

American Paranoid Restaurant

AMERICAN PARANOID RESTAURANT

Caleb Hildenbrandt

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Also by Caleb Hildenbrandt:

This Is Not the End

Life Is Fragile, Blah Blah Blah

American Paranoid Restaurant and other stories

Be admonished, my son: much study is a weariness to the flesh. Let us have a conclusion to the whole matter. In, out, gone and done.

Steve gestured at me:

“I’m gonna poop in his mouth when we’re done.”

“It’s true.” I said. “We discussed this previously.”

The woman Steve addressed stared on nonplussed. A cook at the periphery of the patio looked over and asked us which strain he was using.

““One-Hit Wonder.”” Steve told him, and made a toking gesture with his fingers.

The woman gazed impassively on.

“So how long have you been playing guitar?” The cook asked.

“Thirteen years.” Steve said, and hunched forward. He started to smile at the memory before his mouth froze and he sat, leaning over his lap and with a grin on his face. His head pivoted until he faced me, and then he let out a scream, shrieking in monotone without any change of facial expression from the tight, open-mouthed grin. I stared back at him until he stopped. He laughed and turned his head forward again,

this time easily and naturally.

“Since I was eight.” He said.

I had been sitting on the front patio with drink in hand. He had come out and sprawled in one of the rattan chairs, one foot on the edge of the table, the other against the railing surrounding the patio, pushing first against one, then the other, back and forth.

“Need to find some good weed,” he said.

“Eh?” I couldn’t hear over the roar of the traffic.

“Weed. Need to find some.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and cupped my hand to my ear apologetically.

He got up from his chair and sauntered over.

“Mar-i-jua-na.” He said, as if to a child.

“Sorry.”

He smiled easily and slouched back into his seat.

“Can you get some?” I asked.

He scrunched up his face and nodded in small oscillations, mouthing

“Oh yeah.”

We admired the women passing by. He worked at the bar. He lived down the street. His name was Steve. He had slept with half the women here. Did I want another drink?

“Sure.”

He picked up both my glass and his own and carried them inside. My drink came back before he did, carried by a girl I had seen there previously, who had mixed my drinks for me but who did not, I thought, yet recognize me. When Steve returned to the patio he asked what I thought of her.

“Not bad at all.”

“She likes it in the butt.”

“That a fact?”

“Yeah. I’ve slept with, like, half the people here. I *really* need to find some weed.”

Inside a group of women gathered at a table and spoke loud enough that Steve and I could hear them through the plate glass that separated them from us. One of the women bent over to pick her purse off the floor and her thin skirt moved across her body. The hem of tight underwear bifurcated each buttock, rendering her a quad-lobed Callipygos.

“She a dude?” Steve asked.

We both looked more closely. It was difficult to say. I recalled that in parts of the world there existed people groups in which a genetic mutation had resulted in a concentration of intersexuals sufficient to form their own fragile subculture. Perhaps the cleft chin and muscular back of the skirt-wearing person in front of me was nothing more than a genotypical

expression of an ethnicity-wide tendency toward androgyny and ambiguity.

“Look at that.”

A woman walked past us in a sleeveless yellow dress. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties, or early forties, but from the rear, as we now saw her, she could easily have passed for half the age that became apparent in a close examination of her eyes and hair.

“Yeah.”

“*Nice* ass.”

“It’s not bad.”

“I’ve slept with her too.”

I nodded, unsurprised.

“She’s director of HR,” he said, “and she smokes weed.”

“Ah.” I said.

“With the result that this *particular* wining-and-dining establishment--” He did a quick head-roll to emphasize his words “--is completely free of mandatory drug testing. If we did,” he added as an afterthought, “everyone in here would be fired.”

“I remember one of the waiters once saying something to the same effect.”

“Yup.”

It had been one morning when I had come in early for a cup of coffee. Behind the counter, two waiters poured themselves mimosas and the three of us settled down to the business of getting past nine o'clock without incident. Abruptly, another waiter wearing street clothes entered from the outside, swinging the door opening wildly and planting his hands on the counter to assist the hoisting of his legs over it.

“What's neeeewwww, guyees?”

I cannot recall the face of the man, but he may well have been Steve.

“Not much man.” The female waiter already behind the bar prepared him a mimosa. “What's new with you? Doesn't your shift not start for like another six hours?”

They began talking and laughing all at once and I stayed for a little while longer.

We both swiveled in our chairs before he spoke up again:

“Hey, wanna hear some really offensive jokes? What's wrong with microwaving a baby? I dunno man, but I just got a boner. What's the difference between a baby and an onion? No one cries when you cut up the baby. You wanna know what sucks about being a black Jew? You have to stand in the *back* of the gas chambers. What's brown and white and rolls around on the beach? A Mexican fighting over a chicken leg

with a seagull.”

Was he modulating the offensiveness of his jokes in a gradual *diminuendo*, the strident repulsiveness of his punchlines fading off like the brass-and-percussion tocsin of some 19th-century French symphony?

It was after this that he took me to the back room and the enclosed porch behind. We wove our way through the kitchens and pantries before reaching the fresh air and shade shared by the cook and the stolid woman, both dressed in the white, double-breasted jackets worn by chefs. When we left we wove through another series of rooms, this time private dining areas and what appeared to be quiet sitting rooms. They looked like perfect miniatures blown up to full-size, like reliquaries turned into chapels turned into cubbyholes, like dollhouse parlors from a hundred years ago, like boudoirs, like harems, like brothels.

“I’m going up to play in a few minutes.” Steve said.

He was alone with a guitar under the spotlight. The bartender who liked it in the butt stepped from behind the counter and began snapping pictures with a Polaroid. I wondered if he had directed her to bring out my drink solely so that I could put a face to a name as he described his

conquests.

Earlier he had emerged from the restroom, and, upon returning, had placed on the table behind his elbow and facing me a small white plastic box, smaller than a canister of film. I gestured and mouthed What's that? and he explained in elaborate pantomime that he had found it in the restroom. Later he dove beneath the table to hide the box, sliding it under one of the feet of the central pedestal, and I held his drinks to keep them from sloshing as I felt him move between my knees. Now he was on stage, singing, striking the guitar like he sought to scrape some offending layer of corrosion from its strings.

After he was done he asked me how I liked it.

"It was good, man, it was good."

"Really? Did you listen to it?"

"It was... it was some *Inexorable Combustion*, right?" I said, remembering what he had told me before he went up.

"And some *Great Divorce*?"

"Did you listen to the lyrics?"

I looked hard at him before gesturing expansively.

"I'm drunk, man."

"It's okay." He said. "Did people seem... into it?"

“Oh yeah,” I said, nodding my head in small oscillations. “They all definitely seemed into it.”

“Good, good. ‘Cause it’s not really the kind of stuff, you know, that goes with a place like this.”

He leaned in.

“The lyrics in the *Combustion* one were about getting eaten alive. You know, not the kind of thing these people listen to. They're not *aware*.”

“They were cool.” I said.

“Want some weed?”

“Sure.”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

I wandered around the bar. Jazz quartets and acoustic duos came and went. Steve was in and out, between the inner private rooms and the outer bar, which was filling to capacity. I watched the bartenders. The female would take two shakers, one in each hand, and raise them above her head to shake them, expertly, with nary a movement below the shoulders, but with just a bit of inexorable momentum transferred to her small breasts, setting them swaying. I wondered if all the female bartenders were instructed to shake the cocktail mixers

high above their heads. I watched the male bartenders but could never catch them preparing a drink in the same way. Also moving, like Steve, from room to room was the manager of HR, smiling at me when she saw me, smiling at everyone, at one point laying out several plates of *hors d'oeuvres* on a table at the edge of the room, in preparation for the movement of patrons that would accompany the end of the current band's set. She seemed, in her perfect hair and slim body, in the cheerful sexy modesty of her movements, the image of a 1950s housewife in a magazine advertisement for Frigidaires, brought improbably but refreshingly to life in the dim pot-lighting of a nineteen-nineties bar. If not revived from that era, she might at least have been preserved from it: the generation which had included thalidomide exquisites had now evolved into pickled specimens who had swallowed so many martinis and had had filled so many prescriptions for antidepressants that their smiles were permanently affixed in their skin, their crows' feet, forged in the fires of tanning salons, rendered iconic by Maybelline.

The band--a du-wop quintet with a keyboard simulation of a female chorus--acceded the stage to Eastern dancers who moved among the diners like strippers in full *jellabiyas*. They swayed in yards of cloth under the noses of embarrassed husbands and the younger, more appreciative girls. Under the

veil and headpiece of one I recognized the face of another of the bartender girls. As I stood at the periphery of the room I waited for her to approach, waited for her to make eye contact. The cloth across her derriere was flesh-colored, and underneath the strings of bells one might easily believe that there was nothing but skin.

I asked Steve what had been in the small white plastic box that he had hidden under the table.

“Found it in the bathroom.” He said.

“I know.”

I had this brave and sexual sense of immersion in a culture with which I had previously been on indifferent terms.

“What's in it?” I asked.

“Promise not to tell?” Steve said.

“I promise,” I said.

When I left the bar to check on things, I took to a back alley, believing it in its dark recesses to hold more promise than the lit streetfront in front of the bar. At the sight of a dog watering the sidewalk I was suddenly overcome with the need to urinate, and not willing to go back inside. There was a dumpster in the alley, a giant metal tank twenty-two feet long and taller than I. I approached it and unzipped, and then on a whim decided to stand on the lip, facing inward, watering whatever contents might be inside. Still unsteady on my feet,

I used the footholds in the outside to climb, those metal sleeves grasped by the pneumatic trucks that would come to collect. On top, I braced a foot on two adjacent sides, straddling the corner, and peered in, holding myself. When I heard the door of the business behind me swing open, I startled and fell headfirst into the blackness, still holding myself, then flailing, then bleeding, my face scraped by a wooden pallet propped up on the inside of the dumpster. I lay still, waiting for voices, waiting to be discovered by whoever had exited the building behind me. I looked around, on my hands and knees. The dumpster was nearly empty. The garbage had only recently been picked up. I crawled toward a plastic bag, then jerked back--what had appeared as the flat floor of the dumpster was in fact sawdust floating on a puddle of water that stretched all the way to the opposite wall. The plastic bag I was looking at was snagged on another wooden pallet, lying just above the waterline, and what appeared to be a pile of snapshots spilled from the stuffed plastic bag. It was difficult to see anything in the darkness--the only light came from the security lamp on the back of the building, twenty feet away, and, from my perspective, was almost entirely obscured by the high walls of the dumpster. I had forgotten about the voices outside. After standing up carefully, I waded through the puddle, my feet, then my ankles, submerged, crunching the

fine layer of silt I found lay beneath the sawdust-flaked water.

The photos stank. I don't know what chemical process occurs in the degradation of paper and silver halide, but the smell that came off the bag as I lifted it turned my stomach. Photos spilled out and I tried to catch them, but the bag ripped and the whole sloppy mess came out with a flop and a slopping sound as it landed on the wooden pallet. I turned and climbed from the dumpster as fast as I could.

The nature of the photos in the dumpster continued to haunt me for days thereafter. In my brief glimpse I had seen that they were Polaroids, faces and figures blurred and framed, colors muted by age and water. Some terrible secret had compelled the owner to throw them away—not tossing them in a desk-side wastepaper basket, not piled at the curb, but shoved down into a bag and hidden at the bottom of a dumpster in an alley. Perhaps it was the record of a failed marriage, a relationship turned so horrible that it could only be forgotten if all photographic traces were removed to an anonymous trash heap. I wondered if it was child porn. Or compulsively-taken shots documenting a grisly murder. Torture scenes, lying waiting in a rusty dumpster for someone else to come and take upon themselves the incriminating evidence.

For days the question of the Polaroids recurred to me, and I found myself returning to the dumpster by daylight, once again climbing up the side and now coming down, more gently this time, gingerly on the even-wetter detritus. The photos were still there. I picked them up one by one—some had blown away, were now hidden under crates and creaking, precarious piles of twisted metal and wood. I reached in, through, under the groaning tangles and extracted wet photos on my fingertips.

The album, sopping and falling apart at the hinges, bulged with mementos, ribbons and papers and inserts, a string of beads, undeveloped negatives. Pages limply succumbed to gravity and dropped from the binding as I stood up. I turned to the album's first page and started moving forward. There were pictures of a prom, of cars in driveways and football games, a graduation, hospital beds. There was a school play and home medical equipment. Someone ate Thanksgiving dinner. There was a birthday in a white room.

I got braces when I turned eleven. I was outfitted the day after my birthday, not unlike some modern rite of passage, a bodily modification designed to make me acceptable in adult society. Sitting in the waiting room alone except for my mother, I watched a ceiling-mounted television broadcasting

music videos.

There on the screen was something new, something never before encountered and dangerous, a woman earnestly entreating the listener to kiss her. It was “Kisses, Please,” by *Great Divorce*, from their third album, *An End to Metaphor*. In the video, the frontwoman, singing softly, compellingly, sat on a bench with four men, looking at each in turn, as if she wanted to be kissed not only by the listener but her bandmates as well. My mother made a comment and I was appropriately horrified at the license implied by the dulcet voice hovering up near the ceiling. The receptionist, hearing the comment, came out from behind her counter and changed the channel to the news.

Five years later a cousin would burn me a copy of *An End to Metaphor*, and I would painstakingly copy the titles from the back of her disc onto a piece of paper that I slipped into the blank jewel case that held the pirated music. The title of the fourth track did not elicit my interest, but when the gentle guitar strumming bloomed from the speakers of my headphones I was thunderingly transported back to that waiting room on the early edge of puberty, seeing now only dimly and blurred the mouth and hair of the angelic chanteuse but hearing her voice in full and pellucid volume.

I was shocked. The utter license and explicitness of

passion that I had heard five years before was now merely sweet, the harmonious and quaint way of children together, of innocence and love and guileless attraction in equal measure. A few years later I was to look up the video on the Internet, to find that the peculiar moral plaisance so recently discovered was not an artifact of hearing the song in isolation, but permeated the video as well.

Five years after that, on an amateur porn site, perusing videos of doughy young couples in harried and imitative coitus, of unbelievably vocal masturbators and young girls grinding in their bedrooms to distortingly over-loud rap dubs, I clicked on “1967_stip-and-dance-on-the-cam-wildly.mpeg.” The video began with the girl leaned over the camera, simultaneously pressing “record” on a laptop and “play” on some unseen boombox, and as she stepped back I heard, sweetly shockingly thrillingly, the opening guitar strumming, the softly syncopated snare and kick drums, the flowing liquid voice of the woman who all those years before had seemed to me an unparalleled specimen of unbridled sexuality. The girl in front of me peeled off a jacket, swayed gently, reached down, and lifted the hem of a baggy sweatshirt. Up came the flesh, the midsection, the white brassiere--and her arms were over her head, the shirt was off and dropped gently from an extended arm to the floor below. She moved, her waist

describing perfect circles in an acceleration, a deceleration, an acceleration, a deceleration, a throbbing of radial motion. Her arms were up again and all was white, white everywhere, except her eyes, large, and hair, dark, now lifted in her hands, now loosed, now falling around her shoulders. Still she continued to move, and then reached down, a hand on each side of her fly, then peeling off, down, down--she had it down to her knees, and bent, her poise faltering just a little as she tried to maintain balance and keep the flesh of her stomach smooth as her body curved, fell to a position horizontal to the viewer, her eyes, though, never leaving for a moment mine. The pants were off and delicately discarded, and the motion began again, and still the voice of that female vocalist mewed and trilled, singing what I and what the girl in front of me so dearly wanted, so badly--and here were the straps of her brassiere, held by finger tips, and here the shoulders, and here the frozen frame and an offer to subscribe for 19.95 a month for full and unmetered access. It didn't matter. I had come, achingly and emotionally, long before, when she had given her hair an extra little swing in conjunction with an especially sweet inflection in the song. I sat now and stared, unbelieving of how I had gotten here.

“For here or to go?” She asked.

“For here,” I said, and she left off the lid to my styrofoam cup.

Cash only and no receipt, unsmiling, hairnet, and the tiniest fleck of cigarette ash on the lip of my cup. The counter is surrounded by stools that have been hijacked from a bar and dressed up in pleather circus costumes, sitting and gleaming on too-wide posts, upholstered in red and blue. There is bunting in the windows and there are pictures of sad clowns on the wall. These thrift-store oils have been here since 1975--I can tell by the fading and the way these walls have accepted the frames as extensions of themselves, in the way that a tree will absorb a nail driven into it senselessly.

The coffee is burnt and bitter and the doughnut is impossibly light and fluffy.

Dancers exit from the strip club next to us and I see through the front windows that they all enter a single car. The old woman begins to sing from a back room and I wonder if she has forgotten that I am here. Eventually she emerges pushing a cart taller than she, trays of doughnuts one above the next, almost to the ceiling. She puts them in the glass display case at the front and I ask,

“You make your own doughnuts?”

“Huh?”

“You make your own doughnuts?”

“Oh yeah,” she says, scrunching up her face and nodding in small oscillations.

“Not everyone does.” I say, by way of explanation.

“That’s the truth,” she says, and disappears into the back. She emerges a few moments later.

“We actually supply the doughnuts for a lot of places around here. The coffee shops, businesses, the college.”

“Huh.”

“Would you like more coffee?” She asks.

“I’m good,” I say.

Two men walk in, talking loudly.

“—what the market *doesn't* yet have is a truly *American* Chinese fortune cookie—one reflecting real American tastes and proclivities--”

“I’m with you one-hundred-percent, but I think what we can really boil that down to mean here is that we need a cookie that addresses the consumer directly—an individualized cookie--”

““A Fortune Cookie Made for *You!*””

“Exactly!”

They bite eagerly into doughnuts and continue talking about market shares and infrastructure costs. I take another sip of bitter coffee.

There is a poet who stands outside of bars offering his poetry to passersby. A friend at Kinko's gave him a numerical passkey to the copier, and his stack of hand-written sheets have been facsimiled into a kind of digital leprosy, spotty with reproduction and ink blots. He writes in the cursive they taught in southern schools in 1967, a loopyness unlined and unsmoothed and falling across the page and careful. He gives these poems away and will read them on request. He doesn't drink and he rises at three in the morning. He claims there is inspiration in the quiet post-bar-closing-time, that dawn in empty streets is good for his lines, but I suspect it is the cough and cancer in his lungs that prompts him to keep these hours. I've caught him unaware, checking his appearance in the cardboard-backed glass of an abandoned business. He prides himself on the darkness of his blue jeans, on the cleanliness of his long white straight hair. He drinks Pepsi and rises at three in the morning. When I hug him I feel his bones.

The poster shows a retro television, a hamburger on its screen and a halo hovering between its antennae. I go in. At the bar a girl wearing a tee shirt with something clever across the front looks directly at me and asks.

“Do you know the PBR game?” She says. “Every cap has a card symbol--like, the seven of diamonds--on the

underside. If you can guess it your beer's free."

The music was so loud I ask her to repeat.

"Three of clubs," I say.

She twists off the cap and showed me the seven of diamonds underneath.

I look closer at her chest and cannot tell if what's written there is a joke or an advertising slogan for some kind of medication. A woman behind me is speaking now.

"I'm, um... I forgot what it is I usually order here..."

I turn around and see her squinting at the beer taps.

"Oh! An IPA. That's it!"

"I'll have a Diet Coke," her husband says.

"Leave it open or close it?" The girl asks.

"Um... go ahead and close it up!" The husband says, in an unreasonably affable tone. At a look from his wife he calls back,

"Oh, never mind! Leave it open!"

The wife smiles playfully and looks at me.

Things are better at the front. You can always tell which girl in the crowd is dating the singer. She always stands close to the stage, dancing, a slow swaying in which her head bobs and hands glide, over hips, palms open and fingers splayed, every smooth thing about it a nod to the shattering blows of music. The music increased in volume until I was unsure if it

was the pounding of the drums or dancing of the girl in front of me that caused the felt vibration in my genitals. On the porch, two men:

“So I says, so--listen--something simple, see? Something really, real simple. A couple sandwiches, just your basic--yeah, turkey, beef, maybe we throw in a vegetarian, pork, yeah, a couple soups, a couple sandwiches. But what’m saying is, keep it simple, ya know?”

This man wears a tracksuit and holds a bottle of Peroni. His hair is short, stands up, is brushed back, grey and black. Age has set his nasal bridge into promontory and recess, his eyes pulling back the profile while the rest juts out.

“And look--there’s nothing wrong with the pre-ordered soup. *One time*, that one time he ordered the pre-ordered soup--”

He holds up his hands, palms out, fingers splayed, as if he were a magician revealing a sudden absence--

“Sold out. Completely sold out in the first two hours. So I’m just saying. Why don’t we. You know, hey? That’s my plan.”

I go back to the bar. There's a different girl there now. Do you know the PBR game? She asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Three of clubs.”

She twists off the cap and shows me the underside. I

squint in the dim light.

“Oh well,” I say, unsure of what I'd just seen.

She tosses the cap into the garbage can at the back of the bar and it bounces off the rim, falling to the floor.

The music ends with a crash of chords that sound as if the sky is being rolled back, revealing something else new and unfathomable in its stead. Everybody is cheering and we are suddenly surrounded in a hail of little slips of paper, white rectangles half the size of my finger, like outsize confetti. I grab one as it descends, stilling the flutter by crushing it in my hand. When I open it I see writing. It is dark in the bar and the writing is too small for me to read. On the back there is a slogan of the manufacturer, written larger, sufficiently bold that I can make it out in the dimness: “A Fortune Cookie Make For *You!*”

“Listen. You guys rocked so. *Fucking. Hard. Listen to me.* I've always been, I've always regretted being born too late for the Inexorable Combustion of '67. And after tonight's show, I regret--”

“Thanks man, thanks, it--”

“Hey man! Hey man!”

A man walks toward them with a megaphone in one hand and a black book in the other.

“My man! What're you doing out here?”

“Just, uh, just enjoying the music. My friend here was playing. It--”

“No, hey, come on, come on out here with me man, we're witnessing!”

“Look, I think--not right--”

“What's the matter?” He raises his bullhorn to his mouth and continues: “THE LORD IS NOT SLACK CONCERNING HIS PROMISE, AS SOME MEN COUNT SLACKNESS; BUT IS LONGSUFFERING TOWARD US, NOT WILLING THAT ANY SHOULD PERISH--”

Noise is a symbol of our collusion with our own destruction. A death-wish in sound. Not for nothing do people warn of the dangers of rock and roll, but the doctors have mistaken cause for symptom.

“--BUT THAT ALL SHOULD COME TO REPENTANCE. BUT THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME AS A THIEF IN THE NIGHT--”

Scientists have been monitoring the background radiation of the universe for clues to our origins. The entire spectrum of electromagnetic waves is being funneled into antenna dishes and underground catch basins for space-borne particles of

unimaginable strength and velocity. These hums and oscillations of the stars are echoes, reminders of the explosion from which we and space have been born.

“--IN WHICH THE HEAVENS SHALL PASS AWAY WITH A GREAT NOISE--”

“Now I—now I might be going through some shit, but I still *believe* in that motherfucker!”

Two men in fedoras and pinstriped suits argue beside us.

“You believe—you believe—you *believe*--”

“I believe there's an overall plan! There's an--”

“You don't believe *shit*. All this, all this, all this is just you tryina make some sense outta a lot of B.S. that's been thrown your way--”

“But I still believe--”

“Get this, get this, get this—there may be a god, but why you think he's messin' about you?”

“Well, he may not be layin' it all out before me because that's why *faith*--”

“Listen man, listen man, you know the bible? You think thas still a good way to get around here?”

“Yeah man!”

“Well hey, well hey, well tell me this: how did Adam's

sons procreate?”

“How?”

“Yeah man, look, there's this whole brand new world, right? God made man, made Adam, took out a rib and made Eve, they had kids, and these kids had kids—where you thinkin' these kids came from? How they have their kids? Clearly they fucked their mother.”

“Well, now--”

“Clearly they fucked their mother. Where else they gonna find a lady to fuck?”

Procreation is essentially a death-wish as well. The squicking squicking slapping moaning sounds of sex are nothing more than a form of white noise, a hymn to entropy and an acknowledgment that reproduction is both futile and detrimental.

“--AND THE ELEMENTS SHALL MELT WITH FERVENT HEAT--”

The scientists will collect all, the frequencies and timbres and volumes, and place each note in its place according to its voice and provenance in some desperate bid to take the noise of the universe and reduce from it some systemic pattern of information. There are periodic variations and regular

perturbations--pulses. Beats. A tempo. Overlaps of frequencies—like chords. When we have assembled the song sung by the universe we will know its heartbeat--and when we have triangulated all the sources of radiation--we will know its heart. There will be no more noise, no more random data.

“--AND THE EARTH ALSO AND THE WORKS THAT ARE THEREIN SHALL BE BURNED UP.”

When I leave the show I pass a storefront church, a two-story brick building in a contiguous block of buildings lining this deserted street. There is no indication that it is, in fact, a church, aside from the colored bricks forming two crosses on the upper story, flanking a broad, barred window. There is not, at street level, a plate-glass window given over from displays of hardware and lawn furniture to a painted simulacra of a carnival banner rendering the words “Victory Temple” or some such, as is so often the case in these sorts of churches. In fact I do not even recognize it as a church until I am frozen in place by the sound of a hymn coming from the sky over my head, four-four meter belted out with organ and electric guitar and the voice of a single throaty man in place of the (customary) big-tent congregation. When I look around me there is nothing, there is no one, and the windows in the

church are dark. At the boundary of the first and second stories there is a metal bracket bolted in to the brick and mortar, and on it a single all-weather speaker affixed (duct tape, chains) and wired via cables passing from it to the single barred window on the upper level. It pours out into the night.

No one in this doughnut shop speaks my language, and I love it. The sports team decals in the window have been replaced by Halloween decorations. There are ghosts, witches, a wolfman, which upon closer examination resolve into the images of children dressed as ghosts, witches, and a wolfman, holding their pillowcases in front of them, eager to receive, eager to eat. I take another bite of my doughnut.

Three men come in wearing ties and talk to the woman behind the counter about price protection, something about a rate hike for electricity.

The radio plays a seamless stream of oldies, one familiar sound blending into the next in a way that does not disturb our slumber but corresponds with our own internal recollections of what the world was and should be.

“Can you give me a ride up the gas station?”

“Sure,” I say. “Get in.”

He explains on the way up about gas in wartime and

poison in the blood. I'm not sure which war he's talking about. Was this the one with the bomb? Or was it just a lot of people on the ground, crawling around in jungles and blowing up cars and hospitals? His feet swell now, he says. He's going to try to get a little breakfast at the station. When we pull up he asks for money and I hand it over.

“Listen,” he says. “I don't know if you're a religious man, but pull out a Bible sometime and take a look. Just read it. I'm not a preacher or anything, but it's all happening now. Keep an eye out and you'll see it.”

I know he's telling the truth, so I thank him and hand him another dollar. He thanks me again and walks past the automatic doors of the station, heading toward warming counter where hot dogs turn on greased rollers. There is a sign for lotto in the window.

There it is, the neon sign glowing redly ten feet above the sidewalk, block letters sans-serif, bold as hell and like a credo or command.

AMERICAN. PARANOID. RESTAURANT.

When I pass under it I see the neon reflected in the puddled water by the curb, in the block glass that stands on either side of the door. I take my seat in a corner and a waitress walks toward me. I order and she leaves, a sheaf of

straws cutting back and forth in space as they are held in the left back pocket of her retreating pants. The room is dim and the damp of the surrounding street pervades the glasses on the table, the bulbs in the lamp over my head, the paper napkins under my wrist. When the waitress comes back I ask.

“What's the story behind this place's name?”

“Huh?”

“*American Paranoid Restaurant*. Why is it called that?”

“Um, this is”

I cannot hear her.

“Is what?” I ask, cupping my hand to my ear and leaning in, as if we are in a crush of noise and I must pantomime my need for her to shout. In reality there is nothing to be heard but the tinkling of silverware on plates.

“We're”

It sounds like she says ValuEets, or something like that.
Happy Meat.

“What?” I ask.

There is no sound. A plate is placed in front of me and I begin to eat.

It is dark when I leave. I stand on the sidewalk outside, leaning against the wall. A man in a long fur robe is strolling the streets, carrying a cane surmounted by an affixed goblet

encrusted with plastic rhinestones. His hat, his glasses, his shoes, his pants, are snakeskin and pin-striped polyester and neon green and purple and black and the feather in his hat is impossibly long and improbably died.

“Ey yeah! Hey yeah over there! You know pimpin's tough man!”

A man thrusts both his muscled arms over the wrought iron fence surrounding the porch of a bar, threatening to snag the sleeves of his polo shirt on the metal tips.

“Hard out here for a pimp!” He yells.

The robed man approaches and lifts his cane in silent greeting.

“Crissy! Crissy! Come here!” Inside the fence a cluster of girls loosens to admit a single member to approach the perimeter of the porch--

“Bret--”

He keeps one hand grasping the metal bars of the fence, as if afraid to let go of his place there and, by extension, of the vision in front of him.

“Crissy, come here and get a picture!” He is nearly shaking in excitement.

The pimp awkwardly places his arm over the fence to put it as well as he can around the shoulders of the man inside. They both grin at a cellphone.

“Awesome!”

Arms retract across the fence to respective sides and faces turn back to each other.

“Thanks man.” A five dollar bill crosses folded between the bars.

There is a thriftstore downtown, swarmed by the poor and the chic. They spread through the aisles and call back and forth like a flock of birds descended on a field. They are not unlike like birds, in their bright plumage of oversize sunglasses and scarves and fingerless gloves, in the drapery of tatters that follows behind them like the tails of exotic *paradisaea*, in their wheelchairs, legless, *apoda*. The store is open late in a desperate bid for sustenance, staffed eighty-two hours out of the week by minimum-wage dry-drunks and grown-up crackbabies, but it is nearly empty by seven-thirty, and the poor have fled, leaving only highschoolers with brand-new drivers' licenses and vintage jeans. I noticed it a few minutes after coming in, the way they called back and forth, holding up garish sweaters and checkered blouses over the aisles for each other to see, with voices whose intent I could not discern--they trod the line between enthusiasm and irony so well, back and forth, across the racks and bins.

When I went to check out, the cashier smiled, her mouth

garnished with subtle traces of fetal alcohol exposure. A half dozen hipsters came up behind me and began trying on outlandish sunglasses from the rack next to the check-out counter.

“Hai!” said the cashier, dropping what she was doing and waving from the wrist at the teenagers now outfitted in shades of previous decades.

“Hi, Rosie!” said one of the girls, taking off her glasses and grinning broadly. “How you doin’?”

“Good! I’m getting’ off inna hour!”

“Good!” said the girl, still grinning and maintaining relentless eye contact, holding the glasses in front of her by gripping both earpieces. A man with a tallboy poking from his jacket pocket stands behind her. He coughs. The others have stopped talking and are looking to Rosie as well. “Have fun!”

“Oh, I will!” said Rosie, who faced again the cash register and picked up where she left off.

The kids went back to trying on pairs of glasses and resumed their talking, enthusiasm and irony, back and forth. The man moved forward and dropped three crumpled bills on the counter. Under his arm he carried a waffle iron, its mouth held shut by packing tape.

There is a show on TV about scientists with a talk show, psychologists and doctors who have circumvented the ethical restrictions of their professions by donning lapel mics and business-casual suits. A question is posed and answered by willing participants who have been fully informed off-screen of risks and liabilities. An experiment is arranged—How Much Can A Mother Stand? What Would You Buy? How Do You Know You're Crazy?—I scroll through menus detailing the distilled drama of the past few weeks. How Do Children Hate? Eat Your Heart Out. Who Are You When You're Alone? It is the pursuit of truth, unsullied by red tape and bureaucracy. It is spectacular.

A doctor wishes to know how many arms can be appended to a human torso. Jackie Mulleon of Des Moines, Iowa wants to know the same. An operating theater is quickly outfitted with cameras and microphones. Apoca-Lips Now. Something Fishy. The Winged Nikki of Boniface. A Man's Best Friend. One for the Monkey, Two for the Show. Toe-tally Amazing. I am enthralled. I click “Buy all.” Mankind is at last master of itself.

A chemist wonders. A TV deal is signed. Astrobiology has questions. The willing crowd has in its soul the answer. A psychologist proposes a theory. The studio audience offers to test it. A physicist wonders about the harmonic frequencies

of the cosmos. A switch is thrown and spotlights shine across an atom-smasher that spans entire countries. And now a word from our sponsors.

Between a television and a broken automatic wine-bottle opener I find a used photo album. You are not, I think, supposed to take these at thriftstores—the cellophane has been sleeved back over the covers, the imitation leather clothed now in the remnants of shrinkwrap. Someone has saved the wrapper from their initial purchase and re-wrapped the book in order that the mindless clerk would fold into the inventory this already-sullied archive. I take the wrapper fully off and flip through the book. There are pictures of a prom, of cars in driveways and football games on television, a graduation, hospital beds. There is a school play and home medical equipment. Someone eating Thanksgiving dinner. Someone having a birthday in a white room.

I buy the album and carry it outside. The poet is there.

“Hey man,” he asks. “Wanna hear a poem?”

“Sure.” I say.

He is already standing impossibly erect, but he straightens and stiffens yet more and extends one arm to hold the poem in the middle distance, although he has it (I know) already memorized. He reads.

“That a photo album you got?” He asks when finished.

“Yes.” I say. “From there.” I gesture behind me at the store I have just exited. “It already has photos in it.” I explain.

“Huh.” He is unimpressed. “Hey man, wanna hear a poem?” He calls out to a passerby.

“I think they might be stock photos,” I say. “Although why you would fill an entire album with stock photos is beyond me.”

“Excuse me, sir, would you like to hear--”

“They don't look like stock photos, either.” I add. “They look like bad polaroids. Who even uses polaroids any more? Maybe they're trying to appeal to some kind of trendy customer that still looks back on that kind of thing with a certain nostalgia?”

“Hey man, I hate to ask, but can you help me out a lil' bit?”

I realize he is talking to me.

“Yeah,” I say. “You had lunch yet?”

“Nope.”

“Let's go,” I say. I see block letters in neon glinting through the gaps between the buildings across the street, red like hell and stamping out a credo or command.

On Saturday nights the well-dressed women will come

out on the arms of slightly less-well-dressed men, ambivalent regarding this neighborhood but hoping for a touch of bohemia transcending the staid consumption of the Tennis Club and tapas bars. The men will not care about the man who tells them he is a poet, but the women will try to pay polite attention until it becomes unbearable. Later, after they have slipped away, they will stand at streetside jazz performances, the women at the periphery and back of the crowd swaying slightly in order to convince themselves that they are still young, shimmying to the sounds made by the saxophonist, their eyes half-closed, and their husbands will stand behind them and place their fingertips on their wives' waists in an attempt to convince themselves that they still are with them, that they are still part of the music and the passion they actually believe to be motivating the motion of their wives' bodies. They will pretend to not be confused by the young people around them snapping polaroids and listening to the band while wearing headphones. Someone in outlandish sunglasses from a thriftstore will snap their picture and it will end up in a photo album which will then be disposed of in some unlikely location and/or fashion.

“I got blood poisoning in the war,” he says. “From the gas.”

“Wait, what?” I say.

He takes another bite before responding.

“Back in the war. That's why m'eyes hurt.”

“Which war was this?” I ask.

“The war. I think I need a box for this. I'm full.”

I motion a waitress over and she brings us a styrofoam box. As he puts the sandwich in I glance over his head at the television mounted to the wall, the volume down but the shine of the screen unavoidable in the dim restaurant. A scientist has received a signal from space, using an array of antenna dishes straining for faint whispers of space that turn out to be a message. The newscaster asks keenly what this means for the viewers at home. A congressional hearing is being called. There is protesting in the streets. We are urged to be calm. The message turns out to be a song. It is a summons, says the crawl at the bottom of the screen. NASA has sent a probe to investigate, and now is sending an entire crew. As their ship approaches, a great blackness fills the screen and the waitress sets down the check. I realize that is is not the news but a movie that I have been watching. I don't know how much time has passed, but the poet is only now closing the box that holds his fragments of food which he will save for later.

“Do you need a ride?” I ask.

“I'm good,” he says. “Thanks.”

I am watching a documentary on famous television commercials that have gone horribly wrong. There is an ad for men's hair product that featured a model so closely resembling a little girl's deceased father that she suffered a nervous breakdown in the waiting room of the school's guidance counselor where the TV was playing. There is a man who committed suicide after a particularly poignant public service announcement about the importance of colorectal exams. One time a foreign-exchange student became so enamored of a specific brand of burger, advertised daily on the TV in his dorm's common room, that he refused to eat anything else and died from constipation.

The doughnut is impossibly light and fluffy. It runs round and round, coating my fingers as they pierce, my tongue as it explores. It is safe and warm. A televangelist is on the radio.

WHO COULD HAVE KNOWN THAT WE WOULD ADDRESS THE WHORE OF BABYLON AS MOTHER?

In January of 1989, a mentally deranged man named Kenneth Lamar Noid held up a Domino's Pizza restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia, demanding one hundred thousand dollars, a pizza, a getaway helicopter, and a copy of Robert Anton Wilson's *Illuminatus Trilogy*. He believed himself to be in an ongoing battle of wills with Thomas Monaghan, the founder

of the Domino's chain. As he held the two employees on duty at gunpoint, Noid explained that Monaghan had repeatedly entered his (Noid's) house in order to gather information. This stolen intelligence had resulted, according to Noid, in the creation of The Noid, an anti-mascot used by Domino's to advertise their pizza (the Noid was depicted in the ads as responsible for the cooling of pizza, a phenomenon which could be prevented via Domino's then-exclusive foil-lined pizza-transport delivery packaging). In the twenty-three minutes it took for police to arrive and arrest Noid, he been served and had consumed nearly half of the pizza he had demanded of the employees, while explaining that The Noid was a deliberate attempt to defame and ridicule him.

Someone changes the radio and it plays a stream of oldies I do not recognize.

Steve walked into the room.

“Hey man! Haven't seen you in a while.”

“Nope.”

“This is my friend.”

“Hi there.”

I shook his hand.

“Eduardo.” He said.

“Nice to meet you.”

“He's a filmmaker,” said Steve. “Documentaries and stuff.”

“Cool,” I said. “What on?”

“Nothing much, man.”

“No, I mean, what are the documentaries about?” I looked at Eduardo.

“I'm doing one now in a series on fringe religious leaders,” he said.

I looked across the street at a fast food restaurant. There was an ambulance outside the drivethrough. There was a body in the back and there were horrified patrons inside, watching through the windows of one wall the lights and men in uniform.

Later, at home, I turned on the radio and heard a televangelist exhorting me, his flock of one:

HEAR ME AND UNDERSTAND: NOT THAT WHICH GOETH INTO THE MOUTH DEFILETH A MAN, BUT THAT WHICH COMETH OUT OF THE MOUTH DEFILETH HIM.

I left the radio on and walked into my living room, turning on my TV and tuning the channel to the news. The man at the fast-food restaurant had been taken in for a heart attack, stopped dead (although not quite literally) in the middle of a double-melted patty fry. When emergency

services arrived on the scene, the manager had already begun to reassure the other patrons and was attempting to persuade them to continue eating, even as the myocardially infarcted customer began vomiting, coughing around the food, his sweat running down his forehead and mingling with the ejecta on his chin. It was his third heart attack, the second this year. The doctor advised him to follow a careful exercise regimen and prescribed nitroglycerin pills to be taken nightly, both of which were refused. I realize again that the news anchors have said none of this. I am watching a medical drama and my food is growing cool, congealing on the plate I hold in my hand as I stand in the doorway to my living room watching television.

Thursdays are blue-sticker days at the thrift store. Any item carrying a dark blue adhesive dot is automatically twenty-five percent off its already low, low price. A woman gathers bunches of artificial flowers from a bin.

“I can't believe people would just toss these out!” She says.

“Yeah,” I say. “It's terrible.”

“Terrible! There's a lot of wear left in these!”

“Yes.” I say. “A lot.”

“I teach a class.” She says.

I turn and rummage through some VHS tapes.

“First and third Sundays. That's why I buy so many.”

“So many flowers.” I clarify.

“I teach a class on memorializing.”

Someone has donated an entire series run of a sitcom from a previous decade. I do not own a VHS player.

“Memorializing what?” I ask.

“The departed.” She says. “I teach people how to decorate graveside.” She pauses as she weighs the relative merits of two different sprays of silk asters, before putting both in her basket. “There's a technique, you know.”

“I should think so.” I say.

“Quite a bit of technique.”

There is a jazz quintet performing in the street, a du-wop number with a keyboard simulation of a female chorus. People have come out of nearby restaurants and bars to listen, white napkins still in hand, glasses of wine still held in tentative grasp. They are middle-aged and content and mostly attentive, the women swaying appreciatively and the men watching dutifully, their cellphones pocketed for the most part and their coats left on chairs inside, as if they trust both to the brevity of this event and in their own ability to quote unquote roll with it. The faces of the women are tired. I can see, in the

way they shift their weight in high heeled shoes, that they are contemplating the extent to which they can stretch out this dinner by engaging with happenstance and otherwise-ignorable events, and by so doing delay the moment at which they arrive home and relieve the babysitter of her duties, going upstairs to undress only to be greeted with the sound of all-too-easily reawakened children. They take another sip of wine. I remember reading in the paper today about a lawsuit between rival wine manufacturers over conflicting labeling, the bottler of “Mommytime Merlot” insisting that the nomenclature of the cab sav sold as “Margaux for Mommies” was in direct and deliberate infringement. The case was ultimately thrown out upon the determination of the judge that mommy-themed wines had so proliferated throughout the market that the term no longer possessed distinction in any form, and such trifling similarities as had been brought to case were insufficient for prosecution. I see Eduardo on the far side of the crowd, so I walk over.

“What's up?” I ask, not sure if he recognizes me.

“Hey, man, what's up? Great stuff, huh?” He nods at the quintet. The two saxophonists are facing each other, bobbing and swaying as if in some elaborate mating ritual which will ultimately end with their horns linked at the bowls and mouthpieces in a brassy coitus.

“I was taking a walk.” I say.

“I was eating at that new place over there where they serve your food to you with a picture of the animal it came from.”

“I see.” I say.

“Yeah, it's part of this whole omnivore-consciousness movement. 'Be aware of your fare.' That kind of thing.”

“Be aware of your fare.”

“Yeah, exactly, like—god, that was a great riff right there—that saxophonist's really killing it—it's like, here's the face of what you're eating. Here's this cow or chicken or whatever staring you in the eyes as it sits on the end of your fork. Really promotes awareness.”

“That saxophonist really *is* killing it,” I agree. “Yeah, awareness. I get you.”

We listen more. The men who were first to arrive on the scene have begun to put their arms around their wives as a preparatory move to ushering them back inside to finish dining.

“This looks like it's winding down,” Eduardo says. “You wanna come back to my place?”

Eduardo's apartment sits atop a two-story bar across and down the street on which we were standing. Inside are posters

of films of which I have never heard. In the middle of the room there is what was known in my parents' decade as a "conversation pit." It is lined with shag rugs. It is a little clichéd, I think.

"This used to be a sex club." Eduardo says. "Ever heard of *Touches*?"

I have not.

"Absolutely no life left in this town."

This, too, strikes me as something I've heard before, in a movie or a play performed by college students.

Eduardo lights a cigarette and picks a piece of fruit from a bowl on the low table in the middle of the pit.

"There was this guy," he says, "who lived off sunlight and berries. Or sunlight and his own piss, I forget which. One of my documentary friends in South America made a documentary about him."

He looks contemplatively at the skinny cigarette in his hand.

"I wish I could live off smoke," he says.

Unlike the ill-fated Dominos ad campaign featuring The Noid, the contemporaneous "Where's the Beef?" promotion by hamburger-chain Wendy's revolved around personal indignation and consumerist outrage, rather than attempts at

frustration of unmeditated villainy. In the Wendy's ads, whose catchphrase far surpassed the Dominos credo of "Avoid the Noid" in terms of populist appeal, a group of three elderly women inspected a large hamburger provided by a fictional restaurant chain. While two of the women remarked on the girth of the bun supporting the all-important hamburger patty, the third angrily demanded to know "where's the beef?!" This manifestation of outrage was carried over in subsequent television spots featuring the third woman yelling at drive-through windows and at a hamburger executive as he relaxed on his yacht. The import of these advertisements is unmistakable, in that they condition the viewer to expect amounts of beef whose quantity is never specified but is implied to surpass anything the viewer has yet witnessed, or at any rate anything the viewer might reasonably be expected to be offered at competing hamburger-restaurant chains. While the Dominos promotion encouraged the viewer to contemplate the possibility of nefarious forces beyond their control, the Wendy's campaign turned the focus inward on personal gratification and left the supposed "evil" to be defeated undefined and faceless, conceived only as a lack rather than an active negative force. The ultimate demise of the "Where's the Beef?" campaign came not in the form of aberrant public reaction but in the betrayal of the actor who uttered the critical

phrase, who agreed to advertise for Prego pasta sauce with the claim that she had finally “found the beef.” Wendy's subsequently terminated the actress's contract, claiming that her performance implied that she had “found the beef at somewhere other than Wendy's restaurants,” clarifying that the actress was permitted to “find the beef in only one place, and that is Wendy's.” The difference between the two chains is ultimately one of possession versus observation; note even the difference in the names of the restaurants, with the possessive apostrophe in “Wendy's” lending the franchise an atmosphere of ownership and entitlement, while the image presented by “Dominos” suggests patterns, cause and effect, and chain reactions.

I inspect the flowers closely. They are held together with brown pipecleaners, those bits of wire wrapped in abrasive fibers long since surpassed in use by children than by men, the stuff of day-care arts-and-crafts rather than meerschauts and custom blends. The arrangement is held down with grey duct tape, the better to blend with stone.

I step back to admire the entire scene. There is, as she said, quite a bit of technique. Those headstones in sandy or coral shades are given strips of masking tape, while the more common grey granite receives, as I said, duct tape. The rarer

red granite is given bits of matching red electrician's adhesive. There is a wisdom and foresight in the use of brown pipecleaners—a novice might well choose to use green in order to match the stems, but the person responsible for this arrangement--all-too-well acquainted, it would appear, with death—has anticipated the demise of these flowers and chosen a brown binding that will blend with the result of a few short days' time spent in the sun atop this memorial.

Eduardo had told me more about the South American documentary filmmaker. When they had arrived in the village where the berry-eating guru was purported to live, they found that the man and his followers had been exiled to a nearby mountain peak by the village inhabitants, who were all-too-eager to lead the filmmaking crew to the place, as if the film crew had set down in some inverted Transylvania and the Dracula was more village oddity than horror. When they arrived they found a man who was nearly blind and used a series of ropes, suspended waist-high, to navigate from shack to shack in the compound. There were two women with him, the only remaining members of what had been a fifty-person community. One of the women was ascetically thin, suffering, Eduardo told me, from what the filmmaker thought was dysentery. The other was large to the point of engorgement, evidently pregnant, although both women claimed, with

apparent pride, that it had been years since they had menstruated. The old man's gastronomic philosophy seemed to extend to the sexual, in that he claimed that, while fruit was an essential part of a healthy diet, the consumption of any mature seeds from within the plant would produce sexual urges in the consumer, and was therefore to be avoided. Similarly, milk, as a product of secondary sexual characteristics, was abhorrent to him, and any vegetables displaying particularly phallic properties were forbidden (to the women), while he abstained from those exhibiting yonic attributes. When the film crew inquired about the former members of the flock, now gone, the guru replied that some were "apostates," while the rest had ascended. When asked if the ascended disciples had died as part of the ascension process, the guru replied in the affirmative, although when asked about the whereabouts of the bodies neither he nor the women were able to give a clear answer.

I find a flower arrangement that has broken loose from its moorings, and I re-fasten it as well as I can. I suspect that Eduardo was the filmmaker in question, and that his story is merely a framing device for his own experiences. On a small obelisk someone has attached a single immense magnolia bloom. Together, the two objects look like a satellite dish, listening for particularly eloquent songs in the sky.

I swear there is a plot to all of this.

A televangelist is speaking on the radio. To my right, two men are talking. I continue eating.

“The problem with the white was that red showed up too readily. We needed to be hygienic, but not shockingly antiseptic.”

“I assume you tried matching the red shades to completely obscure the discoloration?”

“Yeah, but it didn't test well. No one wants to use a red tampon. The suggestion is overpowering. Ditto yellow—too reminiscent of bodily fluids. Gross.”

“Blue tones?”

“It discolored well, but too cold.”

“Hence green.”

“Right. It balances it out, it basically just makes the blood—which is somewhat transparent, in sufficiently small quantities—look dark, and it looks fresh, clean, without being clinical.”

“Natural. Organic.”

“Exactly.”

“People really want that?”

“This isn't the Johnson administration. Your mother

wanted to completely conquer her body, subvert it, with science. ‘Mankind is at last master of itself.’ Now we tell people we want to embrace the body, but really *they* still want the same thing. Control, submission. The difference is that now it's to some vague overarching pattern of harmony with nature rather than science and reason.”

“How long did it take you to do the research on this?”

“About six months. For your firm, of course, we could accelerate the process.”

“I need a timeline of about three.”

“You've got it.”

They shake hands. I take another bite of doughnut. Outside I see a homeless man. I wave. Things are looking up.

In 1967 the infamous establishment known as *Touches* opened to instant but short-lived fanfare, gaining a lurid reputation and substantial clientele, its time prematurely come when a senator was found there *in flagrante delicto* and the judicial hammer brought down when studied ignorance was no longer an option to those officers beholden to the expressed (if not practiced) morality of the people. The property was officially closed but never in reality abandoned, as it continued to play passive host to three decades of intermittent debaucheries ranging from the wee-hours trysts of teenagers to

the full-blown orgies of post-ironic scene-conscious twenty-somethings to the desperate meetings of addicts and those in flight. In the late nineties, a conglomerate of developers decided to make something of the place's reputation and location, and therewith began the process of stripping up wood laminate and carefully preserving zebra-print carpeting. The resulting series of apartments, spanning three floors and ranging from efficiency studios to penthouses, were immediately rented to a waiting list of eager urbanites clamoring for something edgy yet sophisticated. On an inset bookshelf in Eduardo's apartment I find a photo album.

“What's in here?” I gesture.

When I had asked Steve about the small white plastic tab which he had found in the bathroom, he had explained that it had held pills. He had found it sitting atop the frame of a picture hanging on the bathroom wall, invisible to all but the tallest patrons but reachable for Steve, blindly stretching. Apparently someone had stashed it there and forgotten to come back for it. Inside were five white oblongs stamped with “LMF”--Steve explained that this stood for “*leitmotif*,” the trade name for a brand of medication that mediated the user's sense of continuity, adjusting their temporal perception via a broad range of neurological manipulations, alternately speeding up or slowing down the user's sense of time

depending on their condition. It was prescribed to patients suffering from Parkinson's disorder and schizophrenia, as well as those with exceptionally severe attention-deficit disorder. Because of the broad distribution of the neural configurations that govern one's sense of time, the spectrum of effects induced by *leitmotif* was correspondingly large, but the manufacturer generally claimed that judicious prescription could result in a decreased (or heightened) aptitude for pattern-recognition, an accelerated (or decelerated) sense of time, enhanced (or diminished) sense of integration, and a minimization (or magnification) of attention to details.

“What's in here?” I gesture.

“Take it down and see.” Eduardo says.

Inside are pictures of a prom, of cars in driveways and televised parades crossed by grainy bands, a marriage, hospital beds. There was a school play and a pasted-in hospital discharge notice. Someone ate a turkey sandwich alone in a dim diner. There was a birthday in a white room.

“I found this in the thrift store over on third.” He says. “I have no idea who these people are, but I like their pictures.”

I look closer at the teenagers attending the prom pictured in the album's early pages. They wear oversize sunglasses and scarves and vintage jeans, garish sweaters and checkered blouses.

“When do you think these were taken?” I ask.

“No idea.”

“I think I used to know these people,” I say.

“Oh yeah? Friends of yours?”

I don't answer. From the window I can see the street below, where a sidewalk vendor sells meat on a stick.

“I'm hungry,” I finally say. “Wanna grab a bit to eat?”

When Eduardo and I arrive I am no longer even surprised to see the words again superimposed above the building. Eduardo makes a comment about “the real grit of Bible-belt culture, slash commerce” but I ignore it. When our food arrives I start to talk.

“Do you know they've developed a form of test-tube meat that can be made in a laboratory, without requiring the slaughter of animals?” The phrases are kiped from articles I have read somewhere, in the human-interest inserts of some newspaper.

“No kidding?” He takes a bite of burger and I can see the pink juice run down his chin, rendered inoffensive by the dim green-tinted light emanating from the fixture hanging low above our table, obscuring our eyes from each other.

“Yes,” I say, “a form of protein culture, a tissue complete with blood vessels, that can be scaled up from *filets mignon* to

whole chucks, to supernaturally large cows, rendered unsacred by the fact of their *prima facie* lifelessness.”

“And how does it taste?” Eduardo asks.

“I don't know,” I say, “I've never tasted it. But it's generally described as bland. I was exaggerating about the *filet mignon*. It really isn't modeled after any specific kind of meat.”

“It would certainly raise some interesting implications if it were,” he says, taking another bite. “Imagine: braised okapi. Side of bengal tiger. Things too exotic or endangered to be, as things currently stand, commercially viable dining. Orca whale. Panda bear. Or even extinct animals—filet of Tasmanian devil, breaded dodo, mastodon burgers. You could even make stuff up. Unicorn *pate*. Butterfly sausage. Or even--” He paused. “more taboo delicacies.”

I took a swallow of water. Eduardo filled the silence.

“I once had a friend who did a documentary on European scientists and the various programs they had to halt once the world war started and their attentions were fixed to bomb-making. One guy in Czechoslovakia managed to keep a chicken heart alive in a nutrient bath for fully thirty years. It just sat there, without wires, without tubes, in a solution of vitamins and elemental goodness, its little fibers contracting over and over for the span of an entire era, long past the deaths

of all the fowl friends and relatives of its one-time owner. I think when it was finally thrown out the guy had just been keeping it in his basement, periodically going down to refresh the solution, the same way you'd every now and then go down to your basement to check on the furnace and change the filter.”

“Fascinating,” I say.

I think in a former life I was a restaurant reviewer. Maybe. I pull out a notebook and begin to write down the stuff that's happening around me.

“Which war was that?” I ask.

“What?”

“Which war did they have to halt their experimenting for? Was it the one with the bombs or the one with the gas?”

“I think it was the one where we went to the moon.” He says.

“Huh.” I say.

When I leave the restaurant a homeless man asks me for a ride. I ask where he's headed and he tells me a town twenty miles from where I live; I tell him he's in luck and that I was headed in his direction.

“Were you in the war?” I ask.

Yes, he answers, after a short hesitation.

“You read your Bible?” I ask again.

Yes, he says. Whenever he gets the chance.

“Good man.” I say.

We have been listening to the radio, and when the station breaks for commercials I do not change the channel. A woman tells us where we can see forty-nine others like her, every night of the year, including Christmas. She tells us there are drink specials and private parties, that we should come visit soon. We listen to some more songs before another girl comes on the radio and beseeches both of us to give life a chance, telling us that help is nearby and that babies are a gift from God.

The voice of the girl advertising the crisis pregnancy center sounds the same as the voice of the girl advertising the strip club—a milky-smooth voice to neutralize the guilt felt by the hearer, to assure them, to assure us, me, that what had happened and what would happen would be okay, that what we were going to do was okay and right. And good. When we arrive in town, the homeless man gets out and I hand him fifty dollars and tell him, “God bless you.”

“Thank you.” He says. “God bless you.”

When we had been sitting in the restaurant someone at the table next to us perused a newspaper and Eduardo had started telling a story.

“When I was a kid I was flipping through a newspaper

and came across a picture of a movie star, this classic Hollywood starlet type, at the Oscars, walking down the carpet, in a backless dress with this fantastically plunging neckline.”

He takes a drink of water.

“There was really more neckline there than dress. Some faggy *clothier* had gotten out their wax pencil and started artistically trimming away on their conceptual mock-up to the point that only the truly integral portions, the dress *qua* dress, remained. Basically it was a skirt with two strips of fabric attached to the top at the front, tapered until they wrapped around the back of this starlet's neck in a bare string. Forget what I said about dress *qua* dress—there was no dress. There was a topless woman who happened to have two strips of fabric placed over her more crucially scandalous bits.”

I laughed at this point, nervously, because I thought the newspaper-reading man next to us could overhear our conversation.

“So that's the mental image that forms in my eleven-year-old brain, that formed from this smeary black-and-white newsprinted photo. This woman strutting about the Academy Awards with the sacred space between her breasts open to the world, the tender side-bulge out there and exposed. She was brave, glamorous, revealed from neck to navel, taut, only the

merest signifiers of flesh as breast—under-crease and aureole—still hidden by this décolletage.”

This time I took a drink of water and Eduardo kept going.

“Five years later I was cruising the internet and quite by accident found a high-resolution copy of the image I'd seen in the newspaper. Shockingly, she appeared to have been wearing an illusion top. The space between her breasts was covered in flesh-shaded mesh, covering her as high up her neck as any Puritan collar. The back was still open, baring her to the waist, but her front was now prosaic, a lie and no longer brave, no longer bold, but complacent and safe. I had thought that I was getting a glimpse of this brave and sexual outside world, away from the hypercultist milquetoastery of my youth, and instead there was only disappointment.”

I didn't know what to say. The newspaper-bearing man, old, whiskered, wearing a driving cap and having ordered coffee and drank it with a minimum of accessory elements, had already gone, and I took another drink of water.

“What's the moral here.” I asked. I felt strongly that there should be a moral in all this, a point to the story.

“It's this:” Eduardo said. “When I was fresh out of college I moved to Hollywood and I got a job stringing for a newspaper, and they sent me out on this gig to go photograph the opening of this new restaurant. I get there and there's no

one there, it's completely deserted, but the front door's unlocked so I go in. There're all these little back rooms, like funerary chapels turned into reliquaries turned into museum alcoves, like boudoirs, or harems. I keep going from room to room and from the cracked-open doorway to one I see a leg on the floor, I go in and there's the Hollywood starlet, spread-eagle, naked, conked out, eyes open at the ceiling.”

He paused to gauge my reaction and I indicated that I was interested enough for him to go on.

“Overdose.” He said. “Anyway, the point is, I got to see her naked. Finally.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I called my editor. We broke the story. I quit my job and bought a bigger camera.”

There is a gas station at the edge of town, and around its corner is a diner, attached and tiny, both by-product and co-dependent. A lunch counter six feet long faces six tables big enough for one or two diners apiece. The French fries here are out of this world.

I order my extra-large helping and ask for the bathroom. The diner is run by an immense man wearing thick glasses, hearing aides in both ears, and knee braces. With him there is always a woman, younger by twenty years, her hair tied back

in a bushy ponytail and her sanitary gloves baggy and large on her hands. They sell the miscellanea of the urban fringe here, the fare of truckers and gas station attendants. Under the lunch counter is a glass window showcasing tiny dishes of potato salad and baked beans, coleslaw and slices of strawberry cheesecake. To its side is the cash register, and below that another window, displaying candy bars and crack pipes. Behind the register the wall is ranged with bottles of herbal supplements designed to enhance performance, or size, or to keep one awake on long cargo hauls, or all three. There are condoms and miniature bags of nacho chips. When I ask to use the bathroom the woman escorts me into a hallway at the rear of the building, above the doorway to which is tacked a sign:

Adults Only.

We have cameras in the back room. 😊

There is a similar sign behind the cash register instructing the reader: “Smile, you’re on camera!” I am not sure if the cameras spoken of here are meant to deter children from entering the back room, or if the sign exhibits two separate admonishments conveniently consolidated on a single piece of paper. The hallway contains stacked crates of the kind used to hold bottles of soda and sports drinks before they are stored in the glass-fronted refrigerators such as those that line the back

wall of the diner. In addition to the crates there is a single magazine stand bristling with pornography, the pages of the magazines already spread open at the corners, very few still in their original plastic sleeves. The bathroom is further in, inside the manager's office. There are no lights and the door does not lock, so I leave it open a crack to admit illumination from the fluorescents that hang in the office outside. There is another sign here, above the sink:

Before returning to work,
all employees must wash hands
to stop disease.

Do this, and ye shall prosper. There is no soap on the sink. When I turn the knob, no water comes out. The rim of the toilet is flecked with semen. I hear someone moving in the other office.

“You ever see guys try to watch belly dancers?”

I pause for a moment to consider this question.

“Yes.” I say.

“They're awkward,” he says, “because they're trying to look as if they're not enjoying it too much.”

I think back to a photo album found at the bottom of a dumpster, and to the images inside.

“They're awkward,” he continues, “because they're

watching something that's ostensibly about culture, skill, grace, poise, costuming, *et cetera*—oh yeah, and fitness, I forgot fitness—but really, for them, it's about sex.”

“Go on.” I say. We have been talking for a long time.

“That’s it.” He says. He takes a giant bite of hamburger. The juice runs down from the corners of his mouth.

“That’s it?”

He doesn’t respond but takes another bite of his burger. The extant rivulets of myoglobin are reinforced now and extend down his neck, disappearing into his collar.

“Come here often?” I ask.

“Every other day.” He reaches for the salt shaker, screws off the top, and douses his French fries. “It’s a terrible strain...”

I take one of my own fries and eat it slowly while he catches his breath.

“...pretending like that, to like something other than what you’re really there after.” He takes the last bite of the burger and picks up the second one. “That’s why I... why I quit my job as a reviewer.”

The fan in the back of the room turns slowly, the breeze it sends out too small to prevent the beads of sweat that drip down his face and into the basket of fries in front of him.

“You were a reviewer?” I ask.

“Yeah, I was. But I had to act like I cared about culture and skill and nuance and really I just wanted to eat.”

I cannot hear the radio because the woman who makes the doughnuts is once again singing in the backroom, louder and louder the words of a hymn. The decals in the window have been changed, now depicting a tableau of colored eggs and white rabbits, the eggs like the work of some Russian workman turned daycare assistant, pastel patterns evoking complex systems of adornment that have been consolidated into monochromatic bands and speckles. The rabbits stare at me.

Through the plate glass window I see the dancers walking to a single car, exiting the club that sits next to us. Three men enter the shop, tripping the bell as they do, and the woman emerges from the back room. The men talk to the woman about payment options, something about a new currency being introduced. A new system.

I get up and leave a quarter on the table as a tip, carefully avoiding tripping the bell as I open the door and step out. There is no indication that the dancers' club exists except for a sign at the periphery of the parking lot, one of those hollow embossed plastic rectangular boxes inside of which fluorescent lights will come buzzing on at night. It sits atop an

iron pole, listing dangerously in the parched ground into which it had been driven, almost unnoticeable from the highway, shy and pleasingly nostalgic in the image of the red-nailed white-skinned iconic woman who smiles out from it amid a swirling mass of black hair. There is no door in the stripmall front by which one may enter. The doughnut shop is joined by a convenience store, a cash advance agent, and a tiny religious bookstore, but the club remains invisible except for the listing sign. I walk around the back of the building. There is a dumpster in the rear parking lot, a giant metal tank twenty-two feet long and taller than I. There is garbage on the pavement. A plastic bag blows slowly past me, spilling out little white slips of paper. I pick one up but it's gotten wet with rain and I can't make out what's written on it. There are two doors in the back of the building, unlabeled, both blocked by stacked crates of the kind used to hold bottles of soda and sports drinks. I push aside the crates and release the latch that holds one of the doors shut. Inside it is dark, and cool. I see some men reclining on couches and a woman behind the counter of a bar. I walk toward her and she welcomes me to Touches.

When I was a child I sat in a church and listened to the people around me singing louder and louder the words of a

hymn. The man at the front carried a microphone and walked toward me, and transferred the microphone from his lips to mine. When he put his hand on my head I heard the stars singing.

Starting in 1950, “Sounds Good, Tastes Even Better” was the slogan of coffee-and-pastry franchise Dunkin’ Donuts. However, in 1964, amid the turmoil of the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassination, and loss of American influence in Panama, Cuba, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere, Dunkin’ Donuts introduced the slogan “America's Favorite Donut and Coffee Shoppe.” This was to be subsequently modified as “America's Favorite Donut Shoppe,” “America's Donut Shoppe,” and “America's Dunkin'” over the course of the next thirteen years. The progression is clear: while once Dunkin’ advertised their goods as both sounding and tasting good, they now attempted to persuade their purchase solely on the grounds that so doing would identify the buyer as American. The doughnuts need not be good, but merely those to which America was partial, and eventually not even that, but simply those doughnuts to which America laid claim, intrinsic qualities of those doughnuts aside. Finally, even exclusive possession was unnecessary—the statement that America was dunkin’ was sufficient to persuade the purchasee that

Dunkin's was the right choice. While other advertising campaigns would make use of quality-based slogans ("It's Worth the Trip" (1979-1990, and again from 1997-1999) and "You Can't Get Better Tasting Coffee" (date uncertain)), these were far out-weighted by identity-based slogans ("Only at Dunkin' Donuts (1950-1991), "You're Dunkin'" (1980-1993), and "You're Still Dunkin'" (1993-1997)), including the "America" campaign, which eventually evolved in 2007 to become "America Runs on Dunkin'."

I order a beer from the woman at the bar and she asks me if I know the game. I'm too afraid of what I'll find underneath the cap so I tell her to just give me a beer. I take it to one of the couches and sit down, the cushions on either side of me exhaling sparse clouds of white powder. I look around, at the stage, which is lit only by the small recessed bulbs that run around its border, like the lights in the aisle of a passenger airplane, and at the other patrons, who are sitting on couches as well. I do not know why they remain in the middle of the day, or why this club is open after the dancers have already left to sleep until nightfall. Perhaps these are not patrons but employees, taking their ease in slacktime, scattered about the room with nowhere else to go. I get up and begin to walk around. No one seems to notice me. No one is talking to each

other, and while there are televisions in the four corners of the room, no one is watching them. I look closer at the televisions. They show a parade, a slow grind of cars draped in bunting and covered in flowers.

After Dunkin' Donuts began using the slogan "America Runs on Dunkin'," they ran a series of commercials in which people were shown attempting to purchase coffee and similar beverages at a restaurant in which the items were all given non-English names. "Is that French?" The customers would ask. "Or is it Italian?" An announcer would then admonish the buyers: "Delicious lattes from Dunkin' Donuts. You order them in English." That lattes and cappuccinos are themselves foreign products, with foreign names only lately appropriated to American speech, was an irony that apparently escaped the creators of these television spots. In an event similarly indicative of either the mindset of Dunkin's fanbase or that of its directors (or both), a commercial was pulled after it was pointed out that the woman featured in it appeared to be wearing a *keffiyeh*. While the garment in question was in reality nothing more than a scarf with a black and white paisley floral design, the distance and distortion afforded by the television cameras resulted in a passing plausibility to the public's claim that the scarf resembled that worn by Middle

Eastern political leader Yasser Arafat, and was, therefore, a sign of the wearer's support of terrorism.

I walk over to one of the men on the couches. I sit down next to him, sending up, once again, a slight poof of dust, this time smaller than the last.

“What's up with the parade?” I ask.

“Huh?”

“The parade. On TV.” I gesture with my beer. Grainy bands cross the screen, slowly scrolling down, distorting our view.

The man shrugs. He takes a sip from the plastic up in his hand. He looks familiar.

“It's not what goes into a man's mouth,” he says, “but what comes out that defiles him.”

We change things by looking too hard at them. Scientists have determined that the elemental sparks of existence are fundamentally unobservable in their natural state, as reality bends itself around our prying.

“What comes out?” I ask.

“Uncleanliness.”

“What went in?”

The man gestures expansively. I'm not sure if he means to take in the breadth of the club surrounding us as answer or if this is merely an elaborate shrug. He settles back further in the couch and takes another sip. He offers the cup to me.

"No thanks." I say.

He pushes the plastic cup toward me again. "The blood of Christ, shed for you."

"What?"

"The blood of Christ." He says. "Shed for you." He tips the cup forward and I see the tiny remainder of red in the crushed ice at the bottom.

I remember where I've seen this man before.

"Were you in the war?" I ask.

"What war?"

"The war."

"Oh. Yes. Got poisoning in my blood."

"That which goes into a man," I say.

Eduardo sits down in front of me.

"I thought I might come across you here." He says.

"Hi." The word comes from the both of us, the man beside me and me. "What brings you here?" I ask.

"This gentleman." Eduardo nods and points with his beer. "An up-and-coming local preacher."

I turn back to the man, whose head is tipped back to get

the last drops of wine from his cup.

“You preach?” I ask.

“E’ry Sunday.” He fishes in his pocket and pulls out a business card. “Got a friend of mine down at the copy shop got these printed up for me and all.”

COME AND BE FILLED

First Church of the Redeemer

Services Sunday, 10:30-12:00

“I’ll visit.” I say.

“Ten-thirty,” he says. “Or a little earlier if you wanna meet e’ryone.”

“I’ll do that.” I say. “Thanks.”

“Tell us again what inspired you to become a preacher.” Eduardo says.

“Why are you here?” I ask him.

“I’m making a documentary on this man.”

“You don’t even have a camera.” I say.

“This is just prep work. The actual filming comes later. This is just the broad, before-hand stuff.” He seems to have forgotten about asking after the preacher’s inspiration, and if his inquiree had heard the question in the first place, he doesn’t give any indication to that effect. I lean back in the couch and Eduardo does the same.

“So this is Touches.” I say.

“What?”

“Touches. I guess they resurrected it? Or were just trying to cash in on the rep by naming it that?”

“What are you talking about?” Eduardo asks.

“Touches.” I say. “This place is called Touches.”

“No, man.” He says. “This is”

A dance track comes in kicking down the sound system, and his words are buried under thumping electronic beats and the voice of a wailing woman. It sounds like he says “Secret Love.” Or “Beats Club.” I know better than to ask him to repeat himself.

When we walk back outside the preacher comes with us.

“Flee sexual immorality,” he slurs. “Flee it.”

“I’m not sure this documentary is such a good idea,” I say, even though I’m not convinced there even is a documentary.

“And?” Eduardo asks. He looks at me with a blankly curious face.

“The works of the flesh are evident!” The preacher suddenly straightens up and looks back and forth at us, from one to the other. “Food's meant for the stomach... and the stomach for food.” He fumbles in his pocket and fishes out another business card, hands it to me. “God will destroy both one'n th' other. The body's not meant for sexual imm'rality, but

for the Lord.” He looks one more time at me. “An' the Lord's fr the body.”

When I had returned home the night before I'd found Steve sprawled on the sidewalk in front of my house.

“Hey man.”

“Hey.”

“Want some weed?”

“What are you doing out here, Steve?”

“I live here.”

He had gestured at the house next to mine.

“No you don't, Steve.” I knew the people in that house. Two crazed women with the stereotypical horde of stray cats coming and going from a million cat doors all day and all night. The women were white-haired and bone-fingered and fat in odd places and they wore clothes from the thrift store, garish blouses and layers of sweaters and scarves. “Two old women live in that house, Steve.”

“Shhhhhhhh.”

He had held a finger to his lips and smiled with something that I supposed he meant to look like mischief. I then turned and went in, and turned off the lights before going to bed.

“You can't make a documentary about my city.” I say.

“*Your* city?”

“It is my city. I live here. This is mine. You’re not... you’re not part of this.”

“I can make a documentary if I want to.” Eduardo says. “Don’t worry, you’ll look good in it.”

I stop and face him, forcing him to stop walking as well.

“Listen,” I say. “I once had this crush on this girl.”

“Oh?” I think when Eduardo hears this he is already thinking about whether he can make a documentary about it.

“I had this crush on this girl, and it was the purest, most beautiful thing ever. It was the most perfect love in the world.”

“And it is now a very much defunct love, judging by the fact that you’re telling me about it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say,” I say. “Listen: I thought that to draw any artistic inspiration from this love would be to tarnish it. To take something beautiful and make it utilitarian, to use it functionally, as a way to produce some artistic output.”

“You don’t strike me as the artistic type.” Eduardo says, lighting a cigarette, immobile, since I’m still blocking his way.

“*The point is*, one day, still very much pining in this unrequited sort of way, I sit down to write a story about a similarly doomed lover, cribbing heavily from my own experiences.”

“If this turns out to be some sort of Pygmalion story I think I’m going to puke.”

“Shut up. I write this story, about a doomed, pining lover, but at the end I leave it open for hope. There’s a possibility of reunion. There’s room for closure.”

“At least my documentaries aren’t high-flown masturbation-therapy.”

“*And then* I edited the story, weeks later. Just a few minor edits, here and there. Verb tenses, word choices. But when I sat back and look at the finished product I realized I’d completely re-written the story—it no longer cribbed from my life but repeated it verbatim, and, most importantly, the ending had changed. Where once I’d left open a route to escape, a vague hope, here it was definitely ended, the characters cut off and all hope willfully abandoned. The next day I got the news that my crush had gotten married in a midnight shotgun wedding. It had happened the night before, at the same time I had been editing my story.”

Eduardo is silent for a moment, sucking on his cigarette. Too much, this looks like something out of a movie. Or a documentary about documentary filmmakers. Or a story.

“I’m not sure I care about what happened to you in highschool.” He says, finally, dropping the only-half-finished cigarette and tamping it with his toe.

“Leave the preacher alone.” I say.

“What preacher?” Eduardo asks.

“Don’t fuck with me, Eduardo.”

“You take care too now, okay?”

“This is my city!” I say. “I own it! I know it! These are my people! I found them! I talked to them first! I discovered them! I discovered the American Paranoid Restaurant! I know the preacher! I know about the pictures! I know where to find the best french fries in town! I--”

“Where?” Eduardo asks.

“What?”

“The french fries. Let’s go.”

When we reach the gas station at the edge of town there is no diner attached. In its place is a gleaming red, white, and blue building, its roof angled sharply up, the carhop girls skating from parked car to parked car beneath the concrete overhang. We sit at a table, a concession to pedestrians such as ourselves, and are joined by a woman whose denim shorts exude muscled thighs, and whose hair flows out with alacrity from beneath a paper garrison cap.

“What can I do for you today, gentlemen?”

I have heard this voice before.

“Two french fries.” Eduardo orders.

“All right, I'll be right out!”

She skates away and I see the thrust of the pavement through the wheels of her foot traveling into the displacement of first one buttock, then the other.

“This looks promising.” Eduardo says.

“This isn't the place I went to before.”

“What?”

“This isn't the place,” I say. “with the out-of-this-world french fries.”

“Don't try to kid me,” Eduardo says. “I know you're jealous, but you have to share your finds with me.”

“No,” I say. “This isn't the place at all.”

When the girl comes back she sets down two steaming plastic baskets overflowing with fries, the salt in the corners of the waxed paper mounding up and the grease creeping over her fingertips.

“Enjoy, gentlemen.”

There are two cokes here as well, which we did not order, and a large milkshake.

“They must have got our order confused.” I say.

The waitress has already left.

“Must have.” Says Eduardo.

We dig in, and I drag my basket of fries closer, lifting back the corner of the paper that lines it. On the rim of the

basket there are raised letters, a string of numbers and punctuation.

“Do you read the Bible?” I ask.

“Every chance I get.” Eduardo takes three fries at once and drags them through a mass of ketchup, bending them nearly to the breaking point in their accumulation of the condiment before lifting the bundle to his mouth.

I can't tell if it's a serial number or a page reference. Eduardo lifts his extra-large coca-cola and sucks at the straw. On the bottom edge of the cup I see more letters and numbers. I can't remember if “Mfk” is an abbreviation for an industry term or for a forgotten gospel. Maybe 23:25 is a density rating, a guide to how a thing might be recycled. That Eduardo's beverage should be stamped with chapter-and-verse directions to the divine seems implausible.

“When I was a kid I used to listen to televangelists on the radio.” I say.

“Oh god. Not another story about when you were a kid, please.”

The waitress comes back, coasting towards us and giving a little hop over the curb, her breasts bouncing.

“How's it going?” She asks. I remember where I've heard her voice.

“Have you ever worked in radio?” I ask.

“No...” She says. Suddenly shy, she reaches for the back of her neck and puts her head down, her feet moving slightly back and forth to maintain her balance.

“Do you think I'd be any good?”

“I think you'd be very good.” I say. “My friend here has connections.”

“Do you really?” She asks, looking at Eduardo, who has finished the fries and is starting on the milkshake.

“Sure.” He says. “I've got connections all over the place.”

When we leave Eduardo has the waitress's phone number written on a piece of paper in his back pocket.

“Tell me more about these televangelists.” He says to me.

I had almost forgotten her name. Eduardo's brash desire to exploit the patterns surrounding us had awakened in me an almost numinous feeling of resonance with a defunct self. Suddenly I found myself simultaneously living in both the present and a (possibly falsely designed) reconstruction of the past. Everything now was seen through (what I would have previously considered) mutually exclusive lenses, as if my two eyes occupied separate realities but nevertheless crossed wires at the optic chiasm and produced shimmering double-exposure films for the theater-going homunculus in my head. The street

in front of me was both the street as it was and the street as it had been ten years before; the objects I held in my hands both current in the moment and physical repositories of history no less fully present, via their physical embodiment, than the objects, and their contemporaneous surfaces, themselves.

After her marriage I had dropped all contact with her, and, while I assumed she was still in the area, I had no definite reason to think so. By some miracle her name appeared in the phonebook, although I had no way of knowing which, if any, of the seven doppelganger entries indicated the address and number I sought.

The TV in the living room spontaneously came to life. I remembered setting the wake alarm some time before, but whether I had confused the A.M./P.M. settings or if it was, in fact, already morning was a fact beyond me. It would not surprise me if I had remained awake throughout the entire night. Eduardo and I had gone back to his apartment while I told him all I that remembered about the televangelists, how when I would minutely tune the radio to bring in the voices of the preachers, when my fingers would finally find the vital band, electricity would flow through the knob to my hand, and I would hear the stars singing. Eduardo had nodded along, saying very little. At one point he pulled out his camera but pointed it out the window and far down the street, focused on

some far distant row of houses. I told him that sometimes I still heard these voices in the street, that there were streetpreachers, twenty years old with the voices of cracked sexagenarians, their megaphones distorting their words into the perfect semblance of crackling radio transmission.

Eduardo nodded and said that this was normal, as if I were a patient describing my symptoms to a doctor, and as if I were, perhaps, slightly hypochondriac, but not insufferably so, really more just over-conscientious in watching after my health, which was not a bad thing to be as I got up in years.

I realize that the radio has spontaneously turned itself on as well, and I've been listening to a call-in talk show about health and fitness. Either I have confused the A.M./P.M. settings twice, on two separate appliances (unlikely), or it really is morning. I turn the radio off to hear the television better, because it is talking about a young man who has snuck into the home of two elderly women and bludgeoned them both to death. Police report that after killing the occupants, the young man set up residence in their home, leaving the bodies propped up on the couch in the living room, where police found them when they entered the house. Neighbors had initially called to complain about the stream of cats exiting the house and invading neighboring lawns and backyards, presumably in search of food. When police

entered the home they initially thought the two women still alive due to the semblance of life provided by their postures and the hectic disarray of empty pizza boxes and drug paraphernalia that surrounded them on the couch—their lack of response to the officer’s entrance was taken as narcotics-induced stupor. It was only when a cat, presumably one of the last to remain, a hardy survivalist, jumped up on the couch and began nibbling one of its owners’ ears that the police noticed the bloodstains in the women’s matted hair. The news crew has not been permitted inside the house, but they have archival footage of the street outside, and they show the house in a static shot, zoomed in from some distant elevation. The camera jumps a bit, as if the operator’s arm has jerked, and I see the edge of the house neighboring the crime scene. It is, as I suspected, my own.

Only a payphone will do. Suppose I were to be traced?
A streetpreacher is on the sidewalk outside my house.

“Why are you here?” I ask him.

He fingers the trigger of his megaphone held limply at his side.

“Going home.” He says.

“Need a ride?” I ask.

“Sure,” he says. “Thanks.”

We get in my car. When I had paged through the

phonebook earlier I had found that the typical flower-courier services were not yet open—the morning was still new, and their business lay largely in the evenings. The number I had scribbled down belonged instead to a funeral home, interments carried out while the larger world slept being, apparently, not an uncommon occurrence.

“Where do you go to church?” I ask, but before I do I know that I won't be able to hear the response.

Between 1647 and 1651, Spanish artist Diego Velàzquez painted what is known today as the *Rokeby Venus*, a four-by-six-foot painting of a woman lying on a couch, gazing into a mirror, her back to the viewer. Her face is visible only by its reflection in the mirror, and there only blurred and muddled. She lacks the facial features typically attributed to Venus in similar depictions; while there are sufficient paintings of Venus on a couch for this subject to constitute its own genre, most depictions feature a blond, slightly-featured Venus, not the plain-faced brunette exhibited by Velàzquez. Likewise, the props seen in a typical Western painting of Venus—myrtle flowers, roses, jewelry—are absent. The identification of this woman as the mythic Venus rests solely in the fact that the mirror into which she looks is being held by a winged child, presumably Cupid, thereby placing this piece in a milieu of

analogous pieces in which Cupid similarly holds a mirror for his mother.

In 1914, a woman named Mary Richardson smuggled a meat cleaver into the National Gallery and slashed the *Rokeby Venus* in seven places. In a statement that shortly followed her arrest, she claimed to have performed the vandalism as an act of suffragist protest, stating that the imprisonment of her friend and fellow suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst merited the destruction of “the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history.” Thirty-eight years later, at the age of sixty-three, she stated further that she hadn't liked “the way men visitors gaped at it all day long”--a gaping that may have been provoked in no small part by the verisimilitude of the painting, not for Venus, but for an actual woman. The commonplace nature of the subject's face, the absence of the mythological props, and the equal-to-life size of the image rendered it believable, and therefore desirable. So complete was the suspension of disbelief carried out by viewers of the painting that journalists, in covering the act of vandalism/protest, tended to the visceral in their descriptions, ascribing to the painting the qualities of an actual person, and to the damage that of bodily injury. The *Times*, in an extremely detailed account of the vandalism, described Richardson's cuts as “gashes,” “blows,” “slashes,” and in one

case as “a cruel wound to the neck.” Richardson was held in prison for the maximum time allowable by law, and the gallery keeper insisted that visitors henceforth leave not only their walking sticks and umbrellas at the door, but also their “muffs, parcels, and satchels,” although the implement brought in by Richardson had, apparently, been held in her jacket.

I ask the streetpreacher if he’s eaten yet and he says no. I swing the car around and we head toward the gas-station-cum-diner, passing through several red lights along the way.

The question of which of the seven identical phonebook entries belongs to my former crush is, I have decided, irrelevant, as I do not plan to pursue this exercise any further. Given that I will be unaware of the final outcome of the project, sending flowers to a complete unknown will ultimately present, to me, an outcome equal in satisfaction to that achieved by sending her, herself in her monotypical identity, the flowers. I had therefore selected at random from among the seven, writing the result down on the same piece of paper which carried the number of the funeral home.

When we arrive at the diner it is not yet open, but the former restaurant reviewer is already there, sitting on the concrete slab outside the door, his knees nearly up to his ears,

his head low. He looks up when he hears us approach.

Édouard Manet's *Olympia* depicted a woman that hailed from a Venerean-artistic heritage different from Velàzquez's *Rokeby*. The *Olympia*, painted in 1863 but not formally exhibited until two years later, shows a woman gazing directly at the viewer from her couch, *sans* Cupid or mirror, but accompanied by a woman behind her bearing flowers. Manet patterned his image after an earlier painting by Titian, usually referred to as *The Venus of Urbino*, which was in turn patterned after Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*. Giorgione, circa 1510, depicted his mythic figure in full mythic context, placing the nude Venus atop drapery and in front of an empty, idealized landscape. She sleeps in the open air, eyes closed against the viewer's, the distant town behind her either deserted or as asleep as she. Her right arm is upraised, its elbow crooked, its hand behind her head. The other hand delicately covers the otherwise-exposed *mons veneris*. Titian placed the scene indoors, in a Renaissance palace, opened the Venus' eyes, and put her right arm in front of her, languidly grasping a clutch of flowers. In addition, Titian placed two figures in the background, apparently servants, looking through a large chest, perhaps for clothes for their reclining mistress. The tender modesty exhibited by Giorgione is

retained here by a similarly delicately placed hand, but where Giorgion's Venus' fingers curled across her vulva in unconscious shyness, Titian's curls her fingers deliberately, less tender, perhaps, in her modesty than coy, her gaze a mixture of repose and invitation, a suggestion, perhaps, to draw close before her maids arrive with covering. Contrast this with Manet's Venus—a Venus, like Velàzquez's, only by implication: as literally interpreted, his painting is of nothing other than a contemporary prostitute—her link to myth exists only in her artistic lineage and the similarities of postures and placements. Titian's grasped flowers have multiplied; now her hair is adorned with an immense exotic bloom, and the woman behind her, instead of bearing clothes, carries a bouquet that we may assume has been sent by a client. More striking in its difference still is the disparity in gaze and attitude between Manet's “Venus” and her predecessors: Manet's Venus' look at the viewer is now unbearably direct, defiant, and bored; her covering hand is now not delicately curved but shown palm-open and finger-splayed, covering her vulva, not from gaze *per se*, but from gazes which have not paid the price of admission. The viewer is invited to inspect that which is available, but full and unmetered access comes only to those who reimburse for the privilege.

When I drop the preacher off at his house, he thanks me. I tell him I've enjoyed his company, and to keep up the good work. He gives me an odd look but in the end nods, smiles, and walks up the driveway to his front door without turning back to see if I'm still watching him. There was still grease on his face from his meal.

I have been debating with myself this entire time regarding whether or not I should include a note with the flowers. To explicate one's own deleterious acts of observation and recording seems not only counterproductive but acolastic, smacking of arrogant impenitence.

The critical difference between the Giorgione-Titian-Manet chain of Venus depictions and Velàzquez's (or rather, between the effects these paintings have had on their viewers) lies in the increasing capitalization of sex versus the conservation of it. While Manet represents the terminus of a slide into transaction and exchange, the reaction of Mary Richardson represents an attempt to halt this slide, an attempt that indicates a valuation of slide-halting over the actual objects risked in that slide; in short, Richardson destroyed the very thing she feared would be destroyed if she were not to take the action that she did. The journalists of the time, then, missed the mark in characterizing Richardson's actions as

metaphoric murder; the cruel gashes were in fact a suicide.

I am placing the call. It is really happening. There is a metal plate affixed to the bottom of the payphone cabinet, the words on it white against a blue ground:

Need Cash Now Easy Quick Loans

Press *12

Need Help Finding a Job

Press *13

Receive God's Blessings Get Daily Prayer

Press *14

Need a Credit Card

Press *15

Joke of the Day

Press *16

I dial the number written on the piece of paper I carry. The woman's voice on the other end sounds familiar.

“Hey sexy,” she says, “where you goin' tonight?”

I stop walking and face her.

“Sokay,” she says. “I won't hurt you.”

I come closer and see her face shining with grease in the streetlight. Her body disappears in an array of plastic shopping bags grouped around her.

“I don't have any money.” I say, fingering the piece of paper I still hold in my hand.

“Sokay,” she says, reaching under her shirt. She pulls out a package of cigarettes and lights one.

“Where you goin'?” She asks again.

“Home.” I say.

“Gotcha home right here f'r tonight.” She says.

I continue to watch her as she smokes. She inhales and exhales as if she were trying to find something and retrieve it from the bottom of her lungs. When I had placed the call from the pay phone earlier that day, the voice on the other end was the voice of the woman in the thrift store, gathering up old roses for use in cemeteries. I asked her if she gave classes on decorating and she acted confused. Apparently she's moved up in the world since last we talked.

“How much do you usually charge?” I ask. This is immensely important to me.

“I don' charge, honey. Not for a nice man like you.”

“Is your home far from here?”

She stiffens. “My h--”

“Your place.” I say.

“Uh-huh. Real near.” She inhales and exhales again.

“You comin'?”

She gathers up all her bags and stands. I offer to take some bags from her and she permits me. A bus pulls up and we both step inside. It is empty and brightly lit. We sit on a bench seat facing sideways and don't speak until she pulls the red cord to stop.

“Here we go.”

The building is an abandoned warehouse. Inside are immense machines, rollers and catwalks glistening with old oil. Printing presses. A newspaper factory.

She takes me down an aisle between rows of hardware sitting on concrete pads, leading me by the hand. The plastic bags we carry rustle and swing against our legs as we walk. At the end of the aisle is a door, and over the door is a light, as if this were an exterior door with some need to guide travelers to itself, as if the interior of this building were not (or had not been) illuminated.

“You gonna like this.” She says.

She opens the door and I step inside. There is no bed but an examination table, complete with fresh tissue paper looped over its surface. I get on the bed and she closes the door. Next to the table is a desk and counter, covered in jars, tools, and papers. I cannot decide if these are medical instruments I've seen before or not.

“You ready?” She asks.

I nod. She peels off her jacket, sways gently, reaches down, and lifts the hem of her baggy sweatshirt. She takes off the shirt and drops it gently to the floor below. On her body I see scars. When she turns away from me I can make out in the dim light the faint remains of a cruel wound to the neck. She approaches the table and picks up a sheaf of papers. She mutters to herself, consulting the columns of numbers that cover the sheets. Next she reaches for a jar and removes what looks like a moldy slice of bread. She breaks off a piece and holds it in front of me, at the level of my mouth.

“This is my body, purchased for you.” She says.

I lean forward and take a bite. I chew and swallow.

“Have you ever worked in radio?” I ask.

The library no longer contains archived copies of the newspapers from twenty years ago, but in a bookstore downtown there are stacks of print lying sleeping in disorganized rows in a corner of a closet in the backroom. Behind the closed door I pick through the stacks, looking for 1967, and there in a tinily-set column, back of the stories about rock shows and sex clubs, there are two inches of text devoted to the recounting of a murder of two spinster women by a “crazed” youth. It's enough. On my way out I notice a photo album on the shelves, but I don't pick it up.