her arrogance or the way she stands, with one hand on the high end of her thin hip, neck slightly tilted toward the same side, so I say, still sitting, "The sign is wrong."

“Excuse me?” she says, like a drill sergeant.

“That sign is wrong.”

“What someone like you needs to understand,” she says, “is that these people have a right to be here. They’re working the jobs that people like you should be working.”

“I’ve been employed by McDonald’s,” I lie, “for the last five years of my life.”

She’s stifled, can’t say a word. I’m not an envious wino trying to pilfer from the cause. I’m just someone who knows how to win an argument. Genuine in purpose, I like to think, or hope, however disingenuous in fact.

I push out the McMuffin. “Bite?”

“I won’t go near dead bovine.”

“Is there another kind?” She exhales really loudly. “By the way, nice leather purse.”

“It’s pleather.”

“My name’s Paul,” I say. “And you are?”

“Busy,” she says.

Father McFadden says very politely, “This is Athena, Paul.”

“I can introduce myself, Stanley.”

Stanley. I never knew. I nod at the father to assure him that, despite my theological issues, I’m definitely not on her side. To prove it, I say, “Athena? Birth name?”

“Does it matter?”

“Sort of. I mean, if one takes the name of a Grecian goddess of wisdom and war, it matters. You know. Like if I called myself Zeus or Thor.”

“I matter,” she spits out. “And that’s all that matters.”

“Does conjugation matter?”

“You’re drunk.”

“I wish. But I’m only hung. Over.”

“And vulgar.”

“The sign’s wrong, Madam Athena. As I said before. It should read HOY MARCHAMOS, MAÑANA VOTAREMOS. *Los verbos estan marchar y votarer.*”

The father nods. Spanish, a good Latinate language. Perhaps he remembers my parochial promise back in the day when I was an educatee of the Jesuit institution that wouldn’t hire him because he didn’t have the scholarly chops. But I always liked his intellectual humility.

The goddess is looking back at the paisas, then at me, comparing notes. Am I a Mexican farmer incognito? Too tall, too muscular, no cowboy hat, no accent, too American sassy. No chance, just like her.

“I guess you haven’t taken your GE in Spanish yet.”

The arrogance comes back, like rushing blood. “I will take care of this immediately,” as if it’s my

fault for pointing out her error. I smile, she shouts, “Hereberto! Go get that marker for me, will you?”

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I say, “I don’t think he speaks your native tongue.”

She says, walking off, “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Why would I dare move when you’re all that matters?”

“I prayed for you and your troubles, Paul.”

There is pity on the father’s face. It’s good pity, not condescending pity. I don’t need it, but say anyway, “Thank you, Father.”

“I was worried about your soul.”

I feel the old smallness rise up in me. I’m not so sure it’s bad. “Me too, Father.”

“You haven’t been to church in a long time.”

“Probably longer than a decade.”

“Why don’t you come to mass this Sunday?”

What the hell can I say, *Tempi cambi*?

What the good father doesn’t know is that I probably know the verse better than he does. I can now run the gamut of textual inconsistencies with too much ease, from book to book, chapter to chapter, mouth to mouth. St. James vs. St. Paul. St. Paul vs. St. Peter. Magdalene and the missing gnostic books. The insane Dungeons and Dragons game of Revelation. I went through the Bible twice in my life, once at a Jesuit high school (New Testament freshman year, Old Testament sophomore year), and later in a medieval four-by-eight cell in San Quentin, and it ruined me. Not happy about it at all. In both cases, I was surrounded by history and learning, but I never completely belonged or bought into either place. It was like education and incarceration touted the same book so hard that their irreconcilable differences left me with no system.

“Father,” I say, “I suspect I’m in a lot of trouble.”

“With the law?”

“No. Not this time, anyway.”

“That’s good, Paul.”

“I meant with me, Father.”

“I see.”

“No disrespect, Father, but I don’t think you do. I can’t get any fucking grounding.”

“Pray.”

I don’t say, It’s gonna take a hell of a lot more than that. Instead: “Father, I admire you. I always have.”

He smiles, knowing what that means: I’m not going to mass.

“Well,” he says, “you’ll remain in my prayers.”

At the end of the day or the end of a life, McFadden is a kind man, and I think that’s enough. I hope. I wish we could find a new start between us, wherever it might end up. Maybe we’d find an

unequivocal key to this life.

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Gotta give something back. “I’m gonna do this rally with you, Papa Mac. Okay?”

“Great,” he says. “We need all the numbers we can get.”

“Stanley!” says Athena. The goddess is back. “You’re needed over there.”

“I’m talking to my priest, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, no. It’s okay, Paul,” says the father.

“That’s right it’s okay,” says Athena.

I consider this odd couple. She came to the show singing Carole King in her mother’s Volvo, he came mourning the fourteen stations in a hearse. She’d like to loosen the starch of his collar, he’d like to replace her beads with a rosary. She thinks we’ve come so far, he thinks we’ve lost so much. She thinks these poor, poor people, he thinks my brave, brave parishioners. She came down from the hills to kick it with the commoners, he follows the carpenter who died on a hill. Allies for a day, a political moment, no more, they are both ready to do good.

“Athena,” Papa Mac says, “will you please sign Paul up here? He’s going to join us this morning.”

Athena says nothing.

“God bless you, Paul. I’ll see you at the rally.”

“*Mille grazie, padre.*”

She says, “So what are you really here for?”

“On this planet?”

“No.”

“Am I allowed on it?”

“Here. Right here. Right now. Why?”

I’ll give her one thing: she has eyes the alluring cobalt blue of Arabian nights. But I’m not fooled. She won’t grant that a transient of her embattled earth has a halfway functional brain, despite the earlier tutelage in Spanish.

“I ain’t homeless,” I say. “I mean, sort of. I have a motel room I stay in.”

“So?”

“But it was paid for by a fellowship. Which should upgrade my status a bit.”

She looks me up and down. “Fellowship?”

I smile, nod.

“As in money for scholarship?”

“As in the Leroi Jones Hookup for Off-the-Hook Artistic Achievement.”

“Okay, look, I—”

“Even went to school here once upon a time.”

“—don’t have the time for this.”

“Let’s be nice to one another, goddess.”

“I will be nice”—liking the way she’s been addressed but still detesting the source—“when I know what team you’re on.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to find out. Forever.”

“Answer one question.”

“Shoot.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just happened to be here. Think of me as an involuntary volunteer, how’s that? Like an eyeblink.”

“You better not waste my time this morning,” she says.

“Or what?”

“You think this is a joke?”

“I think you can’t speak the language of the people you’re trying to help. Some might say that’s the joke. And yet you think you’re their leader.”

She bites her lower lip, and I think she might cry. I immediately feel bad. She says, “I’m not sure like you,” turns, and strides off.

I try to keep pace. Don’t know why. I might as well tell her I’m dying, call her *brother*, and twitch at every step. Might as well ask her for three dollars. Anyway, I just might.

I wanted to afford the happy crankster the same respect she doesn’t give me, or anyone, but I just added him to a long list of people with whom the next encounter, whenever it happens, will be awkward; I’ll end up apologizing, not out of fault or even misinterpretation but a need to clean the slate, as in, “Before we’d ever met, Mr. Crankster, sir, there were giant unclaimed sins between us.”

It will be an attempt to repair the weathered, spindly, immemorial rope bridge strung between us time-bound mammals. It will be saying *sorry* for a life lived—not ours, mine or his, but Ours. That’s the point: Sorry about this story to which you and I indelibly belong. Simple contrition that we’ve had to cross paths in the first place under this Taking fate and physics and luck and all that shit and trying to claim it. A secular, interpersonal Yom Kippur.

Just atone for the blown deal and move on to the next apology.

We’re alone behind the church in the mission garden beneath an old adobe cloister, restored, you can see, very recently. Vines of ivy branch and climb along the wall. Gardenias and orderly patches of impatiens and petunias line the walkway. It’s a rainbow of petals, touched or kissed by some ineffable spirit that we hope came from the labor of the faithful but that probably had more to do with the tax-free designs of the well-endowed.

“I’m sorry about that back there,” I say.

“Don’t fuck with me,” she says, squatting down to a stack of orange leaflets on the ground. They read, AMNISTÍA POR TODOS. UNIDOS VOTAREMOS. SOMOS AMERICANOS.

“Well,” she says, “are they right, Mr. Translator?”

“Sí,” I say. “Es A-OK.”

“Now,” she says, not missing a beat, “what I want you to do is take each of these leaflets and fold them like this.”

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She holds one out in front of me. All that you can see on the face of the leaflet is Che Guevara’s tilted beret: the overused visage, the cliché for the cause. I copy the motion exactly, looking off at the church, folding it in half once and then once again. I hand it over and she nods but doesn’t move. I know she won’t let it rest. She has enough safety and enough time to expect perfection in her life, even in its most minute and elementary details.

She says, “Try again.”

“I’ll take care of it, don’t worry.”

“We’ll see.”

“Yes,” I say. “*Puedo hacer eso. Un perro puede.*”

“We need them ready in an hour,” she says. “There will be people at the rally who are in-betweeners. Curiosity seekers. Some will be swayed to our side when they see the passion of the *gente.*”

“The people.”

“Others will pick up the banner after a speech that’ll move them, or that they can identify with. Some will only be convinced by words in print. The *literatura.*”

“Literature? Books?”

“What you have in your hands right there.”

“Ah, yes,” I say, looking down at the seven magical words in Spanish, “*Sí.* I see.”

“I don’t think you do,” she says, and then she’s off.

Though I feel a bit used, I’m happy to have something real to do this morning, which, I see on the leaflet, is the fifth of May. *El Cinco de Mayo*, a Mexican holiday celebrated here on the streets of San José, California, USA. A day that annually ends with broken store windows and burnt vehicles and a few beaten American citizens and millions of empty Corona bottles and segments on the local news about the beauty of diversity and a historical clip about the legacy of Cesar Chavez and how the city’s first Hispanic mayor, Ron Gonzales, promises to end discrimination at once and us whatever we are still breathing in yoga deep this belief that all is right in our good land where the planet’s inhabitants come at the end of the dream to camp between two identical strip malls made of staples, paste, cardboard, and lots of air.

## Spring Buds

SPRING BUDS of the cherry tree ruffle like pink tissue paper in the soft breeze. Clouds even here in this oxygen-deprived valley are white as bone, pillowy, environmental eye candy. On days like this you can understand why a nation would push west to the Pacific coast. The Cesar Chavez chant—“¡Sí, se puede! Sí, se puede!”—doesn’t seem to reach the undisturbed heavens, caught in a wind tunnel somewhere above our heads. All around us are signs of our own ephemeral heartbeat.

“¡Sí, se puede! Sí, se puede!”

Hundreds of cops are funneling us into checkpoints like cattle into the chute, waving us through the peril of barricaded intersections, beneath flashing red lights and suspended banners that say VOLUNTARIOS Y TRABAJADORES DE LA COMUNIDAD, these uniformed men and women of the thick and faint mustaches, plastic toothpicks, and American-flag pins, hiding behind mirrored glasses and badges, then the bemused business owners at the doors of their establishments, unconcerned by a movement that won’t amount to more than a dent in the local GP, tapping their thighs with rolled newspapers, munching on toasted onion bagels, draining bottles of alleged spring water, knowing their windows won’t likely be shattered in this daytime deal of promised sobriety from Hispanic sources who know better than to give any chum to the cable media sharks, a helicopter with FOX News on its belly hovering overhead like some Grecian god chopping up the smoggy pollinated air of this place, a local news van docked at the corner of San Pedro Square and Starbucks, cameras springing out the rooftop, the sliding door, the backside, a mechanically mutated cockroach expanding its wings—and me, walking with a hand under my chin, unable even if I tried with everything in me to be a bonafide testament to the event, absolutely physically unable to join the chant.

“¡Sí, se puede! Sí, se puede!”

Athena is walking toward my side of the street. She’s cutting across dozens of paisas and Chicano striding out, it seems, at a faster pace. I like looking at her in the gentle gleam of silence between us. I’d like to box her up and open her at my leisure, like a poem. Under-arm hair aside, she is a beautiful woman, nearly my height, which in a crowdful of Toltec descendants is as statuesque as Gulliver. Trying or not, we both stand out. She likes it, I don’t.

I shrink down, walk on.

“¡Sí, se puede! Sí, se puede!”

I try to get ahead of her so she won’t open her mouth in my presence and ruin the peaceful new image I have of her. I look up at the turquoise jerseys of two San Jose Sharks of the week, Gok and Michalek, the smell of steaks from AP Stumps wafting across my face. It’s loud as a college hoops game, and suddenly I hear her. Almost like she’s shouting at me, but I don’t dare turn toward the voice.

She’s posted in my right ear, and when I finally look over, her wide-open mouth almost swallows me: “¡Sí, se puede! Sí, se puede!”

Five thousand people packed into Santa Clara Street, and she’s found me. I nod, look forward again, try and pretend it’s not happening.

“¡Sí, se puede! Sí, se puede!”

“Got it,” I say, smiling at her, speeding up.



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