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Above It All

Senior Paper

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Scene 1 – The Great Sustainment

Walking up Down Street, carrying two bags of groceries, with the Tower looming four blocks ahead, the familiar smell of syrup – strong, but not sweet like maple, more tannic – hit George full force. He knew that next came the tacky feel to everything he touched and a pervading itch buried too deep to scratch. Soon after – maybe fifteen minutes, tops – the seizure would strike, shooting lightning bolts up and down his spine.

He pushed his little legs up the hill. If he could just make it to the lobby of the Tower, then to the elevator which, nineteen floors later, opened into the penthouse he shared with Mother, who would be half drunk and absorbed in some gameshow by this point, and who would only notice him drop the groceries onto the kitchen table so she could get at her carton of Virginia Slims, he could stagger into his room, lock his door, and seize in peace.

I've got time, he thought. I've got all the time. I'm lucky that way.

That's when the gentleman stepped in front of him on the sidewalk near the corner of Down and Cross Street, blocking George's view of the Tower like a shadow crossing a sundial.

"Excuse me, sir," the gentleman said with great affectation, "doing some afternoon shopping, I see?"

"Yes, yes," George said, holding a bag up to his eyes to block out the glare of the sunset behind the man, "but if you'll excuse me ..."

"But I'll just be a moment. A precious moment, I'm sure, to someone of your," and he coughed, "obvious stature."

As George's eyes adjusted, he began to make out the details of the gentleman: his tangled beard, tattered suit, wayward, constantly waggling eyes, and – even beyond the smothering syrup smell – profound odor. A street-person, George thought. No, that's not the phrase, nowadays. Something kinder, for sure. An un-homed citizen. A man about town. The shelter disadvantaged. No, no, that's foolish, George. You can respect the man, but you need to leave him behind. You've still got time.

And there came the stickiness beginning at the end of George's nose. "Any other day, to be sure, but please ..." he begged.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the gentleman said, "I am The Great Sustainment!" He bowed deeply, revealing the Tower behind him, and George could feel Mother's presence hovering nineteen floors above, impatient for her smokes. He could also feel the tackiness spreading across his face.

"Yes, well met, well met," George replied, bowing as well, which confused the gentleman, allowing George to side-step him, and for the briefest moment, there, again, rose the Tower, and freedom. At the very least, he could still make it to the elevator and stop between floors to wait out the oncoming storm.

But the gentleman quickly countered, blocking him on the sidewalk again.

"The Great Sustainment recognizes other men of merit!"

And even in his haste, George blushed. To be recognized as meritable. The things this man had seen, and for him to find merit in George.

Only then did George understand the gentleman's confusion: he had been dressing for work when Mother demanded he buy her cigarettes, and he had rushed down the nineteen floors and south on Down Street to buy them from his friend, Juniper, who also forced two grocery bags worth of fruits and vegetables on him – “Because you eat like shit, honey” – and so George stood in front of The Great Such-and-Whatever in his bartender's outfit: his little black pants, his little tuxedo top, his adorable, little bowtie, and his cummerbund, snug around his substantial, cherubic belly.

“The Great Sustainment has a proposition!”

George twitched, sweating now. “I believe you're confused about me, sir.”

The gentleman looked over his shoulder back at the Tower. “Do you take me for a fool? Didn't I spot you coming out of that local landmark? Aren't you,” straightening George's bowtie, “well dressed for the local grocery?”

George's sweat ran thick. He grew nauseous at the smells enveloping him. The gentleman had obviously been following him for some time. But, even more so, now with the syrup, with the stickiness pressing down on him, George knew he couldn't make it home safely. Maybe he could reach the lobby when the lightning would hit, him shuddering on their expensive, marble floor.

Then, everyone would know, of course. His secret. He couldn't stand their looks after. The pity in their eyes. Even Juni would find out. How long he had kept it from her of all people.

“You have,” George said weakly, “you have me confused, sir,” his arms drooping from the weight of the grocery bags.

The gentleman put a hand on his shoulder. “Why, you look absolutely peckish. Let’s sit; share a bit to eat, maybe, and talk about my proposition. Just four easy installments. Today, only half the price!”

“Half the price of what?” George said.

The gentleman scratched beneath his beard, revealing a festering red welt. Each scratch chafed against George’s eardrums like sandpaper.

“Let’s not get bogged in details on empty stomachs.”

Nausea. And syrup. And everything sticky.

The gentleman blinked. Deep brown eyes buried behind that mess of hair and sunburn. Something profound within them, maybe. Something to get lost in. Heck, George could allow the seizure to happen right here. Give up: those are two fine-sounding words. He could shudder on this sidewalk on this bright afternoon in front of The Great Sustainment and all of Ash. A relief, perhaps. The truth, at least.

But, wait, Juniper’s shop: The Rhuta-Bodega. He was still close enough. He could make it back, lock himself in a stall in their public bathroom, and make some excuse to Juni after, or, dangit, maybe finally be honest with her. It was about time.

He tore himself from the gentleman’s grip and began rushing south. “You have me confused, sir!” he said over his shoulder.

But the gentleman followed. “No reason to rush off! A bit of food but a lifetime of opportunity!”

George threw a peach behind him. “Confused, I think!”

The gentleman picked up the fruit, and it disappeared inside a suit pocket. “The Great Sustainment holds all in his ample palms! Business meetings and expense

accounts! Eternal salvation! Free dental!” George threw another peach, and it quickly disappeared. “Trust is in short supply these days, but the All Sustaining Truth is a worthy investment! Power Point Presentations and your immortal soul!”

George was running now, groceries flinging about and quickly disappearing inside the suit, but he could feel the thunderclouds building, and the oppressive tackiness and odor of syrup began choking the breath out of him, and with the blinking neon rutabaga still a block south, he ducked into the closest alleyway with The Great Sustainment behind him.

And the first bolt hit. George crumpled to the pavement, cold against his cheek. The bags spilling around him did so distantly. Slowly. Someone else’s issue now. The Great Sustainment appeared over him, but his nattering – something about “putting a pin in their discussion” – sounded far off. The next bolt hit, snaking, splitting throughout his body, and he knew he was shaking violently, and he thought the alleyway must be filling with smoke, but it all felt farther and farther away from what it meant to be George.

Then all went dark. Blissfully, wonderfully lost. Bodiless. Just a George floating in the void. No time to worry. No time at all.

And that’s when he’d have the vision.

Scene 2 – That Dang Tree

It always began with the hallway, plain and infinite. Every few steps on the right hung a large window. The left laid bare. Each window framed a gigantic oak tree, and beyond the tree and mountain falling away behind it, a panoramic view of downtown Ash. There sat the entire length of Down Street from La Casa Maison at the bottom to Fuffer's Tower at the top.

The tree stood a good ten feet in diameter at its thickest. Its complex sweep of branches reached gracefully higher than George could see. In the way his visions allowed, he knew the tree to be ancient. He could tell by the solidness of the wood floor beneath him that he walked a ground level, and – again, because he just knew – that there were infinite floors above him, each with bare left walls and large windows hung every few steps on the right with the same giant oak tree and view of Ash.

Through the first window, the tree sat calm during afternoon, thick with leaves.

Through the second, it had shed its leaves, naked against an overcast winter sky of midmorning.

And out of the third, thrashing against a midnight thunderstorm, and the fourth, ablaze in the oranges and reds of a fall sunrise, and the fifth, drooping heavy with a blizzard's worth of snow, and on and on George could walk from window to window, knowing there would always remain an infinite variety.

At each window, he'd pause to find his reflection in the glass. And his reflection would smile back, all five feet squat of him. All bald head and painted eyebrows and subtle foundation and bit of rouge and growing paunch of him. The extra flesh around his

neck only served to make his giant head seem larger. A baby, George thought. A grown baby waddling down an infinite hallway.

Yet he always smiled and the reflection smiled back and on and on. Because that smile. He could beam with the best of them. Cherubic, Juni always said. Told him all the time. The makeup only heightened the effect. Georgie, the beaming cherub flitting through an infinite hallway.

And he'd flit to the next window and seek out that next reflection. A comfort each time. A re-establishment of The Boundaries of Georgie.

Yet, in between, when the reflection disappeared, George felt lost again, as if he was only real after the reflection proved it so, which caused him to panic and walk faster between each window, while outside, it rained on the tree, or the sun shone too bright to see the tree, or the tree baked in a drought, or the tree looked reinvigorated in spring, yet George walked faster and faster, until he started running as the tree and Ash flipped through scene after scene, until finally, out of breath, he came to the realization he could simply stop. Be with his reflection. That it would remain if he did. How silly of him.

And, outside, the tree sat green and healthy on a calm, weather-less day with Ash resting behind it.

Cherubic, he thought. His painted, rosy cheeks. He reached out to touch them. And his reflected hand reached back. The glass surprised him with its chill, and George involuntarily flinched, yet his reflection didn't, keeping its hand on the glass and beaming that angelic smile.

Only then did George realize, as the vision allowed him to, that he was both inside and out. Or maybe he was one him in here and another stood out there. He couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure of what he could be sure.

George froze. Thunder grumbled far off beyond Ash.

The Outside George winked and, with a jaunty spin, turned toward the tree. An undefinable sense of dread filled George, and he said, "No." Still, Outside George walked closer to the giant oak, making his way carefully over each root. "No, no," Inside George said, now tapping on the glass. But the other George continued moving towards the tree, and he reached out to touch it, and inside George was screaming now, beating on the glass – "No! No!" – and just before the other George could feel that ancient bark, thunderclouds formed over ash, and as a new round of lightning bolts prepared to strike again, George came to in the alley, his voice hoarse from screaming.

The two bags lay torn and empty next to him. A single peach weighed one down, and a note had been scrawled across it: "Receipt of Purchase: Eight Units of Sustainment. We appreciate your investment, TGS."

Scene 3 – Bdays and BBQ

George often arrived early to places. Mother joked that's why he was born a week early. "He just loves waiting rooms," she said. He loved the old magazines with pages ripped out, with articles about orgasms and casseroles back-to-back. He loved furniture with strange stains on it – he imagined who caused them like a detective working backwards. Mostly, though, he was a natural people-watcher, and people seem to forget themselves most when waiting. Put the most demure person in a long line, and suddenly, they're a nose-picker. People's masks slip when waiting. George collected those slippages. He catalogued them.

Juniper Grace needed no mask to let slip, nor did she care to be trapped by exact meeting times. She would arrive when she was damn well ready, which invariably meant after all other parties. Even the customers of her little shop knew to not expect set hours: she would serve them early or late depending on their needs, but never on a schedule. This, among other reasons, made her difficult to date and eternally – and happily – single, but also a complementary friend to George. They set up this lunch for "noonish," knowing full well that allowed George his meditative wait and Juni her entrance.

So he waited at their favorite table of their favorite local restaurant, MaHOGany. He got lost in the exposed rafters of the high ceiling that "retained the ambience and grandeur of Ash's meat-packing district of the early twentieth century," according to the blurb on the back of the laminated, pig-shaped menu. He adored the silk-softness of the wood bar sanded smooth, bone white to match the bone white wall panels and tables and floors and stools and servers, which surrounded most of the main dining room, opening up to the kitchen. George could watch the cooks and servers cutting and slamming and

pace and plating all day. And that smell, of sawdust and vinegar and slow-roasted pork: he swam in it.

Proudly centering the floor, and next to their table, sat the *coup de grace*: a fountain topped by a carved pig more than six feet high and a polished dark mahogany, leaping proudly into the air, spitting out a glorious stream of water into the koi pond below. The pig's profile made up the logo on the t-shirt George and the servers wore, a dark purple cotton that wrapped around his belly like a pork dumpling, and not for sale to the general public, but Juni knew one of the owners, and she was a hard person to refuse.

MaHOGany, to George, epitomized the new Ash of the last decade – this postmodern mashup of high and low, of collard greens and expensive drinks, of baked macaroni and blowtorched deserts. Pies as big as George's giant head made only with local ingredients. A pound of barbecue on a gluten-free bun.

George sipped his pickle-tini and waited, happy, trailing a finger in the pond, giggling whenever a koi fish would mistake it for a fat, little worm. He watched the rings made by his finger ripple out, bounce off the stone edge of the fountain, and disappear.

He hardly drank. This was a special occasion, being he and Juni's shared birthday week, so he would allow himself two. Still, unlike Mother, he already felt the effects – the quick snickering, the need to express himself – a slippage. He could catalogue it, he supposed, and he giggled.

Mother, it seemed, could drink all day without ever rising above that low-energy rage that drove her.

Still, for Juni, he sipped, and found comedy in the random, and tried to allow himself to enjoy the pleasure of the drink, how his insides warmed, and how that warmth

rose to a blush across his cheeks. George worked so hard most days to recreate that rosiness, that cherubic look.

“Rosiness,” he said out loud. So funny. “Cherubic.” He had the cheeks for it, that cherubic-ness. Tongue in cheek. How slippery his tongue felt. He giggled.

He could see the pull of it, drinking, for Mother. Of giving in, of being pulled down by the weight of it. They’d find him at the bottom of the fountain, the koi nibbling him like Georgie tartare. Cycle of life and all that. Pleasant to think about. Simple to think about. He wiggled his fingers in the water again. One, two, three, four rings. The koi dashed about. They flourished in their small world. He sipped his drink.

Take care of Mother. Be good at work. Be good to Juni. Revel in Ash, his hometown and only town, and its methodical growth. Its restaurants and gallery hops. Its culture on the cheap. All else be damned.

“Be damned!” he said, and smacked the table, his pickle-tini wobbling, rings spreading out across its surface. One, two, three, four. And that sent him over, laughing fully now, grabbing his chest with the sudden force of it.

“What’s so funny, birthday boy?”

Oh, Juni. As tall the fountain and stealing all its luster. He tried to catch his breath: “We’re thirty-three, you old hog!”

And she laughed in response, head snapped back, throaty and fearless, as if she was light enough to leap into the rafters, as if her dark green dress – too thin for early spring, but perfect to show off her shapely arms and strong shoulders the way she liked, or highlight her hazel eyes the way she liked – would flutter as loud as she laughed.

She placed a vinyl Ruta-Bodega bag on the floor next to her chair and sat, without looking up from the menu, and summoned their server. A twist of a wrist. Her oversized, blue collar hands. And he appeared as men did when she summoned them. “Welcome to Ma-hooog-any! My name is Brian.”

“Brian,” Juni said, interrupting before the spiel about specials, “Is the house red still that Syrah?” Brian nodded, smiling wide enough for George to see his molars. “Bring a carafe of it, and,” eyeing George’s empty drink, “two glasses.” He disappeared, still smiling idiotically.

George leaned in, “I won’t finish a glass. I work tonight. ”

“Oh, stop,” she replied, leaning in to meet his earnestness in light parody, “it’s our birthday lunch. You can sit with a glass of wine in front of you. Allow me my dignity before I drink it for you. Besides,” she loved to pause like this, tapping a strong finger, a nail indenting the wood, “you’re a bartender. Learn to work with a buzz. Isn’t *he* coming tonight, anyway?” How she spit out *he* like venom.

Josef, she meant. Handsome, perfect Josef Fuffer of the famous Fuffer family, of course. Of the very same Fuffer Tower where he and Mother lived. The blush from alcohol deepened.

“Jealous, sister? You’re welcome to swing by. He’s a charmer. He’s . . . well, he just understands all this,” vaguely gesturing about him.

And this time she had no reason to fake being earnest: “Georgie,” touching his hand, “Be careful. That’s all. You don’t know the Fuffers like I do. You don’t see the strings they pull. You know you go blind with these new crushes. You tend to set

yourself up.” *And*, what she left unsaid, but what George heard, *you tend to ignore me in the process.*

George remained silent because: he spent a lifetime perfecting the skill. Because he knew it irked Juni to not talk out every detail of every aspect of every conversation they attempted. And because the alternative, pointing out the parade of men – and occasionally women – she tossed aside, was the surest path to an argument – a path they needed no help going down.

He finish his drink. He took a sip of the Syrah Brian-of-the-Giant-Molars had placed in front of them. And Juni tapped, louder and louder the way she did when she demanded acquiescence until George could hear nothing else – not even the soothing tinkle of the pig’s proud spout – until he became sure the entire giant room could hear nothing else, in the same way he assumed every room Juni entered soon began breathing with her rhythms and grew focused on her every mood and whim.

And George remained silent. He knew this pattern of theirs, this conversational crossroad they often reached. His Juniper Grace might tap it out, continuing to deepen the indentation already growing in that bone white wood tabletop, until whatever energy she needed dispelling did so on its own, or she could, as she did then, stop tapping in one profound *poke*, and lean in, as the room held its breath and leaned in with her, to slash right at the jugular of the conflict:

“This behavior is Mother, through and through.”

George’s sigh signaled her victory. “Which behavior, Jun-i-per?” he said, accentuating each syllable formally. Pointedly.

Juni smiled, crossing and flexing her substantial forearms. “All of it, really, Georgie. Certainly your need to fill a hole she’s never filled with whomever smiles in your direction.” Server Brian picked that moment to ask for their orders. He disappeared with that flick of Juni’s wrist. “But let’s,” and George could see the veins forming, healthy and full, along those forearms, “talk about defense mechanisms. Like avoidance. *Avoidance*,” and another poke into the table, “avoiding *truth*.”

George spun his wine as Juni had taught him. Decent for its price. Nice legs, she would say. Notice how the color remains strong even to the edges. A bit under-ripe, maybe. Too pert. It could use some age, she would say. Juni tapped. “And what, pray-tell, is this truth I’m avoiding?” George said.

“*Her* truth, Georgie.” Tap, tap. “It’s hers you’re both avoiding.” Her eyes flashed deep green now. Her baritone voice surely carried into the gravel parking lot. George could feel Brian hovering, shivering, nearby.

But, he knew this litany. It had been some time, but this was another practiced dance between them. It took the stress of a birthday week, maybe, to shake it loose again. He imagined the tables clearing, them rising like an Italian opera to battle in song and dance. Giggle. There was that pleasure in this for both of them.

On cue, he couldn’t keep the edge out of his voice: “Okay, do it, sister. Count it off.”

Her big smile. How it stretched across her feline face, accentuated the depth of her chin and cheekbones. She smelled combat. She began ticking off points on elegant, efficient fingers: “How do you both live in the most expensive penthouse in the gaudiest hotel in town? How can she,” pointing in the direction of the tower, “afford that with no

visible means of employment? Why does the lobby bar send up food and liquor once a day? She's up there right now sitting above us, above it all – the whole goddamn town – lounging on that soft, leather couch, surrounded by Chilean marble and floor-to-ceiling windows and what-have-you, watching TV and getting shitfaced and chain-smoking her Slims, but how?"

George raised a painted eyebrow. "More?"

"Yes, George. One more. *The* one more." She grabbed his hand between hers, and how it looked like a child's in comparison, "As much as we both think of you as immaculately conceived, Mother in her Tower is not a holy vessel by any means. Who put our Georgie inside her? Who the hell is your father?"

That old canard. The prima donna's aria.

He stuck a finger back in the fountain. One, two, three rings. A nibble from a koi. Hungry today. Everybody's hungry today.

"And what does it really matter?" George said. His canned response. He muddied the water of the fountain. "What would an answer change?"

How the surface of the water settled. How he knew her eyes faded to a calmer blue. He felt Juni squeeze his hand once between hers, with that power, and then let them go. He heard her order for both of them with Brian, but distantly so, as if he stood far off, as if the fountain water was a giant bay, and he stood on the other side of it.

They both sipped in silence, and the food came, which they enjoyed, and the room breathed regularly again, and the two friends returned to simple patter about the fare and the atmosphere and their schedules for the rest of the week. Brian cleared their entrée plates, then brought them a giant slice of banana crème pie – George's favorite – with

two forks. Their heads – Juni’s pile of tousled brown hair and George’s shaved clean – close together as they worked on the dessert. Their eyes met again.

Her citrus perfume. The deep line of cleavage in that cut of dress. The fluidity, surety, of each movement. The affection wet in her cloud-blue eyes. The blush of alcohol on both their cheeks.

“Oh. I do love you, Juni.” In response, she reached down into the bag at her feet, and handed George a gift, flat and rectangular. The ease in which she handed it over belied how heavy it was. “You bitch,” he said, finding it easy to laugh again. “You knew I’d get you nothing.” The shrug of her ample shoulders. He unwrapped it slowly, first revealing an ornate, iron frame – he marveled at its handiwork, “A local artisan,” she said – then, behind glass, a black and white photo: the two of them at thirteen, an arm around each other, standing near the entrance of Rhuta-Bodega so that light from the window-front splashed across them, her in that clerk’s apron she still wore years later even after buying the place, and him sporting a white t-shirt centered by that iconic rutabaga she gave him that day.

How she dwarfed him even then. How they had both filled out since, only Juni had more appropriately, turning pre-teen gangly-ness into the chiseled vision across the table from him. How Juniper found him only a few months before this picture was taken – that weird, prematurely balding kid from school who’s eternal silence shielded him from the more curious kids – weeping in the little makeup aisle shoved in the back of the boutique store, packaging torn open around his feet, an assortment of pencils and brushes in his pudgy little hands.

“Can I help you?” He leapt back like a frightened rabbit. In the process, the ball-cap he wore fell to the floor among the packaging. Juni could see he’d shaved what remained of his hair, but not just off his head. His lack of eyebrows would’ve been frightening if he wasn’t so obviously frantic in fear, cornered, a second from bolting.

And he touched something in Juniper Grace cowering so unabashedly like that, something at the very core of her she often ignored, especially after, a year earlier, her parents had decided to move away from Ash, and she had demanded to remain – because she liked the school, she said, because she had a good job, she said – and they, to her surprise, didn’t argue, setting her up above a neighbor’s garage and heading North without pause. But here in front of her, shaking, stood a sincerely vulnerable someone. An open nerve to the world. Who needed her protection.

She felt his hands shaking while she looked at what George had grabbed. She picked the appropriate pencil: Blonde Bombshell #3. She led him by the wrist, kicking through the trash – “We’ll get that in a second, okay?” – and into the employee’s single-occupancy restroom, locking the door behind them. “Breathe for me, okay?” And he did, hitching, and he did again, until he began to relax, and she slowly drew a new brow, turning him to the mirror occasionally to show what she was doing, and they erased that attempt and she let him try, and well beyond her shift, they stayed there practicing, until he was capable of making a reasonable facsimile on his own, until they both breathed in the same rhythm, until – without them understanding it – they had formed each other’s first real friendship.

Juni paid for the check like always, finishing the rest of George’s glass in one gulp, and stood to leave. “Bye-bye, handsome. Happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday.” His tongue still felt loose from drink. Their dance felt unfinished. Words slipped out like stones into the fountain. “Who do you think my father is?” He watched their ripples: one, two, three, four.

She placed a paw on that smooth crown of his. She kissed it. The heat of her lips. That citrus. To be awash in Juni. And Brian, seething with jealousy nearby. “Maybe it doesn’t matter, Pooh Bear.” She licked a thumb and wiped away her lipstick. “Maybe you shouldn’t know.”

Thunder. An afternoon storm coming down the valley towards Ash.

Scene 4 – La Casa Maison

Josef's younger brother, Jarls, always came with him on Tuesdays, along with Jarls' constant chatter. It floated down the stairway into the cellar that was La Casa Maison – a steady-flowing stream of his consciousness: *That's what I said, Josef, you heard it, you heard it hear, first, ha, but you did hear it, right, Josef, that's just what I said.* Then, their feet would appear through the one window in the place: Jarls in some kind of tennis shoe, unlaced, stomping down, with Josef behind him in something austere and leather, and his careful gait. *Sometimes you just have to say it, amiright, Josef, and once it's said, something must be done, yes, done about it.*

They'd push through the heavy door, into the small dining area of the restaurant, Jarls flopping about as if his head were heavy, and Josef, ramrod straight. Still. And Jarls in something ridiculous, like a pastel bathing suit with a silk shirt wrinkled out of shape, his belly peeking through the bottom of it; Josef always dressed the same: dark gray slacks creased to cut and a button up light blue shirt tucked in, never a stitch out of place.

Always so humid in here, couldn't we do something, open a window or something, like a sauna always.

Only then would George notice how cramped the space was – how the stucco made the place feel even smaller. And every inch of space on the walls covered by black and white photos or cheap prints in mismatched frames. Dim sconces every few feet. Beaded lamps and plaster statuettes crowding the dining room floor, which could only hold six tables, which was fine because they normally sat empty. And George always wiping away at the fake marble bar-top with a rag – could never get it dry with all that moisture in the air.

Hey, Georgie, could we open a window or something, I'll take a Vodka Gimlet, extra gim, haha, amiright, Georgie?

Josef would stand there a second, his patrician nose pointed slightly skyward, as if he could sniff the inferiority in the room. Only then would George notice this particular tuxedo top he was wearing had a permanent stain along a forearm. Or how loud the kitchen staff was during the always slow times of a shift – how crude and common they wear. So, George wiped and wiped away, smiling at Josef, who would sit and nod, which was George's sign to make a Cosmopolitan.

Josef would pull out the copy of *The Ash Apologist*, reading slowly. George loved the grace of each page turn. How Josef's cufflinks glinted beneath the sconce-light, and that font of his initials, that curl of octopus ink against the stark-white mother of pearl: "JJF."

Jarls, of course, flopped down beside him, gulping down his drink, shaking the ice in rhythm to his chatter. *Best drink in town, I tell you, Georgie, you outta' go on the road with this stuff, but, dangit, it's hot in here, order me a club sandwich, will you, and shaking his glass again, how about another of these, George, and don't be afraid to make the ice float, haha, you get me?*

Josef would take a sip of his drink behind the paper, then curl back one corner, his frost-blue eyes captivating. "Well done, as usual, George. A piece of art, really."

George could float on that comment for a week. There was truth to it, though. George loved this job, beyond Jarls' correct complaints at the place, precisely because it was never busy. He hated being rushed. He wanted the time to measure out a drink

properly, to mix it with the delicacy it deserved, then to clean out his utensils and lay them back in their proper places again. Everything in its right place.

Few people in Ash knew the secret of the restaurant buried at the bottom of Down Street, down in the cellar of an old mansion rezoned for business with its orthodontist office on the first floor and J.C. and Company Massage Center on the second: “Relax Eternally with Us.” Certainly the food was abhorrent, as Jarls, picking through the limp lettuce and red thing that once resembled a tomato to get at the meat of his club sandwich could tell you. The service staff consisted of elderly women who had long given up on actually offering any semblance of service. Those who knew the place existed, where Down Street went wild, turned into a woods filled with nettles and old mattresses, whispered it had to be a money-laundering spot to still exist only blocks from the best food and booze in the area. Yet, some in the know knew to come on Mondays-Thursday, and they knew to be patient, because a proper wait led to a George drink.

Because a sip of a George drink was like ice skating on the neighbor’s pond as teenagers with beers stuck in the snow – and that first taste and feel of a partner’s lips coated with a lush, red wine – and joking with a long-lost friend on an empty late-night street – and that first moment the next morning before the hangover and embarrassing memories hit, when the night before still feels like magic, when magic is free, when magic still seems possible.

After the first Cosmopolitan, George would make Josef a second without asking. And Josef would put aside the paper, savor the drink, and give George, who lost sleep waiting for this moment each week, his full attention. “You’re a craftsman, sir. Why you’re wasting down here, I’ll never know.” Those dulcet tones. Josef’s cool appraisal.

The patrician nose sniffing the air. George passing some kind of muster. All the while, Josef would twirl a cufflink. And Jarls kept running down his own stream: *Peanut butter and jelly, that's all, I said, a man can ask for a sandwich once and awhile without getting guff, I said, right up, haha, you should've seen the look on her face, I tell you what, she was fit to be tied, over what, a peanut butter and sandwich, that's all.*

Hypnotic, Josef's cufflink twirl and frost-blue eyes, wide the way he would stare at George. Sneaking little questions in. "You live up the hill, yes, George?" Or "Say, we must be close in age. What year did you graduate?" George murmured replies, deflecting with questions about what was in that week's *Apologist*, an easy distraction. "Oh, George, more claptrap about a 'living wage,' whatever that may be. What workers don't appreciate is what has already been carved out for them to create the job in the first place. They can't possibly see the machinations in place above and around them."

George would nod with emphasis. "How true."

"A pity, really. I have great respect for the common man. Love, even. I only wish they could see that. Rise above the prejudices they're born out of, and see the love us creators feel for them. It is for them we create. One more, George, then the proverbial road for us."

Just love, George thought. Oh, Josef came off as cold, but all he sought was love. To break that barrier. To steal against the permafrost in his glance. To find the furnace deep within him, warm oneself by it.

And Jarls, shaking his glass in agreement: *make it a stiffie, Georgie, yessir, gotta' get ol' Jarls through the day, like rocket fuel, haha, rocket me to space and beyond, you know?*

That barbeque-with Juni-day, on the third drink, when Josef's eyes would get slightly wet, when the hint of a smile would curl at his lips, he touched George's hand to stop him from wiping away La Casa's constant supply of moisture. "Say, how would you like to get out of here for a night?"

"Get out of here" rang a strange note inside George. He saw the tree and the lightning far off. "How so?"

Josef's hand remained. "The family has this annual spring bacchanal, of sorts. A casual thing. We could use a man of your skillset. We'll pay well, of course. Better than," a wave of a slender hand, "this place ever could. And," a hand squeeze, "be sure to bring a date."

How frozen everything felt. Josef's hand slipped away, but those eyes, suddenly large, cavernous blue, remained focused on him. George felt trapped between reveling in the attention and that feeling he always had with Josef, of being catalogued, of being marked and released back into the wild.

Of course, George knew of the spring Fuffer party. Rumors of its extravagance, and of the extravagance of the Fuffer estate, had floated around Ash for as long as George could recall. Even Juni, not a fan of that family, often remarked how she would love to catch a glimpse of the event, but her connections ran short of an invite. What a prize he could offer her. Him, the provider, for once.

Still, the invitation reminded George of the state of La Casa Maison. Of how little he was, how round his belly had gotten, how full of stains all his tuxedo tops were. Of how small his little koi pond had gotten. He felt comfortable in that. But to go up the mountain to the Fuffer estate. What could possibly remain the same?

Jarls, who had grown surprisingly quite during Josef's invitation, broke the silence: *Oh, well, why yes, Georgie, we'd love to have you, yes, trundle up the hill and make these magic drinks for the crew, a lovely bunch, really, why, you'll fit right in, just us boys ringing in the equinox and all that hokum, you know, fun nonsense we get up to up the hill.*

And old floppy-headed Jarls, Jarls of the growing belly, too, of the strange outfits and neurotic chatter, he would be there, too. A challenge rose up in George. A taste of competition he rarely appreciated. And before he shaped the word in his mind, he answered, firmly, "Yes."

Scene 5 – Mother and *The Henchmans*

Thursdays Mother waited up for him. Not that she wouldn't have been up any other day - a bottle of vodka on its way to an early grave, the TV blaring an old movie. And not that George couldn't have joined her otherwise. But, on Thursdays, Mother tried. She set up their TV trays on the soft leather couch George loved so much ahead of time. She preheated the food sent up from downstairs and arranged it the way she thought George would appreciate – that evening, a London broil with a citrus au jus, poached pears, and a squash and dandelion salad.

Ready to go in the DVD player: whatever episode they had stopped at of their favorite syndicated sitcom: *The Henchmans*. George had the boxset. A gift long ago from Juni. Stanley Henchman, played by the talented Charles Aberdeen, was the *paterfamilias* of his favorite TV show: *The Henchmans* – a particularly droll and derivative piece of work, but it kept his attention, and it was something he shared with Mother for seven seasons and now into syndication. It followed the basic loving-couple-deals-with-growing-family premise, yet as the title suggests, the mother and father, Sally and Stanley Henchman, had peculiar day jobs: they worked for two separate master criminals. Tired sitcom tropes followed suit: if Suzie Henchman was boy crazy, it was further complicated by Sally's boss, The Tickler, needing five hundred gallons of cyanide by midnight. If Stephen Henchman lost a tooth, Suntan Sammy was threatening to erase Stan's mind for a recent blunder on a caper. Yet no matter how absurd the challenges thrown in front of the parents, after twenty-two minutes plus commercials, the Henchmans resolved all their issues. Every time. With love. And growth and understanding. As the theme song suggested: "Crime may never pay, but in the end, love always lights our way."

So, Stanley Henschman, played by that versatile, dashing Aberdeen, became, in many ways, the paragon of everything that is fatherhood to George. Stanley could be stern, but was always fair. He was quick with wit about the stresses in his life – in episode 305 titled “Submariner-in-Law” he quipped “I’m getting too old for this ship” – yet just as quick to express affection when necessary – same episode, his big catchphrase: “It’s a crime the way you stole my heart!” George absorbed every line. The morality Mother’s silence lacked to express was filled in neatly by *The Henschmans*’ half-hour sermons. Good people could work for evil people, he learned, because evil people were still easy to spot. They often wore eye patches. They discussed genocide over dessert. They treated Stan and Sally badly even when they knew Suzie had an oboe recital that Saturday. Good folk were all those left.

That evening, they watched one of George’s favorites: episode 300, “’Til Death Do Us Party,” with Stanley quipping, “Marriage is like torture except nobody has fun!” Mother and George always laughed then, and Mother repeated it to herself, clinking her ice.

She stood to make herself another. Wavering, hovering above George. Hard to separate Mother from Fuffer’s Tower for him in that moment. Both seemed impossibly thin, tall. Imperial. They shimmied in a gust of wind, especially Mother in her cups, until George thought they must collapse, but they didn’t, like the willows that they were. Both were sterile hallways, quiet and cold. Both were the smell of chlorinated water in the lobby. The wine glasses hanging upside down, so close they must touch, they must clink, make some kind of sound, yet they don’t. Furniture that’s not meant to be used. That’s being leased. That gets replaced once a decade. Both were the view of Ash and the

sprawling valley around it. Both were the hum of the elevators, moving up and down, all day, but never out and the hum of the televisions, even when off, and just that potential to be on, always humming for George, always a presence.

And both had always been at this spot. Eternal. Both had always been at the center of his vision, as if they were the light to his moth-ness.

Mother chuckled. “Oh, that Aberdeen.”

George had been thinking about him as well. How his chin took a five o’clock shadow so well. How the stubble would feel in the morning. A father one could wake up to. That confusing train of thought led him back to Josef.

“So, Mother, a funny thing happened on Tuesday. I was invited to the Fuffers’ Bacchanal.” And Mother’s silence. He didn’t expect it here. Normally, he could prepare. She sat with orchestrated slowness. “You know, the Fuffers? They own our building?”

“I’m not a goddamn idiot, Georgie,” she snapped, taking a long pull of her drink. He knew to wait this out. Her anger, however, leapt up out of the calm – almost loving – evening they’d been having, as if it always lay in wait.

She took another long pull, shook her ice. As George refilled her glass, she met his eyes – the fury building behind hers: “And how, dear child, did this come about?”

George felt stuck above her holding the now-empty pitcher. “My new friend, Josef. His father ...”

“Oh, I know Jaxon, George. Well.” A growl. George wondered if she might be losing it. If this was the first sign of dementia. He couldn’t remember her ever leaving the penthouse much less hobnobbing with the patriarch of Ash County. He reached down to

check her forehead for signs of a fever. She smacked it away. The old cat was still quick. “I forbid you to go.”

A little laugh escaped from George’s mouth and sat there between them. The room changed color. Thunder echoed throughout the next valley over. Mother was many things, but never a forbiddier. A forbiddier would need to back up her ultimatum. A forbiddier might need to actually go outside.

“If you go,” she said, “you ... you can’t live here anymore, George.”

He sat. No more Tower? He never fathomed anything else. Whenever he imagined it, he only saw him and Mother exactly as they were in perpetuity. Juni would certainly love it. She’d been after him to leave the nest for years. But she also didn’t appreciate how much he did for Mother. This felt like a death sentence for her. They had plenty of disagreements before, he and Mother. But George felt like this understanding always kept them tethered.

And he knew nothing about property. He guessed he could rent. What did that entail? Would he need a car? Suddenly, a wave of adulthood washed over him. He saw himself at the mercy of some chipper salesman smelling blood.

“But, why? Why over this?”

She stood, wavering. Her and the Tower. “That’s not something I need to discuss with you. I had my own life. You can have yours, if this is so damn important to you.” And with that, she stormed off to her room, slamming the door behind her.

It echoed throughout the penthouse. The thunder across the mountains replied.

George fixed himself a drink.

Scene 6 – Above Ash

They hopped in Juni's sensible dark green sedan – license plate, “RHUTA” – and she turned up the music too loud, and they sang to it too loud, and Ash slipped away behind them as they drove into the surrounding countryside – a wild place for George. A place he seldom ventured past sundown. And up and up Juni pushed the sedan spiraling around Mount Climax – the highest in the area – speeding through wooded curves at just George's comfort level, and singing, singing away their discomfort – old pop songs they grew up with, maudlin and simple – and the trees crowding over them, and the evening crowding over them, and the moment their singing felt like it would turn into shouting and screaming and Juni would yank the car into a giant oak killing both on impact, dying together, screaming together, the trees cleared: to the left, all the love and joy and pain and embarrassment and racism and lynching and rebirth and death of Ash melted into one heart-wrenching view – with Mother floating in her tower just above it all – and the road split between continuing straight and conceivably heading back down to the other side of the mountain, and turning right, into a tunnel marked, “Private Property: No Trespassing,” burrowed right through Mount Climax. It looked impossibly dark.

They idled there. Juni looked at George. A strain running along her sharp jawline. And he knew he could say, “Turn around. This is foolish! Let's get in our jammies and rent a movie,” and she would do it. They could roll down the mountain, laughing and singing at their folly, back to where it was safe. Back to their cocoon.

Back to the same. Tuesday lunches at MaHOGony. TV with Mother on Thursdays. Walking up Down Street from La Casa Maison four times a week. A few trips to Rhuta-Bodega. All carefully paced, plotted out somehow, his allotted movement.

Never had it seemed boring to George until they sat there, staring at the foreboding hole in the largest mountain around. So repetitive. Small. How damn small his world was.

Why hadn't he noticed before? What had he noticed before?

Yet, and equally, he knew it was also all fragile. That going through this tunnel might make it all blow away. A mirage of comfort. Everything that centered his silly life could disappear and years of pretending otherwise had only blinded him to it.

George decided to tell her to turn around, laugh it all off, roll down the other side of Mount Climax singing. What fun they'd make of their almost party next Tuesday. But the moment he opened his mouth, Juni turned on the headlights, and eased down on the accelerator into that tunnel, and briefly, everything that they knew was swallowed up.

Ahead, all they could see was the road, the tunnel, and a modest pin of late-afternoon light growing imperceptibly bigger until it, too, threatened to swallow them up.

Scene 7 - Arriving

Just like the clearing of trees on the other side, the tunnel's reveal felt overly-dramatic and staged, as suddenly they found themselves on one side of a giant, oval driveway that eventually circled back to the tunnel. Within the oval sat an acre of carefully manicured lawn encased by a circular driveway lined by trees, centered by a large hedge in the shape of an F in the same font – a family font, George thought – that was somehow upstaged by an oak tree, a giant oak tree, a giant oak tree that rang bells of alarm in George's head but Juni was already pulling up to the valet in front of the gargantuan house – a square austere brick front of seemingly infinite windows and infinite floors. A giant face of a building without expression. Judging them. Even Juni seemed small in comparison. She felt judged as “Too Small.”

Judging like the smirk on the valet's face when Juni handed him her keys.

Judging like the voluminous butler who checked their names at the door, eyeing them both up and down first, until he found George's name: “Ah yes,” eye roll, “the *scab* bartender.” And, to Juni, “This must be your *plus one*. Follow me.” And into a foyer that seemed to lead in every direction into chandelier-ed rooms with cantilevered ceilings and stairways that lead to more chandelier-ed rooms with cantilevered ceilings with and hallways with chandeliers and mini-foyers with chandeliers and chandeliers with chandeliers and people – oh, George! – people dressed in their finest finery lounging and leaning and chatting and scoffing and judging poor George and Juni as the voluminous butler excused his way through with nods and polite scoffs as they worked their way deeper and deeper into the bowels of the building with more hallways and chandeliers and grand rooms opening up everywhere until they found themselves poured into one

giant long hallway apart from everyone else that ended – like a giant, closed mouth – in a set of doors.

Giant, wooden doors, flat and unadorned, but impressive in their size. Another voluminous, scowling butler stood guard.

“It’s *him*,” Butler #1 said to Butler #2, who started to push the doors open, but stopped.

“Just *him*, though, not *her*.”

And everyone looked at Juni. George blustered something about her being his plus one and her being his bar-back and the two voluminous butlers looked at each other and scoffed in that way only a proper domestic could.

Butler #1: “I’m sorry,” he shrugged. “Fuffer’s orders.”

“It’s okay, Georgie,” Juni said, although it clearly wasn’t, as Butler #1 placed a giant hand on her arm and led her down the hallway. “Just be confident! Just be you!” And she and the butler disappeared into the crowd.

Just George and Butler #2, who, George noticed, wore a quite expensive tuxedo shining under this light. He wore it well, with the ease of practice, like his silent scoff. His big hand pushed open the doors.

Scene 8 – The Inner Chamber

Red velvet and wood everywhere. Wood walls – not paneling, solid wood – with red velvet swaths intermixed and red velvet couches and red velvet chairs. In the corner, sat a wooden bar top wrapped in red velvet.

“Begin setting up. The *inner party* will arrive soon,” growled Butler #2, quickly shutting the door behind him.

It was a small room, especially in comparison with the house, and especially with how cluttered it was. The back wall was entirely comprised of a wood bookcase to the ceiling, lined with red velvet, and stuffed with antique books, the gold-lettering on their binding with such titles like *The African Solution* and *The Many Joys of Ancient Usury*.

Covering the two other walls hung giant portraits of, George assumed, ancestors. Strange to see the resemblance in them. The lean, intense look of some who favored Josef. The short, squat, far-off absurdity of the Jarls kin. The largest near his bar was clearly Josef and Jarls, bookended by a lean, intense looking mother, and that squat Fuffer-ness of a man that had to be the infamous Jaxon Fuffer: owner of the Fuffer Tower. How foolish he looked standing next to the grand, dignified personage of Josef. How even painted, he exuded a grandness. How his eyes bore in to George even then. He noticed the portrait’s background: the giant oak on the front lawn. He shuttered. He fought the impulse to touch it, as if even the paint might shock him.

If he wasn’t so preoccupied, he might have noticed the far off note of syrup in the air.

George took his time setting up the bar, imagining his life here among the Fuffers. Horse-riding with Josef down the mountain. Talking politics with Josef on the veranda

with drinks, a voluminous butler serving them. No Scoffing Allowed. Swimming with Josef in the indoor / outdoor pool, doing laps, racing, and how Josef's thigh brushes past him once, and how they share a towel after, and how they'd find themselves in a private study like this one night, talking over centuries-old brandy about their most personal secrets until the morning. They realize how late it's become, laughing, and they embrace, and they linger in the embrace.

Easy to lose track of time in these windowless rooms, George thought. He slowly sliced a lime, sucking on a wedge. Must be dark by now. He had straightened every chair and pillow several times over by now. No more drink prep could be done. No sound from the outside world made it through the solid wood.

He opened the door a crack and peered outside. How the sound of revelry had increased tenfold. Laughter and music – tinkling pianos and lively strings and random peals of joy, and a sort of shuffling of feet, of movement, like the party had become a giant organism beyond George hidden away the way he was, moving of one giant accord, and only George, hidden away the way he was, could appreciate how each person had melted into the collective, how they might still consider themselves an individual capable of agency, of dancing because they said to themselves, “I want to dance!” but only he could see how each step they took was orchestrated by powers beyond them all. Ants following chemical trails. Birds flapping along magnetic poles.

The sound of glass breaking. A women's shriek. George hoped Juni was alright. Butler #2's giant eye appeared in the doorway.

“Hi!” George said. “Care for a drink? It's awfully stuffy in here by myself.”

Butler #2 closed his eyes, shook his head once, and pulled the door closed.

George took to his station behind the bar, afraid to move now. He thought of Juni. He hoped she was okay. And time passed – some amount of it. George couldn't be sure of how much, hidden away the way he was.

The door slammed open and in poured twelve men all stuffed into tuxedos more expensive than Juni's car, roaring with laughter, back-slapping, falling over themselves to get to the bar, yelling orders over each other, and poor George, paralyzed, tried to locate an order first to begin, until a crystal-cracking voice – familiar – shattered all.

“Gentleman!”

And the group parted to reveal Josef in all his grandeur. How impossibly handsome. His graying hair swept back neatly. His tux of the sharpest cut. His bearing ramrod straight, yet he could lean with it, as if gravity meant nothing, always leaning straight into people, and he leaned into them all as he pronounce, with the smallest slur – it was obvious the group had been imbibing greatly before entering: “Cool your respective jets, gentlemen. Let us express the positions we were born into with charm, fellas, haha. This is the ... man I've been telling you about. This is George the Bartender – the best damn bartender you'll ever meet, yet like all fine art, he cannot be rushed. Order one at a time, fellas!” And the group groaned. “Oh, listen to the wealthy belly-aching. Don't worry, no one will remain sober for long. Jones!” And in rushed Voluminous Butler #1 with a tray full of champagne flutes to appease the wealthy drunkards. And to George, Josef leaned in: “No stress, lovely George. Take your lovely time. It's yours to take.” And with a wink, he disappeared back into the crowd, who had lined up obediently, drink in hand.

So George took his time – his to take by the pronouncement of Master Josef –

making each drink with care, and how the rich boys, as he thought of them – how even the rich turned to playful camaraderie when drunk, and how even Jaxon Fuffer, that grand patriarch, but actually only as tall as George, and round like George was round, and his giant head like George, and cross-eyed with drink already, felt the good cheer of the evening.

Josef's introduction: "You remember me mentioning our George, right, father? Works at our little place downtown? You know, the restaurant on Down?"

And Jaxon, barely capable of making words: "Why you bought that dump, I'll never know, son. But," to George, "If Josef loves you, my boy, then you're all right with me!"

But George had no time to sit with this information, as surprising as it was. George could see the magic of his drinks working on the men, even as inebriated as they already were, in the way they suddenly remembered. At first, their stories waxed familiar, recalling their first taste of beautifully aged scotch, or the first time they got to fire someone, or their first affair with a servant, or their first time firing a servant they were having an affair with.

But by the third sip, their eyes would clear, and one would speak in hushed tones about a teenage crush. How she'd always pick a flower and put it behind his ear, and how he'd pretend he hated it, and wore it begrudgingly, but secretly, just the thrill of her finger brushing his lobe sent him off for days. And how they slept together once before she left for college – a dream whose details he couldn't completely recall – and how her bare feet sounded on the bare floor the next morning as she dressed, and how he could

hear them padding down the hall, could still see the swish of her spring dressed, wrinkled now, disappearing forever through the doorway.

And Jaxon Fuffer, growing ever more cross-eyed and silent, wiped away a tear.

And Josef, who could command the room whenever he pleased, told a simple story of a beautiful spring day he always thought of from his childhood where absolutely nothing happened, yet he told it with such elegance and efficiency, the room remained quiet throughout.

“And then I went to bed still smelling of lavender. Slept better than I ever had since. Absolutely nothing happened, yet I can’t shake the memory. Now, I wonder. I wonder if I’m capable of having day like that. An absolutely nothing day.” The silence remained. George had never seen Josef’s face so open like that. How young he suddenly looked, lost in that memory. He could see that boy. And something in the boy rang too familiar. A connection George couldn’t make yet, tacky to the touch.

Butler #2 smashed the moment, gliding in with another tray of champagne. Leaning in to George, growling: “You. Take your mandated break. No more than ten minutes.”

And Josef, grandly recovering, shouted, “Yes, friend George, return soon. You are my guest of honor. Surprises coming!”

George’s trip down the long hallway. The surge of people moving as one, louder, desperate almost, a sense of danger in the air, a sense of an impending explosion, one incendiary incident that would ignite the whole place, and the sense that the crowd was hungry for that explosion.

No way he could find Juni in this mess, he thought, except there she was, just a few feet beyond where the hallway opened up, leaning against a mantle, trying to look both inconspicuous and interesting.

Her gown shimmered, and her figure shimmered beneath the gown, and George had never seen her looking so small, and beautiful, and vulnerable, and like Josef, George was reminded of the child still present in her, awkward and fumbling that day they officially met at work.

George grew angry at the fools around her, their backs to her, laughing and slouching and dancing and shouting meaningless bullshit while they ignored this vision. This actually capable person who could out-think, out-laugh, out-work all of them. For the first time, George saw beyond their wealth. A bunch of children, really, but spoiled and petulant, not beautiful in their naiveté, sneering and grotesque, playing dress up, pretending they could possibly hold real value while ignoring Juniper Grace, and drinking away the gnawing realization, George thought, that they don't matter. Just shuffling feet in a giant organism.

He felt so protective suddenly. He moved to her, yet Jarls, appearing from nowhere, arrived first.

And Juni turned to Jarls. Recognition. How much George was learning. It never occurred to him, Juni's outside world. How they must've known each other from school so many years ago now. How, by their familiarity, by the way Juni touched Jarls' forearm – and George burned at that – they must've still kept in touch. And Jarls' great head flopping side to side uttered something in its nattering that made Juni laugh, head back like she does when sincere, and then he said something that made her blush, touch her

neck to feel the heat of the comment, and George couldn't wait any longer. Josef was never further from his mind.

When he got to them, both blushed as if caught. Juni quickly put an arm around him. "Oh, Georgie, how goes it? How is the inner circle treating you?" And Jarls made some similarly effacing comment about *welcome to our humble abode, Georgie, so good to see you, let us know, yes, let us know if you need a thing, we aim to please, yes ha.*

"Did you know," George said, it suddenly occurring to him, "that Josef owns La Casa Maison? Did both of you know?" He didn't mean to sound accusatory, but something had switched in him, as if he, too, was waiting for the spark. The thought of Jarls and Juni might have been enough. Juni looked at George, squinting as if to see him better, then they both turned to Jarls for explanation.

Yes, well, I guess that's true, Georgie, so hard to keep track of all his properties – a man about town, amiright, ha – and, anyway, I dunno, we both just like your company so much I guess, but yes, I think so, I think he's owned it for some time.

"Well, then," George replied. And they stood there for a second, the great party winding around the three. And they looked at each other. And they looked away from each other. And something had changed forever. "I must be getting back."

"Oh," Juni clutching at him, "So soon? How late, how late do you think you'll be?" George had never seen her so nervous, but before he could comfort her, Jarls clutched at him as well, and again, George could picture the three of them separate from the great flow like a flood moving, rising, around them, and the three of them clinging to each other as if lifeboats.

Yes, say, Georgie, why go back at all, you've served your time and all, and, well, I'm sure I could explain it away to Josef, I'm sure of it, that's my job as the youngest, amiright, ha ha, to be irresponsible and get away with it, and well, those boys, you know, those inner circle boys, and Josef, well, they can be, sure, well, I just think you've served your time is all.

“Well, Jarls,” and George said this looking at Juni, immune to its irony, “some of us were born into responsibility.” With that, he made a dramatic turned, and returned to that inner chamber.

Scene 9 – Surprise!

Butler #2 growled at George's return. He pushed through the door. The room was now dark, yet he could hear the snickering of wealthy folks kneeling behind furniture. Could see the tops of their expensive haircuts peeking over the backs of sofas. George flicked on the light. They all leapt to their feet with an angry "Surprise!"

Josef dragged Jaxon, barely conscious by this point, from behind the couch, holding a large, flat, brown package in his other hand, which he thrust at George. "We just wanted to say thanks, George, and that you're one of us. A small gesture. Open it!" Tuxedo-ed drunk men tried to sing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," but they quickly forgot who the fellow in question was, and the song mumbled away back to their general drunken prattle. But Josef was focused – something sharp in his eye and smile that George had never seen before. Sparkling. He shook his father awake, "Pay attention, Pop! This is a doozy!"

George, unsure of everything, but humbled by a gift, began unwrapping the gift, clearly a framed something-or-other. But it wasn't the gift that captured his eye, but the look on Jaxon's face as he realized what it was. A slow horror dawning on him.

"Oh, Josef," Jaxon said, clearer than anything that evening. "What have you done."

"Just bringing the world a little closer, father," Josef replied, and he laughed, head thrown back like Juni, but dripping with a derision George couldn't fathom, a horrific sound that cracked Josef's face into horrible lines of age. No child left behind.

George took off the last bit of paper. There, framed, was a lovely photo, yellowing from age of a couple lounging on a grassy hill overlooking a meadow filled

with the purples and reds of early spring, just like the day Josef was talking about earlier. That seemed hours ago now. The person on the right, although a little thinner, George quickly recognized as a young Jaxon Fuffer. And while the couple were both looking far off and away from each, it was obvious in their relaxed countenance, in the way they both leaned back on their hands near each other, in the easy closeness of their hands, in the gaiety in their eyes, that they enjoyed each other's company. That they were something. More than.

It was the smile that threw George off first. The woman was lovely, if slender, yet obviously capable. There was a hope in her eyes George had never seen before. There was a future present in them. And there was no thought of George, for sure.

And the slow horror of that dawning. He dropped the picture. What time was it, he thought? So hard to tell in these windowless rooms. Hidden away like they were.

Why hadn't he ever noticed, the way Mother and Josef were built the same. Shaped the same in their hard faces. How George could've taken Jaxon's place in that photo, built how they were. Or Jarls, too. And he saw the portraits on the wall again. Surrounded by them all. Georges and Mothers, really. Or Josefs and Jaxons. And Jarlses. Thin or portly. Tall or squat. Georges and Mothers forever. A parade of them all around him. He grew dizzy, them spinning around him like that.

The syrup hit strong now. His spine began tickling.

"What have you done, son? Why?" Jaxon repeated.

"What do you mean, Pop?" Josef said, slapping the older man on the back. "Why, I'm just bringing family together!"

And with that, the first lightning bolt hit George, and he collapsed.

Scene 10 – Egress

There was the vision, of course, and the tree again, except this time he knew its location exactly. And this time, he stood outside, and it was dark, and he could hear the party raging on inside. And the storm, fierce and fast, flew up Mount Climax. George knew it was heading for the tree and him.

He beat against a window, but while he could hear the party, the halls were all empty. Only noise echoed down them. He could make out Jaxon and Josef, their voices raised. The sound of a scuffle. Of Butler #2 politely begging them to stop, of breaking glass, of raucous laughter, insane, and of whatever remained of inhibitions being lost, and the whole party exploding at once into a fever, of debauchery, of fistfights, of more breaking – furniture, art, chandeliers, of George no longer wanting to go inside, but also trapped by the tree, the size and scope of it, pressing down on him, it reeking of that syrup to the point if he turned and looked at it, if he dared, which he didn't, George would see it weeping. Weeping that syrup, not sweet, but tannic.

So, he stood there, paralyzed, only finding comfort in his reflection in the window. "I still exist," he said.

Only then did Juni appear, kicking open the great doors, carrying a man over her shoulder – a lumpy man in a cheap tuxedo top and pants. An incapacitated man. *That's me*, George thought giddily, and his reflection nodded.

Behind her marched Jarls, carrying the framed picture.

Juni threw her ticket at the valet driver, and when her car arrived, she threw the incapacitated man in the back seat, and, with Jarls hopping in shotgun, she peeled away from the scene, leaving George behind with the giant house and the tree, and the storm.

As if on cue, a bolt hit the tree, splitting off a giant limb which fell toward George, but so very slowly, George thought as he blacked out. Why is it falling so very slowly?

Chapter 10 - How Mother Flew

“Short shrift!” Mother yelled. “And who is this nattering clown?”

Jarls, the clown in question, fumbled in the kitchen with drinks pretending he wasn't there. Still, he'd be stuck on *nattering clown* for minutes of muttering.

George lay prone on the couch, a wet rag over his head, the bracelet from his hospital visit still around his wrist.

And Juniper Grace, well, she stood a few feet away from Mother, hands on her hips, green dress and eyes sparkling with fury – and a healthy dose of booze.

The picture sat quiet on the new Italian marble table that had recently replaced the old one; its frame, in pieces on the floor by Mother's feet next to her empty bottle of gin. She'd been obviously taking her own heavy doses during the evening.

The two women seemed to gather something from each other. No oxygen remained in the room. The three feet between them warped in odd ways. They could've been miles apart. They could've been kissing.

“Short shrift!” Mother repeated. “You come in here like you know something! You know nothing!” George did not recognize this voice. Shrill and insistent. Unrelenting. A dam had broken free. A silence had slid away.

“Mother Stiltz,” said Juni, and George recognized this voice in her; it was her overcoming-obstacle voice; it was her “You're in my way” voice. How sensible she made everything sound. Yet, this time, it grumbled on in a register deeper than usual. “Just explain, then. There's your boy on the couch. After learning he's related to a perverse amount of wealth that he's never been privy to. After learning all this,” waving her hands about her to insinuate the penthouse, “is born out of that perversity somehow. Shit, we all

knew it was something weird. And, Mother Stiltz, after a *seizure*. Your boy had a *seizure*. Something I hear – I *just* hear,” a furious glance at George,” happens all the time. So,” and her finger wagged, “explain yourself then. Free yourself from all this short shrifting.”

Unrelenting. Mother laughed and all the rusted bells within a thousand miles must have shattered. “You think you know so much?” And all the dripping, jealous vile she must’ve been burying for years over Juni came to the forefront. “You think you’ve found some kind of truth with how you’ve lived, don’t you? The way you prance around everywhere.” To make this point, she covered the space between them in a flash, matching Juni’s finger with her own. George never noticed they were the same height. “Let me tell you, *sister*, some of us don’t have it so easy.” He never noticed, as thin as Mother was, how strong she still was, even next to Juni’s strength. Her wiry arms flexed to match Juni’s graceful, massive bicep.

“So easy? Look around, *sister*. You live in the clouds.” George never appreciate Mother’s beauty until he saw that photo of her youth.

Unrelenting Mother. “You talk about *my* boy. Well, you’re damn right. My boy that I had to raise, not you! Some of us had deals to make for boys like him. Some of us weren’t born strong! Some of us had to manufacture it!” And Juni, the oak; and Mother, the willow.

Juni shrugged. “Go on and on, *Mother*. You speak in circles.” If Juni proved grace lived in even brute force, Mother proved it also resided in a stubborn ability to bend to it.

And Mother actually began circling Juni, laughing. She really could be funny, George thought. “You couldn’t last in my circles, honey.” Her thin lips had an elegance he never appreciated next to Juni’s lush, more vital mouth. He imagined them kissing,

and shuddered at the thrill of it. But Mother only smelled the jugular, and she knew where it lived. “You think you’re this bull, but – *sister* – you ain’t nothing but a giant cow!”

Juni shoved her without thinking, an impulse that shot down her capable arms. And Mother flew. That’s what it looked like. Mother flying backwards. Never flailing. As if she knew. This was coming. And she allowed it. As if everyone, including Jarls, who for the first time had gone silent in the kitchen, stood in a fixed point in the universe. A location. The Point Where Mother Flew.

She landed hard on the frame and broken glass. George cried out and leapt to her, kneeling, hands on her shoulders. And the room fell, hushed. Not even the buzzing of the TV. Just four people in a penthouse overlooking Ash, fixed in the whole damn grand scheme.

Mother looked at her hand, cut from the glass. She rubbed her thumb in it, thoughtful now.

“Oh, Mother Stiltz,” Juni said softly, “I’m so sorry.”

“Blood,” Mother said. She drew a line of red across George’s forehead. “My blood!” And she smiled, and she suddenly revealed herself as that gorgeous youth of the picture grinning like that, the creases in her face disappearing, and a light he’d never seen filling her eyes. Filled with a future. “Help me up, Georgie,” and he did. And turning to face him, hands on his shoulders now, her blood smearing his tuxedo top, she said, “I’m sorry, Georgie. I’m sorry for all of it. I – I swear to you I did my best. Wanted the best. Even for you.” She shook her head. “Often for you. But it wasn’t enough.” She bent down and picked up the torn photo. “I wanted so much. I dreamed of you, really. Well,”

shrugging, “the you I thought she deserved. Whatever the fuck that means.” She touched her face in the photo. “That’s really me! I can hardly recognize her. How she dreamed so. How she hoped. Until this man, a supposed friend. A cousin. A hopeful ... something more.” And George saw the parade of all the Josef and Jaxons around him. All their eyes, cunning and quick, drawing him in, dragging him closer. How close he had been to their horrible centers. “How he took advantage!”

Juni gasped. “What are you saying, Mother?”

That turn of hers, so quick on her heels. “I’m saying my blood. I’m saying I bled that day too. That day and today, my same blood! All of this,” – waving her hands like Juni – “my blood! This penthouse is signed for in my blood, that awful day when he took advantage and today. For Georgie! All of it. Your boy! My ... my boy.” And whatever dam she had left broke then, too. And she collapsed onto George, letting the tears of a lifetime finally come. Wracked with great sobs George worried might choke her. He knew only to put his arms around her. He stopped knowing anything else. He stopped feeling just then.

And Juni, soft again: “I’m so sorry, Miss Stiltz.”

“No,” turning to her, still hiccupping, “I’m sorry, Juniper. You’ve been so good to him. Better than I could. And I repaid you in jealousy. But now, all of you need to get out. And you. Georgie.” A gentle pat on George’s head. “You, too. It’s time you left.”

Juniper: “Mother!” But George only heard “out,” and he agreed. He didn’t need to know anything else right now. He slid open the glass door and stepped onto the balcony, closing it behind him. He could still hear raised voices behind him, but they were muffled enough to not care.

How peaceful Ash appeared just then. Must be so late. Well past midnight. How quiet the streets were. Not a car in sight. Not a person prowling. Only him breathing above it all. Even The Fuffer Estate, its lights still blazing, and who knows what awfulness was still happening, was too far away to matter. Just breathing above Ash. “Out,” he said, liking how the word drifted over the balcony’s edge and floated down. Down to the peaceful streets. How nice. How nice to float like that. Mother did, albeit briefly. Maybe Georgie could, as well. How nice to float away.

The glass door slid open behind him. Juni’s gentle touch on his back. Something had been agreed upon. “Why don’t you pack a little bag, my love? Why don’t you stay with me tonight?”

Chapter 11 – Juni’s Big Promise

And he did. Who knows what he packed? He was passed knowing for the moment.

And Mother took her turn on the couch. Juni had tucked her in, and she quickly fell asleep. The exhaustion of it all. The relief of it all. The three of them stood by the door for a second, looking at the scene, looking at Mother. How peaceful now.

George pushed past Jarls to the kitchen. He got out the appropriate tools and ingredients. He made a pitcher of Cosmopolitans for Mother in the morning and placed them in the fridge. How nice it felt to do so. How final. How he floated over to Mother, kissed her cheek, and how the three then left without looking back.

The long elevator ride down. The Muzak version of “No More I Love You’s”. How nice. And how nice was Jarls’ silence. His posture had changed. His expression, more forthright. He and George stood on both sides of Juni. That seemed right.

And it seemed right not to question all three of them getting in to the car. Heading to Juni’s. Jarls had made his own break that night. Where else would they go?

And the trio said little as Juni arranged a place for Jarls on her futon. Tucked him in, as well. Kissed his forehead to his smile. A fondness growing between them. How beautiful was Juni. How kind and strong and forthright. How rare.

And then there was just those two with Jarls quickly snoring. Standing three feet away from each other. George knew little except Juni’s vast beauty in front of him. He saw how she saw him, too. As a person. Not just an issue. Or an absurdity. For once. As a person with something to offer her.

“My bed is big enough. You could, you know, you could stay with me tonight.”

And the scene played out for George. How thrilling. How they might fuck – yes! That word. George could encapsulate it. And how they could date. And marry. And how he could father children. And how their strengths would defeat their weaknesses. Together. And how they'd rule Ash and waltz in to MaHOGany and always get their table and how Rhuta-Bodega would thrive and how George would open his own place – something that mixed his own talents. Makeup and slow drinks. The Painted Trough. Something like that. They had plenty of time to consider it. And when they died, they'd simply float away together. How nice. And the crowd would tear up. And the credits would roll.

But another scene appeared in a harsher light. How needy George would be with her. At least at first. At least forever. How much he'd draw from her until she was as thin as Mother. How much he already resided within her. How he'd yet to become him. George. George Jacob Stiltz. How hiding in her would never allow that.

And Jarls on the couch. Handsome in this light, so peaceful like that. How nice. He'd been so brave this evening. And George wasn't blind to the connection between him and Juni, however absurd it may appear in the light of day quickly approaching.

And what Juni deserved. So much more. He could see her now. A complete person. An engaging, complete, lonely person just as confused as him in some respects. And, ugh, so beautiful and vulnerable she looked just then, disheveled in her shimmering gown. Tired, for once. Not inexhaustible like he always imagined her. Those impossibilities he always imagined her being

Just a real person like him. And what she deserved.

No credits to this scene. No end to it, either. Just the world spinning still. How nice of it to keep doing so. There's a bravery in that.

Something new brewed within him. Floating to the top of his skull. Something he'd never made before: a sincere decision.

Georgie, our Georgie, took Juni by the hand, and looked deeply into her eyes. "No, my heart. Not tonight. But, thank you. For everything. What an amazing compliment."

Juni let out a rush of air, as if she'd been holding all the oxygen in the room that entire time. She nodded. Smiled. And she was done. All within her left. She collapsed on to her bed. And the care Georgie took in tucking her in now. How nice. And a kiss on her forehead.

As he walked past the full-length mirror on her bedroom wall, he didn't turn to catch his reflection for once: an adorable little man with – yes – a slight belly, a large head, blood on his forehead and cheek and tuxedo top, makeup smeared, and smiling. That great Georgie smile.

And he made himself a place to sleep on the floor next to her. And, with the light of the new day peeking through her blinds, he, too, finally found peace.

Chapter 12 – That Glorious, Goddamn Tree

He came to it in a dream, this time, instead of a horrible, shuddering vision. In the dream, he woke up next to Juni, and he decided to take a walk, so he did.

And he walked up Down Street, past Juni's shop and the BBQ place and even past the Tower, and he kept right on walking through the woods with boundless energy. No rock or underbrush too big or thick for him to easily walk over. And up and up he walked, up Mount Climax like it was a slight incline, and he came to the clearing of trees, and he walked through the tunnel, and there he was, by the large F and the tree again.

It was dawn. The remnants of the party still everywhere, trash on the lawn, several windows broken. The house, however, had found its own peace. Haunting in its quietness.

He turned to the tree. Giant, sure, but only in an Earthly dimension. He walked towards it, sidestepping its thick roots, the giant limb where the lightning hit on the ground. He reached out to the scar on its trunk. That first touch.

The sap was already congealing to heal it like a wound. He felt for the tree. Just a tree. And over here, bark. Just bark. Firm and wonderfully hard and soft, like Juni. He saw the branches waving above him. Pliant like Mother. It's a wonderful tree, sure. But just a tree. He could see the pits and other scars of a sordid past in its trunk.

A snow began to fall over Ash. Giant flakes floated down like embers from a great fire. They began to cover everything. A white-washing. A cleansing.

Only then did George notice a path he'd never seen before cutting through the woods, around the side of the house, and leading up and over to the other side of the

mountain. He'd never seen the view from over there before. Into a new valley. A new town to breathe above. He started out at once.