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Starving in the Louvre and Other Stories

Charles F. Sterchi IV
csterchi@utk.edu

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Charles F. Sterchi IV

Advisor: Michael Knight

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The Melon Lady

The melon lady was not a fat wretch. She enjoyed selling melons. Mrs. Hoover and the melon lady were friends. Or Mrs. Hoover had a friend in the melon lady. Or a confidant. Or someone whose ears she filled up with noise. Mrs. Hoover was a grand purveyor of noise. The melon lady had flared nostrils that she tried to control, to make un-flared, but she did not always achieve this un-flaring, as she was the recipient of all sound, the slave of Mrs. Hoover’s voice, Mrs. Hoover: purveyor of all noise. The melon lady had acquired such dirt on Mrs. Hoover, but had nowhere to dump it. Mrs. Hoover bought plenty of melons and her child was cute, yes; but oh, the dirt that woman would pour into the eardrums like in a condemned swimming pool. The melon lady strained at the core to un-flare her nostrils halfway. The melon lady enjoyed selling melons, but she did not enjoy Mrs. Hoover’s racket.

Mrs. Hoover had been speaking to the melon lady for the duration of an hour every day, every day for a week and a half, since the melon lady had appeared that summer. She would drive her BMW into the gravel parking lot of the hardware store and up to the melon stand with her small son, and speak with the melon lady, shifting her weight with the indolent oblivion of morning-talk, wearing her navy tennis skirt and jumper, knowing that she would never again tread the sea foam clay of any tennis court, whether or not she was dressed for it.

Of course, this morning was not the same as previous mornings. On this morning Mrs. Hoover did not wear the tennis outfit. On this morning she had admitted through
the bathroom fog that she would not play tennis again ever. She had admitted that she would not go to the country club to watch or to chat or to see by whom she had been replaced, because by now someone had replaced her, there was no doubt. It had been almost two weeks and you cannot play doubles with only three women. You must have four. She had admitted that her injury was recreation ending. Mrs. Hoover had sat naked on the floor of the steam capsule bathroom and had allowed her wet hair to fall about her face. She had rubbed her pink skin, bloated as it was by the heat of the shower, and had glanced at where she kept her razor, contemplating some therapeutic self-mutilation, but thought no, it’s too soon for that, I’m not too bad off yet, that is too far for right now, and had massaged herself as though she were preparing to be basted and cooked in a Dutch oven by an opulent tribe of mountain pygmies.

Mr. and Mrs. Hoover had recently potty trained their son, Stonewall. Or rather, he had been potty trained two years previously. Still, there was little else in the world that brought Stonewall more pleasure than to shit with the bathroom door open. He would giggle in fits of hysteria, sometimes without even defecating, but making what he thought to be the appropriate noises with his mouth. He would then proceed to flush the toilet several times and run in circles, cutting a trail through space, snipping the strings of the real, pretending he was sliding through the plumbing himself, into the treatment plant, into the Tennessee River, the Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico, pretending he was a turd. It is possible that he thought these things as he spun his world into a blur, as he erased his surroundings into a watercolor of emptiness without regret, or perhaps he was only spinning, a child alone playing a lonesome child’s game.
Little shit thought Mrs. Hoover that beautiful little shit.

She came dripping down the hardwood corridor, a white towel draped across her breasts and dangling at her half thigh, another towel twisted into a turban about her head, she dripped down the wooden stairs, singing, “Stonewall, stop that. Stonewall, cut that out. You’re wasting water, dear.” She came to the bottom of the stairwell, where it was darker though sunlight loomed in levitating dust, where the slats of the floor had greater width. She was mere feet from her son, who sat in dizzied wonder by the commode. “Buddy, let’s not flush the toilet anymore. Once is enough. And, it’s bad to spin in circles, honey. Have you been spinning in circles?”

The child curled his lips and his hairless putty cheeks grew fat. “No,” he said. He rose to his knees and reached for the flushing mechanism.

“Stonewall Bedford Hoover, don’t you flush that commode.” She no longer sang, but demanded. She took her hand away from the towel and pointed a wet finger at the child. Her eyes became hard, the turtles therein retreating to their shells.

The child’s fat arm inched closer to the flushing mechanism. His smile was snaked in the shape of a horseshoe upside down.

Mrs. Hoover took two awkward steps toward the child. “Did you not hear mommy? Don’t do it, Stonewall.” Her towel began to slip.

“Okay, mommy.” Then the child yanked the flushing mechanism and his eyelashes seemed to fly away in dove-like delight. He leapt to his feet and began to spin. Mrs. Hoover pounced; her towel fell to the floor, her turban unraveled. She tried to grip the child’s arm, but he spun away, singing, “Mommy’s naked, Mommy’s naked” amongst levitating dust, amongst dim sunlight.
The melon lady shifted in her lawn chair. Another melon gone. “I appreciate your business,” she said, “come again.” The sunlight prickled her hands as she resituated the melons on the table.

“My goodness, that woman looks just like a Barbie doll,” said Mrs. Hoover.

“She was very attractive, I suppose. She doesn’t choose melons very wisely, but I won’t be the one to tell her.”

“I mean, really,” said Mrs. Hoover. “She makes me feel like a raggedy Anne. Did you ever have a Barbie doll, or were you the raggedy Anne type? I had both, myself. Raggedy Anne as a young young girl, and later a Barbie. Those were so fun.”

“I think I had both, too, though I’m not sure why.”

“I mean, what would I have done without my Barbie as a little girl? I had several, actually. We had tea parties, and sometimes the Raggedy Anne would be invited, but not always. My friends would come over and I could just tell how envious they were of my collection. My Barbies would drive to the tea party in their jeep, but my friends’ Barbies had to walk.” Here, Mrs. Hoover fell into laughing, as she was just too much for herself.

“What a lucky girl you were.”

“Well, you say that, Barbara, but my little brother was a menace. He’d kidnap my Barbies and decapitate them, strip them naked and tear their heads clean off. Once I found a row of them, hanged with dental floss above the bathtub. I screamed and screamed and screamed. He got into so much trouble, but I have to admit,” and here she lowered her voice, “I sort of got a kick out of it, too.”
Mrs. Hoover fondled a cantaloupe. She paused to adjust her sunglasses and tighten her belt, in the process of which she dropped the cantaloupe. It split open on the gravel.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I’ll pay for it. How much was it, two dollars?”

“Three fifty.”

Mrs. Hoover fumbled in her purse. “Here’s four. Keep the change.”

“No. Take your change.”

“Just keep it, Barb.”

“I insist.”

“Well, if you insist.”

“I do.”

Mrs. Hoover took the two quarters from the melon lady with a grimace. It had been nearly two weeks of smashing cantaloupes, and still the melon lady would not accept her charity. It was enough to make a woman wonder.

A red truck pulled into the parking lot and a burly man with sweaty arms and dark tangles of body hair leapt from the driver’s seat. He winked at the ladies. When Stonewall saw the man, he stopped throwing rocks at the rims of cars and watched him with an expression both interested and confused, an expression of juvenile amazement. The burly man bent to his knees and had Stonewall smell the inside of his helmet. Stonewall jumped back, pinched his nostrils, and said, “Mommy, that man’s hat is smelly.” His lips were curled in feigned disapproval. His eyes twinkled like two waxed toilet bowls.

The proprietor of the hardware store was outside smoking a cigarette. He had been gazing into the display window in childlike serenity, but bucked up when the man from
the truck approached. He ran his hands over his balding head and smoothed his red
apron. “How you doing today, sir?”

“Morning, Mr. Sanders.”

The man smiled on into the hardware store. When he was inside, the proprietor
ground his cigarette into the sidewalk and adjusted his glasses. The proprietor stretched
his arms and went inside.

“What you think he’ll buy any melons,” said Mrs. Hoover.

“It would be something else if he did. They’d be sitting in his truck all day.”

“But you’d let him feel them, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, of course.”

“I know I’d let him play with mine.”

The melon lady scowled and readjusted the melons. She removed a small blue pill
from her purse and placed it in her mouth, swallowed. The pill was for mild to severe
anxiety, and had become increasingly necessary.

“I know I’m not what I used to be, what with my hip problems and all, but I think I
could still give him a run for his money.”

A run for his money. I would like to hear Christmas bells. I am not a microphone. I
am not a therapist.

“You know, I had to tell my tennis partners that they’d have to replace me. They were
my best friends, you know, and now there’s just not time to see them at all. I haven’t
spoken to them since I had to quit. Not really, maybe once or twice for ten minutes or so
over the phone. But maybe I can get Stonewall into day camp or something, if I lie about
his age, just one more year, and then I’d have time to cook up a little romance with a blue
collar Romeo. Wouldn’t that be something? Beth Hoover running around with a hunk like that!”

The burly man walked out of the store with a large monkey wrench. He bent down to Stonewall’s level and said, “This is a monkey wrench.” Mrs. Hoover waved at him as he sprayed gravel beneath his tires and roared into the street.

“Oh, yes,” said the melon lady, “something else.”

“Stonewall’s a good child, yes, but it’s not the easiest thing in the world to raise a boy. Sarah, my niece, would be so much easier. Especially now that she’s old enough for summer camp. Of course Stonewall’s father would disagree. I guess it’s like comparing cantaloupes and honeydew, though.”

Stonewall entered the hardware store with exaggerated and needless stealth. Gravel whispered beneath his toes.

“Get it?”

“Yes, a play on the apples and oranges thing. Very nice.”

Within the hardware store, Stonewall searched for a monkey wrench like the one the burly man had purchased. He tottered through the cleaning supplies aisle and fumbled with some toilet cleaning fluid. He laughed at the cartoon commode and made farting noises with his mouth. He thought of the burly man and how he looked like the guy on the paper towel packaging. He wondered why there was a burly man on a product women used for cleaning and men used only as a surface on which to assemble sandwiches. He thought these things without forming words.
Stonewall left the toilet cleaning fluid leaking on the cement floor and continued his quest for a monkey wrench identical to the burly man’s. His mother outside was a rat on the road to him, squealing beneath the tires of the burly man’s truck. He wished that the burly man and his father would get married. He pictured the three of them in the garage playing with their tools and knives. His father would provide the knives. He had an entire case of knives. Stonewall the elder showed Stonewall the younger the knife case every night, the blades glimmering brighter than sterling silver in flame. His father allowed him to hold one knife in particular every night before he closed the knife case and stowed the key in the middle drawer on the right side of his office desk. It had been in the Hoover clan for thirty-seven generations.

“Once you’re old enough,” said Stonewall the elder, “this knife will be yours.” It was a brown pocketknife. There was nothing ornate about it, which is why it was bequeathed to the boys of the family as an inaugural blade. It was sharp, though, and sharpened frequently. “Don’t ever play with this knife when I’m not here, Stonewall,” said every Hoover father to his son, “or I will beat you with my fists.” Then the father would pop his son in the face with a loose fist and ruffle his hair.

If the burly man married his father, he would be free to marry his mother, and they could all live happily in the house, with his mother there to do the dishes and the laundry, to play with the cat. Or maybe he could marry the cat, and the five of them – burly man, father, cat, mother, self - could go to fancy restaurants together at night and the babysitters could all go to hell. Through this all, the shining monkey wrench against the projector screen of his mind.
He tottered past the nuts, the bolts, the drill bits, the nails, lawn mowers, riding mowers, and turned around. Stonewall scanned the aisle next to the nails, found hammers, nail guns, wrenches. There were blue wrenches, yellow wrenches, plain metal wrenches, too. He saw big wrenches, wrenches the size of his finger, and finally spotted the monkey wrench the burly man had had.

Outside, the sun shone more brightly. The dew smell tapered. The dew smell was pleasing to the melon lady. She was very aware of its tapering, aware of the slow boiling smell of evaporation, aware that she was providing the drama in the water cycle, and was pleased so to do.

“Is it just so quaint to live on a farm? Just how far into the country is your farm? Do you receive government subsidies?”

“Not too far in the country. It’s quaint enough. I don’t wear rags. No subsidies, no.”

“I think of myself as a farmer’s wife sometimes. I’ve grown a child in the soil of my womb, and have transplanted him to the fertile minds of cartoon writers, children’s book authors, teachers, daycares, Law and Order SVU, MASH reruns, and the list goes on. America is one big people farm. There might be other people farms, of course there are, but our soil is rich. Soon I’ll regain my figure, if I can ever play tennis again. The doctor says I probably won’t ever play tennis, or run, or play any other land sport. He says swimming…”

The melon lady was somewhere in the neighborhood of listening, rollerblading down a perpendicular street; she was conducting analysis of the cantaloupe’s intersecting lines. The foster children of the cantaloupe, incidentally also biological, disappear in the
intersecting lines thereupon, enlacing their fingers like vines and rolling away in embryonic voyage. Is that Stonewall Hoover with a monkey wrench I see?

Indeed it was. The child had the same curled lips as before. He was dragging the monkey wrench across the gravel, scratching his butt with the other hand. He stopped short and thought to say, “Mommy, do you want me to fix your hip,” but collapsed in a fit of laughter, instead.

Then a shadow engulfed the child. It was the shadow of the balding hardware store proprietor. Stonewall became silent and scowled at the man. The proprietor chuckled, though in truth he felt quite violated by the situation, in a way he did not understand, and said, “Ma’am, I’ll trade you this monkey wrench for a few melons.” Proud of himself, he grinned with his yellowed teeth, thought of his yellowed teeth, thought, at least I never had polio, at least I’ve enjoyed my cigarettes and my Co’ cola, I have nothing to be ashamed of, and waved toward the melon stand.

Mrs. Hoover stopped talking and looked at the proprietor as though he had made an outlandish sexual advance, as though he were dressed in a kangaroo suit and blackface, as though he were a convicted felon of the serial order, an arsonist and a crook.

She said, “You must be mistaken. I’m not the melon lady. That is my child,” now she peeled herself from the table and the shade, “but I do not sell melons to support him. I am a housewife.” She took the wrench from her son and handed it to the shriveling proprietor. She had the eyes and the ornery disdain of an alligator hooked on a fishing line. She said, “Thank you,” with the intonations of another phrase not so polite, and sprayed gravel with her tires at this perplexed man’s apron. The melon lady smiled and thought about evaporation as it pertains to human creatures.
Nighttime crept along the monkey grass and big Stonewall came swooping down the hill in the convertible. Up the drive on clicking shoes of camel’s skin amongst small blinking lights in the flora. Moustache grinning and whiskey aspirations in the eye. He ran through the possibilities in his head, the possibilities of ice cubes, how many to use, whether they’d be foggy.

As the back door shut, silencing the cricket noises, he saw that his wife was chopping vegetables, enjoying some soft rock. Or he presumed she was enjoying the soft rock she had playing on the stereo. He’d have preferred the noises of the crickets, though this did not occur to him at the time. What occurred to him was the crisp crescendo of his wife’s chopping. He found that each cut was the product of deliberation. It was the sound he imagined a troop of tiny synchronized axe men might produce in a forest of miniature trees.

“Hello, Dear.”

“Jesus,” said Mrs. Hoover. Hand went to brow as knife dropped. “You scared me nearly to death.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t all the way, no?”

He decided to kiss his wife’s forehead, then sat down to the newspaper. There was a large yellowing stain on the front page that smelled rotten, of whose origin he inquired directly.

“I spilled some milk on the paper this morning,” said Mrs. Hoover. “I tried to clean it up.”

“Milk.”
Stonewall the elder rose from his station at the table, shimmied across the kitchen and the sound waves of his wife’s chopping, and into the shoot-off laundry area where he deposited the newspaper in the recycling bin.

“Sweet nectar of cow” he said, “souring my newsprint.”

His wife craned her neck toward him. “What?”

He blinked. “Nothing.”

It occurred to him that he might have asked his wife a personal question, to show that he cared, to heighten a feeling of cheerful domesticity, but he was already halfway up the stairs.

His son dozed on the oriental office rug like an adolescent ocelot.

Big Stonewall cleared his throat. “Good evening, son.”

“Hey, Daddy.” He stumbled to his feet. “Do you want to marry a construction worker?”

Big Stonewall opened the cabinet on the far wall, unscrewed the cap of a pudgy glass bottle, and took a small glass from the middle shelf. He poured bourbon in the glass and twisted his face. The bourbon settled like water in the toilet. It had been thrice distilled.

“Not particularly, no.”

“Would you ever?”

He drank from the glass, faked consideration, brushed the image of a flamboyant Latino in a hardhat from his mind.

“It’s not likely, Pal,” he said.

He sat in a stained wooden chair, enticing the chair to creak.

“But why not? He’d have lot’s of tools.”
Big Stonewall stifled a grin. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Then father and son examined the blades of knives and talked about dangerous things to do in the ocean if you’re a dinosaur.

When Mrs. Hoover announced supper, the conversation died, and was resurrected as a discussion of the hardware store proprietor’s lack of class. This conversation was singular to Mrs. Hoover, who sat very much alone in her den of weary boys.

Next day, Mrs. Hoover and her son stayed at home. She lay on the couch and dialed numbers in her phone. She called her mother, who was having her hair done and couldn’t talk. She called each of her tennis friends twice, but they didn’t answer. She called the summer camp at which her niece finger-painted and shot arrows, but the receptionist did not believe she was related. Mrs. Hoover even called the time and temperature number, only to find that funding for this service had been suspended. In desperate finality, she drew herself to the glowing screen of the family PC, where she stared at vintage Barbie dolls for sale.

In the meantime, Stonewall had been in time out. He’d suffered a sentence of ten minutes for urinating on the deck, but spent an extra thirty minutes unlocking his father’s knife case. He took out the brown knife and handled it with chubby fingers. He placed it in its sheath. He removed another knife. It was bigger, shinier, and it had the image of a buffalo etched into it. This made his lips wiggle.

Stonewall crept outside and chased bees with the buffalo knife. This is for the buffalo he muttered. He thought he might carve out a little buffalo in a bee and save the day.
Save the day for someone that was allergic to bee stings, but that also had a hard time being civil toward insects.

Little Stonewall swung at the air, at bees both imaginary and real, with the buffalo knife. He knew where a beehive was, but he didn’t make it there before he swung the knife through his left forearm. He opened a vertical gash from which a great traffic of blood flowed. He winced at his arm, tried to close the wound with his other hand. It looked like wet red velvet cake in there. The growing of the grass increased, spiraled to the knees.

Stonewall considered possible repercussions. He imagined his father placing glass on coaster, raising eyebrows, a fist swinging toward the oculars like a flesh sledgehammer.

Stonewall decided he’d wait it out with the bees. He crouched among the honeysuckle and held the wound in hand. He imagined waking up in a cage with dinosaur bones and a throng of humming insects. He imagined his father and the burly man preparing sandwiches on paper towels, drinking from small glasses, and speaking in the strange language of men grown verbally entwined. With him in the cage, his mother cowered with her vegetable knife, slicing bees like okra.

Beneath the mass of honeysuckle, among the swirling entrails of the sun, in the midst of a growing whine, Stonewall gripped his knife and decided it was important to remain unknown.

Maybe he bled out, or maybe he didn’t. Maybe a bee stung him and he was allergic and asphyxiated and the paramedics took him, hours later, to the morgue, or maybe it didn’t and he didn’t and they didn’t, but it did not matter to the melon lady, who was oblivious to the affair.
She sat far, far away, yet only a short distance down the road, pill-stoned at her stand selling a cantaloupe, not thinking of Mrs. Hoover, or her son, or even the cantaloupe she was selling, but thinking of the water cycle, that cornerstone of third grade earth science. She thought especially of precipitation, because storm clouds had gathered. The proprietor of the hardware store said, “Looks like it’s gunna shit rain,” and went inside. But the melon lady did not want to leave. It had been quiet all that day. Raindrops fell, the gravel bled a darker shade of gray, and the melon lady sat dry beneath her tent until late evening.
Cold Soup

F.P. Lawson is on the proverbial lamb. He’s got a knowing grin and a moustache, wears blue jeans and a sports coat, combat boots. Lawson’s gone and robbed the fucking IMF. Lawson’s got a reputation as a new-fangled Robin Hood.

The blogosphere is ablaze with chatter concerning young F.P. Lawson. They tag him in their videos as he’s walking down the street, situating his trousers, his underpants, flossing his teeth on the subway, combing his moustache in some parked car’s side-view mirror.

“Hot damn!” says an old codger on the street. “I do believe that was young F.P. Lawson!”

The old codger adjusts his dentchers and initiates the “F.P. Lawson Robin Hood Strut” which consists of lifting one’s trousers slightly by the pockets, thrusting out one’s pelvis, and scuttling about until all human beings in the general vicinity have followed in suit. It’s the latest Internet dance craze, and they’re doing it from Tupelo to Dusseldorf to Timbuktu, by damn.

“Good golly, Miss Molly!” says the probably black singer though Lawson’s car radio speakers. Lawson’s in Paris, France, screeching down the narrow streets of Monte Martre hill. He’s got no reason to be there, but he has one or two days before he’s scheduled to hijack the flight to O’Hare international.

Lawson waves at a cop, who bows his head. The cops don’t touch Lawson after what became of the last one that did.
Hey, big fella, had said the New York City cop. He waved his nightstick.

Lawson had raised his hands above his head.

You’re the little fucker who robbed the IMF. That ain’t too cool in my book.

The cop had cuffed Lawson, who did cooperate. The trouble for the cop came when an old lady hit him in the back of the head with a spool of link sausages, when a crowd had gathered and put the cop up on a spit, cooked him over a flame of parking tickets fueled by public flatulence, posted up the videos online, videos that were hit millions of times, reposted, and hit again. No pig did touch young F.P. Lawson, no.

Now, zooming through the streets, through the wafting of bakery-smelling air, past public bicycle racks, places where painters had been drunk for a long while until the gentry pushed them away with their dogs and their low-volume sound systems, Lawson thinks about the banana farmers in Jamaica who love him, Uzbekistani prostitutes he’s never seen or touched, but who would like to touch him, about Elvis Presley and why in the Hell he didn’t steal this flaming gem of a rock’n’roll number. Good golly! Ima free agent, thinks Lawson, a guru a la libertad. Miss Molly! There’s a select few people who do not love me, and these few want to throw me into a meat-grinder. These ole pasty white doods with the money and the rule book. By damn! They’re as old as trees, breathe numbers, profits, CO2. These bastards would prefer to have F.P. Lawson the thick-skulled gymnast, the baker, the drug addict, but shit: they’ve got F.P. Lawson, hero of the workin’ poor.

F.P. Lawson stops the car in front of a café, where a man in an apron waits with a shot of espresso. Lawson downs the espresso, nods, and hands the waiter the keys to the Maserati. He trudges downhill on the sidewalk, backpack full of cash, pocket full of
passwords, backup passwords, fake thumbprints, sun pink behind the city and below the clouds. God damn! The pretty air in this town! Look at my bones and my skin, my blood, my skeleton: a stray part these old pasty bastards would so like to mould into a vehicle for their cash, into one part of a vehicle. In this vast sea of vehicles within vehicles, our universe posing as one of infinite vehicles, infinite possibilities and variations of vehiclery, of anti-vehiclery, of things unrelated altogether to vehicles, and damn it I’m a man. I’m a man amongst vehicles. Lemme think about those pasty fat bastards with the rule books, the money and their invisible whips, they’re sitting naked in the tub or in bed and eating boogers or searching in vain for their wiener, all on a conference call, and one of those bastards, in a powdered wig and a Speedo, says “That Lawson’s darkening our scene!” and another wearing denchers posits: “Gentlemen, we need to send this Lawson character into the alternate universe in which he indeed did become a world-class gymnast!” But they’ll never get me, those bastards. I live in what is much like a private ball-pit in a protective bubble of international love. I cannot be harmed.

F.P. Lawrence stops to pet a stray cat. He speaks to it and soothes it with his rough, tobacco-stained fingers. He thinks about how he hates Lawrence Ferlinghetti, about whom he has written a poem. He recites the poem for the cat:

Late at night
when crickets sleep
and clouds of fairies
don the trees with pocket lint,

wooden hands
stretch creaking out
toward ferlingetti’s
rotting flesh in violet mist.
“‘Merica,”
he mumbles soft;
within his cracked skull
maggots chew his past(r)y brain.

Wooden hands
dig into clay,
toward ferlingetti’s
rotting flesh, and feebly crack.

ferlinget-
ti: die, you bitch.
We do not need your
rotting poems ‘round here no more.

The cat purrs in bone-throbbing ecstasy. He posts the poem on his blog.

F.P. Lawson ducks into Pelleton’s map store down by the Pantheon.

Lawson, says Pelleton, you are a dandy Robin Hood.

Lawson takes a brandy snifter and the two men clink glasses.

I would be no Robin Hood at all without the bear guy. You know, Robin Hood’s
sidekick who is a bear?

Pellaton cocks his head and embraces Lawson.

You are a hell of a guide, Pellaton, is what I mean.

Tomorrow, we will go for a bicycle ride down by the Seine, says Pelleton.

Can we go see the Monet murals?

We can ride our bikes there!

I can always count on my partner, Pellaton, for good company.

Lawson downs the snifter of brandy and strokes his brown moustache. Who is that in
the corner, says Lawson, with the novel and the kitty?
A young woman sits in the corner reading prose to a cat.

Pelleton sips his brandy and smiles. Why, my daughter! She is a very pretty girl.

Turns twenty this month. Take her if you like. Not tonight, though. Tomorrow. Tonight you must rest.

Lawson raises his eyebrows and downs the contents of his snifter.

If I must, he says. I just hope you aren’t taking a piss at me.

You are an international hero, an international heartthrob, says Pellaton. I must warn you, though: she is an actual harlot.

Oh, I don’t necessarily require a virgin, says Pellaton.

The mapmaker’s wrinkled scalp un-scrolls into his horn-rimmed glasses. His tan skin glows beneath his light blue dress shirt.

I mean that she is a prostitute, says Pellaton. The map business does not draw the same sort of profit as it once did, you know.

F.P. Lawson scratches his head, considers. For love, a man must excuse infinity itself, he says.

Lawson crosses the room and takes up Julie’s hand. May I have this number?

Julie stands, and the two dance the Watoosy, the Jitterbug, the Charleston.

Meanwhile, Pellaton scours the files in Lawson’s backpack, counts the money, scribbles in a black notebook the size of his torso, does a jig of his own in the fading of evening into night.

As F.P. Lawson dances the Watoosy, a band of old white men in suits discusses his robbing of the IMF over a cocaine dinner in the penthouse suite of a long, tall skyscraper.
that blares with reflected white light in Manhattan. The interior of the suite is of white marble and gold trim, gold railings. Mirrors adorn the walls, the ceilings, and the floors. One man wears a breathing mask. His body floats in a transparent tube of warm, bubbling water. He wears orange floaties around his arms, and a floaty harness wraps around his loins. A nude woman approaches him with a tray of cocaine. He peers down at her through eyes that hardly focus, eyes void of pigment: white, terrific orbs. The naked woman, whose body has attained the perfect curvature of a body airbrushed, extends a platinum cocaine straw to the old man’s nostril. He snorts, as she guides the straw down the line. He moves only his reptilian neck.

There are six other men in the room, and six other naked women with cocaine trays. The men murmur.

The man in the floaties’ breathing machine shudders. The murmurs cut off.

Okay, faggots, says the man in floaties. I love you all dearly.

We love you, too, they reply.

The nude women assume violent statuesque positions, frozen while scratching out others’ eyes.

The man in floaties’ breathing machine shudders.

Everyone on the planet seems to love this Lawson queer, says the man in floaties.

Why don’t we just kill him?

The man in floaties glares at the speaker.

Because we don’t have to, you mongoloid. What he’s stolen is pocket-change. He’s just like any other revolutionary twerp: the people will kill him themselves. The poor will continue breeding, feeding their children our poisoned health bars. They will die
slowly, so slowly. They will purchase vitamins to revitalize their failing bodies, as always, and will be poisoned further, until their every breath depends on the support of our prescription drugs and our breathing machines. Then they will die, and purchase our structurally unsound coffins. The people are still in bondage, only they have a brand new distraction in this Lawson fool.

Everyone laughs, snorts cocaine, exchanges high-fives.

After his dance, Lawson retires to the room Pellaton has set up for him. He plugs in a laptop and reviews his Internet presence. Lawson smiles and reaches a hand into his pants.

I grew up in a sunny green-grass land of lemonade stands and fine jewelry, types Lawson. The sun would set across the sky from the violet moon and harpsichords played from the parlors and screened-in porches across the meadows and pockets of trees. In the neighborhood, people drove their vehicles no faster than 20 miles per hour and the wildest tunes on any radio were Schoenberg and later Brubeck. Degenerate art hung in the public gallery, in the foyer of each home. Reprints, maybe, but by damn, it was good for the children, for me. Who’d of thought I’d end up a guru a la libertad?

On the computer screen, he bathes in the Adriatic chill.


Lawson posts his autobiographical excerpt on his blog. He swallows a sleeping pill, stows his money bag under the bed, shucks off his jeans, pulls the covers over his face
and thinks of Julie, tries not to think of the other men she’s loved. He gyrates in body
and mind against the white expanse of the down mattress, and falls asleep.

    Want milk in your coffee, says Pellaton.

    Lawson says no, studies a map of the Babylonian Empire circa 1638 BCE.

    Does this map really go back to the date here noted, says Lawson.

    Julie sets a cup of coffee before Lawson and grins.

    No, says Pellaton. I’m a filthy liar. But would anyone buy a map of the Babylonian

Empire printed three weeks ago?

    Julie and the two men laugh, munch biscotti.

    Down by the Seine, Pellaton and Lawson pedal their bicycles. They pull up to a
bookstand and the woman there says hello to Pellaton.

    Pellaton and the bookstand lady exchange words in French.

    Pellaton and the bookstand lady laugh.

    Lawson examines his fingernails.


    Pellaton turns to Lawson and says, not to worry, my American Robin Hood cowboy.

Everyone knows my daughter is a whore. We are joking about sending her to university.

    Lawson extends a hand to the bookstand lady.

    Name’s F.P. Lawson.

    I know, says the bookstand lady. Your blog post last evening was a bit self-serving,
don’t you think?
Lawson takes a step back, raises an eyebrow.

Pellaton shifts in his sneakers.

What do you mean, “self-serving,” says Pellaton.

Ah, nothing.

Nothing. Good, says Lawson.

Lawson’s head is shrieking with the machinery of oblivious regret. What does she mean, self-serving? Have the old pasty bastards sabotaged my blog?

Lawson whips out the flat gray stone of his mobile device and checks his blog. Those bastards must be brainwashing innocent folk to talk shitty on my post, thinks Lawson. That’s a great post. The rise of a bland child to secular sainthood! It’s the stuff of film.

Pellaton glares at the bookstand lady.

Fuck you, says Pellaton. This man is a hero.

Of the workin’ poor, says Lawson. Like yourself.

He regrets this last utterance.

The bookstand lady slaps Lawson’s face. Her own grows red.

Pellaton mounts his bicycle and says, forget you, to the bookstand lady and motions for Lawson to follow him.

Lawson gives the bookstand lady $10,000, stumbles over his bicycle and falls to the ground. He gets up and dusts his trousers, mounts his bicycle, follows Pellaton.

In the city, Paris, says Pellaton, there are some rats. Love is a shoelace tied around two twigs.
He takes an uncorked bottle of wine from his satchel. He drinks from its yellow belly and hands it to Lawson.

Wash down your baguette, says Pellaton.

Lawson drinks.

That about love and rats you said, says Lawson, doesn’t make any sense.

Sure it does. Love is feeble, says Pellaton. Paris is extraordinary, is full of animals lusting and hunting for baguette. Rat and man. Man and rat.

Lawson nods. Paris is another vehicle, he says.

You are a great vehicle, says Pellaton. He pats Lawson on the shoulder.

No, I’m a man.

Sure. Let’s go.

They fly from an expanse of white gravel.

The two men pass all the lines as the crowds conduct the F.P. Lawson Robin Hood Strut. The crowd of people in the lines thinks, There goes ole F.P. Lawson. I wonder if he’d ever marry into my family. His post last night was a bit self-serving. It was a bit offensive in its personal nature. He seems to think he has made it or something. What is there to have been made? Where has he made it to? He should recognize that as a revolutionary, one never makes it. Is he smoking a cigarette? Well, that’s his prerogative. It isn’t the 20th century any longer. I’d still like him for a brother-in-law, I guess.

However, when the people in the crowd check their mobile devices and see Lawson’s altercation with the bookstand lady - 37 different people had captured it on video - they
begin to wish they had not let Lawson cut the entire line to see Monet. They are less enthused about the F.P. Lawson Robin Hood Strut all together.

Let’s take a look at this here mural, says F.P. Lawson. He scratches the buttocks with a finger. Pellaton and Lawson walk up close to it from afar, step slowly, slowly back, stand for a moment, stroke their respective chins. So this is a pond or something, says Pellaton.

That’s what I gather, says Lawson.

The people watch the two men scratching their chins. The people feel no rhythm. Where is my “slice of the pie” says one person, and other people regard him with green eyes.

Cycling home toward the map shop, the men decide to visit the Pantheon and the statue of Rousseau that stands in the plaza. When they pull up, their bells phantom ringing, the place is full of students from the University Paris–II. The students smoke and suck ice cream cones, and when they see F.P. Lawson through their space-age sunglasses, some chuckle and others show symptoms of mild to severe indigestion.

A cop is around the plaza, and he approaches the duo as they stare blindly at the Pantheon.

Lookie, says the cop. It’s the great F.P. Lawson.

The cop laughs and takes of his hat. He runs a hand over his sweaty hair and puts the cap back on.

Why, yes, says F.P. Lawson.
I heard you were in Paris. Why do you come to Paris? A revolutionary? A tourist?

What is this F.P. Lawson? Go and distribute your money.

Shut your slimy lips, says Pelleton. He is scheduled to hijack an airplane tomorrow.

Ah, ah, ah, says the cop. I don’t know if he will. He may purchase a ticket, maybe, but the hijacking?

Didn’t you hear what happened to the last police officer that fucked with me?

Ah, but you are losing the favor of the people, F.P. Lawson. Notice how there is no dancing in the plaza. There is no little old lady with a spool of link sausages.

Students don’t dance, says Pellaton. It is not in vogue to dance.

The cop laughs.

A student passes and says, why are you in Paris, F.P. Lawson? It is just another city. We don’t want you here. The student disappears behind the white portico of a building.

Back in the map shop, Lawson and Pellaton drink spirits.

Let’s jump out of the airplane together.

I’m not so sure about this, says Pellaton.

Now, F.P. Lawson knows he is cold soup.

Pellaton motions to Julie. She comes to Lawson, and the two begin a slow, broken waltz.

Pellaton strokes the rolls of his head, drinks brandy, searches for single-engine airplanes on the Internet black market.

Lawson lowers his lips to Julie’s ear. I hear you are a whore, says he.

I am a great whore, says Julie. Ask anyone.
But can you really love me, says Lawson. Can you say that you love me?

I can say anything you want me to say, I guess.

Oh Julie, says Lawson. He stumbles over the carpet.

Up in his room, Lawson and Julie share a cigarette in bed.

Having ravaged the mapmaker’s daughter sufficiently, I should leave, says Lawson.

Julie puts the cigarette out on F.P. Lawson’s forehead.

I love you, F.P. Lawson, says Julie. Her cool smile and her brief, punctuated giggling coil into the corners of the room.

Lawson jumps to the icebox and presses a piece of ice against the cigarette burn. He extends an arm toward the sky outside the open window.

I am a dog, says Lawson.

I, too, am a dog, says Julie.

He grips the windowsill and leans out.

I am a tittering douche. I am the perpetrator of one million small injustices of the body and mind.

Julie sits up in bed, pulls the sheets of blue yonder over her quiet nudity. She lights another cigarette.

Just the other week, says F.P. Lawson, I ran across a young lady near my own age on the jogging path. This was just before your father helped me rob the IMF. We were the only two on the dance floor and the sun had cracked its messy egg of darkness.
F.P. Lawson looks out over the courtyard below him. Birds sleep in the elm trees. Beeches sway in the rank breeze. A table and three chairs huddle in the lower-left quadrant of the courtyard.

I smiled at the girl and performed lewd gesticulations, says Lawson. Then I stepped on a rock and fell. She looked over her shoulder and laughed at me, ran on into the feeble darkness, left me lone maestro of the insect hoard. I crawled back to my car, punching bag of the moon, hands and knees through gravel. I switched to grass and got dog shit on my hand. I stood, and I wept. I was nothing. I was dust.

And to dust you shall return? Julie pulls her hair into a bun.

My name is F.P. Lawson, and I am a creature of inflated hurt. I am a vehicle of sound and of laughter. I am a vehicle on which other vehicles feed. I accumulate mass, and they take my little pine-tree air freshener, which is a vehicle of smell. Do you see? There are hundreds of small sailboats tossing in the airwaves outside the window. Most of them I could fit in the palm of my hand. Tiny mechanical detritus spirals, and the insects, vehicles of atonal evening, toil in pursuit of first chair viola.

Maybe I am in a dream, or maybe I was in a dream previously, and if I am dreaming now, I need to wake up. I would like to light my body on fire. Inundate my self in flame. Watch me light myself. It will look like again I dance; only I will be on fire. I’m a hunk, a hunk of burning human meat, my darling.

Julie offers him a match.

Thank you, says Lawson.

He lights a cigarette.

He kisses Julie hard on her face, and in a moment, she reciprocates.
I’ll call for you, he says.

You must pay me, she says.

But you love me.

My saying that was only part of the experience that you are paying for. You aren’t any heartthrob anymore. I want to go to university and no longer be a harlot. I have been studying.

How much do you need for school?

Money? None. It is free here. But you must pay me like the other men.

Lawson dresses, places a stack of cash totaling three million dollars on her nightstand, and heads out into the night with a bottle of wine.

In the evening, among the small lights, Lawson trudges up Monte Martre. He takes a slug of wine and enters the café of the waiter whom he gave the keys to the Maserati.

Alien, says Lawson, I need my keys.

Alien, the waiter, sits backwards in a chair. His forearms fold across the seat back and he rests his chin on them. A cigarette dangles from his mouth.

I’m afraid the car has been taken.

By whom?

Alien yawns, ashes. The people who take things. I don’t know. They have no faces.

But it was a gift. From the Maserati company.

Then that is who took it. They say to me, we give it to him, and we take it back from him. Your vehicle gone, F.P. Lawson. Find some other way.

Lawson sits, his legs splaying off in odd directions.
You know, says Alien, that was a rather self-serving blog post last night.

Lawson drinks from the wine bottle.

How was sleeping with Pellaton’s daughter? She’s an actual harlot, you know.

How do you know I slept with her?

She posted it on the Internet. We see everything, F.P. Lawson. You should be ashamed of yourself, taking advantage of a poor mapmaker’s daughter.

Alien boosts himself out of the chair and hits Lawson in the face. Lawson crashes to the floor.

No one likes to come here anymore, Lawson, says Alien, because I know you.

Alien puts the cigarette out in Lawson’s face.

Get out, says Alien.

Lawson stumbles to the river and peels money into the black water.

In the morning, he joins the tourists with his hangover, and waits in line at the museums. Many people pretend not to recognize him. Many don’t recognize him. He isn’t really that handsome, think the crowds. Not as cute as the tap-dancing Corgy, or the small human child who said cunt three times on national television. I’m tired of those F.P. Lawson videos. I don’t care if he did rob the IMF. What in carnal doting is the IMF? Anyway, think the crowds, heroes don’t smoke cigarettes anymore. He smokes so many cigarettes, like a student, or a cowboy. Who does he think he is, John Wayne?
A Day at the Park

I.

One time, in the spring, Alix Catullus was at the park. It was a Sunday and the open pipeline of river and treated sewage crept past him as he read from a handbook concerning road kill identification.

Alix Catullus lied on his back in the shadow of an enormous evergreen and held the book above his face. He allowed the warm breeze to flip pages for him. The shadow of the enormous tree splashed upon a vast white field of grass. He lied on a blanket and read through sunglasses.

Nature is interacting with this text in a way quite favorable, thought Alix Catullus. These pages, each, thought Alix Catullus, are like this vast white field on which I lie. The print is a line of shadows, waiting for their respective objects. I giveth the objects, thought Alix Catullus.

The wind flipped a page of the book.

The wind taketh the objects away.

As Alix Catullus read, the tree disappeared, and the sky disappeared, and he forgot about his sunglasses. The blanket slipped out from under him and all that remained upon the vast white field of what was no longer grass was the shadow of the enormous tree that was no longer there and Alix, who was naked, a wad of flesh against the wind, amongst a grand company of dead animals from various US highways.

II.

After a time, Alix Catullus sat up. He adjusted the sunglasses and the collar of his shirt. He laid the book in the grass beside the blanket and peered out over the field.
Oh, god, said Alix Catullus.

He was no longer so alone as he had been. To the spattering of trees that dotted the vast field had been added a spattering of people who threw baseballs across the sky and into each other’s gloves like dead birds into hard leather nests; a spattering of sunbathers whose bronze stomachs descended into the hostile neon fabric under which their respective sex organs paled; a spattering of loud walkers and their dogs along the little brown trickles of dirt that followed the bending river. East, across the field, sunlight reflected off the hundred automobiles crammed into the once empty parking lot. Alix Catullus searched for his car in the nest of metal. He removed his sunglasses and bowed his head. Upon the boulevard that wound above him and to the north, a slow procession of automobiles stretched into the horizon.

It will be nearly impossible to get out of that parking lot, thought Alix Catullus, and I’m going to need the company of a toilet within an hour.

Alix Catullus replaced his sunglasses and rolled up his blanket. As he stooped to pick up his book, he noticed a small terrier defecating beside the trunk of the enormous evergreen under whose shadow he had sat. Alix Catullus slouched across the shadow of the evergreen and into the warm territory of the sun.

I hope I don’t see anyone I know, said Alix Catullus.

III.

Alix Catullus walked directly to the river, descended the rocky bank, and stood on bare sand with book and blanket under arm.

This sand is rather firm, said Alix Catullus. Perhaps if I walk across the sand instead of the vast and peopled field, I will avoid seeing anyone I know.
He walked in the direction of the parking lot, but as he went, the territory of sand grew narrow.

This sand is becoming more like goo, said Alix Catullus.

He lifted his sandaled foot and the earth spat muck on his toes. Alix Catullus said, God damn this sand.

He tiptoed to the riverbank, but before he climbed to the vast field, someone called his name from across the sand.

Alix Catullus, said the person who called his name, Alix Catullus, it’s me, Mrs. Kirby.

Fuck, thought Alix Catullus, it’s someone I know. I had wished to avoid this situation.

IV.

Hello, Mrs. Kirby. My mother tells me you have left your husband.

Yes, Alix. It’s just me and Gogo these days. We’re living in a condo across the street from the Presbyterian Church.

Alix looked at Gogo, Mrs. Kirby’s son, whom Alix Catullus’s father had said was a retard, but whom his mother had said was merely distraught emotionally.

Gogo levied a vague gaze on Alix Catullus and allowed his tongue to hang out.

That sounds very nice, said Alix Catullus. He made for the rocky bank again.

Now what year are you in school, said Mrs. Kirby. I can never remember these things.

Gogo laughed.

I’m a senior. I’ll graduate in May, after which occasion I will continue residence in my apartment until the lease runs out at the end of August.
You study literature, said Gogo.
That’s right. I study literature.
That’s very nice, said Mrs. Kirby.
The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent, said Gogo, shoulders, said Gogo, Manes!
He’s been reading Ezra Pound, said Mrs. Kirby.
Oh, said Alix Catullus. I’ve not read Ezra Pound at all.
Gogo scooped a handful of sand and sniffed it. Then he packed the sand together with a grin and launched it into the river of sewage. There was a brown splash of water and a vague ripple.
Well, we must be going, said Mrs. Kirby.
Then Mrs. Kirby vanished up the rocky riverbank, Gogo dawdling behind her.
Alix Catullus watched the treated sewage and river churn for a while because he was startled. He wondered if the sewage was actually treated, and if so, to what extent? He wondered how one would measure the extent to which sewage had been treated. He figured that the method of measure probably did not include a system of yellow smiley faces, each displaying a wider grin as the sewage became more treated. No. That would be too elementary.
Then, Alix Catullus lowered his pants, squatted, and added his own raw sewage to the river. He frowned, emulating what he supposed would be about a three on the scale of sewage treatment that probably did not exist, and buttoned his pants once more.
Leslie and Golden Boys

Arbitrary Point of Departure:

The outside was snowy, white like an albino raccoon, or an albino anything really, or the small sharp teeth of an infantile albino anything, living in a world void of sugarcane, a world thus much less cavity-prone. In this world of superior oral hygiene, brown telephone poles protruded from the snow – damp and virile, penetrating the landscape like the detachable penises of a large-bodied extraterrestrial race.

These same telephone poles, or rather, the lines hooked to them, had carried a frequency that had carried a voice - Leslie’s, the quality of which was brusque and impatient - to my parent’s home, where Rufus and I heard it through a speaker imbedded in a mauve telephone connected to the kitchen wall. Cookies were on the bake.

Leslie’s voice, through the telephone, had called us to action, as it were. There were chimichangas to be had, and Leslie craved them with the whole mass of her being. So, Rufus and I abandoned my mother and her cookies, trudged through the gravel and slush up the hill to Leslie’s place, that dusty mansion from whose posterior extended a giant glass spider of a dojo, which strung out webs of telephone lines to those detachable penises mentioned above.

That day came toward the end of a period of time. It also came during the body of other periods of time, on other various scales that I will avoid discussing at any great length. That day was one of regeneration. Something momentous swelled in our loins and in our hearts. Our relations with Leslie, that gargantuan babe, seemed rather solid on
that day. The parameters of the relationship were simple enough: she couldn’t stand, what from the half ton of body fat, and we needed her money.

*How Report with Leslie was won:*

Various displays of loyalty and warm-heartedness - met with neutral sighs and occasional brandishing of harsh language, but clear appreciation – including: conversation with the lonesome woman, painting of various parts of the house, small art projects, most frequently the acquisition of foodstuffs.

*(Note: Majority of above-mentioned activities required use of Leslie’s credit card, which was useful in personal purchases and the occasional pursuit of debauchery.)*

*Return to Plot:*

We trod into the deep, dim foyer and stomped our boots, crept through the halls, below pet cockroaches, through cobwebs, past quivering floor lamps, dust on commemorative muskets, out into the dojo itself.

In the expanse of the dojo, in the expanse of garbage and furniture that swam in the white light from the vast windows, we pandered to the fat woman.

“You said burritos, right?” said Rufus.


Sunlight splayed itself across her western hemisphere, or rather, the hemisphere facing global west. I took her order down on a loose sheet of paper from the floor, took the credit card from one of the coffee tables, and we headed out of that place.
Attempt at Understanding of Leslie’s Psychology by way of Graphic Novel Summary

Excerpt - Pre-Production – Project Untouched Since Adolescence, Specifically

Sophomore Year, High School:

Leslie sits up dreaming in her dojo all day, writing to the townspeople and eating. She sends out postcards saying she has the egg sack of a wolf spider incubating deep in her ear canal, but that the doctors cannot remove it on account of all the fat in the way. She tells the postman, Philip, whom she loves, that the swelling nubile spider hoard will hatch any day and eat up her brain. A memorandum to several protestant congregations informs that she sits in her room, reads Montaigne, and is reflective concerning her own impending death by spider babies. She wonders why this all brings so few visitors.

Fat Leslie thinks of her two golden boys, and does not mind that they frequently make use of her bank account for personal expenses and the occasional pursuit of debauchery. She focuses on the sunshine, the curtain of light slipping from her face.

“I’d like to redecorate,” says Leslie. It has grown dark outside and Philip has not visited with the mail. She thinks of her ancestors sagging in the front hall in their uniforms, armor, petticoats, chainmail, suits, caps. The paintings are all crooked and want dusting, maybe a modern reconfiguration. Maybe she’ll pay the golden boys, from the back road, to do something folksy with them.

Leslie places a delivery at the Chinese place and watches the towers blinking on the ridge across town, the steel skeletons of communication, and she thanks them for her coming meal, for all the money they have brought in, too. (Insert: family history sequence, beginning with obese pioneer in coon-skin cap declaring ridge as own, impressing native Americans with laser vision deer hunting powers, continue to show
Sterchi

mineshafts on ridge, fat fellow presiding over with organic mind control, all the way through Leslie selling said ridge to the phone company, losing powers, relying on cockroaches and her golden boys.)

Leslie eats her seven boxes of kung-pao, fastens her facemask, and turns on the breathing machine. Hounds bay somewhere amongst the dirt roads and the telephone lines. She imagines the fingers of oak trees splaying moonlight. She imagines the fleas on the hounds, the dew blanketing dust puffs, a creaking door somewhere. She and Philip in the barnyard, Philip’s eyes like two green ponds, the native frogs of which hop along Leslie’s drifting into sleep. The breathing machine shudders and keeps that woman alive all through the night.

Insert Exploits of Leslie’s Golden Boys Fighting Crime, doing her grand services at their own expense: they punch a criminal dead just as he is about to curb-stomp a Rabbi, kick a child molester in the teeth and groin as he steps into the shower with his stepson, rip out the esophagus of a man in the next shower stall who is singing Puccini badly.

Leslie, back in her dojo, god was she cradling some science. She was operating thousands of cockroaches by remote control. Each cockroach had a camera and a precinct in the town. Screens surrounded Leslie and her fat, delivering this annotated reality. She made each distant precinct and its people all her own. Also, there were cockroaches tied to tiny plastic forks, to scratch all the places she couldn’t reach. The postman, Philip, stayed all day and spoke with her. He cooed like a mourning dove and mounted her in the afternoon, the twilight, and the dawn. His small body would fasten itself to hers with bright orange tree-felling straps, no doubt.
Insert Crime-Fighting Exploits of Golden Boys, Direction by Fat Leslie via Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches and Headsets, Love Triangle Involving Leslie, Philip the Mailman, and Zeus Himself.

Conclude Excerpt from Graphic Novel Summary:

Return to Progression of Plot:

Once in town, Rufus and I attended to the Pharmacy. I stalked the candy aisle, fingering the lot of bright, distracting packages, pulling sours, lolly-pops and caramel-filled cream puffs into my basket. Beside these goods, Rufus set a four-pack of cough syrup on the counter, and a case of organic hippy-type cigarettes, the logo of which depicted the very colorful profile of either a Native American tribal chief of the plain or a large rooster.

The lady-cashier behind the counter stared at Rufus and me. She smacked her chewing gum, sighed, and wore too much eye shadow.

She gesticulated toward a pennant strung behind the counter reading “18 means 18”, which argument I found circular and, on a metaphysical level, unconvincing.

The lady-cashier spoke up: “Can I see some ID?”

“Leslie, up on the hill, the lady that can’t leave her house she’s so fat, the one that built herself a dojo-”

“Can I see some ID?”

I nudged Rufus aside and produced my own fraudulent driver’s license.
“I drove here,” I said. I am under the assumption that this satisfied the lady-cashier, as she proceeded to scan the cough syrup and the injun cigarettes with her handheld scanner. We ran Leslie’s credit card and teetered on out of that place.

Rufus and I took pause in the alley behind the Mexican grocery, sipping cough syrup and lighting injun cigarettes. I became impressed that I was missing a date with a girl my own age interested in horseback riding. She was rather plain of face, bland in personality – but I related that my juvenile interest in her organ was supreme.

“Give that woman a burrito supreme,” said Rufus. He shivered and emitted a body of smoke from deep in his lungs.

“In any case, I was supposed to meet her on Monday.”

“Then I don’t guess she’s expecting to meet you on the Sabbath.”

“Say again?”

“It’s Sunday, you dumb rat.”

Rufus kicked at a slab of ice, kicked again, and nudged it loose from the sweating pavement.

“You sure today is Sunday?”

I took a sip of my red-violet elixir, made an attempt at calendar math, counting backwards from Christmas to that day’s date, which I did not know.

Rufus lifted the slab of ice and heaved it against the back door of the Mexican grocery.

“Went to church just this morning.”
So I hadn’t missed my date with the horse-faced girl - whose name I should say was Mary Catherine - after all. Satisfaction manifested in my loins, and I melted a cream puff with my tongue.

Meanwhile, our contact, Munoz Munoz appeared from within the grocery, wrapping a thin jacket around his apron-clad trunk. Rufus passed him a vile of syrup and we stood in the brisk alleyway, amongst the whining telephone poles and a litter of cats.

*Description of Mexican grocery interior:*

In the stock room, Latinos sat at card games amongst rising columns of rice boxes, Mexican soda, and flatulence. Steam hovered in from the kitchen, with manic shouting of one Soto Munoz, a cousin to Munoz Munoz and a fool.

*Close description.*

We greeted the card players, various members of the Munoz extended family, in a cordial manner, saying “Hola” and producing slight bows. They emitted brusque grunting noises and snickered. One man rose from the table and wiggled his hands behind his ears.

“Hola, como se dice? Como se dice? Como se what?”

A thin bed sheet of laughter fell upon the room, drawing Soto from the kitchen, with a wisp of steam and a plastic sack of tortillas. His eyes popped at us like hormonally infused chicken eggs, and yellow stains of grease tattooed his apron. Soto put an index finger to his sweating mustache.

“What does fat ass Lezzie want today?”
I waited for the subsidence of Soto’s laughter before I answered, chewing a creampuff the while. The card players were silent in regard to Soto’s query, awaiting my reply with childlike grins.

“16 chimichangas.”

Laughter erupted among the card players. Soto bent over and hammered his fists on a refrigeration unit, howling, as my grandfather would say, like a coon.

“Fat bitch has got work to do!” said a card player.

“But it’s work that she love,” said another.

Laughter.

Munoz Munoz, with his black apron, his acne, and his baby fat, cleared a card table of various items of literature.

*Items of literature cleared:*

3: romance novels (in Spanish)

3: romance novels (the same, in English, heavy use evident, including the protrusion of variously colored sticky notes)

1: Lorca anthology (Spanish/English edition, property of Munoz Munoz, gift from me, good condition, no use evident)

2: pornographic magazines (heavy use evident, including torn and folded pages, lewd cartoon insertions, various indecent stains)

3: automotive pamphlets

My memory of the scene here grows hazy, due to the continued consumption of my elixir. I do recall the friendly aroma of huaraches, and then the taste, equally friendly. I
recall someone juggling pickled eggs in a growing bath of steam, and the animated face of Munoz Munoz as Rufus explained a plan from his notebook in great detail. In particular, I remember the phrase, “We will be rich men, boys, rich men, boys, rich,” which I do not recall understanding in any capacity.

At some point, a conclusion of the foregoing activities, a greasy sack of chimichangas, great awareness of my face and ear canals, which rang as Rufus and I stumbled through the threshold into albino, teething night.

Approximate Exchange in Field of Snow, Overlooking Pine Forest, beneath Gaze of Leslie’s Glass Dojo, Post-Chimichanga-Delivery:

Are we going do it?

Are we going do what?

Are we going transfer, as I have done and outlined at the Mercado, some money from Leslie to our own account, purchase perchance some hi-fi speakers, purchase perchance some recording equipment, set up perchance a couple retirement accounts for the distant future?

Are we going do that?

That’s the question.

No. It’s the wrong thing for two gents like us to do…doo.

Doo-doo you think?

We have a very nice doo-doo going here with Leslie, don’t we?

Why ruin the doo-doo?

Why, indeed.
Though-

Though?

It would be nice to get my music career spinning. Like a record spins. That is a fine example of figurative language, no?

What music career?

Mine. Well?

It’s the wrong thing, I think.

*Conclusion of exchange.*

In the morning, I stomped snow from my boots in the foyer of Leslie’s house proper, coughed, nipped at elixir, chased elixir with creampuff, observed Madagascar Hissing Cockroach (domesticated) skitter across marble floor in direction of dojo.

*Note: For health of Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches, each level of house proper had only one functional floor lamp. The dojo contained no light bulbs.)*

I shuffled toward the shape of Rufus down the dim hall.

He clicked his cowboy boots. We surveyed the condition of Leslie’s ancestral portrait collection, which included 12 generations of increasing body mass. Each face hovered in a void, a contribution of Rufus’s and mine. We’d been contracted to “do something artistic” with the collection, and had elected to paint one solid coat of white over each portrait, leaving only the faces. Outlines of the original painting wisped beneath each single coat of paint. Leslie had never seen the new paintings. We could have done anything.

“Man, these things are creepy.”
“Creepy,” I agreed.

Several cockroaches (domesticated) dropped from the wall.

“What are you doing today?”

“Me? I’m meeting Mary Catherine down at the horse stable,” I said.

“That dump?”

“That dump.”

We reflected upon the information relayed and I sipped my elixir.

“You won’t be around this afternoon, will you?”

“No. I plan to be tied down with Mary Catherine for a good while.”

Rufus grinned.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Guess I’ll just kick it with ole’ Munoz Munoz.”

He lit two of the injun cigarettes and we blew haze into the obtuse faces of Leslie’s ancestors.

“Good ole’ Munoz Munoz,” I said.

“We got a few plans.”

“Concerning what?”

Rufus observed me through slit eyelids and drew in smoke.

“The birth of my record label.”

The abortion of decency, I reflected.

I left the conversation, and making my departure from that manor, I fell deep into contemplation regarding my abilities to navigate the bloody waters of courtship.
Generalized Home Experience:

Our mothers thought we were so kind for helping the obese woman on the hill. Our fathers thought we were homosexuals, not for helping the obese woman on the hill, but generally speaking.

I would depart in the mornings from my mother’s smiling domesticity (said domesticity including, but not limited to: ironing items of clothing, baking bite-sized salmon cakes, winding my father’s watch, imbibing Chilean Cabernet, the general employment of colorful aprons) and crawl back at night to my father’s grinning at the stock of provisions he had provided for his nuclear family, complaining of dissolved wine-corks, or sometimes drooling on the couch’s throw pillows. Rufus related similar biographical excerpts, with added fabrication of his parents’ reefer smoking, or of his own musical aptitude.

The meeting with Mary Catherine, the horse-faced girl, MC, MC horse-face, proved rather beneficial to my hands-on, clothes-off education of erotic relations. Upon arrival at the stable, MC galloped up behind me, mid elixir gulp, and hefted me onto the horse, side-saddled beside her.

We tore through a pine forest, a blur of green, white, and red-violet, through echoing voices of winters past, present, and future. We arrived at a small clearing, and the horse, one Torpedo Domino Lancaster, beat his hooves against the trees, settled near a barrel of carrots. MC and I frolicked in the snow and the horse-scent, losing our clothing article-by-article, and, post-frolic, she wished me a “Merry Christmas”, punctuated with a sucking of the neck (said neck belonging to me).
Approximate exchange in field of snow, surrounded by pine-grove, Torpedo Domino

Lancaster within earshot:

Well, that was something.
Yes it was.
Should we go back to my parents’ house, MC.
Let’s go to mine. We have surround sound.

Conclusion of exchange.

And they did have surround sound. As we sprawled on the couch, I nuzzled my beak in the crook of her neck, enjoying the surround sound, the absence of Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches and duties to morbidly obese women.
I tried some of Mary Catherine’s mother’s cough syrup. The linoleum on the bathroom floor was blue against the expanding white void of grout.
I plunged the toilet with my mouth.
Later, we went to the Christmas Parade in town, the Horse face family and I. It was nice, as I remember. Mary Catherine’s mother had spinach in her teeth, and her father made a point of not telling her about it. He whispered to me once that it was funny as hell. He winked a lot, and raised his eyebrows at me. I was in on something, I think.
Munoz Munoz was doing back flips on a trampoline when I came into Leslie’s place a few days later. He wore cowboy boots like Rufus’s, even in his gymnastic exercise. He hurled himself ever higher in the foyer, toward the chandelier.

The faces in the ancestral paintings wore luchadore masks.

This is when I went home and did one thousand pushups and took a bath. Mary Catherine and I dated for a while, until a leprechaun ate her alive. Just kidding. She got hooked on heroin and started following European soccer clubs on television, which I regard as culturally blasphemous. Now, I am training to become some type of scientist that does dangerous things with laser beams. I don’t know the actual name for whatever it is that I’m doing.
An Unacceptable Fantasy

Z Martin is a post-anthropoid with no sure form, with tentacles, is translucent and blue. Z wields seven 13th century Holy Roman swords at his nemesis, Silvio, who is part motor scooter and part robotic snake.

Z actually descends from pure humanity. Silvio? Not so much.

Do your worst, says Silvio. He assumes battle-stance with a can of mace.

Z snickers and begins his pre-battle monologue:

I have yellow hair. I have a cave in the woods I go to sometimes to listen to the rain. I have a cat that is black. I have a daddy that says words like fuck and cunt and I have a mommy that disapproves of words like fuck and cunt.

Someone outside the cave keeps saying the future is now and the echo of the voice and of the rain outside smells like John the Baptist’s head on a silver platter. I find myself wondering if the good King Hared had a Perth Mint Certificate for that silver platter. Haha just kidding, that’s a ridiculous notion. I wonder if he ate the head of John the Baptist, or if the gesture of the request of the head and platter was merely a symbolic formality.

There must have been some level of self-censorship on the part of the dudes who wrote various bible passages, and I want to know what they did not say.

How do I make my skin not smell like butter? That is a question of the ages, which question of the ages I will refuse an answer.

Opines to self in the cave in the rain with weird prophet of future is now, who now is dancing outside naked. I don’t think he knows I am here. Oh, baby he intones into the
dripping of rain, into the mouth of the cave. There is the idea of the barfly, of the writer
as camera, but I am just a guy in a cave, a victim of poor visibility myself. I am but a
foggy, dark, ashen window into the white space. I have a thought about the Sith, because
I can’t help myself. I feel like I am confusing cause and effect, or applying it to an
inapplicable situation. It’s not that I can’t help myself and as a result I have a thought
about the Sith, it’s more like I can’t help myself from having a thought about the Sith. I
don’t know why it has come to be that I cannot help myself from having thoughts of the
Sith. Maybe the Sith is thematically relevant, but I’m not really sure.

It is 55 degrees Fahrenheit in this cave, if the geologist has not lied to me.

Does it matter that I am married? I feel like that speaks to the nature of my character,
and could be important. My wife is a spider. I am fucking with you right now. I
proposed to the spider and then squashed it beneath my boot heel. Look at my boots.
They’re spider-skin. I am still mourning. She never said no. She was still thinking about
it.

There are beautiful women to be had in the night. In libraries, cafes, bars, and
orphanages, among the sycamore trees. They perform actions beneath fluorescent light,
by candlelight, in darkness - flies buzzing somewhere, oblivious and invisible flies. They
comb their hair.

Sometimes a beast is afoot. Sometimes now. There is no past says the naked dancing
man in the mouth of the cave. I don’t think he knows I am here. He mutters in the
gloom, and I cannot decipher the meaning. Not quite. I have damp carpeting in my ears
I suspect.
Silvio sprays Z in the face with his mace can and Z melts into a puddle. His swords clatter to the ground and Silvio slithers off to recharge.
Starving in the Louvre

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, and the definition of love therein, Thomas Palmer, of Nashville, Tennessee, is in love with Marsha Greenbelt. "Love (4 a.): An intense feeling of romantic attachment based on an attraction felt by one person for another; intense liking and concern for another person, typically combined with sexual passion." Upon notifying Marsha Greenbelt of his feelings, which he thought a proper thing, she replied, Thomas, we are in America; it's unpopular to be so forward. And so it is that Thomas Palmer finds himself in a wooden chair, at a wooden table, in a wooden room, unloved. He is geographically in Paris, France, which is also where his mind and his pen are, but the room is like any other wooden room; the chair is like any other wooden chair; the table is like any other wooden table. It is much like the room in his grandmother’s house in Mississippi, where he used to spend the holidays, of which he thinks when he hears the rain on the windowpane, when he feels the dampness oozing through the curtains. But Thomas Palmer is in a hostel, and he can hear the Koreans in the room to the east fucking all day as he writes, thinks, pines, rips paper. He tries not to be labeled a tourist; as a result, he is labeled an ass hole, too. The hostel staff jokes about him, and when they see his face, their hearts cackle, their smiles beam.

In the room to Thomas’s west lives a black man who plays the marimba. Thomas enjoys the hollow tone of the instrument, echoing in the room, echoing as though in a hollow chest cavity. The marimba player calls himself Chichi, and he encourages Thomas, from time to time, to liberate himself, to go into the city and find a barber shop, to get lost on the way back to the hostel, to get drunk in Paris, and to drink the lights.
But Thomas smiles, and says, I have been drunk in Paris for two entire weeks. Or else he says, I find it interesting that you speak of liberty in a country that, until a few decades ago, held your homeland captive. Chichi would reply, you don’t know as much as you think you do, and close the door, play on the marimba, go into the night, get hired at a roofing job, get fired from the roofing job, rejoice by playing the Marimba.

In Paris, it rained, writes Thomas to the tune of groaning Koreans. He stops writing and tries to remember the ambiance. A child licked the marble of the floor in the atrium. The echoes of human voices, of cowhide shuffling, of raindrops on glass, mingled in the indoor open. His gut, his body, were empty. There was food to be purchased, for which he did have funds, but the food is little more than air. There would be an emptiness in the excrement in the late afternoon, if he did eat, and as he would turn to flush the toilet, the toilet would flush itself, making a fool of him. There would be nothing in the toilet, having gone nowhere, and filling slowly with clean water that would become dirty and subsequently disappear. He perceived the space in the atrium as expanding infinitely into the grey oblivion of the sky beyond. There was the same child rising above the marble in the arms of a large man wrapped in a purple fabric of perhaps traditional African design.

There was hunger in watching the child.

There was a grand starvation in the Louvre.

Marsha is probably on her couch, making love to multiple men of various ethnic backgrounds, thinks Thomas, in the present. No. He concludes that she certainly is, and she is doing it to spite his love. The Koreans are at it next door.
Back in the Louvre, he folded and unfolded the fourth map in English, folded and unfolded the second map in Spanish (the first map in Spanish was pressed in his notebook with the French, German, Japanese, the first, second, and third English maps). He compared the entries in English and Spanish, and floundered in the crag between them. His finger found the small picture of Venus de Milo on one of the maps, and followed the line to the red box indicating the room number. Venus de Milo stood on a landing, peering with gray eyes across a desert of marble over which crawled reptilian men within bubbles. Each within his bubble, and I within my own, he thinks.

Men are dead animals.

He dragged his sandals across the marble, waiting in the security line.

Men are taxidermies, automated, dumb grinning robots programmed to be themselves. He had looked up Venus de Milo on the Internet and had found that she had lost her arms as a result of rough handling. She is an early Christ. She’s also a late Christ. Men cannot handle the fragility of love, I think is what it means. Maybe Christ could have learned something, if only he’d have come much later, thought Thomas.

She is a better Christ figure than Christ, said Thomas. She is universal.

He showed the contents of his empty backpack to a security guard with a bland, white, featureless face and a ponytail. He would have winked, but knew it would have no meaning if he did, and he knew the guard would either perceive the lack of meaning, thereby rendering the gesture a waste of energy, or she would misinterpret the wink as having sexual implications, in which case Thomas would face either a deep basement gallery of embarrassment, in which everyone in line would step back and focus their attention on the guard’s hard-working nature and her victimization by this misogynistic
American tourist pig-boy, or perhaps a private collection of embarrassment in which the faceless guard would give him her number and he would have to tell her he did not own a phone or that he was on his honeymoon or that he was HIV positive (all of which would have been lies); but most likely, if the guard were to interpret the wink he did not give as sexual in nature, and gave him her number or some other token of interest, he would not be able to refuse despite a complete lack of sexual attraction, because of a need to avoid confrontation, a great desire for situational neutrality. He wished to avoid an event. So he did not wink at all. Instead, he trudged on and said, Christ was a shabby Christ and he thought about Venus de Milo’s empty arms, or rather, her lack of arms, arms that time had taken from her. As he considered the arms, he perceived the presence of a hand on his shoulder; then he felt a jerk from the hand whose presence he’d perceived on his shoulder, and he crumbled to the floor.

Excuse me, said Thomas from the floor. He was a spot of flesh on a blizzard of white marble.

The short, fat Italian man standing above him glared and removed his straw cap.

What did you say about Jesus Christ, said the Italian man. He shook the crucifix from his necklace at the cowering youth.

Forget it, said Thomas. Nothing. I can’t understand your English, said Thomas.

The fat Italian guy reeled, fastened his straw cap back on his head. Listen, said the Italian guy, I’m from Brooklyn, you moron. My parents are from Brooklyn. I own a pet shop in Brooklyn. I’m on the city council in Brooklyn. Who do you think you’re kidding? English is my first language.
The fat Italian guy stepped over Thomas, followed by his wife and daughters. He tried not to look under the women’s skirts.

Thomas turns off the desk lamp and rubs his face. He examines the curtain for the 87th time. Its simple floral pattern comforts him in a small, forgotten way.

Thomas lied across the smooth field of white and peered behind and above him through the glass ceiling at the grey immensity of the raining sky. He reached into his bosom and tried to make the gears fit back together; they ground and shuddered in the vacuum of his chest until the pale-faced, ponytailed security guard made him get up.

Thomas’s gaze fixed on the blank penumbra of her cheeks, and the security guard shook him. You must go, said the security guard. She shook him again. You have to move out of the way, like the other people. After she walked away, a smear of lipstick lingered in the air and trailed off behind her.

Thomas blinks into the dark room. He gets out the box of postcards that he has written, that he does not want to send.

Thomas trudged on across the marble tundra of the Louvre. He boarded an escalator and his gears realigned themselves under the influence of the automated steps.

Other people, thought Thomas. These masses of ugly humans, yearning for a glimpse into their own hearts, but their hearts are as empty as their minds. They operate on binary code, as their gears rust and their mind’s limit recedes like their hairlines.

That’s pretty heavy, says Thomas.

He shook his head and pretended to read the map in Spanish.

Salir, he says.
At the top of the escalator, he trotted off into a sea of filing people. He saw a priest staring out a window into the courtyard below. Thomas approached the priest and stood next to him.

What are you looking at, said Thomas.

The priest smiled at him and turned back to the courtyard, a plane of gravel, with some hyacinths in a yellow bucket in the lower left quadrant.

That seemed out of place, says Thomas.

The priest walked away.

A pack of German girls slid through the hall, shouting to one another, taking pictures en masse without aiming their cameras, staring into the screens all the while, seeing the Louvre through their cameras, without flash. Thomas smiled at them, and as they approached, he realized they were speaking American English. Maybe they’re from Minneapolis, he frowned. Maybe they really are Germans. In Paris, in a place like the Louvre, everyone is functionally German. I am Otto von Bismarck.

Thomas wonders if Marsha prefers milkshakes or straight up ice cream.

Thomas stumbled upon a toddler holding a goose in headlock. A stream of people trickled past below them.

I am in disbelief, said Thomas. Man’s battle against nature begins as a playful romp, thought Thomas.

Thomas was alone with the child and goose, the roiling stream of people.

Thomas remembers awaking in the night to rain and the ticking of a clock. Several bibles were on the bedside table. He was somewhere in Mississippi, and it was
summertime. Now he is in a similar wooden room, but there is no Bible, just a few notebooks and crumpled museum maps.

Thomas reached to touch the child’s forehead, but someone in the stream of people shoved him and he joined the mass.

Thomas thought that maybe it would be fun to start a business called Child and Goose. Then he saw a pretty girl and forgot about that idea. Then he saw another pretty girl and forgot about the first one. Then he thought of Marsha and vomited just a little in his mouth.

Thomas leans back in his chair, and as it creaks, he thinks of when he finally came to the foot of Venus de Milo. He was nonplussed. His legs were stiff and he had trouble bending them. He hung out for half an hour, sitting, standing, leaning against the wall, bending over the barricade to get a closer view. He tried to become moved, to muster a feeling in his heart. He stared at where her arms should have been, tried to decide where her hands may have fallen, examined his own hands. He felt nothing.

Why can’t I feel anything?

Why am I still here?

I don’t even know where I’ve put my souvenirs.

Thomas stands up and stretches among the dust in the stale room. He opens the window to the rain, goes down the hall and buys a sandwich from the vending machine. Back in his room, he lies on the bed sheets. He listens to the Koreans fucking again. He wonders if Chichi would play some marimba, would drown out the sex noises from the
other side, but when he peeks through Chichi’s open door, he sees only a marimba and no man. He sits on Chichi’s bed and bangs out a rudimentary spattering of sonic dog shit.

That is my new definition of love, says Thomas.

No one is even around to challenge him.
Dead Tuesday, Caroline

There for the telling to, was Caroline, Tuesday. Caroline was primarily two things: a speech pathologist and a pathological speaker. Besides, she was a woman, a reader of fiction, a latherer of hand lotion, a masturbator, etc.

There for the asking of, was Robert, Tuesday. Robert wore a loose trench coat and acne. He had floppy ears and large sunglasses that were dark and kept slipping down his nose. They, the sunglasses, were of Italian hand making. The design and crafting of the nose had been biological. Robert was one thing primarily: not much, really. Besides, he was a man, a reader of newspapers, a masturbator, a bore, a drinker of small batch bourbon (as was the trend among young twenty-somethings at the time), etc.

There for the asking of and for the telling to, were Robert and Caroline (respectively), chewing burgers at the drugstore, noon, Tuesday. There was rain and low lighting outside. The tires of cars made noises on the street like the unzipping of plastic bags. Raindrops sounded something like the popping of packaging bubbles against the glass walls of the drug store.

Robert covered his mouth with a napkin as he grunted and chewed. His eyes were green and possessed the gift of analytical nuance. He pushed his sunglasses back up the bridge of his nose.

Well, said Robert, it isn’t your heart at all, actually. It’s a bunch of synapses in your brain responding to a social and a sexual impulse, both of which concern me, and the synapses just happen to cause a flutter in the chest area.
Robert pushed the sunglasses back up the bridge of his nose and drank coke through the straw, observing Caroline.

Caroline said, No shit? She ran a hand through her hair and leaned to her straw, toward the table. She shivered and dug her hands into her lap.

Robert, aren’t you such a delicate asshole? She said this in a small and powerful tone, delivered as though by a microscopic plebian hoard from the surface of the cheeseburger.

Robert shrugged his shoulders and decided to interpret the question as rhetorical. He put an amount of cheeseburger in his mouth and chewed.

Caroline placed her chin in her hand, which extended from a forearm from an elbow that was planted now on the surface of the table.

You aren’t so bad, are you, Robert, said Caroline, Tuesday.

A rectangle of light appeared on the table from a gap somewhere up in the clouds.

She gazed through the window, at the happenings on the other side of the window. A box truck was parked outside the liquor store across the street, and a bald man shuttled packages five at a time into the building. She could imagine how the man’s dolly must have squealed beneath the weight of all that booze. She thought of the cold, wet steel of which the dolly was almost certainly made, and the imperceptible cricket noises the rain likely made against it.

Robert turned his eye to the scene, peering over the rim of his sunglasses. He squinted at a particular package and muttered the name of its distillery, a distillery of which he approved. He initiated a game of footsies with Caroline and swallowed a gulp of processed meat.
Across the street, in the liquor store, the fat bald man released a stale puff of air as he sat on a padded stool. A lady led her dog around without a leash. The man followed her with his eyes. Then a scrawny old oaf dropped a half-gallon of vodka on the counter and grinned with his deteriorating gums.

All my life, I’ve had the unfortunate ability to smell the shit on people that festers beneath their deodorant, their perfume, cologne, said the fat bald man. It’s on every man and every woman, especially the elderly. It’s strong on you, sir.

The door closed behind the man, who wore a grin, and from his booth at the drugstore, Robert watched him climb into his car. It pulled out of the liquor store parking lot, nearly striking a fire hydrant, nearly striking a pedestrian, nearly striking another car. Then he pulled into the drugstore parking lot, into a spot by Robert and Caroline. Robert watched the bumper of the car jolt toward him as the tires rolled into the curb. The old man opened the car door and dragged himself to his feet. A soda jerk ran outside to help him.

Robert watched the creases in the old man’s skin flutter in the breeze and thought, what foul beast has providence brought my way? What an ugly old fool. There’s crusty spittle on his fleece jacket. And look at that pathetic teenager, helping him over the curb. He probably expects a tip, has been told to accept tips, and the corny fucker who owns this place has probably told him to refuse tips, and then probably winked at the kid as if to say, just kidding: I’m a helplessly corny son of a bitch. You couldn’t help me if you tried.

Robert, said Caroline, do you feel the same about me as I feel about you?

The footsies stopped.

I’ve been thinking a lot Caroline, said Robert.
You’re always thinking, aren’t you?

The answer to your question, to your questions, is indubitably yes. But we are mediocre-looking people. We have mediocre thoughts. We should kill each other via electrocution.

Why electrocution?

Don’t ask me that. It’s too good for you to ask me that.

Okay, Robert. She slurps from her milkshake. I am blinded by love for you. I will do as you please.

That’s what I’m talking about when I talk about mediocrity.

Meanwhile, the old man orders vicadin and erectile support pills from the pharmacy. The girl at the counter speaks to him as though he is a puppy. The old man hobbles back to his car as Robert draws a picture on a napkin to demonstrate how a closed circuit works.

Oh, says Caroline. I think this is a rather nice way to leave the earth together.

Robert says, that’s what I’m talking about when I talk about mediocrity.

In his car, the old man fumbles with his keys, looks for his seatbelt, gives up, puts the car in gear, the wrong gear, drops his foot on the accelerator, and smashes through the glass into Robert and Caroline, making messy corpses of them both.

Everyone in town is under the impression that Robert and Caroline were two budding flowers, cut down and sucked out in mid-bloom. People think of the event at the drugstore as a tragedy, and blame the old man for destroying innocence and youth. They
don’t know that Robert and Caroline were going to die, anyway, innocent and youthful as they were.

Let’s be honest, say the people. That gnarly old oaf had no business behind the wheel of a car in the first place.