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Despair Priorities

Novel

By

Eugenio Negro

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Text set in EB Garamond.

This text is a work of fiction.

Dedicated to the hardworking people who cultivate,  
harvest and pack Hans brand tulsi tea leaves,  
without which this book probably wouldn't have been written.

TO BE READ OUT LOUD AT MAXIMUM VOLUME

A bold plan  
drawn up by assholes  
to screw morons  
–Nomeansno

But hope is unreasonable  
–Robert Fripp

wear to christ, Chava!— Even with this little rain the house’s mustiness and catsmell got louder. On the step I turn to double-beep the truck’s lock and my toe finds a deteriorated little brown chipboard box, like a former cheap shoerack. It’s right in front of the screen, so I go down the driveway instead. Then I have to wipe the paper and the emaciated striped cat off my shoes outside the laundry-room door. The kitchen is dark, stuff on the floor there, too. Where does all this keep coming from? I almost forget to put my mask back on.

—When you come home I’m like shit, I’m gonna get towed. It’s not even towing, street-cleaning day!— Dave’s voice is like gasoline in a cut. I notice the truck’s yellow glowing in the afternoon light from the west, like an outside lamp behind the curtains, and I guess this is how Dave says that he noticed too. —I’m on call.

—Your mom called?— Greasy vision adjusts to the inside of the fridge. My box of expensive leftovers is gone. —I’m on call, at work!

Trying to stay out of the way all the time means things like my mask hasn’t been washed in probably four days, and now it’s a laundry-room catbox-stink satellite. I go around the kitchen and bathroom once to look around. —Where is she?

—She’s fine.— Dave’s voice has that stop, take his word. Eyes readjust, and in the brighter living room appear Dave and the human-headed chimera of couch and Brian. —I just, when I moved in, you gave me the idea to giver room. Is she in the house? It’s wet out.— My mask stops me wanting to turn it around on him, tell him that I consider her, that yesterday I saw her out in her robe in the cold.

—Hey. Hey ... over here.— His body is forcing mine to redraw the distance, spins us into the kitchen doorway's corner, where the television buzz draws around us. —Might be gettin ridda this lazyboy.

His mask's wet folds like a dominatrix sock puppet. Since he's got me standing right over the stained old chair, I check it for problems.

—Why?

—Fryan sez he knows a friendo might haul it ... Shh, but don't talk about it! ... Right? Think about it!

And now he's turning it on me, tossing the lazyboy as if she doesn't need space. I feel like I'm stepping where something will hit me later. Brian notices our whispers hurry and stretch. Our eyes wander, seek cover from him, from her. The masks help. —You still talkin to that chair?— tries Brian.

Dave raises his voice over to Brian, I think to test him: —Your homie really wantsta take it?

—Wait. Stare at it till it disappears ...

—Fryan,

—No, I'm not sayin ... ! I'm sayin stare at it cause it's fun to do, to relax yer eyes! It was just a idea I noticed. It's white, the wall's white, as it gets dark outside you can stare at stuff like that. It fades into the walls and all you can see is the catscratches.— He looks back at his phone. He's thinking about his eyes going blurry too? Maybe it's this house, this season.

—Are you gettin a nicer one? I saw out front,

Dave spins on me again. —Why?

—What if she wants it? Did you talk to her?

His head swells up around the mask, my neck bristles, a tap at the front door. Brian stretches over from his perch and mutes the tele-

vision. We turn and it's Gil. He wears nicer clothes than we do, and they're not wet at all even though he bikes. Dave starts talking trash with him right away, but soon he dips out to the shower. She's not in the bathroom, I guess.

I skirt around my roommate's thick jacketed trunk again. —We should talk about this with her. Where is she?— Our eyes shift around, tuck in corners of meaning, he's moved his rage to a new corner, like a lamp, shining on me. —She's cool, Chava. She's a grown woman.

—You don't know where she is?— What I want is for him to come out and say that she told him to get rid of the chair, not to decide for her. —When'd you see her last?

I go look out from the landing to see if she's creeping around the cars out front again, like she's lost a cat or something between the curb and the tires. Maybe she wants to look at my truck. Not out front, not tangled up between the van, the gate, the crud and the car.

—Anyway, that's the plan with the chair. — Louder this time, Dave just repeats things until they're true for everyone.

—Did you just asker about it while you ... ? Why don't we asker first?

—You talk like that when she can hear you, she's gonna think you're makin fun of her.

I'm about done standing close enough for infection for the day, but we drop our voices again, under cover. —Listen. Why you wanna get rid of it so bad?

—You can't tal it's fuckin pestilent?

I look down again but it's hard not to notice Dave's two garbage bags of laundry, pile of mail and ranch-spattered takeout plastic around



the chair. I hope he doesn't see me almost nod at it. —Look, yer probably not here when she uses it. She's got a schedule to what she does.

—Oh really Chava? She's got a fuckin schedule?— And he wiggles his pointer finger down the index of his other outstretched palm. —Wal I guess you know better than everyone now, after barely a fuckin month, elapsed! But all's I knows's the cats use it. And that shit's outta control.

Elapsed, one of those words that people with only an eighth-grade education remember from seventh grade and repeat to show education. That and the word conceited. What book did we read in fourth grade that had conceited in it?

I break off to look again, and Gil emerges from the bathroom, finds us still half-ass looking for her. He thumbs at her closed door, but I shake my head. —I'm not gonna be the first to do it.

The back of my neck clicks again, and her slipper-shuffle creeps over the grimy linoleum. She was out back, not in front like I thought. I guess she creeped around the van after I looked the first time.

I wait for her to say something, to express unhappiness that matches her body, but she doesn't. Her silence activates the flight instinct, the body ready to be kicked out of the house. She lets Dave direct her, retreats to her room, probably to shake him off.

He comes back still wanting to make his point about the chair. I hit the kitchen and try to clean up, want to hold them responsible for my takeout box, but how. Everyone wants to put music on the television at once. Gil heads out the front door. I nod at the living-room floor and tell Dave, —Why don't you guys go outside a while, and I'll sweep the floors.

—I’nginna sweep the floors!— Dave orders me, and stomps over in his dirty boots so it’s for sure. It’s like, he’s both disappointed in how much you don’t do what he thinks is right, and too selfish to call you out for it, at the same time. Sometimes I think I’m getting the same vibe from her, but I shouldn’t mix them up.

—Look,— I try to get him to come over so we can talk quieter, about whatever, —the sink’s leaking.

—It’s cause Gil probly washed the floor and under the sink, and now it’s wet.— I lean down away from his hairy pleatedblack jaw, open the cabinet and wipe with my sleeve. —No, look. Now watch ... see? It’s leaking ... — He snorts. —Don’t tal Gil, he’ll have a fistula.

—You swear like he’s the plumbing police.

—The plumping police, the way you guys shit!

—So, should I just handle it, or does she want to be involved with it, talk to a plumber first?

—What can she be involved with?

—That’s why I’m asking!— It’s like we both want this to be evidence for our side of the lazyboy, her missing opinion traced in airborne dander around us, but we’re too twisted up now.

I wait. His neck sweats, eyes like I’m the leaking part, and at last he huffs. —You wanna pay for it, I ain’t gonna stop you.

I try to keep my voice down, though he’s turned away. —That’s why I ask. I’m happy to do it, Dave.

I’m following Gil out as Dave hits the couch next to Brian, no broom in sight. With her safely tucked away in her room, I want to take my mask off out here.

Brian bounces up after me and I ask him very quietly not to call anyone about the chair. He nods his long hair, and his speech snaps

open and closed neatly as the small toolkit from his pocket. —I'll uh, put those contacts on the back burner.

—Does that mean you agree?— It's funny how the things he says, the movements he makes, seem to linger in the space after him, like dust. Maybe I'm just too sensitive to people after that much time by myself.

Outside the air is clean and humid above a fine grit of traffic noise from 87. Gil's not in the front, just the black motorcycle and the cats and the gray barbed tomato-vine remnants. Across the street from the driveway the moving van with the party gear and the brinquelines is gone, and right away an RV has taken its place. I check around it for Gil's slim clothes and shiny hair. Through the window the keys hang in the ignition. On the passenger back end and over the rear-end toolrack hang a Costco security camera each.

—He's in back,— says Brian for sure, and waves his hand disgusted at the huge rusty rollaway that keeps us from going around the car. —lessgo through the laundry room.

The rain's definitely done. We can all easily angle our voices into the open garage or the corner of the ant-galleried fence, so Gil and Brian and me get to talking. Brian says that a contact at the company where he'd applied told him a story. —They're all too polite to give criticism, specially over Zoom.— Gil already has them drinking a tall can, splurps: —Screw Zoom.

—Which I can imagine,— Brian goes on, —it's impossible to trust anyone over Zoom. And people now're just really afraid of each other.

—That's the self-care industrial complex, man,— concludes Gil, —Antisocial people from the nineties finally found their brand.

—So now it's time forem to fire someone, and there's nothin written down about why they need to fire him, cause no one kept track of what he did to get himself fired, cause they didn't want to be bossy. So I dunno if I should wait to pursue it or what. I'd be a perfect fit.

—I got the same situation at my job, and it's more than that,— Gil seems to continue a big thought that he has, —They're afraid not to be able to just say what they think, without any response or consequence. They're afraid to let talking do what it's meant for. Yer sposed to talk, then get something back, and thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Corporate America can only have monologue, like the posts they do on their social media. That's why they love Zoom, why they got the whole country bloated with middle management steada paying the producers more. Now that's everyone, from contact, we're a country of wannabe middle-managers, and half the day of self-care steada pick weeds and pick up trash and plant trees or make something.

Gil swishes the can, upends it, tap against the ground, a smart swift smash with the foot, muted beneath the rainclouds. Brian's hands animate. —Exackly dude. Lookit this quarantine. Yeah, it was smart for Newsom to shut the state down back in March, but look how business and government took it as a six-month vacation. No one needs to work or pay rent,

Gil's ears vibrate. —If it was about protecting old people, where the fuck was the emergency session of the assembly, of the national congress, to make all these billionaires pay their taxes, and pay to protect the old people?

—Watch,

—Watch, take a sliver, slice outta the military and hire an army of med students who wanna look like heroes on their résumés. Lock up

the old people, and pay the med students to deliver groceries and shit to the old people until the virus is gone. We coulda done that from March until now.

—Or until there's a vaccine. And now we did such a shitty job, it's gonna be endemic. Watch. Look what happened in July. After Thanksgiving, it's gonna pop. I won't get it, cause back in November last year, I already had it.

—Annit wouldn'a mattered if we protected the old people, cause to hear it from the news, the old people don't wanna be protected until they're like, humbled by the nursing home.

—And that's the excuse that business and the government will use when you ask them why they shut the economy but didn't finish the job,

—Exackly, —waves Gil, —You already had it?

Brian adjusts his cap over his big hair. —I'm pretty sure, dude. I felt like shit for a week. Then I went to acupuncture and got some CBD, like, for the respiratory ... — he finds himself late to an appointment with his jay, —you guys understand, if I don't share this,— He steps twelve feet from us to the fence, toward the west and the river, and sparks the jay. I step back but hit the van's bumper and turn to see cattails scatter behind the windscreen over cracked fake leather.

It feels good to smile, to turn to Gil with something to say. —That's the most I've seen anyone talk in months.— Gil nods down at the wetsplotched cement. —Wasn't sposed to take this long, dude.

His voice is weighed down now, has to lift every word, but not drunk.

—And who knows, right?— I nod at Brian and the flaming joint, —It turned out not to stick to surfaces. Maybe the masks take care of it.

—I don't get the flu, like ever,— growls Gil, —so I coulda gave it to you and not even known.

I look over toward Sacred Heart's two bell towers and have a sudden thought. —Think a the kids goin to school on the internet.

—Yeah, I'da been like, fuck that. If we'd been in high school ... How many less billion people were there when we were in high school?

—Dude,— Gil just happens to know, —there's like forty million more assholes in this country now than then. And cars. Online dating bonanza, dude.

—Ey, don't blame people for,

Last spring's weeds have grown over more house junk. First I see that, then I look to the laundry-room window to see if she's watching us with a look I can read, but then I notice the doorjamb. It's got little two crosses or Xs scratched into the paint, recent but too high and too precise to be from cats, no, it's pencil, the catscratches are coincidental.

The talk flows on, never intent on arriving. My mind goes back to the shoerack, the chair. I don't know what to do about Dave overstepping her stuff, or how to try to speak for her. Maybe I've started to get cabin fever about other things besides being alone. Or maybe individual things, like this house, are filling up with cabin fever.

—Hey, I'm gonna fix the kitchen sink tomorrow and clean up,— I raise my hand to squatting knee-level, want to ask them won't she be pleased, but then that feels like I'm asking them to take a side that they don't see. —Too bad my takeout disappeared.

—Oh, dude,— Gil sounds prepared, —that was definitely not me.— Brian hits, eyes water, smoke in mustache, —Not me neither.

—You guys gonna be around to hold the flashlight for me under the sink?

Out comes Brian's tiny fancy toolkit again. —For sures, dude.

—One less problem around the house, right?— Maybe she's far gone enough with whatever she's got that she can't care about the chair anymore, or plumbing leaks, like she doesn't care how many cats, or how it seems like she doesn't really care about how many of us.

Light sprinkles barely stick. The inner sidewalk pavers that sit flat remain wet, the outer ones at even a tenth of a percent grade already dry beneath windsundered stormscraps. Could've biked twenty-five minutes in this. Pereira's finally got us here without displeasing his stupid phone.

I read a smile behind the mask in Pereira's brow-wrinkles. He could be relieved that I'm getting out of his car, but maybe he's also lightening up after this long on his guard. Tension doesn't express itself in the face, or else humans'd figured each other out a long time ago. I smile back and say thanks. Probably neither of us has shared a car outside of family in months. He lets it drift into reverse and takes his mask off, he's got exactly the shittooth and unshaven second chin I'd imagined.

The neighbor's baby is walking now, and his big sister waves at me from behind her mask. —Does that old grandma ride this big motorcycle?— She makes me laugh, and I wave my fingers at the baby, for whom my masked face and everything else is normal. —No, definitely not.— The kid looks at me stumped, like, then who rides it. I move on, they move on.

From behind the oleander I tap on the screen and watch Pereira's faded Toyota slush away, consider my chances with him if it rains

harder. But the Acclaim's rusty, trashed rear end gets my attention, backed out a little more today from the amassed shitdrift, hiding the oilstain I saw on the driveway yesterday, so it must move after all. Maybe they'll move it to get that van towed away.

—It's open,— comes Brian's voice through the screen. —I can see that,— I almost whisper. Brian doesn't make a sound, so I let myself in. Someone left some shitty old cheap furniture underfoot. Tight to the schedule, my eyes first and then my ears search out Aunty. Dave's voice saws at them before I can listen: —It's Wild Gil Dickcock! Yer not even a drop a wet!— I kick off my shoes, socks exchange clean spots on the floor for cat pollution. —Got a ride.

—So yer admitting that it's a good idea if someone has a car!— he laughs. —So, diddee have pride, was the car nice? Or was it heshier shit?

—I dunno, Dave. Which is your car?

—Which is ... !— Dave waves his arms and head around for the others to see. —Can you believe he's asking about My car? Mine's fuckin cherry! He's tryna ask Me about My car ... !— That last line with the six trochies of his idea of a jovial black preacher from Oakland. Then he tries to get me to agree with him that Chava's yellow truck stresses us out about getting towed, and I tell him that if they move the Acclaim and ditch the van they'll have room for his car. —Oh yeah, Gil Dickcock? Shid we clean up so you can park yer bike there?

Then he seems to tire out. It's getting to be dark at six. —I'm gonna take a shower.— I say it to shut up Dave and be the good guy in spite of his routine about my bike. Brian's eyes look up at me from between his earphones and his hair, then at Dave, who runs with the attention. —Yisee, Fryan, you shouldna took a shit, now Gil's gotta clean the whole bathroom!



—Whatever.— It’s all I can throw back at Dave in here. Now the word whatever has no power anymore, like far out. Once whatever and far out had whole lifetimes of meaning and expectation and even assertion of power behind them, political lives, libraries of maturity rites. Now they just signal ceasefire with no expectation. Brian just laughs at him, or at something on his phone.

Dave and Chava right away go back to what they were mumbling about, eyes on the scraped laminate, pupils dotting like the layers of Dave’s grimy bootprints. Normally I’d want in, since I can hear, but tonight I don’t care. Not Brian neither, though he’s in it. Watching out for Aunty, I head right of the kitchen for the bathroom.

In the shower, another new perceptual phenomenon when I close my eyes to shampoo. Behind my eyelids roadside objects and trees keep streaming by. Has it been so long since I rode in a car that it’s printed on my eyes? But only images can be printed on the retina, not movies. It doesn’t make any sense. I guess it’s in my brain. In the car it didn’t matter if Pereira didn’t want to talk because I was back to my late-teens imagination, visualizing a race of malevolent freeway signs chopping down like giant hatchets on traffic, slaughtered cars at their feet, especially the one for the Tully exit.

I can’t tell from staying in so long whether my skin is unhealthy, aging or just needs sun. My face is blotchy like it never was, like a white person’s skin. The bathroom is pretty clean so I leave it this time. Think Dave’d be grateful that I clean up.

On schedule, I carefully approach the kitchen, hydrate two pints. I just can’t run into Aunty tonight without jumping. My beer is still cold in my backpack so I open it and start the routine run through the

afternoon. Drink until six-thirty, quit and switch to water or I won't get to sleep or stay asleep.

Now everyone's milling around, even unmasked Brian. Somehow their bent posture tells me it's a lost human and not a phone or pipe or hat. —Djou guys lose her?

Chava's eyes meet mine, still hard to read behind the mask. —Did you see her?

—No. I barely got here ... Did she eat?— I look around the counters and in the garbage can. I still can't tell Aunty's schedule because I'm always at work. Chava shakes his head.

What does she eat? There's no waste like there should be, no pots to scrub. Open tins spilled on the floor for the cats, unused Hamburger Helper boxes. —I needa remember to get special shoes that I can leave here for this catfuzz.— Chava nods. I told him because he understands when I let out stuff like that.

Pretty soon it's clear that we don't look in Aunty's room. The scampering is an organization and communication problem, doesn't fit Aunty's absence. In an instant she appears in the laundry-room doorway, slippers embroidered with dander, face and shins as yellow, eyes as lost as ever, nap of her sandcolored robe in dirty fingerlength dunes. My mouth is open but I just wave at her in passing, put the mask back on, gone like I came.

Dave suddenly cuts through us, hunches right over her and lumbers her away by the elbow to her room. Chava and I hold our breaths, each listening with every hair. Nothing. Are we listening for the same thing?

—They must have some arrangement.— Chava always looks and talks to me like he wants to ask me something, but he never does.

The air thins out again and Brian and Dave both want to put something on. Just like yesterday, Brian plays *I Wanna Make It With You*, with the guitar lick in the beginning that sounds like Pink Floyd. Dave outflanks him with diarrhea from the TV's speakers, an affront to the prior old-lady silence that I wouldn't risk. But she doesn't come out to shush him. I suspect she's raised young men.

—That singer's standin there like this,— Dave grins somehow through his mask at Brian and puts his heels together, balancing bulk over bent knees, —squeezinnis own balls!— Mud crumbles out under his tapping toe. Brian's round black eyes tilt up down the hall once more before he discreetly exhales a big hit off his vape mod.

Dave pounces on Chava. —Chava! Now, the chair.— Chava retreats, runs the sink, starts clearing the strewage off the counter. What chair? They only talk for a second.

—You okay, Gil?— I find Brian crosslegged now, still unmasked, wary kid's eyes on me.

—I just can't ever call the hospital during business hours,— I'm screwing with my phone because the screen just does what it wants now, including turning off the ringer. My eyes are so fried. —cause I'm workin all day.— Brian exhales again, smells like pandan and rotten bananas. —Yup. I worked all day too on this proposal for the city. But I been lookin. Stock market's up, Amazon's up. Everything's up. You shid check out these coins, it's all for free on Coincap,

—Maybe later, I gotta try to call.

—Where was she? ... Huh. Well, that laundry room could be a lot more, yknow, functional.

—I bet ... What?— I lean forward at him, his black mane and earphones giggle. —That's what the kids say, man!

I tshh a big tshhht. —I said I bet, not aight bet.

Still giggling. —Whatsa difference?— He makes me laugh. I let myself out the front door, no way am I squeezing through the laundry room. The van looms dark in the driveway, rust perforation spreading like shingles across the ribs.

In the garage the roof isn't leaking, my bike is present and my tent is closed, free of cats and fuzz and shit, the cold can in my hand harmonious with the outdoor damp. What detritus will I disappear tomorrow, some junk between the Acclaim and the van? Push the van back into the driveway away from me?

Next to the window the bright wall is conspicuous where the crate of spray degreasers was. There's potential now, I could stand up the broken fishing poles where that was, and fill up the vertical space, and probably no one would notice the free floorspace where the poles are now, because people only welcome floorspace. If I cleared it out, Aunty could fit the Acclaim in here.

Brian and Chava, with a garbage bag, have followed me out. I shift my weight on my feet, try to look disinterested. —Whattappened?

They look down or up and shake their heads, just Dave getting intense. I persist just to talk friendly with them. —Dave's intense?

—He wantsta get ridda that chair of Aunty's.

—Why? ... nevermind, I don't care. I don't use it. Yknow, I've forgotten now whether I've ever heard Aunty's voice. Dave's man-child Safeway manager flow was all you could hear in there.

Chava swings the trashbag at the all and all. —But she uses that chair.

I want to add an idea but I really don't know what they do while I'm at work or back here. Chava finds the garbage can nice and empty, tosses the bag. —You just havin a brewsky?

—Yep. It's dark, man! I trust in orbital mechanics, but still I swear that January isn't this dark. November'll be the darkest, they're not symmetric. Few more weeks before I can get another hazmat disposal appointment for the carburetor cleaner. Dude, when this state burns every year, just think of garage upon garage of carburetor cleaner, vintage 1980 to now. A statewide Napa cellar of spray foam sealer! Breathin that every August like we did for two months this summer. My guy Thomas at work sent me a cellphone photo when I got hired. Was a palm tree ignited by lightning on Sixteenth and Washington.— I tip my chin across the street at the yellow Alongi Bros truck. —You gotta work tonight?

—On call,— Chava nods, eyes meet mine again, an earnest smile at the corner of the left eye. —You got a ride in the rain?

—Sheah, we were just makinnis phone happy, he routed us home on it instead of me directing him, then he pointed the car's nose to the left to back out of a parking spot and the fuckin thing sent us around town through a neighborhood and a third left onto 680 to turn right once, down 280 to 87 to Alma. Instead of heading down Oakland Road or even 101 above the city. He doesn't have the balls to dispute with it. So. What's she say about the chair?

—Well, I just don't know, Gil.

I want to ask why the hell she doesn't talk in front of us, but again. Don't act like I know the place so well, don't put myself in the middle. Just stay as long as I can.

I kind of like how they'll just talk about the quarantine without either scolding about their fears or denying the whole thing. We've all got a lot to say, the little details that matter. Not that talking changes anything, but after this long it's good to let out what we've probably all been rehearsing in our heads since May. Apparently Brian's residence here is complicated. Chava says he's going to fix the kitchen sink tomorrow, I didn't know it was broken.

Then Brian makes himself at home in my tent, the way that guys get into your stuff assuring you by way of asking permission that they've been camp counselors or cleaned motel rooms, even when you didn't invite them to, and commences to try to work out a bluntwrap.

—You okay, Brian?— Chava observes as Brian's round eyes squint into his phone. —I'm not sure if this guy was honest with me. I needa check this strain on Leafly.— Now that same voice of concern turned at me. —So how you doing, Gil?

They must take my normal face for upset. I take a brassy gulp and squat again. —Just glad I still have a job and somewhere to stay.

—That's what's up.

Chava goes with my comment, which may be very generous or some phony toxic positivity: —Did someone you know lose it all in the spring?

—No.— Who cares if that's not true. Stay out of the middle. I just texted my results to Elena, that I can't get a hold of the hospital. She'd better not complain that I'm not keeping in touch. She's the one person in all of this that isn't hurrying up and waiting, out there in no-quarantine Visalia.

Brian's immersed in his phone, too, but interjects to show he's listening. —Yeah, I could really leverage my bike if I can get these

lawyers to read this white paper I found about discriminatory firing temps.

I want to laugh but I know that we all show stress different ways. Guys like Brian, they double down on gigs and longshot schemes. At his level he must be pretty stressed out, always moving. Chava looks like he has nothing to do with his hands and I wish he'd do a beer.

The masks dangle on ears, and outdoors I guess it's fine or else by now we'd know. There's no pre-resentful discussion, no compromise on safety to reach, just taking it easy. The impossible distance between what people value and what they fear will be back tomorrow, so tonight let's just enjoy.

Winding down our exchange of life-stories, Brian produces us each personal-pan pinner. One hoot in and I'm snuffing my brains out. —Won't smell carb cleaner and catshit tonight with this excessive club weed.— Brian laughs and waves me away. He insists: —This's porno weed ... not porno with you guys! ... Whatta ya new, Chava?

—Like I said, I'm on call, man.

Outdoors Brian is indiscreet, ample purple lips ramped out over his right cheek excrete clouds of high-fructose crab and tuna between neat cubic teeth.

Chava and me laughing at Brian's usual self, Brian trying to meditate in my tent while going through his phone, focusing must really be a compromise for him, a forced march of bread slices into a bag, looking over his shoulder at the breadbag's twist anus.

—I'm stoned.— The older I get, the funnier that sounds once a year.

Those little mongrels are after us now. I laugh more because they have fewer places to hide since I've been cleaning up, but when the guys

ask me what's so funny, I cover up and start to say a joke about weed and catnip. But then I get pissed and lose my focus.

The cats gather close and mewl like we abandoned them. —This one got the shit beat out of it. Recently.

—That's where the chickenblood smell is comin from,— ewws Chava. The nice clean garage is getting polluted, at least in my head, detritus like an infected sneeze painting over it.

—Chickenblood!— exhales Brian, —You ain't been in no Filipino grocery. Go to Lucky Seven on McKee, that's chickenblood.

—Looks like somethin big got it. Maybe even a dog.

My face hurts from grinning. —Imagine what it'd be actually take to controllem in San Ho.

Chava, regretful but fair, loses balance off his squat. —You'd hafta be up all night with unlimited darts, or a pelletgun, or something, and know when they're in heat, to leverage that.

—You'd hafta have people all along Loss Gattis Creek, Guadalupe, Coyote Creek, all down Dry Creek and in the big parks, just to spot where they are, cause you can't just put out rat poison for the cats, cause then mice and owls'll eat it. You'd hafta leave traps everywhere.

—You'd hafta get every trash homeowner to get the Zillow and Starbucks and Amazon out their mouth and take care a their cat collection,— I spit, rehearsed, —You'd hafta set traps, and then somehow be able to dispose ofem all before they make a lotta noise. If you caughtem, you'd have to be digging all the time cause you'd hafta buryem down deep enough for other cats, dogs, fucking raccoons, not to be diggin for their meat after they're dead. That's what got that kitten, a fucking raccoon.



Brian's caught up in the flow. —Or herdem like buffalo onto the freeways.

—Or one a these billionaires could reach innis back pocket and neuter all ofem.

We all lose the nerve for the topic. —Aunty could hear us and think we're putting her down about the cats, — I concede, —Old people lucky enough to have family are probably always wondering how much their younger family plot their disposal. Can throw away an RV, can throw away an old housemate.

—People are trash,— concurs Brian. I see now that the cats are definitely nesting on the van's dashboard behind the old curved glass. I'm out of things to say about it. —I'm glad Dave stayed inside and gave us a break.

October night has closed down for the season, a starless overcast that teases rain and makes 7:30 in the evening feel like midnight. Can ride to work tomorrow easy.

I check for any overlooked text messages from Elena. She sends me question marks to follow up, like I'm not attentive enough, but the fact is I have to work, and do these after-work routines, to have something to think about besides Dad.

The message says Dad's moving his shoulders back and forth a little, more than last week. His mouth now gets stuck open, and the nurses are trying to close it without hurting him. Still on the ventilator even though he was supposed to be off, still got pneumonia and I guess he's been on antibiotics now for like two months already. My brother is on the message too but he doesn't say anything back.

I stick my phone away after I text my dad's poor girlfriend back, ok. What else can I tell her? I try to keep the standard reply, ok, I hope

they're communicating with Dad and keeping him comfortable, down to every other week. I had fun tonight for the first time since who knows, so I'm not going to stop. Can't help Dad this moment.

The beer and weed keep the panic out of my head, just thinking over and over what must be going through Dad's head. It's a process of elimination, usually first all of his joints screaming with aches, like mine do when I'm dehydrated, but then he can't feel or move so that's just me. Knowing that he has a bedsore, seeing his fingernails unclipped, mouth stuck open, cut off from assessing himself.

Then it's his boredom, which I guess could be less than I imagine since I read his lips over Messenger at the first hospital that he watches Discovery. Then it's his terror, will I ever move again, will the bedsore poison me, will I die slowly without talking to anyone or hearing music or going outside again, I have a hidden ailment that no doctor or nurse could ever find with yes-no questions. The last real food I ate was. I want to ask him all that, but it's selfish, a checklist of my own fear.

And then the beer covering all that up, one thought at a time, like wrenching the leaks out of pipe fittings. His girlfriend might have to endure each day on the phone with the VA and the hospital, but my routines are for throwing days away fast, shorten my own life to shorten Dad's situation, the quarantine, before it all overtakes me.

On schedule, the muddy rainy itch of Highlife at the temples, go find something to eat. I might get myself truly accepted into the tribe at this place if I start cooking again. I ride a bike, shower three times a week, but that's it for ethics. Now it's four months I can't even cook my own food, and looking for organic throwaway plastic at Whole Foods is getting to be bullshit.

Who should I ask about Aunty's eating schedule, just so I can fit in? We could take turns cooking for her. Not knowing who's who, other than Dave takes the rent, has been a blindspot for me so far, but now it's holding things up. I just get the feeling someone'll get pissed if I ask. I asked her if it's cool that I occupy the garage when I first came, but she didn't answer, just big girlish brown eyes trapped in old sockets, up at me and down at something only she saw.

After my train of thought I don't even notice that I walked to La Mejora. I just get a few tacos and that's it. Hunger in the morning is motivational, clears the mind. I almost forget to ask for a glass of water. Alcohol filters out on the water shift, on routine, finish before nine and piss the day all out by ten, or I can't sleep. Be a shame to wake up at three in the morning like I do since I turned thirty-three, and piss in the dark on a shitcat.

I tiptoe back through the wrecked gate, catshit mines activated with indicator stench. My phone buzzes. Elena texted me again this late. Says they bent the rules up in Sebastopol and we can go visit Dad this Saturday. They put Dad to sleep with drugs every night now.

I think the routine is working tonight, or maybe it was talking to real people, or maybe the weed. I yawn hard in the mummy bag's black crook. I can't remember how long it's been since my clenched chest and screaming brain loosened to let me yawn.

—Goodnight.

You still puttin yer room together?

—It's not much. Just stuff to be comfortable, now.

You don't needa gimme advice about the lazyboy, I already hadda hear it from Fryan. I'm tryna go get a margarita.

—Shh ... is she asleep? What'd you hear from Brian? ... Anyway, just relax, I'll clean up in the morning.

I'nginna clean up in the morning.

—Well, that's kinda why I said something, shouldn't we talk out who takes little chores, so we don't end up doing something twice or,

It doesn't hurt nothing to show a little pride and like, consideration and initiative, to do somethin twice outta puttin in some effort!

—Like I'm tryin to say, twice, or! Moving something that you don't want moved! Right? We can avoid that. Otherwise the guys'll move stuff,

They'll move stuff cause they're go-getters and ontrapinnoors, I'm useta being the guy at the bottom of all this wealth cleanin up after people's dreams, I'll move it back. I know hal the place should be setup. And fixin the sink ain't a little chore.

—It's okay for people to see ... it's okay for you not to've made a decision! It's not damaging your rep or making you look weak, Dave. We can just talk about it.

We'll talk about it and they'll start exaggeratin based on what we talk about and before you know it it'll be MTV The Real World Sannizay. They'll use the halse and the stuff in it for their personal dream projects.

—I dunno why they'd do that, with what there is to work with, but they might, like I say, get into some stuff to be helpful and not know that a mess actually means something.

They'll not know that what they think's a mess doesn't mean shit. A hotel is all stuff that has a purpose. I mean! There's shit that gets

cleaned regularly, and there's someone's life that's their shit. Whatever, go.

Lo?

Memo! What happened, did Carly come by? With the money.

Cause I told you a fuckin dozen times, cause whatsitcalled I boughter a fuckin bottle and she owes me thirty bucks! You needa member this shit, cause member if she gets carded and you told someone about it, and little City College bitches rattle, that's your ass too, cause your number gave Dylan's register the fuckin override!

Course I know it was you! Where're my carkeys? I puttem right here ... it was the Friday we both worked and then went to JJ's, otherwise why would she be begging me for a bottle if it wasn't a Friday? You gotta member not to forget cause if you forget, you'll fuckin chitchat about it like it's the next thing, and that ain't takin the wood off the fire and it don't go out. It's peak state mindset, Memo! Ah god, there's my carkeys. So she didn't come by? Why does she hafta ... no, I just got my whole, I leave my room unlocked once and now my Hotwheels're all on the living-room windowsills, I don't know why that's so important to ...

Okay, just tal me if she does, and taller to call me. No yknow what, don't say shit, I don't want nobody else to touch that.

No, I just figured why'd you call me if it wasn't somethin important! So what?

No.

No. It was clean. I'm always after three stores always the only fuckin one I know who can sweep right and not leave streaks when I wipe glass down. I useta clean windows downtown, I cleaned HSBC bank's fuckin windows. No streaks. These kids just think someday

someone's gonna order up a Thumbtack guy to come in and clean up afterem. I've never seen people live so filthy, leave the store so grungy, like they do now. I dinno why Pam don't fire alla them for grabassing. It's a good thing we were makin people wait down the aisle before we calledem up to check out with social distancing, cause they'd spend less time noticing hal dirty those lanes are.

No. I never borrow to ask for keys, no one does that. Brenda's gonna say no. That's on her if she lost it. She probly just lost the receipt tape or read it wrong and there's a pack missing. Or who closed the register.

Lola? Oh yeah? Gotta get this fuckin car watched.

I said I gotta get this fuckin car washed. What's the boyfriend like? Is he dumb as fuck? Is he look like a tech dick? He's white, uh? He drover to the store innis Tesla. Did she come through your lane? They Both hadda pay-scooter? I don't give a fuck, I tallem I stole the little kickstand off the scooter and used it to break into your car's back window. I could get a zombie scooter, I just ask any bum. No, I'm not goin back to check it, I'm drivin downa street to get Clockaypockay. A fucking quart a margarita to go, dude, with tacos. With a straw. Where you been?

Wal if that's what yer worried about, yer ginna hafta go get a job at Walgreen's to see if Lola buys a bigass box a condoms! Ha ha ha ha! Cause if she don't, then you gotta be worried about when it's your turn!

Fuck you, I know what the pill is. Fucker!

No. Yeah.

Tal Jude to ask for different jobs, then. He bitches all day aboutis back pain, but what're you sposeta do? He's not ginna check sittin in a

wheelchair. And he wipes down the cooler handles hala slow. I don't even care if he was a founder of Mangiano. Everyone worked in a restraunt it's like he was in Nom. I don't give a fuck, I seen people hala wait forim. You don't wanna get between a Willow Glen cow and that Three Twins ice cream! Yer ginna get plowed, fuckin, donkey-kicked, camel-kicked!

Yeah, Thunder Thighs was there today too, on my shift. And fuckin Xavi, he was off his meds today and he was yallin atter, come see Jesuses greatest created lane! Ha ha ha! Everyone looks hala funny tryna act right with the mask on, with just all eyes. It's like the I fuck tech bros, make my life convenient eyes, and the I'm filming my antiracist influencer blog in this fuckin Safeway and. So yeah. That mask makes her face look liker chest anner forehead's a big squinty eye with hair on top! And Pups 4 Patriots was there too. This time she bought two things a toilet paper and I hadda taller twice to not come up to the fuckin conveyer balt. She ... hold on. I'll call you back. If you, hey! If you see her, taller to pay up. Then give the money to me. Yeah? Shut, hey, shut up, I'll call you back.

Manual! What's crackin?

Whatta you mean carnival equipment? Lemme call my guy back at work, he only hangs with bearded wimmin! With one titty. No, I'm kidding! God.

Yup, all's wal, I was just cleanin up this afternoon, is matter a fact. Yeah, yeah, it's fine, feedin the cats, everything. Yeah, I guess it sprinkled. What's up, you nervous? Alright then.

No, yeah, same guys. Three guys, you remember about that new guy uh, Chava, and this other guy, for a little extra I guess, even know

it's gettin real crowded takin every stray dog into the halse when we're tryna keep Covid out. It's not ideal. We're all payin rent.

Wal, they're all fucked in the head, it's like talkin to a little kid. You can't talk abalt important shit with them, they're so decided on their own way of seein everything, like they know everything about the place. They know what's the right place to put things, right? Chava leaves his shit all over in the fridge and like, his work uniforms, and I dunno where everyone else's sposed to not knock up against each other. Yeah, they wear masks. Any case it's all my fault.

Wal yeah see, I can tal ya. Are you in line? Yeah, I ordered already. I can tal ya just by watchin it. You give a guy just a couch, and he's gonna manage his shit cause that's the whole space he's workin in, and then, butcha give a guy a room, or two rooms, or a whole halse, they see the whole situation differently. I'm still the only fuggin guy knows what sharing is, and what it means. But they're fucked in the head, so they each talk like they gotta plan, like they got a way of doing things, when ixactly what I'm tryna tallem is that I already know the way of doing things, and that's why they gotta listen to me.

Whattaya mean communication? I communicated to them hal they're too whatever, grabby about their agenda, like one of us owns it.

No, they don't know anything. You want me to pass the phone?

No, why should I tallem, Manual? If I tallem, and they're fucked, whatever I tallem becomes part of an agenda. You don't see all those signs on people's lawns since May? In this halse we believe yadda yadda yadda. They don't believe shit, they're just puttin, not reflect on their beliefs but put their foot down, so no one talks to them, so no one tals them what the fuckin, the thing is. Or else they feel attacked. Thanks, have a good night.



I said attached, attacked, not attached!

Whatever. No, she's fine. Same, no change. Same. Hold on, I gotta put my airpods in. No, she just eats whatever I bring from work. Chava said she's got a schedule, too, everyone must be a big fuckin expert on her schedule cept me. See, that's what I'm tryin to get through yer skull, Manual, everyone's got a right to be an expert but me, to see it cept hal I see it. I dunno, you tal me. God, cold margarita tastes like back when my only problem was childbirth.

Sunday? What you lookin for? Alright. Yer not gonna believe hal clean Gil keeps the bathroom. Not a single cat hair. Yeah, for sure, not Saturday for sure cause I'm plannin for gettin some spooky dooky nooky, and I ain't workin. You gotta watch for the kids that night anyway, right? What, they all got boyfriends? I'm playing, chill!

Look. It's Halloween. Everyone's wearin a fuckin mask, Manual! Mask! What's the problem? Just lettem get out! No one's done shit since March. They're kids! They needa see other kids! Rollin down the street, smokin Pintos, sippin on margarita! Laid back. Yer ginna see my car when you come over, it's fuckin dipped in lightning. Show me any, listen, show me any ice-cream paint in Oakland. I used Car Guys Liquid Wax. Show me,

Manual, hal're you gonna say you raisedem when you don't trustem to wear masks.

I'm talkin about wearin masks, and lettenem have some tradition, and you could be hanging with your family steada writin'em off.

Anyway those guys were all outside earlier around the Bruno Mars ukulele campfire, tallin their piss puddle fortunes. Or one puked and they were tryna find his missing tooth. I'n just fuckin around! I'nginna

plug in my Superintendo for some peace and quiet. Yep. Sunday then.  
Late.

Black scratchy nylon out of the pocket, feels clean, radius over ulna, unsnapped and right number of TV-blue gleams aside the thumb. Ashy thumb, on the other hand, absorbs and grays the light. On the other hand! Because it's just my right hand. Kit's in order. Elbow up and over into the backpack, one two three zip-up kits and the bag's drawstring. Flashlight works, knife clean.

Close and turn everything to the left. The bottle was still in my lap, okay, lid is secure. Find ipad in the couch cushion, close everything up and turn right, hips pull in away from knees, muscles feel like thick strands of ripped-up carpet, all clear.

Dave's squinting at me like I'm listening to him. I'm not. The music is around me, I'm focused. Guess I'll put my mask on because they're talking so near.

—It's sick, right?— Dave needs a review of the music from me this instant. My opinion: —These guys're takin a while to find a bridge.

But he's already turned into the kitchen, wet clunks bounce around the fridge, he comes back out with an armload of catlittler bags.

—That's yer new litter?

—That's the old litter!— he points, losing a heavy corner down over his gut, —saves a flimsy, like, a garbage bag, that's gonna break!

—You better just get it outside,

—You hate cawordination? Look, this part up, then when I get it over the trashcan, this elbow up, arm over arm, it's a hack, dude,

—The bottom's gettin wet.

—It’s cardboard! It don’t get wet! Think about it, does a pizza box breaaaaahhhh!

His lower body registers the shift in weight before his head does, he rushes toward the door but in the process only pours the litter eight feet along the floor toward the door, and over his knees. —God fuckin dammit! You just hadda be Marsha Stewart! You just hadda approve!

—I got things to do. Lotsa money at stake here, can’t get distracted.

He gambles on the speed of his scooping getting him out of having to clean the wood, still using the wet bag, inverted, to hold the reeking mess, stench of mixed male and female cat.

After a while Chava shows up, the guy who got the room. Dave tries that same song again, and at the end Chava gives me this look like he’ll defer to my opinion. I propose: —His choice of oldies could just assume be an affectation,— Tube digging in my thigh, lick my lips.

What else. Why was Chava arguing with him? They’re lip-reading themselves as if they’re checking what I see, and I’m not even lip-reading, and they have masks on. My lips read another stealth hit, wipe tip on inside of shirt hem, pen and CBD rotate in the left pocket between fingertips, CBD on my lips so I can stop licking them.

All these days, months, waiting unemployed, and can’t even nap the hours away. More music. They start swarming around, I don’t know if Dave made them do a chore or something. Then she comes in and it gets really quiet, she takes one look around and goes in her room. They must’ve blown the chore because now Dave’s looking like he’s stomping his way to cleaning up.

—You want some help?— I ask him. —Just gonna straighten up what I still can,— he gulps, —before Gil plays fuckin Occupy Wall Street with any more square footage.

—What?

—Nevermind, Fryan.

That's funny because I can't see that the new guy Gil's taken any space in the house, and I know he's helping with rent because it's the Dutras we're talking about here.

If Dave's going to need his space, I'm going to probably need mine, so I go in the hall to follow them out and I run into her as she's coming back out of her room. —Good night, see you soon.— I nod back at the oncoming night. She lifts her brows to me without a word, then she shows me this pair of old cat-chewed Birkenstocks and I just get out the way. Off she goes to put them out on the front stoop. Those were Anthony's Birkenstocks. I look after her just to be sure, to see that she would see that my bags were packed up.

Chava wants me to help him find the new guy. Right away he copies Dave's big shouldering hiding move with me, except he's a lot shorter, and whispers: —I hope you won't call anyone about that lazyboy.

—Don't trip,— slimmer cylinder in left pocket threads between my knuckles. —I'll uh, put those contacts on the back burner ... I don't think Dave appreciated the soundness of uh, my advice about the vanishing eye trick. With the lazyboy.

Chava laughs, one of those now I believe you laughs. —I guess not.

—Which is funny,— I try another hit but the cart is dry, —cause he's the one was all mister resourceful asking me to find someone to take it anyway, and now, just now he seems like he changed his mind, and it's like he's mad at me, or us, for agreeing with his plan now that it's obsolete for uh, some reason that's stressful to him now, presently.

Steady change our minds when he wants us to. That must be a grocery thing ... no I in team or grocery.

—Really?

Why go into it. Out the front door the driveway goes down at right four car-lengths deep: the sedan, that rollaway that I need and trash occupying one car-length, the gate, and the van flush with the backend of the house, leaving one car-length of open driveway.

My lips get rubbery about work and we all trip on the Zoom situation. —You guys wanna beer?— The cyclist's got both hands full.

—Let's see,— I inspect the brand, drink, Gil's and my gums flapping about coronavirus and everything, in sync like sunflowers. But then I notice the garage is open. —You got your tent setup in there? I get it now.— Twist my hair between all ten fingers, test ear tension, airflow. —You guys're cool with the masks off long as we're not in each other's face? The vaccine's gonna come out in like a month and it won't matter so much.— Gil is enthusiastic.

—Just for old people,— stipulates Chava. —Yeah, and old people're what counts,— insists Gil. —Just needa nother few months of not gettin fired for takin off sick time.

—It's nice not havin to negotiate each time you get near someone.

—For real,— Gil seems like he's really wanted to talk about this since about the first of April. His voice puts a smell in the ear like April grass. —and isn't that a bitch, Brian, when you isolated yerself for a month, and did everything to help, and then you wanna just see someone you know, cause we're social animals, and you haven't even seen yer parents cause they don't know what a mask even is after a month, and the person doesn't trust you to have quarantined so as to hang, but they won't say it, will they!

I can't keep from laughing. —Not speakin from experience, are you Gil?

—Instead they talk about respecting wishes and boundaries and all this shit that has no owner, right, no my, or I, or our, just, yknow. But then! You find out two weeks later they've been doin dumbass online dating with random people and their bubble is totally outta control cause they're divorced, but you're the problem for not talkin about hangout protocols with the same words they use!

I just have to breathe for a minute. This guy has taken that piece hard. —Wait, millennials're already gettin divorced?— I ask. Gil laughs with, like, no joy. —Whatta you think, dude.— Then he quiets down and seems embarrassed, like he talked too much, which is fine.

—Yeah, people're dicks, but that's minimal. I've been on furlough for like seven months.

—Damn.

—You're still in entertainment?— asks Chava.

More CBD on lips, this time it goes on right. —Yeah, stagehands' union. I was doin Jumbotrons, picinem together for concerts, until Covid hit. Still tryna sue for my rights after that Google subcontractor discriminated me. I got contacts and processes frozen on that for what seems like a year already, and between that and furlough, that's it. Whatta you do, Gil?

—Hardware. Came back to San Ho when Streakwave picked me up. You hearda them?

—No, dude.

Gil sighs heavy like there's a hard story behind what he says. —I'm not passionate about it. Just covers expenses in case I get another band together. And I can afford to plant trees around. I was down in El Ay to

work for Cox. Another hardware company. But it's El Ay, yknow, musicians around. They woulda moved me to Vegas but I got laid off in August.

I point out his bike. —So you ride your bike to work every day, I mean normally?

—Just up Thirteenth.

—No shit. I useta have a place, right out front of Backesto Park. With my girlfriend at the time.

—What happened to that?

I think he sometimes seems to challenge you to say more. I like that. —I paider car bill, her rent one time, but then she dumped me. Since then I've uh, had a harder time with debt cycles ... Oakland Road, that far's a banch on a bike. You could get a motorcycle like I got.

—That's not really the point though, for me,— Gil politely confirms.

—Yeah, I mean ... All I got to say is, I hope skaters were doing epic skate videos in all those wide abandoned streets downtown. Yknow, back in April and May.

—For real.

Time to roll up a blunt since we can relax out here and not get her attention. Time to see how Gil's tent and sleeping bag rate against foundation slab conditions. It's weird to relax, weird to see each other's teeth and lips. Gil's mouth is too thin for his color. —How long you had that motorcycle?

Slightly greasy, fragrant papers between thumbtips, foil wrapper too thick for its one-use purpose. —Yamaha V-Star. Oh-two. I got it last year.

—Sick, dude.— Chava jumps up in front of him to check his phone and Gil goes on, —Anyhow, you do live here or you don't?

—Yeah, here and there as needed. Just kinda tryna stay out of the way between periods of self-quarantining. I mean, I don't wanna freak you guys out, but I've very carefully stayed at a few people's places in rotation, no infection yet. Like I said, I already had it in November, before it was on the radar, man. Just so you know. But the other stable place I was house-sitting, that's my aunt's who died, so.

—She died of coronavirus?

—No. I mean, death by life-cancellation, right? But that's why I have my shit right here with me, so she knows I'm not staying.

—I get it,— Gil gets it, —well it's cool I get to stay out here, I really need somewhere after bouncin around.

—You got choices,— I wave my arm, feel like I need to challenge him back, —in this town I dunno of who would have a more dire situation. I mean, I been workin on this debt situation since before the quarantine, and I'm in an immigrant family. You guys shid have families, right?

—My dad's not in town and he's sick.

—Yeah. My mom just moved to Modesto a few years ago, so it's been complicated during when the floor drops out. When my Youtube channel dried up I gave up on school rather than go into more debt. I'd been up in the city after I split with that girlfriend, yknow, at Backesto, and before this union job made a BA a possibility again. But I got condoed by Ed Lee. I just got back from six months with another lady in Colorado, matterfact. I'm a little surprised that we're all gettin away with stayin here at once. Man. Aimed for middle-high but threw too high.



That could be taken a lot of different ways but I'm not in having the humor to set all the interpretations up, considering these guys' excitement span. Chava reads my mind: —When yer flyin with Brian yer dyin from fryin.

He checks in on Gil and they start talking about cats and the van here, and vigilante animal control and it's like I'm watching a cartoon and an infomercial at the same time.

—What's the deal with the van?— asks Gil, clearly hoping to find out in a chill way who knows what. —What year is it?—

I blurt out, twenty-twenty. Too high. —It's always been there. Late forties? Early fifties?

Again I could tell them that Dave is keeping all this stuff, at least to hear it from him, but I can't set it all up right now and then explain why it makes sense to leave it alone.

—How do we gettem to do a house schedule?— I think they both ask at different times, but it blurs into one. They don't like it when I shake my head. —I got real problems besides keeping someone happy. I'm not gonna try to hold anything together's not already together.

I have to admit Chava is more perceptive than I expected him to be given my prior experience with guys who wear T-shirt and beanie when it's cold out. Left pocket feels incomplete, check all cylinders and fasteners. Suddenly find my missing lighter in my right hand.

Chava bursts out that he's going to fix the kitchen, but then says his takeout disappeared and goes quiet again.

At some point after I finish that beer and try to think for a while, Gil wanders off and Chava gets a call. I go back inside, gear ready to go by the couch, fresh catshit stink and Dave is there against the sink playing on his phone, kitchen window like a half-full glass of beer.

—Sounds like those guys can really shoot the shit,— observes Dave with confidence. I know I need to talk to him, so I stick another conversational foot in front of the other. —Yeah, they're pretty good listeners.

—Not everyone you just met means it's a really good listener, Fryan. Yer just excited to sniff, yknow, a new dog's ass.

—I guess. Listen for a minute. That chair,

—You can stay on it.

—I'm talkin bout the lazyboy. Don't get rid of it unless she says. Just cause Chava agrees with that side doesn't mean it's the wrong side. Or makim clean it. To test him, yknow?

—Testim,— muses Dave, even more genius than before, —that's an idea. I'nginna get a margarita.

The bus always has to wait at Lelong and Willow either for speeding cars or for people crossing the road in the overpass's shadow, deep even in October's slant. This guy pedals down hard to drag the big water bottle in his haggard bike trailer, so I have to almost stop for him, and the Audi out of Willow Glen behind me of course just adolescent rocket-nuts on the horn like I lost him his job. Down the westbound verge blow old dead olives in drifts straight as the fogline.

I worked all through the quarantine but I still got used to not seeing people move. Plus when I tow, the owner's usually not there. The Willow and Palm bus stop is like a center of gravity for this neighborhood since the 25 goes to Valley Med, and the movement tells the meaning of it all.

All these homeless people you see walking or riding up and down the crunching olives, you start to pay attention and you ask what part of their survival you're seeing, the bus stop or the bike path or just Willow Street for a heading. Or you're judgmental and assume they're going to get drugs or alcohol. These towtrucks are yellow mansions of locking safety for me.

The senses go in and out of focus, earth and grime on all that guy's clothes and containers smell like the clean bag on the seat beside me. Up the dash walk my fingers, scrubbed and sanitized raw, dry silent swishes between knuckles, like strides in stiff jeans, and find the cold-wet gone from both of my masks. I put one on, the smell waterneutral, opposite of the wet mineral under mezcal. My whole

room will smell like this soon, and I wonder how different it will be against the room's past.

I guess I should clear out some more of my quarantine nest in here. The big difference is my dashboard is up at chest-level with a clamp or cord for all desires, and my room has just the cold wood floor. Rather than hang I'll have to box things.

The fast arc of my right hand to the cooler and cleaning supplies was a stressful exile, but it's already thinning to fun memory. Back pain is under control but I feel like the itch-doubt will remain, from when I used to lose track of whether the sweaty seat was permeating a fold of my shirt, my pants or my flesh.

Left from Willow into Palm and October slants over my dash again. On the curb in front of the house stands Brian's black motorcycle. I expect to see her looking for one of her cats between two cars, but not now.

Hard to tell what's going on in this room. Like my grandma's living room down in Los Gatos. Even with the light from the door and the kitchen, this room has all of the valley's seasons and daytimes crossed up through each other, separate flares of glare for the eyes and the walls.

Brian's on the couch and wants to tell me about the crypto. Dave congeals out of the kitchen's separate glare-membrane. —Dave! You do good today?

Calling across the house is familiar. Under normal circumstances speaking from a distance is mutual and friendly, not like huddling around the lazyboy, which is still there. —Not yet,— sneer Dave's bare teeth. I stow my laundry, watersmell against dust, and bring the tools out to the kitchen. Brian's up now and running commentary on my toolkit. —The sink's gonna be good as new.

—I gotta work in like a hour. Two guys caught it and they're out for a week, I can't,

—If they have COPD or diabetes, dude, they're hosed,— declares Brian.

I present the flashlight. —Chill, me and Brian got it.— Dave palms his hair up. —Okay but let's make food first, so yer not brown-nosin me.

—Yeah, I know, the house seems really small what with quarantine-brains and,

—No,— decrees Dave, —there's enough room for everyone.

Again, whatever is to be true, he needs the truth to contradict you even if your intentions are good. He paws in his big old box for a new black mask, after the rare look at his too-twisted upper lip, the abrupt bone chin out of the soft chin. Maybe I'll see her eat after this.

I share the Bragg's I brought home, see if it vanishes. Dave has a pot of instant-noodle packet going in a saucepan and chops broccoli. —I'nginna dry-fry this brockly, with just some sauce, that's good. I needa put my mask down to cook, cause the smal tals you, so get back if you need to. Not that masks do anything.

—We're cool ... only you and Gil sees anyone all day.

—Gil thinks about everything up to the tree frog yer gonna kill with yer motorcycle unless we all live in a fuckin teepee, before he decides if he's gonna wear a mask or not. Fuckin Al Gore.

—How's the broccoli smell?

—Watch.— He goes for the Bragg's. —Whasis? ... Liquid amino acids? Fuck is that mean?

—It's soy sauce, dude,— laughs Brian with a confidence that only he dares put to Dave, —amino acids means protein.

—I know what it means!

—So it's protein, but it tastes like soy sauce. Here,

—Gimme that.— Dave parries Brian's hand and unwraps the plastic from the top. His and Brian's backs sway in time before the stove's grimy niche. He must be used to self-regulating soy sauce drippers because he inverts the Bragg's much wider mouth over the broccoli, like for ketchup, and splash. —What the fuck? This Sannacruz shit ... —his stirring spooning in time with his rant, —whyncha go to Safeway where I can Show You where the good shit is, and just get normal, Kikkoman? God dammit!

—Don't trip.— Brian turns down the heat on the instant soup, which upsets Dave more. Down slams the bottle and Paul Bragg and his daughter-in-law Patricia grin at him from the happy yellow label. —Fuckin Grandma and Grandpa. Guys just hadda be Different.

I dash out of his way as he turns right into me and wipes off the tiles bound by construction to get wet behind the faucet. —I'n the only roommate I've ever lived with knows hal to clean the halse. Lookitis tile, it's a pestilence, mold, spot.

Like that's all he needed, he's back to mix in the instant noodles and carries them off, abandoning the souped broccoli. I look to my left, and there is a kitchen table under all that trash packaging and empty cat litter bags and mask boxes, but looks long unused. Is he offering it to her to keep her in her room? Brian returns my look, beyond caring.

—Cmon, let's do the sink while he's occupied. Hold that.

—You really oughta switch from batteries to USB.

I get the inside of the cabinet empty, clean and dry. I know that Safeway, that glamor-striped stripmall. Millie and Jude, trussed up

under heavy velcro in their black back-belts, held together just to work in their seventies. Do they have to deal with Dave?

—Bird Avenue Slaveway,— I continue my thought out loud, —Used to be what, not a Fart and Smile. A Fresh and Sleazy. Few months ago I towed a car with no badge in a handicapped spot fronta Cherry Liquor right there. Enough days for someone to notice! Now that I'm staying here and quarantined, I pretty much just get food there.

—Yeah. Nice long left-turn light,— reports Brian, and I smirk. —I like to get pumpkin beer at the Whole Paycheck, next to the shark tank.

—Next to the Sap Center. Center for saps.

—Hey. I assembled the Jumbotrons right there, for Sam Smith, Lady Gaga, you name it.

—That sure was fun last night. Let's see ... tip the light up more ... faucet's not it ... — my voice croaks, the throaty working voice, joyfully competent and useful, —okay ... guess it's one a these nuts.— Brian huskles. —You like that? ... Look, it's been goin for a while, cause this cabinet bottom ... ah look, it's done.

Nothing in the world's more yielding than water. But to wear down the hard and unyielding, it has no equal. This everyone knows, but few can heed it.

The light flashes down into my right eye. —It's plywood with paper over it?

—Yeah,— I scratch porridgy wreckage under my previously-clean fingernail, —sixties-era stuff. Everything useta be made out of this kinda crap when we were kids, remember?— It disintegrates just like I worried that shoerack thing would when I almost stepped on it.

—Sorry, I'll keep my distance. What shoerack?

—It’s cool, we got masks on. I guess we better just dry it and ask if we can demo it ... Yeah I was thinkin about people sleepin out,

Now Brian’s voice grates too, hollow against his inverted airway: —Totally impossible to keep from gettin exposed. They say shelter in place. People got no place.

—But look how many ofem are just getting or transporting water to drink and clean themselves. We take for granted having a sink to fix. There’s this city water pipe there under 87 on Willow, it’s just leaking alla time, from campers cutting water. I saw this guy goin to fill a cooler jug just now, almost got him in my grille.

—Yep. I’ve done some couch-surfing since my last place, but I couldn’t sleep out like that. You gotta have so much paperwork to get any services, and I already got uh, inconsistencies in paperwork, from identity theft.

—When was that?— I interrupt his ready response. —Was that part of yer girlfriend you lost money on?

—No, that was just some bullshit,— he minimizes, —this site I was running with affiliate links and SEO, it wasn’t getting the traffic, so I kinda left it alone for a month, and before I know it I guess I got in a data leak. So that makes me panic about the Youtube channel too.

—You made money on Youtube?

This appears less impressive to Brian than the little black bag that he recovers from his inner pocket. —Affiliate links, plays by the million. But it dried up. My affiliate links got obsolete or bought out while, yknow, I was laying low from that data leak, that was it.

—You ever work for a big tech company?

—No. Contractor for Google a couple times, but there’s legal gray when they pressure their contractors to mistreat employees, hard to say



who gets in trouble, so I've been unfairly dismissed. Like I said last night.

—Shit. You can't clear all that up?

—Can't really pay a lawyer to do the clear-up.— I dry the nut with the hair on the back of my arm. Better not tell him that, out loud. —Might be worth it in the long run.

—Can't get my credit history cleared, can't explain even to satisfy Manpower, why there's gaps in my credit history, payment history, I don't wanna wait in line all day for the bank to yknow, sign a ... — he trails off. —To notarize something?— I suggest.

—Notarize a ...

I put the bucket that I found in the garage last night under the drain trap and carefully undo the nuts, two plastic and one metal at the wall. Normal, relatively fresh buildup spills into the bucket between the fittings. —Proably old tape or someone took it apart and put it back together loose. Pour that out back, yeah?

While Brian's up, Dave comes back in but I don't want to meet eyes with him so I don't risk looking for the pan of food. Did he take a bowl?

—Fuckin sink! You guys're like Gil now! That's not the same as rent.

—We know.

—Wild Gil Dickock's gonna be Wild King Tiktok, he's so uh, fuckin he's so influencial on you guys.— Dave's voice outside the cabinet like cold spray sticking in my arm hair.

—He might not be that special.

Cats scatter right down the narrow shadows in microsecond anticipation as the backdoor slaps shut, its draft inflates the osmopause

between kitchen scents and catbox reek, slaps back over my mask.

Brian's voice: —Djou get it?

—Think it's the tape. Here, it's in the bag.

Brian's delayed footfall describes a swoop around Dave. —Got it.

—Let's clean the fittings real good. What did I,

—Likes dissolve likes.— That's my favorite of Brian's tones of voice. He passes me the citrus cleaner. —Is there not a rag in there, Brian? No? Dammit.

—We used it on the paper uh, on the bottom.

Dave's voice winds around the doorframe from the living room.

—Do Not use a kitchen towel, Fryan!

—There's not any.

—There's not any!— reports Brian, and recoils at my shush.

—Shhh! You don't hafta, here, there's no paper towels? Or just gimme the sink sponge, I'll buy more. There we go. Thanks.

The J-bend is still too heavy to be empty. I turn it over into the bucket, stick my finger into it, release an hourglass of shards drumming down on the plastic bottom. —Whatta ya know.

Now Brian's head stacks up on top of mine, hair awkwardly elbowed and shouldered back by both arms. —Glass?

—Kind of a lot.— Some could be Corona bottle, but it's definitely kitchen-grade, and some white from coffee cups. Brian's chin dislodges from my shoulder blades. —Sounded like a whole buncha those cats pissing.

—Yeah, I wanna get up soon, cause the smell is worse down here. Take this, here, tape it, my hands're wet.— Brian hands me back the J-bend pretty elegantly taped. Water from my fingers and the decomposed cabinet floor climbs with catshit-shadow up my shirt.

Shitty plastic seals flush with the nuts, reinstalled, draining sink as designed.

—What shid I do with the leftover tape?— studies Brian.

—Dip it in sugar and chew on it.

—No dude,— hesitation as big and bright as the moment before a car crash. —The roll.

—Oh. Gimme it.— I mean to stand up on cold tingling legs, but first he awkwardly delivers it to my inverted and upturned palm. I drain the water from the bucket and find the saucepan back on the stove, looks like it wasn't touched.

In comes Dave again, falters like he doesn't like having to bend over, but gets a look under the sink. —Oohhh ... !— Dave's rictus rises above the mask, the usual mocking in place of approval. —Yer not just a Atkins Breath!

Brian returns my look, beyond caring, nods at Dave with craftsmanly pride. Dave turns on me. —Yer not just rear admiral! Ahain't Jay-Arr! Yewain't Sue Ellen!

—You like it?— I try, —Just a few things.

—Just a few things?— Dave's whole body assumes the macho mantle of I'll listen to you if you convince me to. I give up, grab Brian's eyes with mine. —You'd better break it to him about the floor.

Dave's eyes get even closer together as Brian reports: —The little paper floor, or plywood or whatever, is toast. I'd check the back-end development on the uh, on the subfloor, too.

Body humped again, Dave shrugs. —Who knows how much it's been let go in 50 years. That's why there's linoleum under there.

—Anyhow, it'd be a good idea to take that piece out. It's done.

Then Dave's eyes dive down to the bucket and straight up again into mine. —The hal's this?

—That was in your trap.

His neck reinflates. —Wal whose fault is that?

—I just,

He twists it on me again, I must know something, so he has to know more. —What. That bother you? You got somethin to say about it?

What can I say, I have no authority or investment in this nor a macho retort, my face lifts up and forward like it's running from my head, like I'm a kid in a schoolyard confrontation. —I thought you should know,

—Wal, thinkin don't make it! Don't assume, Chava!

All I want is to tell him to lower his voice so he doesn't get her attention, but he's paralyzed me again, he's got authority or at least long conditioning behind that stupid rage. —I'm goin to my room.

He grabs the bucket from me and demonstrates emptying the glass into the wastebasket. —This's cuzza fuckin lazyboy, isn't it?

Suddenly Brian is gone, doesn't absorb Dave's exhaust anymore. —This is yer proof that you know what's right for the halse?

—No. Forget it. It doesn't mean anything.

—Yer finally makin sense,— at that I stupidly decide to turn back and give him an audience, —it doesn't mean anything. You think you're all full potential, but look, you still left all the shit out from under the sink!

I left it because I'm fleeing to get away from him, but he's got me. —Here, I'll put it back,

—I'll put it back! You're so good at fixin shit, but look,— He points at a nick in the cabinet, —where'd that come from?

The nick is bay-area overpainted and dustgrimed. —I have no idea, —Right, you Have no idea! It's all your guyses opinions about yer chicken nests that you want, but this ain't the place, Chava! You stay in yer place!

And off he stomps right past me, but I can tell it's a circular, returning stomp. I get out of the circle, in the narrow hall just like the cats did. Where was she this whole time?

Exiled indoors for a change. I feel so beaten, my chest so tight, that every idea and movement feels selfish, harmful. I toss away the idea of getting boxes for my stuff. No point, I could be kicked out this time next week. Or tomorrow. Stay alert.

I send texts to Liset and Jay, just keeping contact, replying safely to what we last exchanged days ago, not bringing anything personal in. I supposed it'd be stupid to text Gil four walls away.

There's no way I could've known how Dave would react. His secret or deep-structure rulebook balloons us against these unfamiliar walls. I didn't know it until Gil and Brian reminded me last night how you can talk things out when you listen with respect. That feels selfish too, one night of fun and how long do I have to pay for it with guilt and anticipation. Or infection. Nothing ever stops, ends, resolves. Anticipate the next problem.

A 1930s Thermador stands at knee-level in the wall, mounting screws gone to coffeebeans but the grate shiny as new before its pair of dusty coils. I flip the switch to the right just to see. His voice heats up instead of the grate, on the other side of the wall, either to her or on his

phone, probably talking about us. After two more minutes of no kick at the door, not knowing whether I'm getting kicked out, nothing.

Sleeping bag was an all-night slough of cold drunk paranoia. I swore I went to sleep sort of calm last night. Probably lasted about an hour, now my chest is back to average strangulation. Don't have to go into the office today, briefly consider just hiding out in my tent to see if Aunty shows, just to run my situation by her. But then she could scrutinize me from a window without engagement. Jump up and go find Brian on the couch after all?

Drink water and try to sleep again, but the thought of letting my guard down last night throttles my chest and closes out sleep. Don't know if I said anything stupid, even if I didn't get drunk. Not used to being around people anymore, without fear and hostility from without, so the body synthesizes them both. On top of everything else my salvaged phone's speaker-phone function has always been fucked up, so rather than explain to Elena that I can't do video calls from where I am, the laptop and tent and wifi's refusal to mix decide that I'm going to Streakwave. If everyone will just leave me alone while I get on Facebook and do the one-way conversation.

Before I do, what would be great is pay Jason back that call, actually talk. How about that, he picks up. —What's up brother.

My cool cousin, the one that toured with Anal Cunt, who grew up with the guy from Sleep, and so forth, who used to help my band get gigs opening for his band since he's like fifteen years older than me. —Dude! You're not at work yet?

—I'm just settin up. Pretty mellow here at UC compared to Plantronics. How you doin?

—Yeah I bet. Well, Elena, yknow my dad's girlfriend, she sent me another text early this morning. I dunno how it can be so different from one day to the next.

—How is Frank?— He doesn't know his uncle hardly, but he asks for me, wants to listen.

—The physical therapist saidis muscles've hardened. Yknow he hasn't had a voice in a month. Which means the VA nurses and doctors give him no real attention. First Elena told me he was sitting up in the cardiac chair, now this. Like is muscle hardening something that needs exercising, or a sign of being screwed? And this's thirdhand, it takes so long for nurses to set up Zoom or Facetime since she can't go see him anymore, but ... they said I can call today.

—Man. That's rough.

—Yeah. The new hospital's no-visitors, and they're not real firme to keep up with me and Elena at the same time, so there's not a lotta on-point stuff between us, but she's just waiting to hear from me alla time. Everything I could say just sounds drained out, or beside the point ... I dunno how long ago they stuck the phone by his ear so I could just tellim how paralyzed my life is. Yeah, but we gotta get together, dude! You been jamming?

—Not really, I just been postin up with my girl. I went out to Sac to see my grandkid the other day though, I feel fine, they were pretty careful so I'm not worried about gettin sick.

—Cool man ... Yeah, I just got this place in San Ho, so I'm back.

—How you like it?

—I'm glad I'm back, for sure, I mean, El Ay wasn't, wasn't gonna last. El Ay was, is, bullshit. It's hard to get laid off after everything I put into that move, but I'm over it.

Perspective feels good, dissipates the stress some, one sigh at a time.  
—Yer mom's still in Capitola?

—Yep,— says my cousin, —I'm fine. My mom's fine. She doesn't wanna get the vaccine.

—Dude, just teller to get the damn vaccine.

—She's like, I don't go anywhere as it is.

—I guess Sannacruz's different. In June this county'd kept it to a lousy three thousand cases and a hundred or so dead people, now it's 23,000 cases and two hundred more dead people. This winter it's gonna seriously spread, and Trump just said the symptoms were no big deal the other week. We could've done this crappy of a job back in April and been back to work by now, with all the selfish assholes done or dead. That'd make the presidential election interesting.— He mutters assent. —Yeah well. I'm glad yer at UC. Work smarter, not harder. But there's no students, right?

—No. Who knows when they'll come back. But, so, when they do, I'll have the whole kitchen set up to run for like, a month at a time. It's all on a Google Doc.

—Lessgo to the beach like we were sposed to whenever that was, before I moved.

—You wanna go this weekend?

—Ah man, I dunno, we got special permission to go see Frank, I dunno what's gonna happen.

—In Visalia?



—No, he’s in Sebastopol now. They brought him there from the VA cause this small place was sposeta exercise him every day and shit, and now ... he’s still on a breathing machine, everything. But I’ll hit you up. It’s cool talkin to you again. You talked to Thomas Ryan?

—Yeah, he’s just quarantined with his son.

—That’s cool. Aright, I’ll let you go. I’ll call you Saturday, okay? I might be depressed but,

—It’s cool, brother, hit me up.— We say goodbye. Having him is catching a break.

I go to lock the side door and find a cardboard TV box with the distinct shine of leather under pale morning light. Didn’t notice that before. It’s a fancy leather-sleeved letterman jacket like dads had to have in the nineties. Embroidered Goodguys patch from a Pleasanton show. A cat had recently made a nest of it. Gross. I heave at it, it’s light, so I get it above my head, up on the storage rails above the garage door, cat dander and termite dust suppurate in my superior tarsus. Can’t pour old beer in my eye. I check my bike lock and light out with barely a cloud over my one-story hideout in the canning-basement district.

The river trail goes down from Palm, still pretty empty of tents and garbage, then up to under Woz’s exhausted sycamores. I don’t want to know what the guy feels like who sets out on the levee all day with nothing to do except protect his exposed possessions, but I keep seeing him and I wonder if my timeline will put me out here with him.

And look at everyone who’s not sleeping out. Houses full of human statistics, getting sick and maybe dying, partying with extended family in their six-foot duplex front yard just to prove a point, In This House We Believe dipshit signs all through suburbs where no black lives reside, Amazon trucks dominating the empty streets, everywhere trash and

piles of destroyed plywood, lost homeless possessions, fastfood trash. Like my boss Jorsh said, plenty people are doing great stuck at home for six months. I whizz by houses all standing there self-righteous and aloof, next to their invasive Orchard Supply ailanthus trees that have more pig property rights than native plants or people have the right to exist.

Over San José State and a zigzag into Naglee Park, in my highest gear and just spinning in the fresh air, little traffic, then 13th Street opens up as far as the eye can see. I bet this deserted trashed frathouse block hosted Tape a Gun to Your Dick and Pose with a Boat Paddle Day on this calendar date before the quarantine. Good riddance.

Just the 101 ramps are busy and then smooth sailing again, twenty-five minutes, sans goofy turns prescribed by a phone, from Palm to Streakwave's droop-eyed industrial condos. Pines stand shining around the corner, electroplated cumbias rattle in the metal shop. A peeling old Itasca stands circumspect at the curb papered with torn-off sticky tickets. The hopeful resident has a cardboard sign on the dash that says for sale \$8,000.

When I dismount, the air is cold and rough in the throat and for a second my self occludes, like it did after April, like this morning, wondering if I could've caught it from talking with Brian and Chava outside. Put the mask on and keep it on. Either nothing or too late to worry.

I slip through the loading door into the dark hallway. Maybe two voices up front at this hour, maybe that'll be it for the day. I know the ancient receptionist is never coming to work in-person again. Must be tough to relay calls through Zoom.

My dad's girlfriend's message says to ask for Judy. I second-guess the number and get caught again in Sonoma Specialty's phone maze before I remember that 8511 is correct, there isn't a better nurse-station number like the Tulare VA has. Luckily Judy is near, she gives me her personal number, that's right, and I punch that into the Facebook Messenger. Good thing I still have a Facebook or there'd be more exposure to guilt in this smoky nightmare autumn.

—Your dad's pneumonia seems like it's going away,— Judy begins from outside his room, —his bedsore is about the same.

Suddenly I lose my modesty for taking up this nurse's time, and I need to ask her everything I can, so I can sleep. —Are they exercising him? How often is the physical therapist coming?

Judy's eyes down: —I don't really know, I'd have to ask the doctor for that part of his file.

—Right. No, that's fine, you wouldn't know.

—No. So ... any other questions?— And now nothing to ask, mind blank, doorframe darkens around a doctor file. —I'm gonna take the phone into his room. Just stay positive, okay?

My chest muscles revert to stone. —Yeah, I know.

Judy's face, probably younger than me, flips away into wood-paneled haze and then Dad comes on the phone, head and face moving, loose jaw and skull wrapped in a sling but not tied shut. His crewcut has got long since he left the last place, still-tanned face looks happy to see me but his tongue and teeth don't live together, and I can't read his incomplete lip movements. Like half the person is coming through the computer. Three weeks ago his lips were still readable.

—Hi Dad,— to say I start isn't right, more like toss a chunk of normal interaction into the void to sound its depth, —can you hear me on that thing?

Dad shrugs his shoulders, twists them faintly side to side, paralyzed chest-down, upper face smiling and jaw lolling as it can. A new kind of unpredictable behavior, like when I used to visit him, only different gestures. Then the sweat of anticipation rings my corneas like it used to, sweat of defense against how judgmental his every notion might get expressed, a reflex from before I knew that he'll be less eager to hurl insults since we're visiting outside his house, from before I knew only a year ago that he'd behave himself at a restaurant in front of Elena.

But then obviously he doesn't act out. He's not only degraded but stuck accepting, maybe past his last complaint. He does his little upward brow-tilt, mhmm gotta love it, one of his half-listening memorized-ad responses that fill every phone call since 2002.

—Are you okay today?— I don't know how else to give him his dignity but ask him honestly, and how they have all but positive encouragement tied off, it's what I have. He wants to jerk his chin away from the bandaged tracheostomy. Just a month ago he sat up and breathed on his own for an hour in the cardiac chair, whatever the hell that is, and now this.

—Did you get another IVIG treatment this week?— Another sideways nod, either no or I don't know. Or is it the usual video-call question of whether he even heard me that time.

—How am I? I'm fine, I guess. I haven't talked to my brother. Just waiting to be able to,— don't make it about my own need to get outside, —to come visit you.

His mute lips round over the uncooperative tongue that hasn't tasted real food since September. He looks sweaty even with his chest bare. I hesitate long enough to show I'm trying. —Are you still hot? Did they take you out to exercise lately?

He shakes his head clearly. Affirmative smiles and negative frowns drop down his face by chance like raindrops. The obvious next thing would be our visit Saturday, but Elena says that the doctor's bending the rules, so I don't say it. —Are you still watching Discovery?

Maybe a nod and frown, maybe a head shake with smile of surprise, the same but in a new combination. He must be medicated all day now, to wake and to sleep, not to notice the duration of how many intravenous immunoglobulin treatments now. What do his expressions transmit? Just going through the motions with me? —Elena's doing everything she can to get you help. Did you talk to her on the video call yesterday?

His lips move a bunch now, his familiar outburst intensity behind the shoulders and back, but through the screen I can't read it. Does he have a lot to say about Elena or is he trying to ask me something, or tell me how he sees the world, now that it's too late to speak? This is hopeless, a whisper in a hole in a wall with another wall in between. Maybe he's taking the situation at face value, mostly too old to be mad the last five years. A moment of clarity: —Dad, have they got you one of those boards with letters on it so you can point and spell out words?

—Not yet,— suggests Judy, —we could try one.

I'm glad Judy can't see my face coloring. How the fuck is my digital face the first person in a building full of healthcare professionals to think of a spelling board? —Yeah, you all should get him one. He could have something he wants to tell you to be more comfortable.

—He’s comfortable.— As in he can’t feel anything below his shoulders.

—I’m at work, Dad, and my guitar’s been packed away for a month, so I can’t play you anything today ... sorry about that.— Maybe last time my jangly solo Santana copy, without the whole band from his memory, didn’t connect.

—You’ve got some stuff on your wall!— I didn’t notice it until just now. —Did Elena send you that?— Now a distinct complement of nods and smiles. I squint. We love you from Jett, Tagg, Bush-redneck names. These are Elena’s kids and husbands from Visalia or Tulare or Hanford. —That came in the mail? Hey Dad, that’s great. I can send you stuff, too. Can they set up something to read on yer lap if I send it?

I think he’s trying to lift his left arm, or it’s a loose nerve twitch, and his face falls meanwhile in a way that strikes all of my hope for him. Judy comes into view and his lips round like last time I did a video with him. —You gotta go, Dad? Alright man, you gotta go. I love you.

—Gil!

Thomas. —I’ll see you soon, Dad. Thanks, Judy.— Hardened muscles and lolling jaw dissolve into ever-positive fascist Facebook blue, pleased to mediate your murdered future. Please rate the quality of your call.

Up bounds the super-millennial, must be ten years younger than me, corduroy knees almost to my shoulder. I scribble MAIL on the nearest paper and fold it into my pocket. —What’s up, Thomas, you been alright?

—Fine as frog hair. Look! New froggy buttons on my Crocs!

Thomas is either a truly nice young man or a rare specimen free of the essential white belief that only whites are clean, as edified by their

segregating performance during the quarantine. —Your mind, though a high-fidelity impression of a Spongebob episode, does reveal clear internal pathways, just sometimes they appear in reverse order, like you gottem all in a bag ready to go, and life is about picking the order in which to flingem out into the world. I guess I used to be like that, pero más espuqui.

—Your analysis is inspiringly perfect!— corresponds Thomas, —Man, listen to those phones.

—Glad you think so. Alright, I'm comin to work.

On the pretext of looking for paperclips I case the whole building's four rooms and find Jorsh gone. Excellent. Two callers are trying to get cybersecurity, I really wish that Engenius ad on our website would not give people the impression. I play helpful and let a pissed-off caller rant into Jorsh's personal office voicemail about cybersecurity.

—Nice to see anyone, nice to just be able to go to work.— I bet my voice gives away that work is my only place right now. Thomas finishes typing, then says quickly, as if to make up for the silence: —Me too, it's like, this is how it is, we're at work, just make it work.

—You got it, dude. No negotiating with people who don't really wanna negotiate. I was tired of that by April ... — It's weird to narrate my inner diary to people but here we are in October. —Far as I'm concerned, anyone hasn't figured out not dying from this flu, in six months, that's their problem.

—I tend to agree. When's the vaccine coming?

—Tshhh, no idea, man. Soon, they keep saying. Before we know it, I guess.

—But just knowing it's coming!

—I know. Remember June, when it wasn't even an idea. That sucked.

—Well, I can't see this'll go on much longer after the vaccine. It's gonna be free, that's the first free, the only free, healthcare in our lifetime.

—That's what I'm saying. All the angry white people who never got a handout in their life like minorities do, now can say they got somethin free from the government. Trump'll go down in history like FDR.— The big workshop's cold clings. —Let's put some music on our somethin, man.

Thomas pouts behind his knight-helmet mask. —Music?— Then much quieter again: —No, I can't mix Taylor Swift with this environment! Ohhh! Let's put on some ASMR, Gil!

—No, Thomas,— having to explain everything to this guy does, I admit, often produce amicable outcomes, —I don't wanna listen to people talk. We already got that. This's exackly why music was invented, dude.

Pereira's voice rises unexpectedly from behind his pallet of wireless cameras: —My Wife wannid to listen to Ayessemarr. She made Me get this financial planner guy, and then she got into Ayessemarr, cause she was Fuckin the Financial Guy!

—Welp,— welps Thomas, —That's two. I believe in democracy ... People talking. So no podcasts, then.— We both laugh. —Jesus, no!

Then Thomas crosses over to my desk, squats where there's no chair, leans in close. —Poor Dennis.— I ignore the phoneline and finish typing. —You said it. He needs to see a dentist.

—No, I mean it,— Thomas means it, —I think it's him's gonna get fired, like they said on Zoom.



I thumb toward Pereira's pallets. —Zoom? Why him? You got any complaints you didn't wanna lodge against him? ... I was just talkin about that last night.

—Talking about work?

—No! Talkin about employment. Why wouldn't it be Jorsh?

—Jorsh has power!

—He has responsibility.— I raise one didactic finger, —Upstairs might be wantin to shake things up, blame the quarantine on us. He's the account manager, he's got the kinda numbers they can blame on him. It's all sales. Pereira doesn't have numbers. He is the numbers.

—Kay, I'm gonna get up, it looks like I'm blowing you.

—Indeed. Answer the phone.

The door opens and in comes the latest masked bandit with an invoice. —Thanks,— I glance at the invoice on its way into my Jorsh file. —Tracy, uh? Did you get any of those sprinkles?

—I don't think so,— thinks the guy. I do the banker glance behind my shoulder. —Look, Jorsh, that is our account manager, he's not regularly in the building. Do you need this invoice closed now?

—Not my problem.

—Great! Enjoy the weather.

—Yeah, it's not gonna get cold at all this winter. Good for all the homeless.— He says it with that arrogant told-you-so tone that people save for topics they know nothing about. I can't help responding: —Yeah well, it's never good for all the homeless,

—Is for me! No one knows I live in My truck. You know how much crypto I bought since March?— And he leaves me hanging about how much, out the door and back to Fuckoff City or Tracy or Lathrop with twenty boxes of Grandstream Networks 3.6mm HD spy cameras.

The worst thing about giving a shit and trying to live more gently on the earth is the loneliness. No one else gives a shit, and they just put you down for expressing compassion, just deny the helpless feeling from global situations. There's no convenience, no Amazon Prime two-hour delivery on compassion. Pretty soon they tell you your bike is a futile gesture, not because of the bike, but because your compassion is all over it. You end up just sassing people.

During that train of thought Jorsh must've arrived, because the whole room is being sucked in one direction behind my left ear, Thomas is practically horizontal, a fish swallowed by a dam intake.

—See, how can you say I don't like Hispanics? I have Gil!— He's talking to the airpods under his Joel Osteen hair, always dominating the space with convenience, yet never anywhere. Oh to have a slingshot. —Okay, I'm here. Hi Gil! I was on the phone with Dennis.— The boss cranes his neck up indicating the height of Pereira's ramparts. —You guys okay?

—Think so,— I say, —no symptoms.

—Ain't that the truth! Yknow, it's a flu, people.

—I think you got a message in your office.

—You went in my office?— I clear my throat. —I sent a caller to your phone.

—Oh.— Then he looks at my proffered Jorsh-file like it's a squashed lizard. —Dennis says you live off Willow?

—Approximately.

—My folks live in Willow Glen! I mean, you don't,

—No, on the other side of the tracks.

—Yeah. Right.— Boss's world is saved. Thomas just pipes in, can't blame someone who's been quarantined out of office hierarchy: —My

grandma lived in Willow Glen but,— now it's the white-people family-story-laundry-list with the upramping tone, —my parents moved to Quito to be closer to my mom's job at Saratoga High.

—God, public school, man, I was in that for four years,— draws Jorsh to me, under the weight of all four years, —yknow, public school is just such a waste of time.

—You mean high school?— Thomas earns an elbow from me, a little too hard. —He was a teacher, guy.

Jorsh holds forth: —They oughta just have it for those who really wanna be there, and know the value of education, and don't mind payin for it. Hey but now I know you live close, I should lend you this book I been reading! It's, I mean, it's for sure ap-lickable to Streak-wave's goals for growth, but anyway, it's got Murray Rothbard, it's got Ludwig My-ses, some respectable people. Butchou gotta be disciplined, Gil, it's like this thick. But it'll change yer life.

—Two counts of that's not what she said!— hisses Thomas through his fifteenth-century helmet visor.

—Last week you said you had a place in Sac, what, in Antelope.— I can interrogate Jorsh a little since he keeps me to solve the place's problems, almost like equals.

—Yeah,— he insists, —but that's my rennal. I stay at my folks' cause that Antelope house is an investment.

—Anyhow. All I know from today's in the folder.

—Great. Uhh. You want it back?

—You're the boss.

—Everything else okay?

My lips are still loose from his book routine: —My dad's not okay, that's for sure. Saw him over Facebook this morning.

—Now don't get uptight cause your dad's been watching Fox. Yes, Facebook!— it dawns on my boss, —don't forget to join Protect San José and Strong Trump Supporters. That'll make it real easy for me to post stuff for you about the book, yknow, decision points. Okay, go team!— He wags a finger at Pereira's tower of loot. —Dennis built himself a wall this week, let's build that wall!

I lean over to Thomas' desk, whence he's been relishing our show. —Oh look, he's grooming me to take over the place, Thomas! He's gonna lend me the anarcho-capitalism book! Maybe he'll sell me his folks' place in Willow Glen too! He crashes withis mom cause his mortgage is an investment! Órale! Maybe he'll get coronavirus and I'll hafta be boss early and I can fire him.

—Must be nice to get hired with a future in mind.

—It's that fancy El Ay résumé, my silly Saratoga squire. Drink yer Soylent.

—You're looking for a place?

—I was makin a point about his folks dyin and he's got two investments. Why, you got one? Hey Pereira! You got any boxes left over from those servers? I needa build a wall.

No rain east or west. I should start a social-media garage-sorting business, show San José just how unoriginal each person's shit collection is. Let's see, a one-car garage is, damn, can't use a calculator on the bike. Let's just say three hundred square feet, and seven feet of shitstacking potential, that's 2,100 cubic feet, times what, I don't even know, but for every hundred thousand one-car garages in San José, that's two some million cubic feet of boxes of shit and skis, a small skyscraper. Imagine somehow disposing of or recycling (which turns out truly to be fake) all that shit, then dumping the machines that make

shit into the ocean so we can't make more, and then plant a bay laurel or valley oak in every driveway spot that's not needed with the garage functional again. Modest environmental goals!

Then, if I had a reputation for handling people's private spaces I could buy up these abandoned parking lots all down Oakland Road. So many months stuck inside and no one's been out cracking parking lots to plant a tree or two. Which parking lots will probably never be used again, thanks to Amazon delivery. Life blows by, wasted, helpless and waiting for the moment when you won't get caught.

Like this tiny blue banner-printing shop with the oversized showroom window, forgotten in the bustle of the 101 ramp. Now it's just for parking trucks. Wish I had a little shop like that just to be able to do whatever business, or think. My dad could've bought it in the late 70s for nothing. I could grow trees in the backlot, like, tough shit, this is my private property, I'll grow native trees if I want to. Does my dad fault me for not having a suburban house to nurse him in?

Just to be different I get a tall can and walk my bike off past Gish down the old walled-in freightline tracks that end up next to Gordon Biersch on Eighth, and sip beer in the concrete void. Coming out over 101 is pretty cool. The little joys of quarantine.

I go out for tacos again just to stay out of the house, since it's not cold. Return to find my stuff safe in the garage, move a few things around, tie up the bike to that heavy old iron clamp bolted to the workbench.

Another beer in the tent, transition to water on schedule, until I can't avoid having to use the facilities. In the house it's quiet, few lamps on, Brian's vanished from the couch, leaving Tony Robbins tracks. *Awaken the Giant Within*, which I'm sure is for dating, but also

*Unshakeable*, which suggests Brian must be in some real financial trouble. But otherwise why would he be here. Just from this town's society I do feel an itch to read one, even if I don't give a shit.

That controversial lazyboy of theirs is still present. No Auntie nowhere, no old-people television blaring. She must spend the cold nights in her room. Or parties with friends down the street?

Now it's got to be ten-thirty, minding my own sore-assed business in the tent, when out of the night fingers rattle the fabric. —Who's ... Dave! You're pawin me like a fuckin bear, man!

—Come talk to me.

What if for a moment I wasn't paying attention. What if I got hit by a truck this morning and all of this is just a dream before death on Oakland Road's gravel and discarded vape carts.

My arm describes a broad arc unzipping the tent, uncomfortable to expose one's armpit and lung so before an enemy. I step out and he's got no mask on neither. —Dude, yer lips're too thin, man! Sorry, I been makin up what people look like for six months.

Dave's breath curls over crossed arms in the outside-lamp glare. —You talk to Brian or Chava today?

—Nope. Workin for a living.

—That's it,— he nods away at nothing, unsatisfied.

—Look, I'm really busy and my dad is sick, so I'm not keepin track of them. Is there something I should,

—Yer dad's sick?

—Yeah.— I should know better after running my mouth at work today, but after last night something just won't clam up, like everyone wanted me to in the spring. As if to tell him look, I moved in and this

moved in with me. —it's called Guillain-Barré, it shuts down your peripheral nervous system,

—English.

—He can't move. I'm kinda stuck checkin onnim, I dunno what he needs so ... there's not much to talk about with the doctors, yknow?

Every turn of my skin feels aglow with sweat. Dave must perceive that I'm off-balance, because he doesn't miss a beat. —Yep. Sometimes you gotta jist shut the fuck up ... yer mom's not takin care ofim?

—His girlfriend. He's been remarried twice and then, now her.

—I see you cleaned up the garage.

—No, just swept and moved some stuff, really.— I can lie to this guy. What's it matter.

—You didn't toss out the shoes on the front porch? The leather sandals?

A layer of me darkens, cools, relaxes. Someone else's problems.

—What leather sandals?

—Okay. But look, let's get things straight. We're all staying here, renting, and we gotta act like we're renting, like we wanna stay here, annit's good enough. It's not our place to be doin home improvement.

—I know.— He's seeing everything I did, maybe. But then how's he going to jettison that lazyboy? He's putting his weight before disagreement over when Aunty is okay with things and not. Does he actually report to Aunty, or what's the arrangement? —If we can sit down and decide what's good for use of space,

—I dunno if anyone's gonna agree on what space is, much less talk about it.

A laugh snorts around the sneer I'm holding on him. —I thought people were supposed to learn that in college, how to find the common ground.

—Fryan's got plenty goin on, and he didn't get a college degree. And he can see where's a good lane to stay in.

—Not a lotta lanes to pick when you owe money.

—If the feds can do it, I shid be able to ... everyone's so high and mighty and ... — His fists flex and drop limp at his sides. How about that, I wore him out on his own digression. —Hey, how about I cook tomorrow night. I can do a fried rice real easy for everyone, and lunch leftovers, too.

—Cool.— Coldly. —Just do it normal without no SJW twists.

—You got it. I'll clean up, too. Count on me!

Need to put in my phone whether my storage key is in the third cylindrical pocket to the left or at one of the edges. Fingertips search blindly down the tough polyester building-blocks, trip on phone-charger cord like a tree root on the path, old receipt I can't remember why I need it, the key itself has a cylindrical housing that makes the pocket feel empty when it's not, or I think it's a lighter, by the time I find the key right where it belongs third from the left, joke roach disintegrating at the right, I'm already back under the anti-hooker floodlight from down at the church. Step around the castor bean's bony claws, almost under them, it's getting so tall, but that yippy dog still yips away at me like I'm a thief.

Yellow towtruck, motorcycle, all's in order. Door's unlocked. Might as well. What momentarily solid and flat mushes beneath my



shoe? Looks like it was already garbage left out right at the door, some cardboard object. I kick it away and those Birkenstocks are under it. Pick them up and set them by the couch inside. Dave's house when we were kids always had this smell. I figured since thirteen it was the reek of Dave's bull taint. I sniff the lazyboy but smell nothing. Got a mask on, don't I.

The bathroom really is clean since Gil's been here, but someone's trying to get the tubes and containers and stuff fung shway. But the milk-carton-shaped bathroom's not going to get a flow going. No ventilation fan or nothing. I wipe the seat even though I didn't splash.

My ipad has half battery life. No work offers from the local. Only two weeks left until my credit bill's due. Something has to happen besides sit on the floor that Dave didn't even sweep.

The house is too quiet. Tiptoe quick, two strides out of the little hall, hope not to run into her like a ghost again. A quack and wail from the floorboard, clunk from the baseboard. Chava's door is cracked open and when I file myself into the doorway he looks me right in the eye. —Sorry bout the noise,— I slide all the way in, —I just came to take a piss.

—You don't ever stay over? I guess you said last night, but,

He's still got a mask on, too. Thumbs in my tearducts. —Almost never ... I was reviewing my case, but I can't see right now what order the changes I'm tracking in my files go, cause I hafta look now where the changes stand, relative to the last emails I sent. This discriminatory firing job, this other thing I have to deal with now, now is just not a good time for it to be coming together for me. I hafta talk face to face with someone, to make sense of this case.

I tell him this to let off steam, to lead him to see my situation from the room he got ahead of me. He didn't hear me. He looks sick or scared. —You okay?

—You wanna change up and help me talk through the situation here?

Cumbias from the neighbors. —Outside. I can't focus with that sax jumpin those jacks.

Little snotty-eyed cat hisses at me when my shoe falls on the driveway, kick my toe at it. Gil's right, that old panel van needs to get cleansed in flame. Chava keeps looking back at the door, but there's nothing. —Where'd you go earlier?

—Had that call. You worried about Dave? Here, just turn the light on in the washroom if you wanna see him coming. Or don't trip.— I think Chava benefits from a choice of solutions.

Set backpack down between my feet and squat, rolling-tossing flashlight between my palms. Turning it, catching it, then pinching it with fingertips, and he notices me doing it. I'm like dude, it's fine. Not everything has to get pointed out. I don't think he hears me.

Where's that joke roach now that I need it. The garage door's still open. —You awake, Gil?

—I guess I would be now!

—Okay, sorry.

—What're you guys doin'?

Chava just starts going, but keeping his voice down. —We're gonna get kicked out, man. There's no common ground, —he means with Dave, —no starting point, no expectations, just wait to breakis rules.

Gil comes out of his tent, adjusts a cloth mask over his chin. —I got the law laid down here, too, I dunno, maybe twunny minutes ago. What'd you guys do?

Flashlight perfectly up the ramp of my left hand's fingers, like a skater hitting halfpipe, down with gravity into my pocket. I need to do the explaining, Chava's too emotional. —Probly started with the ... — I gesture with pointing finger and valve-opening thumb.

—Oh you guys worked on the sink? Totally forgot about that,— forgot Gil.

—It was just dirty and the tape was messed up,— Chava counts out patiently.

—Did she say anything?

I lick the end of the receipt tape and hope it sticks to the roach.

—Who? Katie?

—That's her name?— They both call out at the same time, lighter flames in their eyes.

—You guys didn't know?

—Hadn't got around to askin about it!

—Yeah, it doesn't go well,— adds Chava, —and I assume this is his sublet operation,

—Katie Dutra.— The sticky receipt trick! I'll be god damned. The roach gophers up out of the pocket just enough to pinch. —Her husband was Anthony.

—Porchiguese?— Gil yuks. Roll the roach in the tiny flame.

—Watcher mouth, dude! This whole neighborhood is. Anyway, we fixed the drain but that settim off, it's not really worth hyposethizing about,

—I think we should at least compare what we all know,— Chava’s whisper insists, —if he kicks me out and then Gil, I’ll feel like a total asshole involving,

—Dude, it’s fine, chill,— Gil tips back on his squatting heels.

—But you know how it feels, right?— Chava needs to let it out. —Being responsible for everyone every time you breathe since this spring, but no one says where the line of responsibility is, and it’s like no matter what I do it’ll not just cross that line and affect someone else, but a third person who wasn’t involved is gonna change the rules on me. Like they wanna be more isolated, and they can make more rules to do it!

The weed falls straight out the bottom of the roach to the pitted concrete. —I think he doesn’t like sharing the space. But look, Chava, money talks, or else he wouldn’t be tolerating us. He got mad cause Chava brought over some weird-smelling soy sauce. I can already taste my morning breath or borderline halitosis when I sleep, and I just dream that I’m chewing the shit out of this horrible candy that’s part just, dirt, broken-up pavement, and it’s too big and dry in my mouth to chew it down and get rid of it or spit out.— I point at the rollaway out of sight behind the big old panel van, —that’s why we needa clean up that rollaway, so I can organize CBD tinctures and do taste research.

Gil spits laughter at the ground. —Oh! Good thing you got the sink outta the way! Now we can focus on,

—I’m serious, dude.— It’s irritating that these guys aren’t on the entrepreneurial ball. Chava’s scared to let go. —I don’t get how he decides what she will and won’t let us do. He’s obviously keepin her away from us. Do any a you talk to her?

I know how it is. Contingencies. Gil sees it too: —Okay Chava, but did he say in those words tonight, he's gonna kick you out?

—He ... well no, but,

—Then we're gonna have to wait for that problem until it comes. We can't prevent,

—I know but. I was just really lookin forward to having an address, a door, just to make some things easier,

—Tellin me,— I tell him, —imagine havin to go get my mail for this discrimination case from Visalia, my mom's, and then makin filing deadlines.

Gil looks at me when I say Visalia, then advises Chava: —You gotta kinda be ready for people to mean two different things, cause people, more and more it seems like they're talkin to themselves in this specific way they need to hear, at the expense of talkin to you in a way that makes intentions clear. Yknow? This self-care bullshit. I gotta guy tries to do both at once, you should hear him talk,

—How can you tell he's doin both at once, if it's like you say they talk?

—I can tell, with that guy.

—I wish you'd put some time in listenin to Dave, then,— Chava puts his beanie almost down over his long eyelashes, Alongi Bros calendar hunk, —who's sposed to live like that? Where you have to guess what they want when yer tryna uphold an agreement?

—That'd be ideal,— scratch behind my left ear with my lighter's cap, or is it lighter's hood, —but just cause you try hard to be clear doesn't mean anyone else sees the use in it.

Chava nods but he's still got more to go. —I got into the house on a legit rental deal with Dave right before the quarantine. And Dave pulls out,

—How do you know him, anyway?

—Mutual work friends, it's not that interesting ... so I used to spend most of the time living with my mom, she's disabled, this was only meant to be just a crash pad, cause she's quarantining and won't let me visit or stay. She's at Paseo Senter, yknow, thank god, but she doesn't want to upset managers and end up, yknow, like the three of us are right now.

Gil goes on: —We're not, Chava. We're not. It's no one's fault, cause how we gonna know what an old lady wants every second. Every landlord has to deal with their tenants spreadin out.

I need to steer them straight. —We don't know if Katie's mad. We just know Dave is either mad by himself or mad to get the heat from her off himself, and we can't,

—That's what I'm saying!— says Chava, —or it's one, yknow, bracket down from what she really wants, cause I'm pretty sure us fixin the sink wasn't really the problem, but he used that to get back at me about the lazyboy, even though he twisted it on me as getting back at him about the lazyboy.— Gil doesn't go for it, looks at the ground. —And he's just always watchin us since Gil moved in, always under surveillance, always havin to perform, like how everyone sees whether you wear your mask right ... I'm just tired, guys.

—Ah Chava,— says Gil, that tone of voice that tells me they know each other longer than I thought, —you shoulda said somethin yesterday when we were all talkin, if you were so stressed out about it.

Chava does this two snap and fist-bump move, right over left, tiddlepunk. —I dunno, it just all came together at once. We all partying outside again and dropping masks?

—If one of us passed it around last night, it's too late now. Look, if it happens again with Dave, just come talk to me or Brian,— Gil looks at me like we're right about to go up a scaffold loaded up with Fresnel deuces, —we can talk it out. Dave, yknow, we don't needa predictim or rationalize, when it happens you just needa distractim with somethin else.

Gil cracks me up. I start thinking about everything Chava just said, part of me feels like I agree like maybe Dave has been watching me this whole time too, when we're supposed to know each other. I don't know. When you get perspective on something you're so accustomed to, other times in life you feel it, a lighter sparks, but not now.

Now the snaps again from Chava, then left over right, diddlebunk. —I gotta say, with how things've been this year, it feels, it's a real relief, guys, to be able to just rely on the words we're saying, and not guessing why you say it or why your body does something while you say it.— I catch my chin cocking back into my neck, like Chava read my mind. Now it seems like he's all deflated out. He stands up and starts balancing on his toes. —It's just nice to have a place to stay, that's all.

—That ain't even a minimum anymore in twunny-twunny. Medieval peasants,

I need to help keep Chava's calm, and not wind him up again with Gil's medieval peasants. —Yeah, imagine how many people right now stuck outside in a historic quarantine, wish they had a place where like, I guess I can just come in at anytime and take a piss. This late at night, and not get a shotgun up my balls.

—This is why the city wants four ADUs in every backyard,— Gil recovers from the derailed medieval peasants, —they don't want anyone to really live here. They want to feed us alive to landlords and Whole Foods, and no one ever has community enough to even figure out shifts for kitchen use between four housemates. Downtown they want empty condos, that function solely as poker chips for rich investors, and in the neighborhoods they want Delhi producing six grand a month in rent. No offense to Delhi, different situation, but that's more what it'll look like when it happens. Delhi with BMWs. The decision-makers want us avoiding each other in a current out of our control.

Gil glances back into the garage and then what do you know, he's doing a two-snap tittlepat. Did I just say that out loud? Both their eyes on me. I can throw them off my trail by just laughing again. —You guys got that down?— They laugh too. —Member last night and Gil was wavin his hand one over the other, like what he was saying, yknow, was cover for subliminally showin me how to peel a big banana.

—What dude.— Gil's head and shiny hair tilt like that pissed him off.

—No, he was talkin to me, not you,— Chava corrects, —Gil and me were just makin conversation about my towtruck, and he told me about how he saw a car flip end over end on New Years' Day 2006.

—On uh, on 880 South in the rain. Speakin of last evening,— now Gil is all in, —are they gonna get rid of the shitcatmobile, and isat why the Acclaim was moved?

I shrug and that means a neck rotation is in order, and a gut check.

—They moved it?

—Yeah.— Dead serious. —Cause then you could work on yer roll-away idea. The taste-tests.



—Anyway,— Chava needs to check if we all agree on everything, —do you guys feel like, after just a little relief ... I still feel like there's so much to lift off myself from this year, like just now it's just become okay to even talk about settin it all down, and there's nowhere in the world to set it down?

I want to reassure him, but I'm not sure I'm with Gil on where he comes and gets us every time Dave snaps at him. He can be patient another day.

—Kay,— kays Gil, —I'm goina bed. Goina tent.

—Yep, me too.— I just squeeze around the van, through the ridiculous black gate and find my finger on the rollaway's patina, smooth-weathered grit like rice starch back of a wooden spoon, past the car, and the neighborhood stretches out east into the shriveled loquat night. The couch is no good for even a normal watch of sleep before Katie gets up, too much disagreement. Or sleep in the storage somehow since I've found the key. I'm tripping. Door's unlocked. Might as well.

by some seventeen-year-old bimbo twit. She can look up the law.

I know, he's sposed to gimme a full shift anny cut me tonight. Tomorrow morning I'm already back, it doesn't make any sense. For old-people-protection hour. People're so senile ... I mean until you didn't spray the fuckin belt between them and the last one, and then they're like, hherrncha ginna spray the belt that his fuckin packaged paper food touched? Iiiidunwanna die.

I thought we're sposed to be reopening California in fuckin cohorts or whatever, so we don't mix with everybody, but I guess except in

Safeway where we just get where they pull us outta the god damn, whatiscalled. Bingo cage for shifts.

No, I'm not helpinnim with that! How much? ... Fuck no! He's gonna sal it to who? Everyone's stayin home. That's a party pill, fool, how's he gonna pay me back quick unless it's one-man e-tard parties in fronna yer Tiktok. Wheresis rich brother at?

I'm already hustlin, Cue-Ball, I doneeda investinnis boyscout cookies. I'nginna sal a buncha old shit that's been abandoned here, and I got that guy renting from me, that should

car or just go to Portavayarta for like a fuckin month, dude? Dude and tequila down there's not like the shit here, it's neat, no hangover. Lookit the numbers, there's nowhere near as much coronavirus in Mexico like there is here.

That isn't shit. Seven hunnerd people a day eat shit in their cars or die of cancer.

Yeah so Sunday, and don't bring that fuckin guy. Just you and whatever chicks you know ... bro, at this point, it's if she's breathing. You still got the pitcher of my car I texted you? ... I texted it to you. Look for it ... Only this time taller it's my car, not yers.

Dude, you can't get Covid from hitting it. The first thing when you put Covid into Google is it says can you get Covid from havin sex. Like everyone's tripping abalt this fact. I don't spect you to have any experience with it.

I gotta clean up this fuckin kitchen cuzza these fuckin idiots live with me got it all wet under it and barely cleaned it up enough for the cabinet shelf not to turn into just, sopping garbage shit, so I gotta fix

the cabinet and paint it. From nothing to a shitstorm, I'm tallin you man. It's like havin kids.

I can't believe Brian'd even insinuate that the sink cabinet was neglected. I think this other fuckin guy I got livin with us put that up innis head ... Brian, my homie.

Why're you takin his side? You weren't even fuckin there to even take my side. I'm sayin what both sides were, so you get the picture, first. Listen! If he's been hangin here halfis life, and it never mattered before, cause us bein friends was more important, why's it important now? Yesee? It's not even a mental shift for you, it's one plus one.

Okay, wal I guess yer the devil's avicket. What the fuck I gotta be jealous a them for? ... That's what you said.

But you implied, Memo! I ain't stupid! If I wasn't sposed to catch that implied meaning, why'd you make sure to toss it out there?

And I dunno whadappened to these new towels I had inna kitchen, these guys better not be movin stuff around on me. Case in point!

He's been straightening up the garage but he better not've put two and two together with those fuckin towels. Yknow I think they ferget that when yer homeless, people'll just take yer shoes off yer feet while you sleep, or shoot you up with fentanyl and take this guy's coolguy bike that he's so proud of. People ferget hal bad it can get just from havin attitude in a good situation. Oh, yer tired of me goin on? I'm gettin between you and Oprah?

Yeah, Sunday, no! Saturday! My tchiú texted me today that he changed it and that fucks up my whole thing! Ahh ... ! Maybe I can hit it early and then come back to the halse. I gotta caller. Every woman in this town has three kids or's married.

So yeah, bring bottles and somethin that girls like, like clubweed or something. Or get a Smirnoff Ice vape cart or whatever ... Tallim I'nginna give Him a ten-ninety! There's no parking so

on, I'nginna go in the kitchen, I don't want anyone hearin me ... jussec ... Hey!

I gotta call you later. Late.

Hey, it's late. You should be asleep. What's wrong with yer room? ... Is somethin wrong with yer room? Are you cold? What're you doin on that chair, it's dirty. It's gross, cmon get up, let's go back to your room. Gimme your hand.

Cmon, you can't sit there all night, your legs'll hurt, and your back'll hurt. Plus it's gross from those cats. It'll get on your robe, cmon! You don't wanna grab my hand?

That's right. Go back to your room. Dyou needa lean on me? Cmon.

The bathroom? You needa go to the bathroom? ... Okay but go back to bed, okay? It's late and you don't wanna stay up all night. Look, it's dark. It's October, it gets dark earlier but it's late now. Don't stay in there too long, okay?

Chava's eye lands on me from behind the Acclaim like I don't know what happened. My brows allow. —What?— And then he changes his whole body from the face on down as I shuffle my bike through all the crap and the gate. His mask is gray and forlorn. —Masks back on, yeah? What the hell, I already rode how many miles with it on, so it wouldn't fall out my pocket. Member in April when cocky suburbanites would criticize people they saw driving by, wut ah don't git is that people wear the mask whal there bah themsilves in the coh, lahk there ginna make theysilves sick. It'd take two Fifteh Cint to make one Jownny Cayush. That's how you know if someone's a anti-masker or,

—Katie.— puffs from Chava's mask.

—Right. She hang with you today?

—I guess I hung with her.

—How'd that go? ... It's a secret? Alrighty then, time to get preppin? —I should offer reassurance that previous plans don't have to change because of one new development. —Whaddid I say, a fried rice? What's over there, did Brian do his toolbox already? I got somethin he can taste.

Now Chava's unstuck himself from the toolbox and followed me into the shade of the garage door, still in his Alongi Bros yellows in the new cold, like he suddenly has the gas to answer my questions. But instead he consults his phone. —Dave wants our part of the water and trash bill.— I don't tell him with my mouth that I'm not in water and

trash like he apparently is, but it pretty much flies out the rest of my face. —I uh. Well, I guess I'm only in the garage.

—Did Dave cash your rent check?

My front brake caliper's thin old quick-release lever has jumped loose again, I flick it down. —I'm not gonna lie, I had a cashier's check for about as much so I signed it over to him. So, no idea.

—About as much?

—Yeah, like, almost as much, and I covered the rest with cash! Why, what's the worry about now?— Chava's eyes seem to change just one tone. —He didn't cash mine.

—How long's he had it? Before the first of October?— Chava's back to last night's affect, hopeless. —Kay. I'm gonna do some laundry while we think about it.— He still wants that help I offered him last night, only in more situations than I foresaw, but I don't have it. I leave him hanging.

Through the grimehazed window, the shitcat graveyard. Either wait there hovering above chlorine-gas degradation and watch my clothes so Aunty, or Katie, or Dave doesn't take them, or spend the money on the laundromat. Get all my shit home by bike how, and if it rains? Drying some laundry would give Dave a good reason to ask me for utilities. But bake in the biohazard stench? What the hell, this is why I bought that cleaner. Dryer's interior isn't dirty but I do wipe away the ambient odor. Don't bother with the fetid floor.

Later after I transfer from wash to dry I'm thinking about starting up the beer and hydration routine, slap the old reward center with alcohol, when I decide to shave. The bathroom remains pretty clean despite increased residential load, Dave either drastically lost weight and can see where he's pissing or got a mirror, or sits down. Shaving, one of

the worst wastes of the second half of one's life, how many trees could be planted in the time it takes a hundred million jerkoffs to shave, to please their boss or dating app. The thread of wrinkles down each cheek seems to be permanent now.

The door thumps, the knob jiggles. —Be done in a second.— I allow myself my long beachbum drawl, no clipped housemate or co-worker voice, cleaning and resetting my razor's blades.

In the hall Dave looks like he started drinking already, thin lips crested to hold some ugly English word, chalice, decanter, codicil, with the unlikely Cupid's bow also under the lower lip, a full buccal cartouche. My mask goes back on. —Dave! I didn't clean the bathroom, no need to worry. Am I still cookin or what? Fried rice? I swear I won't fix yer pipes.

No response. His loss. He lumbers by in that circle destined by kitchen hall bathroom living room. I wonder if he circles all us renters like a shark.

I'm outside waiting on the dryer when he pops out, definitely already drinking a Mike's Hard Lemonade. —Yer housekeys workin?— How much you want to bet he or Chava lost theirs.

—Shouldn't they be?— Dave looks at the ground, like he and Chava both lost a fifty somewhere. —You talk to Chava today?

—Yeah like I said, I work for a living.— Not sure that line is getting through to him, not even with the yeah that means no. He's still both not minding his own business and assuming about me. —What makes you ask?

—Just keep yer eye onnim, yeah? White on rice!— he just recycles whatever word he just heard, rice or whatever, —I know he got you

into the house, but I don't want to take me to the reasons show and I gotta pay for dinner.

—But I don't go inna house, Dave, apart from the pisser,— you can always knock down someone's criticism or expectations of you by depriving yourself of benefits freely extended to you, that they wouldn't even deprive you of because they'd be scared to lose it themselves, I call that the vow of poverty defense, —how'm I gonna know if he messed with yer stuff? I mean, which Glad bag full of,

—I said I gavim keys, he! Said I already gavim keys! But I dunno how he'd a gotten.

—Didjou see if he physically had keys? Didjou check all your keys?

—Look! It's simple. If I say somethin happens, and he says he didn't do it, that's the time to motor it on over to by me. Got it?— He must be barely thirty, by the size of his repertoire for other people.

—I'll take that as a no. Just like that, then? Or I can just stay inna garage and see nothing.

Dave does his seldom laugh, forceful lung evacuation. —Oh, you'll see somethin. Member, white on rice!— Off he circles. I set out under the white marine layer to prove myself right, see nothing for a while, stay out of the middle. If Katie comes to observe me, lines pouting outward from her lips, I'll just wave hi or be in the tent, safe and sound from wifi, infection and doubt.

It goes perfectly until I perceive that the kitchen window or something must be open because Dave and probably both the other guys are talking. Then it goes away, no paws on the tent.

Let's see, what do I have, almond milk. Back to college when I had no stove and ate half each of a box of Cheezits, a brie and a carton of soymilk for a meal unless I thought I had money for a burrito that cost



less than those together. The slab's cold comes up through the tent and sleeping bag now.

It's been dark for an hour or so when I come out for air to find Brian inspecting his paraphernalia. —You alright? You seem unusually tense.

His eyelids are preoccupied. —I'm fine. Here, this's good for your blood pressure,— he hands me a fancy foil snackbag, —it's got cacao nibs.— I hate it when people show friendship with gifts, that have to be corresponded with junk, but, desperate measures in desperate times. —Cool man, muchas gracias. You still can't sess out my tent again tonight. All's well?

—I got the no from that company with the Zoom firing situation. You seen Chava?

—No. He has a room, though, doesn't he? He wasn't with you?

Brian cocks his head back. —You wanna hit, Dave?— I look back. —Dave's not here. The door's closed, man, it's cold.— I don't think he gets the reference.

—Chava doesn't text you?

—Not since I got settled out here. Unless it's like a Youtube link to some Ani DiFranco. What'd he lose someone's keys?

—You gonna drink that whole carton tonight?

—It was down to this far.— I shake the carton and point at the milkline. —It's not gonna keep another day. For some reason Arteaga's has this all the time, but not soymilk. You seem like you wouldn't want milk on that upright mustache. Are you political about almond milk?

—Hey, I'm Asian, it's the mustache I have. Um, yeah, people don't really understand drought, man. I mean, I been spending time in the valley, and it's sunk twenty-eight meters for sure, but ... exports and

consumption don't quit during droughts, and you can argue that it takes a ton of water to grow almonds, but row crops'd be more water. And if it was controlled, like, drought year, cancel your lifestyle, then you'd see a difference. But there's no difference long as the land hasta bear whatever the supply side wants to sell.

—Indeed, well said. Your family farms?

—No.— Brian does the firebreathing Polynesian god thing or whatever where the smoke comes out of his mouth, nose, ears and eyelids. Then it's back to his phone. —Dyou see that New York Times article from last week? Probly more like three hundred thousand people're dead from Covid. Half again higher than the official number.

—I didn't see that, but I'm not surprised. I mean,

—Cause maybe they had Covid, but that madem have a heart attack or messed up their diabetes, so it's not gonna be,

—Exackly. And who knows if most of the counties in Texas even give a shit if it's documented, or even have the people to document it. Justice of the peace, that's like, the one guy in the government of some a these counties in Texas. Does all the jobs.

—Right. And the news just gets what's convenient for them. And ... then the first thing you see is oh no, the world population's not growin fast enough. I'm like, great, maybe I could afford an apartment when I'm old.

—Exackly. Isn't that funny how whenever the capitalists and the media talk about stuff, they only talk about in terms of how it benefits them, like oh good, the stock market went up even know now rent is impossible, or oh no, if population goes down who're we gonna sell all our crap to, who's gonna wanna wash our dishes and dryclean our clothes. And in fuckin Willow Glen they're all, who's gonna cut my

lawn with a leafblower for a fuckin hour. And yet ... ! And yet, when it's time to talk about how things work, they leave out the fact that it's rigged in their favor, that the half of the one percent is ripping us off, they act like the forces on the economy don't exist.

Brian takes another puker. —Exackly. They don't talk about how they just decided that houses should cost this much.

—It's not even that,— my blood's going now, feels good to open up, —they act like the economy got this way by itself. Let's examine, why do houses cost this much? What did your parents do all through the eighties and nineties?

—My dad was in the navy. We hadda house by James Lick but not much else.

—My dad had like two houses before I was born. One in Sannizay, then one in Sac, both of which he just tossed, cause in his lifetime it's just buy, toss, that's it, right, and so then I grew up in Watsonville, right, paradise on Earth, but I didn't know he did everything on credit. Specially once him and my mom broke up, he never owned none of that shit he had to have, the RV, the boat, the Jeep, credit bills for all of it, and now he's got none of it. Did yer parents break up?

—My mom kicked my dad out when my sister finished highschool. They were both ready for him to go.

—Right? So add a ton of just, nonessential, just, consumer debt, and then my dad gets remarried twice while I'm in highschool, and when they rip him off and leave, he's gotta buy them outta his house twice, so he doesn't have shit. And now multiply that by all the dads you know who got divorced in the nineties,

—Like, at least half,

—Right. So everyone’s gotta hump their house to pay off, basically, being mentally twelve and with no socialization for even simple,

—Well, they grew up deployed in Vietnam, I guess,

—Well, they’re grown-ass men and can learn stuff too, like you and I have to, I guess. Right? So the real history of housing and real estate in California is emotionally retarded consumer baby boomers fucking their lives up under creditcard debt and getting their house to cover it all. That’s where homebuyers today come in. Why ain’t the dumbass influencers doing Youtube videos about that?— I’d love to compare military stuff about our dads, but I’m not ready for how Brian might take my dad’s navy deployment to the Philippines.

—Bro, I dated this girl in like, March, who was a influencer. She tried to get me to buyer dinner at Tacos al Carbón cause she hadn’t got paid yet, I mean, I understand living off SEO and all but,

—Dude, Tacos al Carbón is like, a jewel of Sannizay.— I sip my Modelo and imagine salsa and chips with it. —Not just regular Mexican food but like, exuberant, virtuoso Mexican food. Like mi abuelita made, but like, in Technicolor. Plus booze.

—Yeah. Yeah, the boomers’re fuckin everything up.

—And look, people our age’re turnin into boomers fast as they can. Did you notice what happened this spring while we were homeless in quarantine? All those bints from college who grinded coffee fifteen years ago cause they got no skills under their BA in psychology,

—So, I didn’t finish college,

—Yeah, but you been around, right. All these bints from San Pedro Square now just turned thirty-five and inherited like a million dollars and property when their parents died, and it’s like an automatic transmission, the wealth is transferred, the economy’s tryna crush us,

smooth action, in ritual time. That's what all these fuckin Black Lives Matter signs on people's lawns way out in the suburbs are tellin you! Look at how I can afford to care now, George Bush Gavilan College trampstamp and all.

—That's why weed's legal now, too.

—That's what I'm saying.

—Filipinos need to get behind Black Lives Matter. I'm like, that black.

—Yeah ... anyway, the boomers're on their way out, my dad's worse today, his pneumonia is back that he's had for like two months. His spinal fluid's fulla protein.

—Your dad?

—And there's no visitors allowed at the hospital. I'm gettin a special chance on Saturday. He can't move, can't close his mouth. Not a god damn thing I can do.

—Shit. What is it?

—Well dammit, I think it's that the environment's gonna get all of us in its own way. Guy washed his hands up to the elbows with gasoline for forty years and ate Safeway German chocolate cake for dinner whenever he wasn't married. Now he got a weird autoimmune thing. We're not sposeta say nothing but positive shit when I do talk to him, in case he gets worse. Other day his girlfriend hypothesized, maybe he's got depressed and slowed his recovery since he can't have visitors now. And there's, like, nothin positive goin on in the world right now, less you're so confident that goodness will prevail against Trump in the election like it does in Harry Potter. What a life he's had. Got the world delivered to him on a plate,

—But he’s Mexican, it hasn’t been that easy for them in the sixties and stuff,

—He’s from Mayfair, right here. That makes me barely Mexican, at least I admit it. Anyway, inherited the whole world on a nuke bomb, free college that he chose not to use, had all the toys ever, all the wives, all the houses ... I think a that Zappa song, *Cocaine Decisions*.

—I don’t know Zappa. But yer sayin his life was ethically easy, not like economically,

—Sure. Here, listen.

My phone’s media speaker doesn’t work so I convince Brian to play the first bit of the song. Cocaine decisions, you are a person with a snowjob, you got a fancy gotta-go job. Brian taps his foot. —These guys’ rhythm section’s tight.— The tune is modal, but I don’t really know what that entails.

—This song was so right for its time, dude! Course it wasn’t on the radio. Certain people were questioning the materialism and debt, but it wasn’t gettin to people like my dad. And guys his age leave us with the pollution and the inflation when the party’s over. All these dumbass talking heads on TV talking about markets and crap. Go to the Carmel Valley wedding venues, there’s yer market research. I’ve got no time just after surviving, yknow, to even decide what parta the world to try to fix. ... So what’s that make my song? *Despair Priorities?*

Like a city bus can sneak up on you when you’ve already looked both ways, before I know it Dave’s mask-multiplied chins tower above us. —Yknow what yer problem is Gil, you spend all yer time tryna make stuff better that’s just ginna get messed up again, and you don’t got no enjoyment.

I almost crack up when I see that Brian's giving him the same oteada that I am. Dave must take it like we're demanding evidence, he doesn't get that we don't care. —You gotta have some kinda lifestyle.

I whisper to Brian: —I rest my case.— Dave accepts a fresh blunt from one of Brian's depot of small zip-up containers, lights up, again exposing his pitcher lips, bitemarks of the holy host. —Like, what would you really like to do, that brings you joy?

His customers must quote Tony Robbins to him all day. I scratch my ear. —I don't list after lust. What would bring me joy is to not have so many catastrophes to deal with. Like, seeing a new problem everywhere I go, like,

—Like all these stray cats,— mumbles Brian, kicking at a shitcat that just excreted a dribble on the pavement, as devoid of nutrition as it went in. —Yeah,— I concur, —like these stray cats. Where's the one got the shit beat out of it? Did it multiply already?

—It's expensive to control,— Dave gulps and exhausts, —when it gets to this point.

And the cocaine decisions that you make today, will mean that millions somewhere else will do it your way. I flatten my beer and have a bite of Brian's gift. —They say windmills kill like half a million birds a year. Right? Tryna put whistles onnem and shape their, their fins, a certain way, and it's just an excuse to burn coal and gas. But these little feral bastards kill I guess like four billion birds a year. And we're hesitating over some windmills.— Brian's whole visible face grins naturally. —Windmills?

—For power! Lifestyle, Dave? Where's yours at?

—Whatta you mean? What lifestyle?

—That you say I need. Where’s yours? I guess I need an example. Is it the cats?

He shakes confusion from his ears. —Morn You got, Wild Gil Dickock. I gotta halse.

—Yeah, it needs a science march sign, or else your lifestyle’s a quart low, yknow, your joy. You needa sign. To attract an educated white mate, yknow.

—Someone’s makin money off those signs, man,— Brian tries to redirect. I don’t like how he doesn’t just let me get myself in trouble. But I follow, for him. —Yeah, the next Trump’s gonna either be the owner of a chain of gyms or the person made that sign.

—Hold on, I’ll look.— Out comes Dave’s phone and thumbs, hard lemonade can must be hovering midair somewhere out of sight. —It don’t matter, Dave.

—No, no!— Better let him be right. —I’nginna ... here it is! Jennifer Rosen Heinz in Wisconsin!

—Fascinating.

—And the money’s gettin donated.

—To Trump’s fuckin re-election PAC! You needa know how money works before you get a lifestyle, Dave.

—So whatta you do to make the world a better place, Gil?

—I work at Facebook, fool. No, I’m messin around! Look, I’m busy with trash cleanups and planting native bushes, I can’t be in every movement when I’m trying and failing all day to house myself even,

—See, Fryan,— Dave smirks, the can safe again from gravity in his fat fingers, —he’s mad at the cats cause they’re not virgin forest, like, mountain lions. That beer was made by humans, Gil, not by mother nature. What’s good for people wins.



I squat down against the fence and find a toothy green strand of cleaver that must've just popped up after that sprinkle. —See this? I never remember cleaver growing here even five years ago, and last year no one but me took it seriously so now it's fucking everywhere. Each plant climbs over everything on its little razor claws, makes a thousand viable seeds that'll sprout in piles of dead leaves in the gutter, and spread out forever unless you pull it up. Not that anyone in California knows a native from a noxious invasive weed. Lookit the plants in this town by maturity and you can see yuppies' taste in shade from what's over ten feet tall. Chinese privets, tobiras, oleanders, greasy shitstreak grevilleas, mini-eucalyptus that fall over, pointless pears that crowd their own branches, whatever landlord crap Orchard Supply and then Home Cheapo after that were selling bulk for less than cocaine since the eighties.— I chuck the sprout for emphasis.

—I mean, the Mexican families had the grace to plant avocados,— contends Brian.

—But they don't stop the ailanthus from taking over neither. And landlords and property owners in general don't pull weeds while they complain about immigration, just have the immigrant blow-and-go mow the cleaver, to encourage more growth, so these fuckers' roots establish like baytrees in the climate. Everyone's too busy watching Disney Plus and fighting with each other over social media to see the town dying of thirst from weeds and suffocating in garbage.— Brian nods, Dave toots an opinion out his nose onto the can lid.

Really it can be hard to worry about my dad so far away suffering by himself when all of us are in ailanthus, cleaver, coronavirus, prison, forced to watch the world die from private seats. Is the kind of tiny compassion from my eyes even getting through the trash? Does my dad

feel abandoned, or does he feel like the situation is past compassion, how do I order all this under my exploding skin?

Then my mind just comes clear again. This is me explaining myself like I started working on when I was in highschool, now a muscle ... but it's also something older, a dump of the shield I built to deal with my dad's unpredictable moods, usually mad, the shield I took down during visits to him the last fifteen years, to show him I'm a grown man, even if he seemed like he saw the shield down and helped himself to use me as a punching bag. I'm stopped silent now, my moves look too much like his.

This is just one way of expressing stress buildup. There are other ways. I'd better show these guys that I know. Especially show Dave.

—Gil, come back, dude.— Brian waves his fingers for me at a safe distance. —Hey, wanna go track some stray cats? Save the birds?

—You guys're retarded,— spits Dave into the night. I shake my head at Brian. —I was just ... I mean, that ain't the way to go about it, although it would seriously blow some steam off ... Man, imagine, those millennial heiresses wouldn't even imagine that this conversation's takin place. They just think men talk about cr, —I almost say crypto and look up at Brian, —coverage of football all day. Whatta we even have to trappem with?

That was a joke but Brian's super into it now. Do we go through with this just to get rid of Dave? Did they have a fight when they went to the liquor store? —Dude, we can gather data. Here, Dave, you got catfood inna house, right? Just gimme one tin, I'll buy ya nother one tomorrow morning,— Dave drains his latest hard lemonade. —Yewin't evenava Fuckin Job, Fryan.

—Alright,— I put on a safari voice, —let’s go see what’s crackin down at the river. There ain’t no water in it. No flashlights!

Dave must take some kind of conversational bait. He sings out: —One time this guy was rude withis mean service dog, pitbull, right there in Safeway, so finally I said bullshit, one day I sold him pasta, croutons, I says it’d make the dog healthier but really made it Shit! Like a Firehose! Inside his House!— Over my shoulder the neighbor’s light comes on. —Cmon, lessget Chava! You need some joy, Gil.

—I dunno man,— hedges Brian, but Dave’s nose toots. —Pussies don’t wanna go hunt cats!

Brian and I watch the prediabetic rocket’s launch. I point at the mangled kitten. —We can start with these,— But Dave’s already in and out of the house, now bearing new lemonade.

—Whattaya gonna drownem with that?— Dave back into the house, now for longer. None of Katie’s padding slippers. No neighbor calling animal cruelty on us, not yet.

Dave brings out a dark blue Montgomery Ward’s hard suitcase from when our parents were young, I know because I had one in dark brown right out of highschool that I used to keep my guitar pedals and wires and shit in, back in 2003 when you could at least have a moldy apartment for your music gear.

Now I hope this does mean some bro-down between Dave and us. That’ll test his recall and how he decides if he likes me. Totally silent, masks on, we head to the end of the block, turn left into Virginia and with a few high steps we’re at the strolling trail winding through the patches of mostly native plants. The river drops down at the edge of the park where a black cyclone fence runs. At right the water company’s

access gate is closed as always, but look. —Look! There's a hole inna fence. I betcha that bicycle thief cut it.

—I can't fit in that tiny hole.

—That's what she said. Cmon Dave, just climb over it, then. Climbin fences and logs's good for equilibrium.

—Oh yeah, equilibrium.— The magic word, up he goes.

—Toss me the case. That's it. Our equilibrium gets lazy sittin at work and inna car.— We duck and slide, or climb like a fucking drunk lemoncandied rhinoceros, and now we're down in the spillway, in the bridge's nocturnal shadow, Virginia's pavement sighing and rumbling above.

—That bike fucker's tweaker bike collection and person are oddly absent.

Brian takes a wide look around. —I have no idea what yer talkin about, Gil.

—You ain't seen it? Tonight woulda been a great night to get in a Modelo-fueled fight with a helpless tweaker puffin out unmasked breath, ey Dave? Maybe he got an SRO for his floody muddy bikes. Maybe he jumped on a stolen bike with a stuck chain and brokis fuckin neck. I'm sayin all this as a courtesy, Dave! This is us beatin the bushes for homeless campers and pumas.

—Wild Gil Dickcock, what the fuck're you pullin on in those rocks?

—You boys know a ailanthus from a walnut by sight? ... Problem is, so many people think it's a walnut, till it smells like poison. Everyone wants a weed-free park and all that, but they think some magic deep-state government's out tending every inch of land that they live right next to,

—Yknow what, Gil, you think yer such a Star Wars Justice, or Star Justice Wars or, SJW, but yer really just a fa,

The levee's two-foot rocks overcome our balance and we tumble into the slimy damp.

It's quiet. Fifty feet in front of us the bridge's foot descends above the vague five-meter river-weed land that in turn shoots back up the levee against 87's sleepy nocturnal tire noise. Dave sets the suitcase with a piece of debris in its teeth and Brian baits it with the open catfood tin. Spray catfood with ammonia and it smells identical to catshit. Now we just wait?

—This's why it's great we're socially and legislatively obligated to wear masks. When we do sabotage, no one can see our face.— This is fun, I'm making a real impression tonight.

—Are we actually gonna kill what we catch, dude?

—Shh, relax Brian, we clip it into the case overnight, then we take it to the SPCA tomorrow morning. They can do the final mercy.

—Overnight it's gonna piss all over that fuckin case!— panics Dave,  
—And meow to beat hal!

—It's fine, Dave, it's one more thing you can get outta the house, like that lazyboy.

—See! You know what I mean!

Slide, pwump, snap! One of Brian's containers? Sugar and fizz above the dead algae stench and dry oatstalks. —You brought another hard lemonade, Dave?

—It's Friday night eve, Gil.— Then he gasps and I hear his bulk breakdance in the dark. —What're we sitting on?

I point down at the pondscum clinging to the access ramp's corrugated pavement. —It's the river, man.

—Fuck!

Okay here we go. Soon a cat appears as they always do, night taking form, tail waves to a stop with its last step, so in phase with itself, feral and yet ready for any handout. Maybe someone bought it last Halloween to be seen with a black cat by their Willow Glen nonprofit friends and tossed it away like everyone else. The suburbs.

—Shh!— It occurs to me that I could pull a huge trick, take this cat home, then stuff in a few more of Katie's shitcats, which may or may not be hers, and meet animal control a block away. Just like with those three shoeboxes of rusty hardware that met me in the middle of the garage floor. Gone before anyone notices.

Silent yellow eyes approach the suitcase. Will the trap work? I can't read Dave in the dark, damn it, is this still a big joke so he feels cool, or a big joke to humiliate us with later? Are Brian and I really doing this, or are we testing Dave? Why did they shift gears and do this? Now my expression of how discipline can result in bitterness, a pushing away of the normie way of life, is inverted on me, into an adolescent quest, a pulling me close, by two people stoned out of their minds. After seven months of seeing no one.

Above our heads a manual car drops into third just before the bridge, his expensive ground kit slams up the uneven edge pushed up by the river, a half second, slams down again and grinds as it leaves the bridge, the levee, and screams out over the 87 overpass where the lightrail still hasn't returned. I follow the sound through lampglare with my eyes, then find the cat gone.

—So whydya think it's slimy, Dave? Is that water moss or animal shit?

—Shut up at least while I'm tryna swallow,— bubbles Dave.

—Man, what would Katie say about us doin this?— Brian stifles a laugh that sounds like his square teeth, —what if these cats we’re catchin were hers?

Finger at my lips, I mouth shh, shut up, but I’ve got a mask on. The moon’s almost full, just in time for Halloween, but the bridge’s gloom won’t let my eyes focus. Suddenly winter cuts down through the river, all the way from Alaska, wets the San José air under my jacket.

Now another cat, a tiny splotchy one, approaches and lets itself right in. Snap, Brian has the case down before Dave can get it. —Whoa, Fryan the cat ninja! Yer the crocodile hunter and the crocodile!— He guffaws over his gut. —Yer not definitely touched by an angel! This guy’s got eight-foot balls!

Pathetic mewls escape from the case. —Wal, you got it, Brian! Whattaya gonna do widdit now?— Over his mask moonlight strikes Brian’s eyes, the pupils surprise me with that look of you’re not doing your half.

Dave recovers from his fit, sips daintily from the hard lemonade and paws the case. —Here, just, hang on! Lemme just get the fuckin bait out before she pisses on it,

The mewls twist up as desperate questions. Now we’ll see if the cat’s calling for backup. Brian hugs the case, cat and food tin clatter down within. —Leggo! You’ll turn it loose!

Dave cracks up again, desists. —You guys’re fucked up! Wait’ll I taller!

Sweat jumps up on cold wet feet on my spine, meets the breath of winter. Is he proposing this as a stoner notion or he’ll tell her for real?

—Dave,

Brian adjusts his grip, the clasps either were no good or not clasped, and the case shifts out the fleeing cat, dignified contempt restored. His eyes don't meet mine again. I have no idea where we're at, or if we're still on the same team. For a minute we sit quiet, each alone.

—Look, there's another one!— Brian's hand goes in his pocket but I stop him. —No lights!

I duckwalk around so I can see Dave's chin clearly tipped up against the night, can empty and set quietly amongst the levee rubble. —Is it still there? I gotta take a piss.

—Stay down,— I know Dave loves military commands. Like being in a movie. He obeys. —Ready?

—For what?

Brian inspects Dave, then meets eyes with me again, and I nod up the levee toward the street. Sure enough there's another cat, or the hungry first one is back, bounds up, one sniff two sniff. It copies Brian's glare at me. I guess this is my chance. —Dave, that's a skunk, dude.

—Fuck!— The second launch of the prediabetic rocket, must be a reusable Space-X one, he does a helical dance, trips on the ramp's curb and ends up with his ass sliding in the algae, California's version of a sledding hill. Maybe even the back of his neck touches. Another fuck! disintegrates into a long and a short hrwabbling hylelps down below our knees.

Getting around Dave we get muddy shoes, Brian behind me, and we social distance back to the street. Quick as we came we're back behind the house. Shitcats line up, smell the food, smell their own. —That wasn't a fuckin skunk, Gil!

—Shh! ... Better safe than sorry. You better go drink some water and take a shower, Dave.



—Yeah, likes dissolve likes,— adds Brian.

—Yeah, which means make sure to wash with catsh,

—Don't fuckin,— Dave drops his voice finally, —don't fuckin tal me what to do, Gil! Yeginna give Me nickels' worth a free advice? I'nginna give You fuckin nickels! You guys're all the same, Jeopardy, encyclopedia brown-noses. Do Not come in the halse with those muddy fuckin shoes. Less yer comin to clean the bathroom again and mop the whole back a the halse.

Night closes around our periphery, it's just us in Dave's verbal spotlight. —I dunno what to say, Brian, thanks for indulging me on that.

Dave heaves once, we wait, then his mask is off the Giuliani jowls. —Brian, if yer gonna be around, I need you to watch this guy. He's a real fuckin character. He's whisperin everything to Chava that didn't used to be annoying, and now He is.

—Don't botherim, Dave, I ain't goin in. The garage and my work're plenny. Just keep cashin the rent checks.

—Enough about the Fuckin Rent Checks!— The whole neighborhood hears that one. —I gotta go back, I gotta see if these fuckin keys fell under the bridge.

Brian actually sounds annoyed with Dave. —You didn't drop any keys, dude. We woulda heardem.

I don't know about that. I was thinking about a thousand things at once, not listening, Dave's got wetbrain, Brian's stoned. Dave vacillates, then whips around stomach-first like people do. The filmy window flashes tallow sallow and slams to behind him. Brian toes the abandoned suitcase to the bottom step, inspects just two pockets, and just looks at me. —You happy now?

—Hey man, I'm payin for free speech here. So what happened with Chava?

—You wanna talk about that now?

—Why not? Was it just the rent checks?— I step gingerly, try to whisper into space that he keeps leaving. —Hey. I'm innerested in the signals you been givin me with yer eyes. Are you pissed cause your boots got dirty or did I disappoint you somehow?

—Whatever, dude.

All dehydrated from the adventure and the emotions, my hands feel big in the cold. —I mean it. One minute yer in on the joke, the next minute not, I'd just like to work on our timing a little, yknow, if we're ever gonna be straight with Dave.

—We don't have timing. You might have good credit, and don't need a real room here, but I don't need nothing adding to my credit.— I chase him as he turns away. —Hey ... hey, I fucked up,— Brian leaves me in front of the oleanders, walks his motorcycle down under the brown light, then up a block I hear its revolutions stab at the lamina of lull.

I didn't think I'd feel this alone, didn't think Dave would floor me with his paranoia without Brian and Chava to juggle it with me. This is too many calculations for any person to have to make.

Probably one tall can's worth of piss falls perfectly silent on soft earth beside the garage. I ask myself if getting hit by a bus feels like one big envelope of pain, black at the center, purple, white light, or if it's more like every nerve projects itself distinctly, pins and needles enlarged to nails and rebar, pounding night out of the amygdala.

Chava's probably got it right. Kicking us out moves in one smooth direction outward from Dave's way of concealing the foundation that

he's hiding in his rules. To think he can be dealt with, even twisting my whole self into the shape of his interactions, like I twisted myself into Dad's behaviors twenty-five years ago, he won't subjectively choose to budge. I've got to get out of here. Shouldn't have bothered to try to rest and heal, a stupid idea.

What's this, a text message. Not from Chava, though, from my boss Jorsh. We'll have coronavirus tests at work tomorrow for everyone. I type that's great Jorsh, thanks, but I'll wait to send it until tomorrow. Don't set a precedent for after-hours contact. I reported the hospital visit to my brother by text message, still no response.

Does Dad's throat crease and crack, like mine does, for water that he can't swallow? Is he finding a way to resent me for not being sick, for having half a life left that I don't even believe in? Jorsh follows with three Protect San José Facebook links and a Trump tweet. Tomorrow I'll ask Thomas if he knows of a place to crash, and the world will say no again.

Late getting on the hydration and pissing carousel. My quadriceps ache, hamstrings pulling on everything within reach, an ache down under my butt pulling my middle toes back. How do I brush my teeth without a bathroom. I'm not sleeping much tonight.

My whole day off Dave's eye has been on me. Our work schedules might never line up, being both practically random, but here we are. The morning binked and boinked with Super Nintendo noise until about an hour ago when I figured out that his eye comes wandering by my doorframe when he's on his phone.

— ... why would it be about Dad, Tchíu? I wrote that guy off before I learned howta talk!

The fridge suggests that Dave also drank my juice, but the bottle of Bragg's has been spared. All the kitchen towels hang wet. I'll have to put them through the washer. Each thing in the house jumps up compelling me to focus, I can feel vibrations issuing sideways from my elbows and knees, with the potential to move the furniture enough for Dave to notice, want to be still.

I wish he would just see use, movement, like he should be watching her. Some people have a definite sense of the uses of daytime. I think Gil is like that, he needs daylight to watch the environment and keep his head turning. Brian probably depends on night as a blank space free of form, cultural obligations and responsibility, in which to explore the inner. There's lots of ways to see the movement of anything. Movement overcomes the cold, stillness overcomes the heat.

Libraries being closed is getting old. Can't even get on a computer and do basic things when my phone decides not to let me pay my credit card bill, with the internet signal apparently lowest in my room. I guess I'll have to just go to a bank branch. They've stayed open.

Everything on a phone is a distraction, so my settings soon tug my nose to my free storage space, and *Not Really Here at All* by Dead Western. What was strange and exciting before soothes familiar, like a cool hand in my own. Who sent that old file to such a recent phone?

My bank website works, what's this? I go out squinting between the living room's yellow teeth, around the house, but now Dave's gone.

Gone outside too. Brian's motorcycle is here, but no Brian. I stop and look at the car, the Acclaim, as Gil carefully calls it. I spot signs on that wrecked rollaway that Brian's been sorting through it, coveting it.

Then, like a shadowy tree becoming a wary animal, her eyes are right in front of me. —Hi, hi Katie!— She doesn't jerk when I do. I idiotically wave my hand. —How you doing?

She has no mask, never does, and I take mine aside real quick to smile at her. I don't know if she's wearing the same clothes as yesterday, but her weirdly uniform hoary hair and skin of an autumn grape don't look like she showered today. But her eyes are clear brown, like a girl's, or like when someone is so old that the redness retreats from the skin and eyes, with only a ring of time-hardened charcoal around the pupils. I'd like to wait to speak again until she does, but she doesn't. —Looks like you're getting some help around here, uh? This's your house, isn't it? It's your uh, your vintage, I guess ... is this your car?

She dutifully examines the car, returns me an eyeful of I don't know what. —I work with cars, yknow. Not that I'm that interested innem. But if there's something wrong with it, yknow, a couple of us could help get it running. Looks like it leaked a little oil at one point, I'm sure it's no biggie ... — She sticks her hands in each of the faded 1989 skyblue robe's pockets, looks at nothing, stops dead because of whatever she found or didn't find, then sees me change my weight from right to left.

—Where'd you like to go, if we get it cleaned up? You wanna go visit some family?— Her gaze goes back to the hardware-strewn driveway. —I know it's uh, like, quarantine, but there's ways to be careful.— She doesn't answer, just looks down.

—Yeah, so. Just helping with the stuff, uh, the non-fixable stuff here ... is that okay? Look,— I indicate a slim toolbox atop the rollaway, like for sockets, with a hole rusted out of the bottom. —I wonder where to stick that.

She steps surely, gently grabs it from me in both pomace-yellow hands, it clatters on the cement between the car and the house wall, then she points directly out at the October sun, natural as hanging wash.

My mind races. —What? ... You mean stick it where the sun doesn't shine?— Her right eye might smile at me, or maybe the whole turn of her neck. I'm laughing, laughing with her, I hope. —Is that what you mean?

I follow as she turns away and goes through the gate, no sign that she even notices the decadent kittens lolling and clambering about the van. She stops and regards the closed-up garage, lower lip scooped up a little with age. Then she turns right, looks at the two steps up to the backdoor, then climbs up, and then sees the two Xs penciled on the jamb and touches them! She must've put them there!

—Whatcha counting with those Xs, Katie?— She doesn't point at anything this time.

Dave's eyes are back on me above a crisp disposable black mask. The door swings open, I swear Katie murmurs something to him, because he moves like he heard it as he barges between her and the washing machine. She shuts the door behind her without even a look askance back. Dave's chest is curved forward wanting, like when he wanted to rope me into the lazyboy thing.

—How's the sink working?

—You figuring outer schedule that she has, or what?

—I was just tellinger, if she wants help fixing that car, we can,

—There's nothin wrong with it.— His voice is like someone who hides behind a corner to jump out and scare you even when you saw

him go. His neck and chest jut out of a life spent competing for being right. —That’s good,— I say to his chin, —can she drive?

—She’ll drive if she wantsta drive. Listen. Here’s the housekey, now that yer all the way in.

—You already gave me one.— The key turns back over my knuckle. He doesn’t like that. —Member?

—Whuh ... when was that?— His head whips back between me and the house’s secrets.

—Here,— I show him the flaking Goodguys hotrod keychain. —You gave it to me at least two weeks ago. I haven’t really hadda use it but ... didjou needa give one to Gil, too?

—Why would I give him one and think it was you?— He definitely is to the point where suggestions and accusations are one same hit against the skull. Maybe he’s projecting on me about the lazyboy and the sink, anticipating wrongdoing.

—Just an idea,

—If I gave you that one, then ... there’s one lessen there should be in the drawer. Did you help yerself around in the drawers when you fixed the sink?

—No! I had all my own stuff! You can ask Brian.

—Brian? ... If you see Gil, see if he has one. Act like you needa have one and just get his if he has it. Think you can handle that?

—You have his number, right? Just ask if he has one ... just an idea.— I just keep running into ideas that sound like suggestions or accusations. —So, uh, if I ask him, and I take care of it, are we on the level then, like we’re both doin our best for the house?

—What level.

Taking another decision helps keep me calm. —Hey, uh, Dave, I wannid to ask you something, too. I just looked at my bank statement, and my rent check, was there something wrong with it? Did your bank call you?

—You don't have the money?— his voice reaches the betrayed crack, —Chava, I swear to god, I'll,

—I have it! It hasn't been cashed, is all. I figure by now ... I thought I better remind you in case you just forgot to depositit.

The color returns around his mask. —I'll call the bank.

—If you want, just tell me which bank you have and I can put it in myself next month.— There I go again. He bites my words. —What're you tryna prove? That I'm not collectin the rent right? I can't handle a simple thing? Think about all the shit I hafta manage for everyone else, Chava, if I was stealin yer fuckin money that I don't even want or need, yer checks would be gettin cashed somewhere! There's yer level!

—Yeah, Dave. I'm cool. Just let me know what happens.

—It's not gonna be today.

I've watched adults do this my whole life and now it's happening to me. You ask someone about something getting done, in the appropriate timeframe, and they think you mean that it can only be done now. That's what he's looking ahead for. —Yeah, I mean, when it happens, not right now ...

Clang of metal on metal against my right cheekbone, behind Dave down the driveway. Brian's home and doing something with the rollaway. —Brian!

Dave follows me, but with two paces between us I whisper to Brian: —Sure you should do that right now?



—Whatta you mean?— Brian adjusts his hair and then his black ballcap. I breathe really deep but that just reveals the tightness in my chest. I cross around the rollaway to the wall and put my arms above my head and try to loosen up again as Dave regards the rollaway.

—What's up, man.

—Now what're you workin on?

—This rollaway's gettin a new lease on life. Look, it's empty cept for dustbunnies and totally gone washers and screws.— I slide the empty socket set toward him with my toe. —See that?

—Already checked that. So Dave, this's gonna be perfect for sorting and storing CBD tinctures. That's positive income.— He sprays in the open rustbottomed drawers from a bottle of solvent. —I can tow it on my bike, so this is gonna be taste research.

—What, so when you get Covid and lose yer sense of taste, this is like, a cheap test?

—What? No!— His laugh gets Dave to hrank once, too. —Like finding out how taste works. Think about it. Weightloss, weight management, quitting smoking. All the pollution, war and finance to please the tongue.

—Dang Brian, that's true.— He nods at me and goes on, —There's a wide-open field of nonwestern medicine that's totally untouched, with how the tongue works. Plus this girl I've been texting for like a year, she's with it on this concept, so I'd like to show I'm for real by doing the prepwork, gettin some data.

—Or just get a job.— hranks Dave again.

—Yeah, too bad the economy's shut down for six months now, mister essential worker. And remember, a job will just pay depreciating, inflating, cash, and with your own business you can accept crypto.

—Pffft! You bought into a stock where forty percent of the value belongs to one guy. Monopolies don't pay unless you have the monopoly. An extra grand a year in growth?— He must be referencing a previous conversation. —I could jizz for one night and make that.

With the last top drawer wiped, Brian closes the tops and opens the middles. A draft of heavy ferric dust projects out, buildup of carbrakes from the freeway and the rollaway's own decline, provoking a mask-wetting sneeze. Up swing Brian's arms to cover his face, rusttag plops at Dave's feet, and clang goes another part. —Shit!

He recovers a caster from the driveway, the plastic part of it split. I think I hear ballbearings on the ground, unless the cats found something to chase. —That figures.

—You don't have any fuckin horsepower!— barks Dave. —You gotta ketch it! You owe me that, whatever that was.

—It wasn't for this. Look, all four on the floor, Dave. Pay attention, now. That dude who offered to take that chair of yours, once I get this clean he'll give me a deal on chroming it. Right over here on Pomona! Then when it's chromed it's legal for serving food. They can see themselves in it, it raises my uh, conversion rate optimization. I can still work shows at night. Probly enamel it for me too.

—Hold on, I'nginna get a drink.

—Yeah, let's toast my success!

Dave goes in the house but he's gone longer than just getting a drink. I whisper but Brian doesn't. —Dude, you're workin on this after what happened with the sink last night?

—Relax, this's been in talks for days.

—What if he gets mad and we're back to gettin kicked out again? ... Just, let's be clear with him that I'm not involved, okay?

—Why would you be involved? Just cause yer standin here talkin to me, it's not,— I step around the rollaway, now standing about where Katie put the socket set, and there's my empty juice bottle.

—Didjou take this from the fridge?— Between the rollaway and his cap, Brian's black eyes blink at me. —No, dude.— I cross back over to the recycling can, kick its bottom so the two cats will clear off its lid. —I'm not mad, I just been wondering where stuff goes, and if I need to label it or do something better.

—Wasn't me. But yeah, write your name on stuff. Gotta sharpie?

—Yeah, I got one.

—Lemme borrow it.

—What? ... I meant to mark my stuff in the fridge, I don't have it right,

—I thought, just in case, I'd ask, I wanna mark where the part ends that I needa hit with steel wool.

—Maybe Katie drank it. She was out here. She like, motioned, mimed to me, to stick that box where the sun don't shine. That's why,

—No she didn't. Don't make stuff up about the poor woman.

—Yes she did! That's why I kicked it to you just now, I was tryna tell you. And why shouldn't she? You've had a shitty day or a shitty life and still tried to be funny, right?— He's back to beyond caring about the subject, like last night. —I think she was checkin out your project, too.

—Yeah, I mean, I sawer out with her reading glasses onner head earlier this afternoon, that's like a paradigm shift for me. I mean, if she reads, that's good, right? I mean, when I go around her, I hate to say it but, I'm not sniffin for old people, I'm sniffin for dried shit. But I guess it's okay.

I don't answer or ask for him to tell me more because Dave comes back out with a Truly in one hand, which proves his character beyond a doubt and above all other evidence, and a sweet drink in the other.

—You didn't bring me one?— Brian scolds him.

—Why would chrome make it legal to serve food on?

Brian does the thing where he laughs to cover losing his patience.

—Dude, have you never worked in foodservice. Think about it, Dave. Shiny, flat surfaces, easy to clean. Chrome.

—That's .. fuckin ... bullshit.— Dave's face puckers up like he sniffed a spoonful of lime. —Here, take that hat off,

—Don't touch me!

—I'nginna give ya a ten-ninety!

—I'll give you a tattoo of a dick goin up yer neck!

While they have at it, I go around to the front of the house, check my truck across the street. The RV that was parked here has vanished. When I go in the front door I see that mushy cardboard thing is gone, but some passable sandals stand aside the door now. No Xs carved in the jamb, and oddly no catscratches either. Maybe they smell Brian and the couch and give up on the front door. I get one of those damp towels from the kitchen and dust my room's floor with the palm of my hand, soaking up the quiet.

I guess I can't rely on Brian to be any more careful with Dave than he feels like. They see Katie's condition, they just accept it. I don't get it. If she's too far gone to order him around, why does Dave distract us and control us with threats?

Brian takes off and Dave either leaves too or gets quiet, so I go out to see if there's anything else to learn from Katie, but instead I see Gil come home. He's got all the luck with scheduling. I ask him about the

rent since I thought we might be in a package deal together for Dave, but he doesn't seem to know anything.

Now my room's wood is friendly. Just enjoy it. Getting kicked out will come or not. When we see things as good, bad is created. Being and nothingness create each other. My lungs are still plugged with cannonballs, worse when I stop moving. I put my arms up again and breathe down past my lungs, drain the concrete out of them into my belly and out the tailbone. If I could just think straight here. The clean floor travels slowly up my feet, knees, around the truck-knot in my left hip, and I can lay down breathing on the bed, housekey poking through my pocket into my thigh.

The key works like an alarm clock on my skin's tolerance. When I zone back in, my leg itches, there's no message from work and the east hills still glow silver in the clamshell of dusk.

Outside they're back to bickering their boredom away, Dave's quit his mask for the night, I think, and has cleared both those cans. Brian's got several tiny black toolkits laid out under the neighbor's faded kitchen light, running his pocketknife down a bluntwrap atop his nice clean rust-perforated rollaway, armpit-mounted LED beam completely missing the spot.

Dave starts when he sees me. I guess it's dark. —Whatta ya need, Chava?

—Just chilling.— He crosses two fingers, itching. —Well it's warmer inside, I betchou.

Brian's dexterous digits are still overcomplicating something. —I just have this torch gimmick.— The torch gimmick lights against a piece of old rusty crap from the driveway and I almost lose interest before he mouths the blunt and ignites it with the touch of the metal.

—Time for more drinks, Frahuurrrgghhrrrhghhrrrrgghhan,—  
belches Dave.

—Did Katie go to bed?

Dave does it again, convince me to listen if you're worthy. My ear hears a supersonic tone even though he didn't say anything, a dog hearing his nostrils rage-whistling. I start to speak but he shouts me down. —I knew you were checkin on that schedule, fuckin Chava! Time to let that go! She stays up long as she feels like it.

—I've never seener up past dark,— I offer, —isn't it good that I try to stay outta her way?

Brian shines his light on the subject. —She takes a walk before it gets dark, then she's usually done for the night. That's how I know it's time to,

—Oh, excuse me!— Dave's affected a British accent, I think. —I didn't knehw I was tohwlking tew the Ensoyclopedia Piss-assica! Shit roight on me!

—I just wanna know the best way for me to live close to her, Dave.

—You shoullda thought a that today, then, and watch her since yer such a scientist, steada suspecting Me for stealin yer rent!

—What's going on?— Brian's voice goes down an octave, spread over us both.

—Nothin, Captain Crunch. Chava, you needa get the important shit straight here, which is I don't have nothin to clean up after you, or I'll put You in check, then You'll be the one pissin and changin yer tampon inna fuckin lightrail elevator!

I dash right around and go back inside with no answers to him, no answers about Katie. Behind me Dave's shrieks doppler over concrete and banana trees. —Are you comin, Professor Colchester? Are you

Colchester or Coalchamber? Lessgo re-up these drinks, man. And maybe he'll sal me a quorum or a carrier for you, or whatever the fuck you need in pall-mall.

—Oh, you mean in parliament?

—Shut the fuck up, you psychic. I'nginna still give you a ten-ninety.

I just fell asleep, laying half on my chest, like I never have before in my life, midthirties fat tit pillowed between bicep and collarbone, relearning how to sleep laying down, and on a big-enough bed, when the backdoor slams hard. I wait out the stomps, clomp of boots kicked off onto the floor, monosyllable swears, waiting to see if he'll barge into my room. Does the door lock? I tiptoe over. Why in North America are there still these worthless brasscolored button doorknobs? The rest of the world uses levers, if México and Spain stand for the rest of the world.

His footfalls move away from me. The house's echoes somehow sound like Brian's word Anthony. Her husband was Anthony. I forgot completely that he said that. I should've said his name to Katie, it might've made her talk!

From the kitchen, a flash of shattered glass like a threat thrown from Dave's fit of rage. That explains the sink trap. I put my ear back to the door. His voice buffets the air, low but pitched, suddenly the clear word keys hits the ceiling. He must be ranting at Gil.

But was the broken glass from him, or Gil, or even Katie? What if he's ranting at her. What if he does something, or she does something. What am I about to do? To fight Dave with witness, to repel him with a third set of eyes? For those who practice not-doing, everything will fall

into place. But what will come around back to me if I practice not-doing now?

The most dangerous part, the transition, where I invite attention by twisting the stupid doorknob, the lock button pops back out, it clunks in my two cupped fists, I step out toward the kitchen, past two grown cats smearing globs of long wet hair on the lazyboy's cushion.

—Dave. Don't,

No one under the kitchen's ceiling light. Towels still hanging to dry. I cross over to the hall where his silhouette stands rummaging in the closet inverted to flat black in my retinas. —Don't what, Chava?— Now he's hanging right over me. I anticipate the smell of alcohol, but it's moss, sweat and dirty water.

—I thought ... I thought you were yelling at her.

—Uh huh. Like I said. I'm not gonna have razorbumps on my neck less you thought you knew how to use the clipper.— He retreats to the closet, a dirty old suitcase in his hand.

—You think you lost your keys in there? ... You said to keep a watch out.

—Not for me. Go.

—Sure none of that in there is Anthony's?

Closet contents clunk. —None a your business.

For five minutes it's quiet again except for the echo of glass in my ears. I'm wired, chest strangling me, getting kicked out in slow motion. I listen at the unlocked door, at the floor, but his voice has ceased. I look out into the short hall. Katie's bedroom light yellows the bathroom door and the outline of her hair, and she turns the knob on Dave's door. She's in her threadbare brown robe, bare-legged. In her



other hand she's got a set of sandals, a hand towel and a ring of keys. She drifts inside.

Now he's talking. I might as well act normal, I tiptoe out to the bathroom to piss out some fear and adrenaline while they're occupied. There's a set of two Xs penciled into her room's doorjamb, I'm pretty sure they're new.

—Dave. Who're all these fuckin people?

—These Fuckin People are my family, Fryan. You don't like it, the neighbor just threw out a Covid calch for you.

—Memo's your family?

Deltoids are sore from moving furniture at my aunt's all day, aching even with the swing of my gait. I have tonight, then I have to wait until my cousin stops staying at the house before I get another chance. I check my Venmo and my cousin's cash for helping came through on the way over here. Second big notice of the day, behind the news that my Chase bill went to collections. I was this close to negotiating a deal.

The first thing I noticed was the car parked blocking the driveway with two bumper stickers: *Proud Portuguese* and *A House Divided*, with flags of Italy and Portugal. I move my bike down the sidewalk and then I come back around just to take in the scene, and my eyes focus through all these people with no masks on laughing and crying into their vinho, to find Anthony's old crap gone, the car gone, and a bunch of people doubled by stereo noise.

—Did you ditch everything in the driveway? Did you throw it away?

—Not the car or the van.

—How'd you move the van?

—Manual helped me.

Dave takes off to do his thing and soon two relatives catch me being the only brown person at the party. —You another one a Dave's friends?

At least he doesn't demand that I show proof of citizenship like he could in Arizona. Can they still do that? —Yeah. I've known Dave since high school. Name's Brian.

—Hater.

—Josefina Antonieta.

—So is uh ... Manual, here?

—Well yeah, my brother better be here, he's throwin the party, ain't he? — Hater, combed-back hair pulling until his eyebrows, scratches his huge vulture nose with some kind of huge ring from sports or college. —Go get a drink. There's porto, there's Truly.

—Oh Truly,— pouts Josefina like she's in a commercial, —it's just so healthy. It's kinda like back to scotch and water, isn't it, Hater?

—Yeah,— I change channels, —I just wanna check inside to see if I left anything, and use the bathroom,

—Oh, yer one a the tenants? Manny told us about you.

—Y ... yeah. I'm not really permanent though, unless they get a ADU or somethin.

—Oh ADU, ADU! Yknow, we know Sam, we know Sam.— I look to see if Josefina points to Sam somewhere, but the activewear jacketing her whole senior-aged body just stiffens. —The mayor, silly! Anyway, he's very supportive of ADUs.

And now short Halloween-masked people are running everywhere, voices fast as radio. I turn back to the old people. —You guys arnt worried about wearing masks?

—I ain't worried about a mask!— rasps Hater, —Let me tell ya, I come from centuries of Portuguese survival instincts. Yknow, we gotta have some way of surviving the cost of livin here,— His voice drops into a lament, quickly getting more passionate. —Yknow, I just retired,

and I gotta worry if I'nGINNA keep what I put away, with this inflation!  
In this pandemic!

—Oh, the pandemic,

—Listen, hon. And why shouldn't I leverage my equity and put a  
ADU in my backyard?

—At least then there aint' no lawn,— a Halloween spider of  
spray-flattened black hair climbs down the wife's forehead, —for our  
good-for-nothin son to come cut when we're old!

—Yknow Ryan, our grandparents came here with nothin, they  
hadda get a loan for a cow in Sannaclaira,

—Hey, on the other hand, you'da been turned down for a loan if  
you'd been Mexican or uh, Hispanic,

—The Spanish're racist.— he turns a bad taste up over his lip,  
—And look, what I'm tryna say to you is, the Indians got reservations.  
The Jews got all a Israel. Think about that. And at what cost. The  
Portuguese that built this country, we don't get a fuck! Let's get smore  
to drink.— He nods and I follow them up onto the porch where wine  
bottles stand on a beer keg. Not satisfied, Hater brings us in the house.

—Some of us are lucky, though,— intones Josefina solemnly,  
—think a Joe.

—Oh Joe, yeah, Joe! Yeah, he sure cleaned up!— I'm not sure what  
happened but now Hater's on a bike being pulled by a dog on a leash.

—Soldis parents' dairyland about ninety-nine, Ryan, big bucks.—  
Josefina assures me. Hater needs to do all the talking. A kid seated on  
the couch hits the TV remote, and now Hater is back on his feet, with a  
golf putter shining partylurid in his hand. —They started out as tenant  
farmers! Like blacks! The Portuguese's the Atlanteans, as old as the  
Africans. No one talks bout how we suffered as much in the slavery as

the blacks did. Now that farmland's under suburbs. But Joe, he was smart! He didn't take no money, he just toldis financial advisors,

—Never worked a day innis life. And pickin a financial advisor ... ! I hadda get an app, honey.

The channel changes again, and Hater has grown incredibly long blonde hair and huge muscles under the bounty hunter's leather vest. —Last time I seenim he sez, I'nginna be discin and discin ... you gonna be discin, Joe? That requires knowin howta use a tractor, what the hell ya discin for? Oh, I'nginna level my yard, that means grade it, cause I'nginna pour concrete and add a addition to the garage. Seedis 32 Ford? I'nginna slam it, uh, chop the top, yknow, do the whole thing, uhhhh roadster. You got the most beautiful property in Aptos, why you gonna cover it up with garages when ya got fifty million god damn square feet a garage ready to rent in Sannaclaira? I'm done with Sannaclaira, I'm out. Just get me a stripmall with the money from the land, I don't want no money. Like a couple two three times.— His voice is like a hamburger flipping.

—Who's done with Santa Clara? Who doesn't want no money?

—Joe! Both a them's him, Joe! Pay attention, Ryan! So he had multiple streams a income from stripmalls!

—He wezzinna TV movie!— congratulates Josefina, —You know what a TV movie is, Ryan?— I look around for Katie, listen for her slippers.

—Hotrods, as many as he wanted. Hung around Wayne's, Santa Clara Speed Center, while the rest of us bust our ass for unions and everyone's welfare and school lunches and shit, pertnear twunny years, god damn Vioxx,

—But now he's on permanent vacation. There's nothin else to drink in here, honey, let's just go get the vinho outside.

Hater is himself again, and follows her out. —Yeah, that Joe. Now he's gone on to his rest.— On the porch we're distracted by some little kids jumping at our right. I didn't see it before, a big bunch of balloons pull at their strings, tied down to the banana tree. —Yeah. Jump!— says Hater with that tone of the uncle who doesn't care at all.

But then the little girl painted like a cow does manage to get a balloon loose, only to have it slip away up into the yellow sodium night. —Hey!— screeches Hater, and leaps down over the girl. —Don't you know nothin? There was a fifty rolled up in that balloon! Manny!— shouting at no one over the stereo, —get a god damn bee-bee gun!

I look at Josefina, who gives me a stern look. Hater's still spitting at the little girl. —You go to your mom and teller whatchou did! ... Ahhh shit ... happy Halloween, homeless.— The little girl runs off terrorized, bawling. The uncle returns pleased to the landing. —Yer not gonna dress up?

—Ah ... is there a fifty rolled up in every balloon, if I do?

—Anyway, they'll probly sell this place fore they get a ADU, Ryan.

—Oh look, hon, it's little Jwow! Hi, sugar! Member me, I'm yer tchía Josefina!

The plush dinosaur suit is detained and presented to me, and I just say hi. —I'm yer cousin Dave's friend.

His buckteeth slit open his broad red mouth. —Wanna know where's the best taquería?— eyes rolling, suggesting a view of the whole neighborhood.

—Where?

—Bend over and I'll show ya!— the kid doesn't even finish before cracking himself up and running off. Under Josefina's makeup flashes angry embarrassment. —He got that from a movie at my nephew's house!

—Look, I'm gonna go use the facilities. Good talk.

—Yeah good to meetche, Ryan. Manny! ... Lesstart the god damn balloon game!

Probably sell, that's news. What is that noise. I bend over out the porch and look back in. The plush dinosaur suit is now jumping up and down where my rollaway should be. It's a trampoline? Beneath their feet, and on the porch landing just now, there's still fuzzy sandy catshit, so it must be on the trampoline too.

The living room does strangely smell simply of its own paint. There's almost no people except a couple in the kitchen with drinks. Standing at the window, where the lazyboy used to be, there's a private view of the trampoline, brainksh brainksh brainksh, kids in costumes tweeting and shrieking, the awkward twelve-year-old girls wanting to get on, too, but just gathered at the trampoline's edge absorbed in their phones' safety. A few more kids pass through and here's Katie, unmasked and just drifting. Everyone already knows to ignore her like the TV shelf. I catch her eye and try to reassure her but she never seems like she listens at all now.

I'll have to wait until they leave the kitchen to take the tequila I stashed in the cabinet above the fridge, or have a shot and hide it again. Why wait forever. Taking out the cat litter has disturbed and worsened the stench in here.

—Hi, I'm Brian.

—Oh hi!— meows the elder woman, —I’m Griselda.— Her elbow down, wrist up under the yellow lamplight, fingertips down, like a rich socialite. I’m high enough where I just look at it and then it’s too late. Lighter and vape pen roll between my two knuckles, pocket like a drainpipe. —You related to Katie?

—Yeah, and these are my sons, Katie’s sobrinos. Anthony and Junior. Say hi, boys.

They look at me and escape back under their takuache bowlcuts and that’s all I get. I cross over and light up the uninviting living room with the TV. I go to put on some Milton Nascimento, they’ll like that. —I just met Hater outside, and uh, annis wife ... this thing have wifi? Where’s the menu for Youtube,

—Josefina. That’s my sister. That Heitor, he’s a real job.

—Oh. Cool.— The album starts and she follows me into the TV glare. —Oh, if yer gonna put music on, put on the Eagles, or Pablo Cruise or somethin!

I succeed in corralling us both back in the kitchen with the remote concealed in my left hand, switch the TV off. —Whatcha drinkin?

—Oh I don’t drink,— which is funny because she pulls a narrow-nosed face like she just sniffed vodka, —ever since ... you can take that mask off.

—It’s fine.

—Ever since I quit scientology. And look!— now the triangle-wave arm is down in her purse, —I take Ervaláif every day, and you can’t be drinkin if you want the vitamins to be bio-available.

My eyes cross to read the bottle. —Bio-available.



—Bio-available, honey, that's why we get gray hair. The time of our food, when we eat our food in its lifecycle, it's like watering the sidewalk instead of your lawn.

—Indeed.

—We miss the nutrition! So we have to supplement. Yknow, days when I forget, that's our cue for a little White Claw day! I can give you a QR code.— Sudden conniving whisper. —Yknow, don't take anything Heitor or Josefina say too seriously. They've got major problems, I mean, financial ... problems. Their solar panels, they costem their hot tub.— She pinches my forearm once, a warning, then grips, an urgent postscript. —Heitor got Covid, and I'm not gonna be the one says he was paying for sex ... but a week after he got Covid, their little dog got cancer ... have you ever?

I open the cabinet and it almost ejects its stuffing of plastic bags full of heavy tinkling objects. —So uh, you talk to Katie much?

—Oh, honey,— her kids tackle past me, xanax-scented white waffleweave across my shoulder, her voice back up at level with the kitchen lamp, —you know we're all just so busy, yknow, and then, hello, pandemic! I just, but look honey, don't put that look on,— I didn't put a look on, beneath the mask I pursed my lips for lubrication, —Katie's discovering her independence! It's something she has to do, now that Tony's gone.

—You don't mind if I do?— I almost forgot to take my shot, stash the bottle and get the hell out of here. —No, no, honey! You do you. You do you!— Wait, can't stick the bottle in my backpack with my ipad, glass on glass doesn't go.

Screams outside, Anthony and Junior are on the trampoline, shit-tracked shoes still on, sockfeeted minors go flying, one lands on

and smashes that pink plastic laundry basket that's been out in the sun for five years, now upended on the ground. —Have you uh, seen Dave?

—He's not out there by the trampoline? That's fine, go look, honey, I'm gonna have a cigarette.

—I'll go see. Good talking to you, uh? Take care.

Where is Katie now. Right when I step to the door it flies open and in stomp the kids. —Mom! Bring us some sodas! Nashe doish!

—What's that mean?— I want this kid to look me in the eye, slow his charge.

—I dunno,— he takes two steps further in to dodge me, —but it's all the Portuguese I know. All's I know's when I say it, my mom gets me somethin. Mom!

I spin, considering whether to nail him down, but now Katie's headed for us both, those sandals cradled in her hands. She sets them right down where the lazyboy used to be and then just looks at them for a long time. She's got something else between her fingers.

—How you feel, Katie? You uh, you like this party?— Might as well ask. She looks at me more than the kid did, walleyed, puts one hand in her robe's pocket. It's a ring of keys she's got.

—They took away your lazyboy?— Half of me feels really bad for her, but what am I going to do. —Those're Anthony's sandals, huh? Do you like havin his stuff close?

She changes her mind with a big movement, like a sudden riptide wave from beneath the breaker, and the keys are under my nose. —Here,— I take them as gently as I can, —how bout settem right here.— I set them on the windowsill and draw the blinds down over them. A half-second glint of conflict in her eyes, then they're lost again.

—See? Okay, don't forget to brush your teeth.

She turns not to the bathroom but to the kitchen, empties a drawer and comes back in front of me, plops a stack of handtowels right down next to the sandals. —You sure that’s where they go? ... Hey, yknow what, nevermind. Do your thing.

Outside it’s like an old music-video. Some people are brightly lit, some rocky piles of shadow. The trampoline’s still popping. When some annoying late-90s country comes on, a hip-hop beat, which is supposed to be the most offensive sound on Earth to white people, with a computerized violin sawing on top of it, who does this style, is it Shania Twain, the guy standing right next to me erupts rapping, like he’s been doing it since he was under sixty. —Four-barrel sport-fuckin nukie sub!— His audience cracks up.

—You sing that while yer changin tires at Costco?— Dave comes up like a crane above the other spectators, no mask, guzzling down a red cup. The small-toothed guy goes on, —Mhmm, you got it, Toyota. Tires fair. Cadillac, Seal-team, a-four-bolt main! A-four onna floor, fifth under the seat! See, I can rap too!

—Do some more, Stu!

—Chowchilla, dude.— Everyone knows that this means no. Oh, I get it, ciao. —I never did drugs, so I’ll never think rap’s cool.— His voice drops down to an old hippie wheeze. —Smoke a ... nother ... hooter ... dude. I jest went to my reunion in July, my buddy Dirty Dan can’t even, he’s got Coke-bottle glasses, if you walk up and talk to him, he can’t even turnis eyes to look. He hasta turnis whole neck around. Duuuude? But he’s best friends with Neil Young, so, anything he needs drugs-wise.— These can’t all be just family.

—Sat the guy who ate a whole car, Stu? Or’s that your buddy Bullwinkle?— Everyone keeps on chuckling. Memo’s appeared next to

Dave, chins tucked under doing what a neck does for most humans. His ring of half-inch hair is gelled up over his ears, so he looks like the top of the neighbor's barrel cactus. The scar down his temple blends away with the light, sharpens with shadow.

—You change yer pad, Fryan?— sneers Dave.

—Back to high school, uh?

—Back to what?— he dribbles, nods forward away from the hee-haw hee-haw of the violin. His finger comes up at me but then he turns to Memo, who's mumbling what he sees on his phone. —That isn't shit. Look, Brian. Chava and Gil fucked up.

Wonder if Chava's even here. —Chava didn't go on the cat hunt last night.

—I'n not talkinnabout the fuckin cat hunt.

—Cat hunt?— guffaws Memo, setting his scarred melon back on his shoulders. The look in his eyes is bad news. Not even scheming. Dead, no humor, no right and wrong.

—Ain't no fuckin hunt,— Dave shushes him, —Brian, you gotta lay daln low a couple days while I clean out. It's got to be jag-packed of stray sheep. You have shit to get from inside?

—No. What happened?

Memo holds up his phone and Dave stiffens up on his toes.

—Teller I'm six a my own cocks tall!— The crowd has stopped listening to Stu, so Dave seizes the spotlight. —Coronaviruses not to stay! Uncle Cock is here to blame! To hang!

I feel eyes on me. Katie's looking at me from the doorway, halfway to a dusty ghost. Looking at him. —Hey Dave,

—Teller I'm goin right noooaaah shit!— He drops his fresh red cup, circled feet recede from the spill like cockroaches on the moonless

pavement. —Where's the car? I'nginna go get my keys. Here, texme her fuckin number! Fryan, you still fucking selling weed?

Right next to all his white relatives. —Dave, look,— I grab his arm. He goggles at Katie's shadow on the porch. —I think she's probly standin there staring at you cause she's waiting for you to helper get in bed.

His eyes flash at me, me an enemy thing not giving him his way, and steps away toward the trampoline. I look back at her, back at him. He's got another relative with him, a balding curly-headed man with an expensive Hawaiian shirt, a business-Hawaiian shirt. —What the hell am I sposed to do?

—Just make sure she brushseser teeth and goes to the bathroom!

—Jeezis Mary and Joseph, Dave. I been drinking.

—Just do it for me, tchú! I gotta go attend to some business. Just get it over with!

Then Dave's gone, where did Memo go, and that must be Manuel. He's stooped in front of Katie, looking like he's persisting to sell her something after a first no.

Why did I come here? The tequila bottle's still in my hand. I stick to the fence and head back to the garage. That's funny, Gil's gone and the garage is all closed up.

Tube is tangled in the drawstring, upend it to fish it out, CBD on my lips.

I decide to look like I belong there, give that look to the kids, pull the curled old plywood door up to knee-high and stash the bottle, let the door push it back in with its closing motion. It's perfect night under the door, and I wish I was in a tent in there.

One of those bowlcut adolescents, I think Junior, has taken off his longjohns, probably to show off his shoulders and biceps, and only them, to the other cousins. —Hey, what'd you put in there?

—A flashlight. Don't worry about it, kid.— Griselda is standing near, cooing at a cat missing a triangular raccoon-bite, which already looks pregnant even though it's six months' size. —Oh, hi again. Here, Brian, this is my girlfriend Ricky, she was gettin a peddy down Willow Glen so she just came by for the Halloween spirit. Ricky, he's a friend of Dave's, my sobrino's.

—Qué gusto.— Ricky's got two red cups.

—Igualmente. Soy Filipino, no hablo mucho,

—You guys chat, I gotta go powder my nose.

I watch the mom go because she's going to make a traffic jam for Katie, if she is getting ready for bed. Ricky watches me watch, sets one red cup down between her feet and masks up.

—You close to the family? You don't have to put that on, I got mine, had it on since I got here.

—I don't mind,— the woman assures me, —No, I'm not that close to them. Who's house is this?

—Griselda's ... sister? Cousin?

—Whatta you think of her?

—She's what I imagined middle-class people were like through my whole childhood, like, the black microwave instead of the old silver one, except older.— It worked, Ricky is totally charmed unless I'm not reading her mask right at all. She picks up her other drink.

—It's ice water. Griselda and me both work at Mercedes. You know, out on Tully?

—Yeah.

—The booze here is pretty good. But she’s nuts. Looks like her family’s a little threadbare, too.— I look behind at the milky laundry-room window. —You mean,— I’m blowing it, but have to follow through, —you mean Katie?

She stands firmly on both feet. Fingers are in my backpack still, iPad clothed, cloth-wrapped box I can’t place ... I lift it and out comes the clipper. Might as well. —Hey, uh, you wouldn’t give me a hand with just my neck and behind my ears, would you?

Eyes change shape above the mask, forehead changes one tiny shade in the lamplight. —I ... I guess.

I bow down, expose my neck. She flips on the clippers, the line I want done is obvious since the rest of my hair is in my fist. She’s quick, gentle, keeps one red cup in her left hand.

This is really the ideal situation. If we both got coronavirus from being here, what would it hurt to swap spit and cut loose and things.

—Thanks. I feel cleaner already. Don’t worry, I’ll clean it later.— I want to smell my clothes but she’ll notice. Place next to charger, zip three corners, stow.

—Got a photoshoot?

—What makes you say that?

—The way you move. I thought for a moment you were a performer. Like the type of person who’s always seeing himself as a character in your own famous story. Posing for yourself.

—Well, I gotta act in a trustworthy way.— She almost pulls another readable face, but then stretches that mask back on.

—I’m not gonna hang around real long. I gotta go back and stay at my aunt’s cause I’m helpin clean out the house.

—Sounds like a sad errand.

—Yeah. Not Covid. But uh, we needa consume less, cause the corporate supply line makes employment impossible, and also it's hard when you rack up all this junk you consumed, then the house makes it all attached to the memory of the uh, deceased, and we can't just chuck it like the junk that it is. In the Philippines I don't think we have the problem to this degree.

—I think you're right in the long run.

Curling light fills the sore parts in my deltoids. Now or never. —You wanna get away from all these people? Reduce the risk of infection? I'm sick of listenin to this kid right here,— I point, and this kid does give me his attention, even if Junior still doesn't, —he's been goin on and on about how he cheats, games, his GPA, so he can get his hotrod insurance lowered.

The kid's face is like a stoplight. —Do you have to say that so everyone can hear it?

—You did first, my dude.

One of the kids must be an older aunt in disguise, because she coughs, hopefully from smoking, and starts in on Junior. —That's not how Portuguese live!

—I'm seventeen now,— protests the beanpole, —I'nt wanna just be Portuguese anymore! I'm from Roosevelt, I'm a hood-ass negga!— Notice I'n becomes I'm when hood.

The four of them scamper, and now it's almost as intimate back here as it was with just me, Chava and Gil, ignoring the nearby trampoline crowd. Ricky raises one eyebrow that could mean anything. Griselda comes back out, too soon.

—Long line at the bathroom?— I want to catch her with an idea before she comes off the stairs. —These old houses ... !— she gasps,



—Junior, come back here! We'll go right now and you can head out with your friends. Awful nice talkin to you, Brian. You're not enjoying the party?

—It's just awkward,— I ask for Ricky's patience with my eyes, —how do you all justify coming and partying here with coronavirus raging?

Ricky strides off in her Lululemon Lululeggings under that short leather jacket, not even an adiós, leaving me the only brown one again, catshit headed to her Mercedes.

Another cousin speaks from behind my shoulder: —Well this is the place that's for sale, right? Manwell told us to come look at it.

—Yeah, that's right, Brian, you're not here to look at it?

I would've got so far with Ricky, then what, with this bill. The other cousin chugs on the red cup and adjusts her bra strap. —They were clearing stuff out when I came by earlier. Does someone still live here?

—Hi, hon! Can you hear me?

—Hi, Mom. How dyou feel?

—I'm okay, I jist can't get the assistant to come pick up my laundry, I tolder I need my support-socks cleaned and they have to be done carefully in a bag. I toldem that one pair wore out, and of course there's no staff or no one to go buy new ones!

—Don't get upset at them, they don't know, just,

—I'm not yellin attem.

—I can buy you more socks. You should've told me, you're just driving yourself crazy not telling me so I can handle it. I'll do it today.

I'll leave 'em in the lobby with your name on 'em. Unless I can come visit. Do you know if they've straightened out the visiting rules?

—They didn't say.

—They're probably not gonna say, Mom, they're busy. You needa ... can you hear me?

—I can hear you. Can you hear me?

—You needa reach out, both to me and to them. There's no reason to wait until it's a problem.

—They don't like me asking 'em things all the time.

—Mom, come on ... you never talked like that before lockdown.

—I never needed 'em before lockdown!

—Look, I got cabin fever, too. Just because you see them do the same little reactions all the time doesn't mean yer getting thrown out for expressing yourself. They're just takin care of themselves, just like you should be takin care of yourself. It's not gonna be perf,

—I don't wanna rely on them!

—And it doesn't even matter cause if you just tell me, I'll do it, and you don't need them! ... Tell you what, I'll call Penny and ask her how I visit. I shouldn't put it on you, I'm perfectly capable. You never hadda rely on them.

—I know I didn't.

— ... Are you wearing your foot and exercising?

—Yes, yes. I'm not wasting away. My insulin's right. They probably figure I only need one sock.

—I don't know about that.

—I talked to Shelly.

—How's she?

—Going nuts. She's on some long, long appointment list to get her blood pressure meds adjusted. I spose all they do now at Kaiser's wait for Covid patients to die.

—Or the doctors can't go in to see patients. I don't think they got people dying of Covid in the cardiologist's office.

—Anyway she went to Hawaii with Ted. But now she's worried she won't get back to work on time cause they might makem take a test before flying home. She said your cousin's hearing voices. She gets upset cause she hears voices, and she left a huge long buncha messages on Shelly's phone.

—Deeana's hearing voices? How long's that been going on? Why's Shelly in Hawaii?

—I dunno. And she said those books I senter made her more nervous.

—I know, Mom, I tried everything too. Melatonin, breathing, nothing helps me calm down. Less I start takin Tylenol or Nyquil before bed every night. Everyone I know's wound up tighter than a nun's ass. You're not too nervous?

—Not about that.

—I miss you, mom. I'm sorry I can't come over.

—Stop apologizing, it's not your,

—But I have to, so you know that I care! Otherwise how'll I make you know?

—What're you accusing me of with that? Did I accuse you of not caring?

— ... Nothing. No. But when did it change? When you don't call for help, I start to think,

—I dunno what to tell you. Nothing changed. If I asked for too much help or I got impatient with you, that's just what you think. I'm not keepin score.

—Fine. Look, I'll call and ask Penny right now. And I'll call Deeana soon. Course she's hearing voices, ever sincer dumbass narcissist boyfriend killed himself in front of her.— Wesley Willis went schizophrenic from his mom's boyfriend beating the shit out of her and him. —Now you mention it, my old school girlfriend Valerie told me a few years ago how Leti, our girl from school, went schizophrenic cause her dad killed her mom and then himself, in fronna everyone at the water company, cause she cheated on him. People snap from things we're not sposeta deal with, from other people being selfish.— I say it knowing she'll ignore what's uncomfortable.

—Just relax. It's not all up to you. You're, you're not working today?

—It sure seems like it is sometimes, Mom, the way you get impatient. No, it's Saturday. I got the Monday to Friday shift, not like it matters now. Just a buncha Triple-A stuff the last couple days, it's been quiet. I'm calling from my new place, cause I moved in after all.

—Whattaya mean after all?

—Well I was ... staying in my work truck since September. I stopped asking to crash with those other people.

—Why? You didn't ever say that.

—I didn't wanna. And I don't make barely twunny bucks an hour at my job, so I can't just get a place in town. This place'll work for a few months maybe, until after New Years and the vaccine comes out.

—You think things'll get normal again when the vaccine comes out?

—I dunno, Mom. Normal already excluded what I can financially pull off, so. Your managers would know better, you shid askem. I'll talk to you later, okay?

—Okay, bye.

A text from Gil. Hey guys just so you know I took that test at the fairgrounds and got negative this morning. A second text. If we hang again maybe someone else can take a turn.

What does he mean if we hang again?

A voice I haven't heard shone October-blond over the floorboards while I was on the phone. Maybe more than one voice. They traveled through what grooves ... grooves made by Anthony, her husband? His furniture legs or his parents' furniture legs, storage for his hotrod-club junk? What other marks are his. What if Katie's scratches around the house weren't about us, but that simple, a way to join him even as a leftover consequence, a smokestain above the windowsash.

But why should I find his fingerprints? I'm a renter invited to use the space, it's not my responsibility to protect his dust. This is more cabin fever, fear of every little thing's placement, consequence springloaded into each existence. I should go out.

The owner of that voice is not in here. The lazyboy's gone, its cat-detritus footprint more disgusting for the dander's lickstained white shine. All the way gone, not on the curb neither.

I decide to see nothing, take the truck down Almaden to Sprouts just to be different, buy food that sounds good for confinement, a bag of ice, who cares, two cold coffees to last.

A bottle of kombucha, two big Mineraguas, a six of Fat Tire, so I only have to leave to use the bathroom until I don't know what. Until the weekend's over.

Too bad I can't buy someone to camp out with. Or drive out over the hill and sleep in the parking lot at Greyhound Rock, alone but living, gathering some life to bring back to that room? If August's fires left any pines left to sit under. No, the towtruck would stand out of the fog like a lighthouse. I ride the wave of my responsibilities and grab some microwave dinners to offer Katie, and choose isolation.

The forbearance soaks in almost back to the house, and I remember that I forget to get the socks and call Penny. —Hi, it's Chava, Carmen's kid.

—Oh, hello uh, Salvador. Is everything okay?

—Yeah, I just, I'm here at the Walgreens and I wanna bring by some socks for my mom that I'm gonna buy. Plus toothpaste and some skin stuff and ... anyway, I'm shopping.

—You can bring it by. Just put it in a bag, and label it.

Penny has this way of being mentally either behind or ahead of her voice, not like multitasking behind the phone, but weighing some huge amount of intersecting consequences, in case she needs to take it back. Then she snaps back. —That's fine. Are you gonna quarantine it for a few days, or when should she expect to get it? Is it medication she needs now?

—No,— I probably should've lied to hurry her decision, but she could look in the bag. —but uh, she does need these support socks, and uh, I'm gonna give a T-shirt,— I grab a pirate San José State shirt off the front of the aisle, —she can sew that up and use it as a laundry bag, so the socks don't get beat up in the wash, and we don't have to worry about her circulation changing. Can you write that down, so,

—Slow down,

—Yeah sure ... so they don't think she's balling stuff up, and they don't separate it?

—Can you write it down and put it in the bag?

—Yeah. Someone'll make sure to read it? I'll put a separate note for Catholic Charities, too, so they,

—I'll read it.

—Okay. Thanks. So uh, so is there any change in rules for visiting?

—Rules for visiting?— There she goes, gives me the burden of proof.

—Yeah. Like right now I can't, right, last time I checked. Is there any change?

—Well, I don't know if you watch the news,— I sigh that I know.

—So no, we're not planning to encourage visitors anytime soon. I know your mom is probably pretty lonely, but,— the tone of Penny's voice on the word lonely for some reason matches my mental picture of her dark, sort of crunchy long hair, —there's just not enough protection for places like this.

I know I could dispute it, but only to put myself through more squeezing. Consequence in each existence. —Can you assure me that if I write it down, they'll do what I write?

—It's not for you to worry about, Salvador. I'll call your mom's room,

—Just go see her, so you can talk,

—I'll call her room.

—It is for me to worry about.

—The assistants know how to do their job.— The cashier girl behind the plastic barrier doesn't mind that I'm still on the phone, waves me forward. —Fine. I'll be there in ten minutes. Thanks, bye.

Even though I just talked to my mom, she doesn't pick up when I call from outside her hallway door. Maybe she's watching TV. A janitor opens the door, exchanges the bag for lots of assurances. I wait there in front of the door with its ample window, call again. I should've made it clear to my mom that we could still see each other through the glass. Now she might assume that it wouldn't be good enough for me, and I have to convince her that I understand.

This feeling that I got loose with my responsibilities is cabin fever, but it's also the panic of losing direction. My mom doesn't appreciate how I've stayed on duty to her all this time, and now when she acts like I'm accusing her of being demanding, she just tosses aside the work that I've put into being there for her every second, quarantine or none.

When I get home I can't not see it now. Two younger women are setting up a trampoline where all that junk was, where Katie pointed at the sun, where that tool cabinet had been. What are they going to do with a trampoline?

I stash the TV dinners in the fridge so Katie will find them, and lock myself in my room. Inside the front of my beanie is coated in fallen-out hairs, and soon that voice from this morning gleams over them. I start in on the Fat Tire, do basic and painful stretches on the bed that make my hips feel worse. As the sunset shines on the houses across the street, a stereo outside drowns out what my phone can play. I shut off my music and there are voices and hurried footslaps in the house now. When it's quiet on the floorboards I go to the bathroom and lock myself back in here with the broken radiator and my staycation food. Why so many people?

Nothing from Liset, nothing from Kyle either, hopeless to keep checking. I put on the Red Light Sting, what's this really good one



called, *Rub Em Down, Rub Em Out*, why didn't they get as big as the Blood Brothers, then close my eyes under the beer. Each time right before I doze off, someone rattles my doorknob. Young womens' voices and elderly grunts. How many people are coming through here, tunneling through night? Finally Dave's slobbery whisper follows the rattle. —Chava!

Where's my mask? Hung on an empty bottle. I unlock the knob and find him filling my doorframe. —Estplain to me how that kitchen window got cracked.— His voice is like the first gust of a coming dustdevil.

—I dunno, Dave, I heard a glass sound last night ... that's why I came out! You know I was in here.

He guzzles from a red cup. —Yknow, how would I like it if you guys're rollin up somethin in ducttape on me? I'nginna be ducktaping You together to it, you fuckin unnerstand me?— Dave's life has been a grasp for someone else's macho license, for a pass through somewhere he can't survive. —Dave, I don't understand! The curtains've been closed in the kitchen when I looked today. I dunno what happened to the window.

—Oh yeah, whatsis?— Out of nowhere he produces a hard resin saint with S. Antonio on the nameplate at its foot. My head shakes mechanically. —Is that what you think broke the window?

—It was strew there next to it, when I found the broken glass.— Then he jumps like a tarantula went down his shirt and behind him stands Katie, looking horrified in the stereo and TV noise. Before I can ask if she's okay, she reaches right over and grabs San Antonio. He gets packed away between her feet in some dirty old plastic suitcase with a weird biohazard smell on it. Her look to him has distinct accusation.

Then she drags the suitcase away with her into her room, but doesn't shut the door.

—What's going on?

Dave's look to me has distinct recrimination —I want you outta here.

Out comes Katie again dragging that suitcase. We watch her go to the kitchen, and the water runs. —That's just great,— barks Dave, and remembers to drain his cup, —now you know what's going on with those fuckin towels!

—Where'm I gonna go, Dave? This isn't my fault!

—Tomorrow night, one day's notice! That's landlords. For you to be out. So I can fix it.

—For,

—Until I say you can come back! How'd you like it if— He whips his head around, puffs up into my doorway, doesn't want me to see what he sees. Katie crosses back over the living room, opens a closet I barely noticed in the hall, and carefully packs the suitcase in with San Antonio safe inside. Sure enough she's got wet handtowels folded up in one wiry fist. She turns to Dave, stares at him, and he stiffens like he's going to explode.

What is their thing that they have to keep it going with these performances? I shut the door and lock it, wait for him to pound on it, wait for party guests to jiggle it, but only the stereo outside shakes the air. I call Gil. I assume by our conversation that I was wrong about our friendship.

The music pounds for a few more hours and then it's just old people's voices in waves of cocky, bitterly entitled and reproachful with

the final drops of a dying culture. I drink another Fat Tire and wander into the short-breathed sleep that soldiers describe.

Then it comes. The failed starter motor in my dream is brass, turns back and forth only five degrees but really fast. It's the doorknob. —Dave,— I try, but no one answers. Another five-degree jiggle, in a thoughtful or habitual pattern. I put my pants on and open the door to her.

—Katie ... you want Dave? That's his room there, between yours and mine. That one. Don't you see? Look for me ... I dunno how to help you.

Behind her bathrobed back there's a racket from behind Dave's door. I listen for a few seconds, embarrassed, but then in the infinite symphony of female sex voices there comes an unmistakable ow that doesn't belong. —I dunno, Katie. Why don't we go to bed?

Standing, breathing, feel like weights pulling on my lungs. Exhausted, I shut the door gently right in her face, wait for the doorknob again, my jaw sore from gritting my teeth, but it's silent.

Elena's text came yesterday. I got this close to asking Pereira to rent me his other car, but I pussied out and rented a little Nissan from the airport.

Some family member of I'm not sure whom showed up this morning and they started moving stuff out of the driveway, the Acclaim first, so I loaded my tent in the Nissan's trunk. I bought the only garbage bags in the house anyway, so I put a bunch down in the backseat where I stashed my bike with the wheels off.

It was easier on the nerves but you're not supposed to rent a car for a day. Again, something to chew on besides think about whether the clinic'll let me in at ten. I left nice and early, and coming to the peak of 280 there downtown, the huge copper moon set over the dusty patch of the Permanente mine in the metamorphic October west. Through 19th Avenue and up over the Presidio onto the bridge without a holdup.

By the 19th Avenue exit my head had loosened up and it occurred to me to rent the damn thing for the four days and do all the things I haven't done in three years since I've been car-clean, but then what would I do now? My shit has nowhere to be but in storage or Katie's garage.

Right around 19th Avenue I also finally finished a good hard listen to *The Emancipation Procrastination*, so I'm all current with the three "centennial" records. When that sax comes in on the first track, right about when you're getting on 280 in San José where no one knows how to merge, the sax says whatever you're going through, something even weirder is happening right behind your peripheral vision. Right or left eye? Not both. This record betrays how everyone intelligent that's my age really loves Radiohead.

Something to think of besides how I'm about to try this handdrawn crappy spelling board on Dad, how apparently the nurses haven't figured one out. Besides my imagination of his inner monologue, terror of death, of his displaced disappointment, of losing track of past time now that each minute is probably counted.

I stop at the lookout on the north end of the Golden Gate just because I never have, and send Chava and my old guy Merry-o a photo. Oh, should tell the guys about my negative test, too.

The sun is still so low over the Oakland hills that I can't even get Alcatraz or North Beach with my phone camera, just the bridge right of a liquid gold flash. A college-age couple is out for an early bike ride and have no idea what's out beyond their time together, the bay's expanse a flat prettiness that both enfolds them and stays absolutely away, the snacks and drinks they bought something they call up from outside of each other, but governed by trash physics never to really be there the way each of them is.

I get to Cotati less than ninety minutes from home and hit 116. Long flat slices of October shade slap down on the quartz road over trees and structures, each one a refreshing cold bath. By Sebastopol *Fear Inoculum* is over and it's just the new-car smell flaking off of me in the freezing parking lot. What's in my pocket. A note to mail something to Dad. What the hell would I mail him. Now to find the front door behind these spiky sweetgums and see how alive he is.

Above the heavy N95 nozzle Elena's let her short hair go gray. She's got a stack of posterboards pinched at her side, one set of their corners steadied in the toe of her shoe, and I nod at them, but she just looks embarrassed at the sliding door. I try to hide shudders by hopping foot to foot. —I don't know why I'm so nervous.

—Me too. It's cold!— her voice is compassionate.

—Yeah, finally got cold.

—You been to Sebastopol before?

—No, just through on the way to the river.

Her crinkly eyes smile at me but we don't hug, who knows if she's gone as long as I have since hugging someone.

I'm honest when I say I don't know why I'm nervous, but after saying it out loud, the nerves start to make a case for theirself. As with

the awkward Messenger video chats with Dad, we're only supposed to encourage him, so he doesn't get worse. That leaves me with about nothing to say, not from my end, not from his.

So I'm nervous because I'm not an actor, and because I know it's probably too late to ever talk meaningfully with him, no more chances to avoid demanding respect, or resign in frustration.

The lady has appeared from beneath the glass and shouldered aside the sliding door before I see the paper bat and realize that it's Halloween.

—Good morning. So I'm Elena, the next of kin,— they're apparently fiancés as of when Elena took my dad back in May, so that's as far as the file says from the previous hospital, —and this is his son, Gilbert.— Elena's a nice lady in person, always has been these past five years.

The lady triggers the electronic thermometer at our foreheads. —Do you have any symptoms such as headaches, soreness, fatigue,

—Yeah, but not cuzza that!— Elena and I stammer it out at the same time, and even the lady's masked brow smiles. —It's good you came. Of course the patients do better when they get visitors. Have you come far?

—San José.

—Visalia.

—San José's not too bad. And he's here because ... ?

—VA coverage.— I want to add in, or else he'd be dead. —He was in the navy in Vietnam.

—I see. But he's receiving what treatment?— she doesn't need to know, but I took her question so wrong that I guess she needs to salvage it. —IVIG and physical therapy for Guillain-Barré.— Elena's voice has a

warm ambiguous far-west drawl, like she's from California but her parents weren't. Her eyes glitter faintly behind heavy mascara and age.

The lady doesn't make me leave. We follow her in and have to put on purple latex gloves and shitty yellow tulle gowns like we're going in a gift bag. Wonder if Dad'll even recognize us. If you want to really trash the planet and drive species extinct, use hospitals, airports and hotels. Everything thrown away, even the needle steel, I think.

All the texts I've got from Elena now mash together in my head, and I want to ask everything at once, then for a moment I tense up anticipating Dad's state, and maybe his disappointment with me even though I can't visit. But once we step into the room it's all moment by moment.

—Frank? ... Frank? Are you awake? Look, Frank, it's Elena and Gil here to see you! Judy's on her rounds, she'll come soon, okay?

We thank her and Elena dumps the new posters against the wall beneath the ones he already has, and posts up at his right, between him and the window. Starts saying stuff to him right away, fumbling for a remote to get Discovery down under her own voice.

He looks at me and I think he tries to do his eye-popping head movement of surprise or approval that he used to do when I was a kid, but it doesn't work. The jaw is I guess halfway up the scale of stuck open, based on watching him mouth words, but the lips just don't close enough to read them. A knotted wad of bandage hangs disused from a rod mounted and extended above his head. Behind his two-day beard his tongue is dry, on the right upper side of which stands a thick adipose chicharrón, I didn't know spit could harden, can't be a tumor.

—Good to see you, Dad.— I think that's what I say, my memory goes blank as soon as I speak, that sweaty defense against what, shame

and desperation each to the level of solubility. I'm pretty sure my voice creaked and perished against the mask. —Did you go outside for physical therapy today?

Shoulders, chin and narrowed eyes shake no, lips approximate. Across his sweatpolished permanent sunburn wobbles the ventilator tube.

—Are you still warm? They got the air on in here.— It's almost as cold in here as Halloween morning outside. He mouths yeah. Low-grade fever? I pace to hide my shudders.

His arms lay inert at his sides, the skin means something that it otherwise never did, a drift of mud accreted in the shape of the last rain. The idea of his muscles hardening like hams, from the text message, completely envelops his limbs' meaning before my eyes can finish seeing them. Long wavy nails and big skin flakes stand out from the yellowed wrenchturning fingertips I've always known. A human tree just dead enough to attract carpenter ants.

—Your mouth feeling better today, Frank?— I know Elena hasn't seen him in person in a month neither, but she has this maternal encouraging thing, probably a loop she's been on for three months. —The sheet up to here, right, Frank?

—Can you hear me alright with the mask, Dad?— And by extension, does he understand her. —Seems like I'm not underemployed anymore, Dad, work's going good,

—You're tryin real hard to move your top, arncha? And keep smiling.— These leading questions, that's her idea of encouragement. To me: —The nurses say he's their favorite. He's just got the best smile.

—Can you feel your hands, Dad?— I'm trying to ask him other yes-no questions, get deeper into his situation, to establish that I am



listening to him, but she just keeps on. And in his state he can't keep up with both of us. I stop talking again.

—You're gonna get better and come home, arncha, hon?

Anger erodes at the shame and panic, and all three crumble away as I go into work-mode. I've got a job to do here. Cheer up Dad. Divide it into doable tasks and proceed.

—Your hair looks good longer. Your jaw doesn't hurt? Is it more like pins and needles in your hands or nothing at all?— I take hold of his hand in my purple latex glove, stroke my thumb over his adductor pollicis. The blade of his tongue stands up to me behind worn yellow teeth, but his lips don't deliver.

—You gonna breathe real deep for me, Frank? You gonna beat that pneumonia finally, sweetie?

He can't even feel me hold his hand. I switch with ashamed speed to squeezing his shoulder.

—You don't wanna give up, right Frank?— I freeze at the confrontation in the question. She gets right to it, doesn't she. But his next response-movement is unclear. My glove leaps off him again, strokes his hair, but gently, so the latex doesn't pull.

—When's the nurses come by?

—Judy said she gives him medicine after breakfast.— This comes out like a desperately outflung datum from her endless requests to the hospitals, not necessarily the right one.

—Does he have anything to read?— Elena's exhausted eyes look like I'm nuts. Her loop of questions has stopped.

—Look,— I bring the paper out of my pocket and unfold it, —I brought you a spelling board, Dad. So we can get things clear for you. See how it works? There's yes, no, repeat. See how the rows are number

one two three four five? That way we can narrow the letters down to what row. Wanna try a few things?

Either he isn't into it and doesn't say, or he just blanks out. When his eyes come back to me it's like he's started the moment over again. I thought this was going better over the Facebook the other day. Why is nothing connecting now?

I guess Elena sees it, or she has great timing, because just then her hand goes into a bag I didn't notice outside. —I brought you something to play!— and the wood rolls knocking down her drawl right into my hands.

I know how to play ukulele? I set the paper down, babble stupidly finding which pair of strings has the fourth so I can at least do major and minor third shapes. Oh, it's out of tune from travel, just give it a fourth. Almost drop the mauve little bastard. My dad's seen me trembling down to my knees this entire time, hasn't he.

Now if there were just a safe place in my mind or body to find something to play. Something he'd know. I have no idea. Eighteen angry years of light rock less talk when I went in his musty garage. What did he hear around his time in the service?

—Just about a year ago, I set out on the road ... — This way I'll see if he has a sense of humor about being stuck somewhere. His face works ambiguously, teeth bare, maybe some rhythmic nodding. —Oh lord, stuck in Lodi again.— I find the guitar turnaround on the fourth. *Suavecito* would be ideal but I'll have to breathe deep and find it.

I don't want the obligation to perform. I pace a few minutes while Elena fusses. My routines have been for throwing days away fast, shorten my own life to shorten Dad's situation, the quarantine, before it all overtakes me. Now I have to sustain the time, fill up the space. He

might think we have nothing to say from being quarantined, or he may think we're freaked because hospital visits always suck.

—When I was in El Ay I found some good pentatonic licks,— I strum D and G minor sevens followed by A and B flat majors in samba, then switch to picking just the pentas, down from the first string, pinky-pointer, middle-pointer, ring-pointer, ring-pointer, pinky-pointer. Fingers find a major fifth penta, short short long long short short. That fills in some time, has a variety of feelings in the licks, and Elena's eyes smile in approval above her mask, though I can barely fret the ukulele in these disposable purple gloves.

Flashes of the nineties from now, here on the indifferent far side of rock and roll's death: why is there no singer, is this Hispanick music, I don't listen to instrumental or classical music. Will they kick me out if the gloves split on the frets? The outlines of my face and my eyeballs fry in sweat again. If it's the last time someone plays him live music, it's a pretty lame show.

The defensive sweat won't go away, won't let me work. Having to be positive, without the relationship to say anything deeper, is enough like when I used to have to be myself despite Dad's readiness to disrespect me when he took anything in the world personally. When something his wives did to him came near enough to his attention and he decided to hit it all away onto me.

Wanting to ask him if he's scared of the deprivation of his body, if he's scared to die, if he has things he must say to me before it's too late, is nervy enough like having to stand there and take it from him, not back down like my mom would. But we all know he never had important things to say like that. Here he is, in his moment, in his mood.

And now it's irritating for me, because I'm the one with the voice, and I'd like to drop encouragement in favor of more truthful questions, but there I go again. That's what I think should be here, not what is really here. Maybe behind his blindfolded tongue there's nothing, just dope reverie. I guess it's having to perform for or with Elena that's got my head turned around. My own unfulfilled needs balloon outward from inside me, pushing out my eyeballs, teeth and hair follicles, wanting to avoid the present.

When I first introduced Liset to him ten years ago and he doesn't ask her a single question the whole time on his termite-eaten porch, but then rants at her that when the police tell you to stop occupying a park, you gotta get the fuck out! I'm still ready for him to do that now, when he suddenly sits up again and twitches his elbow hopelessly, and he lapses back forward in time to too old and tired for anger. The pulling in my strained right hip, feeling of blood leaking out when moved wrong, has begun to pull on the wish that Dad were dead already, rather than this.

Elena does her cajoling leading-question routine again for a while. I feel like we need to get to business, she and I. Do we let him live like this?

—I haven't given up on the spelling board, dad, if you're into it ... here, why don't we try.— The ukulele goes under his bed. This is my version of being hopeful, forcing an adaptation. I want something simple like what day is it, but it's too scary. —Do you wanna spell out Elena's name just to get used to it? Which row?

I start doing the rows, the letters, but he either quits and reboots his attention span from nothing, or he jerks a finger hopefully just once, or his head movements punctuated by incomplete mouth articulations are

impossible to judge. We start and stop, or I check to see if he's restarting or continuing. My stomach acid, chest muscles and eyeball-adrenaline have slowly condensed into a sternum spur that pokes at my heart and lung, and I have to stop. I wasn't paying attention to it, but I've been hardening in anticipation, believing that Dad too was getting invested, that later he was quitting in frustration. Maybe the whole time he was telling me not to bother. How can I know besides asking him point-blank without a shell of positivity?

The nurse finally comes in, says some routine lines to him, doesn't answer my question about spelling boards or questioning methods, gives me an indifferent response about the bed sore, and then exits. I can't be mad at her, she's totally busy.

Outside this jean shirt was too cold, but now it's stifling. —When's the doctor ever come in?

—He's sposed to be here, I can check,— volunteers the nurse from the foyer, but what she finds out comes after her entire next cycle. I watch her leave and speak across Dad to Elena, October morning glowing on daylilies out the window behind her. —I thought you said you hadda appointment with the doctor while we're here.

—They said he was coming in at eleven. Whatta you wanna know?— Again, a turn on her exhausting wheel of information, not a defense to me.

—I just wanna hear it from him, in one story, yknow? Where he's at and what we can do for him. Dad, do the IVIG treatments wear you out or make you hot?— Need to ask him one question at a time. —How do you feel when you get the treatments? Wanna show me on the spelling board? I'm gonna point, you just nod when it's right. I'll go slow.

He starts to, but then turns his head and looks at Elena, like they've arranged for her to know his mind. —Dad, I'll ask the doctor to make sure to write everything,— and I just lose control of my neck and head. Tears pour down under my mask, which hides how much my mouth twists open, but which doesn't hide the croak from the bottom of my neck. Me failing to help him, crying over my wall.

I look at him and his brows do an arched what's-wrong frown, and this questioning gesture, like he doesn't know how fucked he is, or how many feelings I'm tangled in, or somehow me breaking down is inappropriate, drives me again to defense, I splutter something stupid like —it's alright, it's me ... I haven't been able to let it all out ... — hiding from him once again behind humiliation. I don't remember how Elena reacts.

Nor do I know what happened for another hour after that, except no doctor ever. But I lasted three hours and then halfway past one in the afternoon his care schedule and our tenuous welcome in the place seemed to move on. I played the goodguy of my thirties and just told him see you soon.

Outside Elena finds some woman and introduces me. —This is Rita, she's driving me back. You know my eyes aren't that good.

—Nice to meet you, Gil,— Rita's just another overweight fish-skinned gringa in a pantsuit.

—Thanks for driving her,— the goodguy says, easy.

—We've been friends for a long, long time, haven't we Rita?— So maybe the tortuous leading questions from inside Dad's room are just a greater style for Elena. I must've missed it before. We don't have much more to say, and I don't want to ask her the important things with her friend there, so we promise to text when we get home safe.

The one-sided abject failure of the spelling board, getting nowhere with Dad, desisting with the questions, squeezes high-frequency and rotten-citrus from my elbow joints. Finality farts down from under my armpit, a gas-spot that apparently doesn't exist before one's mid-thirties, into my small intestine. Need to stand up.

Up a half mile into town and around the corner I find the Community Market and buy bags of goodies in bulk. Coconut date bars, sesame sticks, a huge cucumber to chew on. I should've pissed in the hospital. My body's just unclenching slightly with the walk through the aisles, covered now in needs and aches. There's a good bathroom with a good bulletin board.

Once more in the car, maybe I should've kept strolling for like, twelve hours more, then my body really starts to freak, throat and mouth twisting on empty sobs, back spasms, knees jerk, shoulders jackhammer, orbicularis oculi stand on tiptoe, inverted eyelashes in my pupils like fingernails. My body convulses against the tension forcing the situation to work, holding Dad's happiness, Elena's happiness, Liset's happiness, in my hands, my body wants them gone, a shell so thick that a breakdown inside it feels selfish. I want this to be final, to direct me, but it's not time, nothing to do but hang on.

When I reach the livestock wastes on the way to Cotati, the physical closeness to Elena and Dad has put the text messages into perspective. I know that our micro-snippy texts were about stress, confusion, grief. I know her good intentions are fried from advocating for Dad pretty much daily, wrestling the VA between the walls of insurance and quarantine, meekly begging uninformed doctors for attention. When she says that the nurses say he has the best smile, imagine how much of her own life is flying away before her eyes.

I don't want to go back to San José but I don't want to spend a bunch of money on what, enormous forty-ounce emergency-legalized take-out containers of isolation panty-droppers. Wonder how long those will last once the vaccine is out. Never thought I'd live to see the straight community behind the wheel of their Priuses, digging into margarita big-gulps from bars. Newsom takes care of his liquor-store-empire pimps that got him all his elections.

In Cotati I stop for gas and a bomber of Sierra, because they'll be twice as much at the water, and go pee. Gnawing on the cucumber and chewing sesame sticks, I hit Sausalito just to see the bay, the indifferent blue sky, the earnest brow of Oakland watching the cancer of San Francisco grow in the water.

I think of those two kids off the Golden Gate this cool windy morning, or myself with Liset in that time, how the world outside that desire for connection peels away from consciousness and disintegrates, like the morning, like the miles of road. Soon my dad and all the air he ever sucked up might peel away and never have been real, just like that.

What I should do is call Jason like I said I would. He won't mind if I'm a total wreck.

—What's up, you in Earl's Realm already?

—No man,— laughing feels just like crying, my chest is willing,  
—I'm still drivin.

—Stop and have a beer.

—I might.— I crack the beer slowly, separate the sounds, as if he would hear it and get confused. —I'm barely gettin home from Sebastopol, I'm out here by the ferry in Sausalito.

—How's Frank look?

Cold Sierra scrubs copper assurance down my sore chest. —Like



shit, man. I'm not gonna lie, I ... put it this way, I hope somethin happens soon, either better or worse.

—That's tough, brother, I'm sorry.

—Yeah. You gonna rage down for Halloween?

—Nah dude ... Maya's in town, she's got a truck with her boyfriend.

—Howbout that. She's studying nursing with a boyfriend inner truck? I mean, you know what I mean!

—Yeah yeah, she's doin real good, I guess. She's steady in school even with the travelin.

—Yeah, so my dad's stuck there, he's like a slab of bacon. His attitude seems good but who knows if that's cause he's on, like, opiates. Yeah, while I was drivin, weird stuff started comin to me, like the first time he called my mom your mom steada just mom, how he's always been separatin me and him. So, I guess what I'm sayin is, the relationship's just not there for me to comfortim.

—Yeah ... — Jason's pause is an acceptance, an assurance.

—Like I'm still operating on how if I try, and say somethin he doesn't like, he's gonna blow up at me, total lack of recognition that I'm tryin to helpim ... yeah but then, now he's too old and tame to get upset about stuff. I mean he has been.

Jason pauses. —Yeah, I guess when my dad was goin down, it wasn't that different. You got all yer habits and expectations, but then there's just nothin but you annis pride.

—That's for sure. Well, I ain't got nothing to do, no reason to rush home. I asked my guy at work if he knew of a nicer place for me, but I don't think he'll get back to me today. Shame I'm doin this drive alone, and for this reason. I really do like the drive. This guy Sean from school

first told me about this area cause further ahead in Guernville apparently there's this famous gay bar on the Russian River, and he really wanted to go. To say nothing of Bohemian Grove.

I catch myself recalling all this like I'm running some personal inventory, and I don't like it. It's like I'm the one that could die sooner than later. But maybe Dad's lesson is that I'm supposed to cycle through everything, so that when I do go, I'll let go and just be present for it.

—So his girlfriend just got back to my text message. I mean, I thought we were comin up here today to see if we hadda unplug him. But it was like the opposite. She says, of course as soon as we left, the doctor showed. That's just twunny-twunny, ain't it? Nothin happens while you're there, then everyone decides the future without you while you're isolated.

—What'd they say?

—She says somehow the doctor got Frank to nod that he still wanted to live. Like, nod his head. Which is fine, it's still in his hands, even if he's doped. But he does have a DNR.

—Oh does he?

—Yeah, I signed it, like, five years ago now.

—You talked to ... damn, whatser name,

—No, I'm sure Liset doesn't know I'm back up here. I imagine she's got a fiancé ... Hey man, I'll catcha later, you enjoy every minute with Maya while you gotter. Teller I said hi.

—For sure.

Earl's Realm. He cracks me up. I wonder if he and his brothers still use that one on the regular basis. I can't sit still even to enjoy the view of the bay, the bomber of Sierra dries out and stops me pacing. Drive up

and down Sausalito's ridiculous hills and tasteless houses, its juniper, pine and cypress that I've idealized since I was a child.

Laughter, routine. Maybe hearing Christian Scott again will close the book of this day. I'm annoyed at his label and Kamasi's label for fighting over the stupid 'future of jazz' tagline for them both, sticking it all over the internet and posters and whatnot. It's totally not what real music fans give a shit about, disappointing marketing crap. What about Miguel Zenón, Akinmusire, Nubya García, Esperanza Spalding? Robert Glasper, even though I'm annoyed at him for starting forty minutes late at the San José Jazz Fest not once but both his sets. What's the requirement for being the future of jazz? The future of something has nothing to do with one person involved in it, that's messianic Disney, Star Wars, indoctrinated into fatalism, crap.

I try a Gustavo Cerati album from the library, but it's a glorified demo. Two tunes go by and I haven't heard a note. Time to cross the bridge and find something to do. The foggrimmed city is a ghost town except for Ubers and Amazons and Virtual Black Rock City assholes on scooters.

I go down unhurried over Crystal Springs and take One home. In San Gregorio the store is open with the mask mandate and hand sanitizer. Used to see Mammatius play in that broken-down garage across the road. Being here, a stinging field of finality arcs through me again. One more place Dad is finished visiting.

I wind down 84, see the sun set at my right over the wild green back of Portola Valley, into Woodside and dump myself back into the banal evil of 280. At that one hill back of Palo Alto the canopy of buckeyes stands naked to its balls. It's quiet but not dead, crowds up where 85 exits and then quiet again until Santa Clara. It's almost seven now,

blue-dark. While I was on the roaming-phone coast, Chava got back to me on the text message. What does he mean there's a party going on? Being facetious, question mark. No response.

Merge with the last-seconders onto 87, almost don't notice the phone ringing. —Dave.

—Gil. Where are you?

—Somewhere yer not, man. ¿Qué tranza?

—You comin to the halse tonight?

—Was plannin on it. What's all this about a party? ... Chava said.

—Chava said? That's white on rice, Gil? I gave you a chance! That's why I'n callin you now, to tal you I'll check you on the stories you got!

—To be precise, it was a text message, and I didn't answer it, so,

—Butchou implied, Gil! ... Listen. You guys're fuckin up the halse, I need to have the space empty so's I can take inventory on what you did.

—Did? You're gettin space by throwin a party?

—I'n missin keys, I'n missin some shit I had in a closet, you got towels all over the place,

—Whoa, whoa there, Tiger, I don't know nothing about a closet or towels, and I already told you I haven't seen any keys.

—Wal, you shoulda been lookin out for shit, in yer surroundings, like I told you to the other night, steada yer imaginationary opinions, Gil! It's priorities! After last night I was cleanin up and I see this inventory of missing shit,

—Maybe you set it aside makin yer cat trap last night?

—I don't make the cats crap!

—Trap, man, I said ... can you hear me?— I love how break-down-level fights just have to stop to see if we can hear over wireless technology. —I hear you!

—The cat trap, dude, the suitcase. Sure you didn't make the mess yourself?

—Now there's a broken window inna kitchen! Hello?— I make him wait. —I dunno, Dave.

—Yeah, you dunno. You don't use the halse, you don't go inside, right!

—Hey, you did listen to me, I feel better! I'm just not in this, man. How's Katie doin'?

—I'n payin real rent here, and I been livin with her just fine, and I don't need you to aks me if what yer doin to this halse is causin Me to hafta estplain to Her which fuckin pipe anything goes down! I'n here keepin priorities on what stories I gotta keep straight thanks to fuckin people like you, me who's been totally honest, so thanks for the kick inna balls!

If he's at a party, he's bumming it out. —Yknow what, Dave, you ain't gotta worry about me. Yknow, it's a little jarring of a transition for me, from seeing no one and having fun's banned, to going through hospital safety and then end up in a jammed houseparty,

—I dunno nothing about no transition. I dunno about yer elitist self-sabotaging behavior.

—I'll trickertreat until real late, howbout that?— Dipshit. That'll get me off worrying about my dad. Maybe I'd better find a restaurant where I can at least sit outside, try to work around him with Chava. The road finally ends, I find La Ceiba open, and hide in a dark corner.

—Hey. Gil here. What's this party shit about? I saw this morning someone was moving stuff,

—That's what I'm tellin you, Gil!— Chava whispers, —can you hear the music?

—No. Djou check with Brian?

—Not yet. Look, did you find a statue in the house? Or the garage?

—What? Statue? How,

—Listen, Gil, I thought you were gonna help me with Dave! He's pretty much violating my privacy, and our deal about the room.

—So evoke the contract, dude. That's yer right.

—Gil! That's not what I'm ... can you callim? I don't know if he's told people I'm stayin here or if someone's gonna break in so they can sleep it off in my room, or what.

—Put a sign on yer doorknob ... — sometimes he's like an unprepared kid, —How can that not be what yer talkin about? You have a contract,

—You said you can see what he's up to. Why doncha take a look tonight? I mean I don't think he'll listen to me, and I could use your help, cause you're in this situation, too, and when I tried to ask you just now, you changed the subject.

—No subject, Chava, you've got a deal! You've got a room to protect. So protect it! Now look. He's on me about some broken glass in the window in the kitchen and so forth. Are you involved in that?

—Yeah, no, but he tried to put it on me, too. But I,

—He's tryna manipulate us into blaming each other for when he gets wasted and loses shit!

—I saw. When he talks to me, he's covering up for something. We gotta say something back!

—So say something, push back.

—Fine. I'll talk to him myself. You should know, he wants us gone.

—He's made that clear, dude. But he'll hafta wait till my rent burns up.

—If he's even putting your rent on the house and not innis pocket.

—Kay, I'm gonna go trickertreat.

These people are going to drive me nuts. Brian wonders why we can't get in a groove. I order a second beer. Shut my eyes to test for road objects streaming past my vision, like in Pereira's car, but this time nothing.

I was too hard on Chava. I should've learned with Brian the other night. If it's a party, Dave is probably two schlitz shits to the wind, beyond what Chava can deal with. I pay and take a nap in the scratchy frontseat, bolt upright away from my bike in the backseat.

About two in the morning the street's deserted, if there ever were trickertreaters. There's a parking spot on the curb for the rental, probably a first in six months. The Acclaim and the van are still somewhere else, there's this trampoline standing in the house's driveway surrounded by drink cups and candywrappers, and I have to evacuate the day's terror from my bowels.

At eye level next to the trampoline there's a broken pane in the kitchen window, alright, and it appears two kittens have already fallen to their deaths from it, shitting themselves on impact. The laundry-room door is unlocked.

I creep through the night over a loud floorboard to the bathroom door. I slide my hand to the left of the door, like I always do, to flick on the light, and with my left eye I catch half of Katie, naked on the toilet.

Doesn't make a sound, but the hair I can see turns away as her face  
must turn toward me. I run away clutching my guts shut until dawn.



*sbtish**sbtash*

en taker back to the house! Just gimme today to see what's happening.

And my workout shoes were just here, where ya think those went?

I think it's totally possible you puttem somewhere else. Didjou look by the backdoor?

The backdoor? You know it was her, she started fidgeting soon as you brought her in the house! God knows, make sure you keep yer keys and yer phone on you!

We'll just hafta watcher. She's not ginna break anything, so just relax. I'n stayin with her. I dunno what the hell's been goin on at the house but Dave's just galavanting like she still does his laundry forim. Here's a warm towel, Kate. You sleep good? I'm pretty sure you were asleep when I left the room last night. How long you been awake already? Gahead, wipe your face with it, while it's warm. Here, I'll, hold still, let me. No? Fine.

*sbtashtish*

Hey, the blinds're fine, look, they're clean, leavem alone. Just sit. I'll make coffee. Do you wanna watch TV? We got just about all the ... hey, where's the remote here in, uh, the den?

The what?

The remote! For the TV! Alexa, where's the TV remote? ...  
Nothing?

It doesn't work like that! Hang on a minute, I'm trackin a packa

*mp mp mp mp mp mp*

Djou find it? Here, move the DVDs. Look! You never look behind anything. Here, Kate. You member me? I'm ... Gloria ... your ... sister-in-law! Nashe doish!

Jesus Christ, she knows who you are.

So only you can diagnoser? Wouldn't it be useful if we used me to find out, too? Kate, here, lookit me, Katie. If you remember who I am, put up two fingers. Will you do that for me, Katie?

Be patient.

Be patient? Which one of us hadda be convinced I could do it at all? Kate, are you ginna do it with me, you ginna raise your fingers or no? Tellya what, let's start over. If you remember me, Gloria, put up two fingers like that. But if you don't, just put your hand, like, closed, but still up. Okay?

You wanna do it with us, Kate? Maybe she doesn't know ... how the hell're we sposed to find out?

Did you ask Dave if they talk?

No! Like I said, he dumped her on me last night in the middle of the party and took off like he hadda hot date!

Jesus, Manny.

This is's much as I can do, is just watch and try a few things, okay? I'll do more when I know more. Don't rush me. You didn't even wanter here.

That's not true, honey, look, Manny didn't mean that. I'm just as worried as he is. We don't know, we dunno what to do. You gotta tell us if you can unnerstand us! ... Jesus, Manny.

Yer askinner like ten things at once! Don't cry, you'll upsetter.

*mp mp mp mp*

Arhhh, porra! You're such a,

Go calm down, yer killin me ... that's fine, Katie. Here, forget it, jist, here's the remote. Yeah, jist surf till you find something. I'n jist ginna get you somethin to drink. You like coffee?

As a talkin bucket a KFC, dinnertime is my including Japan. Today Conan enjoys get to the bottom of an age-old parlor trick: that only a strongman can tear a phonebook in half. But first he invited some familiar faces from M7 to grapple with the original myth. I have something fun designer accessories, offering versatility to your wardrobe, this leather handbag collection by Mark Jacobs features two totes, two cross-body bags,

Here, Kate, have some coffee ... you like it? Cheers. So I was thinkin today we'd look at some pictures a Tony I have here, maybe you can tell me what you were doin in those pictures, who the other people are. I guess they're either from Pleasanton or Paso, I dinno where else it'd be, or Hot August Nights, nothing's got dates on it, Katie! You liked those shows in Paso we useta go to with Tony? Are you okay, isn't the coffee good? Why're you crying? Doncha like it? You want me to ... just set it there if you don't like it. Why doncha tell me what you think? ... Yknow, I think you can, Kate, you just don't wanna.

Yer ginna hafta maker go to the bathroom. Why doncha now, before she drinks that coffee.

What're you talkin about?

If you maker go to the bathroom and she does, that's yer answer.

Where'd you get that, Facebook? Why're you cryin, Kate? Is it cuzza the pictures?

It's called Web MD, Manny, don't be a,

Right now it's tough because we have one out of sixteen. But we'll let you get rid of half the boxes at a time. I hope you do get down to two boxes, cause today is Dream Car Week, we have a little extra some possible Whopper. I think you'll be surprised. This is good. It's two for six.

Okay. Here, you wanna keep surfen channels, or? Hey. Hey Kate. Why doncha get up, here, lemme take yer hand. Gimme yer hand. Gimme yer hand, Katie, I know you can hear me! Let's get up and you can go to the bathroom. Cmon, just,

*chtihtat chittipit                      tnatt*

Here, I'll put the blinds up. You wanna see out?

*tiktiktik thbbbnit*

Yeah, that's Trina. She's twelve now. You can walker when the girls come over. Wouldn't that be nice, stretch yer legs? Okay. Cmon, let's go to the bathroom. I'nginna give you some new clothes, too.

And those slippers! Isat what she came in?

It's all what she came in. Just the slippers, yeah, no shoes.

I got some slippers you can have, honey. Manny, just throw those out.

Then we'll see those photos, okay? Here, just leave the coffee. If you go fast, it'll still be hot. I can nuke it again. I'nginna knock onna door in a minute, and that'll be me with the new clothes, okay?

I dunno what photos yer talkin about. There's no pictures of Tony in the ipad.

I'ntalkin about the albums, not the ipad!

Well wheresat?

Just, leave us alone, don't help! You wanna do me a favor?

I guess not, you'll bite my head off.

Cmon, just get on my phone and call Dave, and tellim to stay home.

What if he works? I dunno your phone's password!

Yes you do, it's 1957 just like my ATM pin! Callim, and uh, obviously tellim it's you, and I'm indisposed with his poor mother, and he's gotta stay put, or tell me when he's not at work!

And call a doctor. Wait, don't throw the slippers out, she could get confused! I'll keep the slippers, honey. Find out from Dave if she has a real doctor she sees ... and then call Does and asker what the hell's goin on! ... Go to the bathroom with Manny, Kate. I mean, you know what I mean. Go with. Maybe we shid put makeup on, so we look younger, like she'd remember.

I still look like I did.

Manny, you're such a dumbshit!

—Lo.

—Hey, it's me. Where are you?

—I'm at home, why?

—Nahtscuz, my manager called me this morning.

—What manager? Whadey say?

—My apartment manager. She said,

—On a Sunday?

—She said cause we adopted my friend's cat, it's a violation of the contract, and she doesn't wanna wait for the rent anymore.

—Okay before you cry, step one, I ain't got any money. And ainchou sposeta apply to like, money from the state? Yknow, if you look this stuff up, they're givin free rent out from the state. Must be nice.

—I can't do it! My manager hasta do it, and she said they denied her once, and now she called me cause whatsitcalled, she says the wait time's too long to try again.

—Canchou just ... whattaya mean, why'd they deny her?

—They didn't give a reason!

—She said they didn't give a reason or she didn't tell you a reason?

—I don't wanna fight it, Dave! I can't! Whattem I gonna fucking tal her? Am I gonna taker to court? She just wants the money! What you're sending me is just so I can feed Martina! ... and you know what else, your cousin Imelda texted me this morning cause she went to a party lasnight. Guess where?

—Where?

—Your fucking house, pendejo! ... No answer? ... You coulda invited us,

—I didn't invite you cause I wasn't there.

—So Martina could see her grandmother and trickertreat! And bullshit, Imelda said you were there drinking at least for one part. You don't think it's important for Martina to see her grandmother?

—It's quarantine, no one's goin to see no one.

—So then who were you seeing if you weren't there? You go and fuck someone with a mask on? I can't ... I'm not surprised, but ... I can't,

—Do you needa get to the point now, or call back when you stop crying?

—Fnnnnffff. I called you to tal you all this cause I needa just get out of this apartment. I'm gonna apply to a new place, I just need to get her outta my life, and I needa stay there at the halse for a few weeks. Just a few weeks, so Martina can keep logging onto school. I don't have nowhere else, Dave.

—Martina's not ginna have nothing to say to me. I'n not even in her life. The halse'll maker uncomfterble. Yer mom's?

—My sister's quarantining at my mom's! They won't let me come. Cmon, it's been three years, you can stand a few weeks.

—I got people livin with me now. Renting. I needa get them out first ... I even gotta guy inna garage! Everyone wants a slice a the cheese, like this whole neighborhood's not fulla houses. Yknow the guy a block down from me just added another house to the back a his house, why don't I innerduce you.

—When can you have those renters out by? Hello? Can you hear me?

—Can you hear me?

—Don't hang up and pretend it's yer phone! I can pay you rent. Watch, Dave, it's better if I move outta this place and in with you, cause

then I won't hafta pay her what I owe, and then I can pay you, just not ridiculous nineteen-eighty, like I was.

—Look, when I gettem out, it's cause I need time to clean the place up.

—Fine, I'll just go sign up at Family Supportive Housing, even if it the list's a year long, cause I'm not havin Martina fuckin sleeping onna floor at Boccardo.

—What's Boccardo?

—The shelter! If you don't call me, I'll just call back.

These bouncing flight dreams! The nightblue of the fútbol field, Mintie White's smaller one stretching out to become Aromas' bigger one, fenced off by powerlines, I leave my schoolmates and rise from black surface to blue altitude, just pushing the air down under my arms once, a vertical swimming stroke, always dodging the hem of powerlines, sometimes bouncing too high above clouds like holes in the sky, my fall slows right before disaster, a missed toe-knee spring, then coordinated again and up, balanced enough to look down and see only the oaks and cypresses below, not even houses or railroad tracks. Best of all, the wires stretch out into an unlearned horizon, the fall is a bounce back into possibility, the eyes and mind of childhood.

The best dreams I got in my twenties, not lost yet, a nice break from the new dream from my thirties, Dad's house is a mess and I have Liset plus a kid with me and I'm looking for something healthy to feed us but he and his third wife only have bags of dry cereal in the cabinets beneath the stove and Dad doesn't even live here now, he's moved to Visalia, I'm left to figure out the mess under the hopeful and



damningly forgiving gaze of the abandoned dog that only my mom cared about in another lifetime.

My dad's on his feet on the field now, or just his voice, says his bouncing flight has become terrifying since he's lost his body, he says my eyes just watch me shoot up and down, I don't know what's going to happen. He speaks with the voice of a child. When did he speak with such a voice to me in real life?

Maybe it was just a dream where everyone is like a child, me and him equally. That's pretty good, I usually don't dream like that under stress and alcohol. I jump out of the tent containing my cramped bowels. Packing up the garage again in a foggy morning spotlight through the side door's window, feel like hell on schedule, how much of it was yesterday's despair ride, how much just beer in the blood. I should quit, it's a stress behavior now, doesn't make me feel like a rockstar.

Check my phone. How does Elena know for sure, or rather has she asked herself how does the doctor know for sure he got Dad to nod that he does want to still live? I had such a hard time keeping him awake yesterday. Or maybe Dad's attention is so dependent on the doctor that he pays closer attention to him, and to Elena, for instance, than to me, for instance. It adds up. The same probably went for his second and third wives.

I find a text string with my mom and stepdad and tell them Frank looks like shit. Take care of yourselves, drink water. I've been waiting until I had news, and just telling them that much feels less like I'm alone in the middle of this like I was. Yesterday. Inhale until the chest has to loosen, exhale that day to elsewhere.

Enough clean clothes for a few days. The backdoor's unlocked, the laundry room and kitchen showing little evidence of a rager, not like the mess in the driveway. In the kitchen I spy the rental out the window, need to return it. Such a waste of a parking spot. I creep into the relief of the bathroom, swear at my rectum, Katie's ghost from last night impressed on the space.

When I step back out of the shower mist, my left shoulder almost collides with this bald yellow ogre standing there between two bedroom doors. —Gmorning, sunshine, are you our new roommate? Nice Pennelton.— I fumble in my pocket for yesterday's grungy mask, good thing I have it, momentary smell of sesame crackers and hospital.

He gives me a loose-lipped glare that I've only seen before on Star Wars movie aliens, shattered blue glass eyes full of toilet cleaner. A ring of keys turns between his fingertips. He heads me off and I follow him into the living room. The lazyboy is gone, in which spot he sets down on a chair from the kitchen table.

—I'm Bill,— offers I, —what's your name?

He rises, eyeballs me around a facial scar as he passes, and tries a key on Chava's door. —Hey, someone's in there, man, lay off! ... You deaf?— And then pop goes Dave's door, and instead of another lumbering Safeway lunk comes this sleepmatted broad, poor thing thirty going on mentally fifteen, hustles into the living room, lights up a real 120 cigarette, puffs a blond lock up off her eyebrow and everything. The ogre repairs to his chair, and I step in front of the windows to show the way to the door.

—Kay. Say, where's Dave this fine Sunday morning?— The girl's staring at the scarred yellow pumpkin, can't get his attention. Which isn't unusual for any male, but this dude gives me the creeps. —So, last

night was a hell of a party, yknow, six months in the making, but it's time to fuck off unless yer a resident, now, friends. We gotta sweep and mop, yknow, HOA meeting and mindful session before we check our stocks. I'm gonna have *Suavemente* up pretty loud.

—Memo? You gonna gimme a ride to Curtner?— Her voice deflected right out of the house by the pitiless but clean walls. Looks at me, looks at him, takes her cigarette and dips out the front door with her heels still hanging out of her heels.

It's not working on this Memo guy. Saved by a loud plop outside, we both spring to the windows. Dave's got a five-gallon bucket slopped between his expensive pennyloafers there next to the trampoline, gait of a serious hangover. I tap on the glass and he hangs on over into the front door. —The fucker you two doin here?

—We're not together,— I assure him, —he's tryna get into that room. Didn't you say you were missin keys?— In case his brain doesn't register, his eyes follow my thumb. Then he looks at Memo. —Chava's room? What're you doin?

—I wanna stay another night,— slops the ogre, —You said yer gettin these guys outta here.

—We're not ginna be fishin here. I'nginna be catching, Cue-Ball. What's that?— His voice rises two octaves. —Isat my fucking keys?

—Foundem on the windowsill,—

—Wal fucking un-findem! Gimme that!

—I can't stay?— Memo's emphysema monotone cracks, he sounds disappointed. —I got that chick I'm seein. Crown Royal coupon.

Dave's outrage fills hissing around him, like lava makes land in Hawaii. —Crown, yer fuckin the Crown Royal Coupon? Fuck no! Not in this halse! She'll go through every fuckin drawer!

—Ey. Whaddid I do for you just last night, you little pussy? How you wanna pay for that?

Dave drops his voice. —We're talkin about this later.

—Think about it. There's no credit cards here.

—Later. And gimme those fuckin keys. Givem to me, fucknut! I gotta deal with this guy.

Finally the lunk lumbers through the door, slams it just enough, and it's just me and Dave's highbeams waiting for an answer.

—Aincha glad you kept me around to watch out for things?— Maybe my grin draws my mask a little tighter around the nose. —And the keys! All's well that ends well. You calmed down from last night? ... I'll take that as a no. I just came in to get cleaned up. Is Katie awake?— The keys dangle uncomprehended between his greedy grocer fingers, his mute head juts out at me. —You should put a mask on, man. You hadda party here last night, where knows who you been now.

—I wasn't even at the party. I was gettin laid!

He's not going to attack me after this week. I'm not going to be too careful. —A ha. So, what's up with the bucket a water?— He follows me outside until we meet at the bucket. He waves at the party mess. —The driveway ain't gonna clean itself. If the tweekers can cut water daln under the freeway, why shid I pay huge water bills that yer rent doesn't cover?

—Did you lose your job, like they did down under the freeway?

—You say who shits where they eat again, Gil? You tell Mem ... my friend, what to do, you tell me if it's basically not my right to do what bums do?

—What makes you say that?

—You think yer so fuckin funny. Yknow, I only knew about that free waterpipe cause Brian and Chava said when they were getting on my case with the kitchen sink! I guess you all write the law on hal to feel about tweakers, huh fuckin Earl of Pisswipe? Cause I know that was yer Halloween costume.

—I don't really care, Dave. Don't lemme hold you up from mopping. I'm on my way out. Look, where's Katie? She should decide our settlement, right?

—She ain't here!— My eyes go wide without me. —She's okay?

—Visitin family. I couldn't get ridda you two fast enough. She's haddanough.— He breaks off back up the porch and into the house. I follow him and now in the living room we find some other guy, white roots on his goatee, tanned drinker's jowls, polo tucked into bluejeans, retiree sneakers, bald spot, must be family.

—Manual. Did you bring all that food that's in the fridge? ... Was it you?— Me and apparently Manual each take a turn shaking our heads. —Yknow I work in a groshry store, tchíu, I can handle havin food in the house ... Where's Mom?

More parts of my head go wide without me. —Mom?

—She's at my house yet,— says Manual, I think it's Manuel, but whatever. —I needa get into her room, Dave. Do you have the keys? I guess she's done with havin the responsibility for keys.

In his voice, the same finality as in my head. Dave looks off into space, then finds just the keys between his fingers. He hands them to Manuel and makes sure to lead the charge into Katie's room for just a moment. I'm still going oh and oh yeah when Manuel steps back out with an armload of clothes. With his free arm he holds a stack of folded things out to Dave. —What's with these?

—The towels? They, they go inna kitchen. She musta been washin them again.

—She washesem?

—Yeah.

The uncle gives me an impatient look. —Excuse us.

—Not at all,— I smile, —I really have some rental business with Dave, in fact I guess it might concern Katie, as of this morning, or else I'd,

—You hadda hard time with her last night, at bedtime?— Dave asks, and exhaustion rings the uncle's eyes just to recall it. —No, it just took a long time. Dave, how long has she been ... at this point?— A silence that I'd hate to occupy. —Doncha know?

—What parta this point?

—What's it matter, Dave? Any part! Is this how you and her deal with what's left undone with your dad?

—Oh, my dad and me were cool! We were the only two people understood each other!

—What else kind of care do you think she needs?— slips out of me, —is she done with menopause?

—You're fuckin done with mentalpause! But my dad and me were tight when he died. I moved back in cause I toldim I'd take care a her.— Like his dad died in his arms in Vietnam.

—Really. So, as hard as it is to get used to this, I'n gonna keep her at our place for a couple days, until we know what the hell kinda lifestyle she's been having, and what we can do for her. And I called Does before I came, too.

—Fine.

—It's not fine.— Spoken like he knows that no one's put a foot down with Dave for a long time. —You're forty-one years old, Dave, you deal with the things around you. I brought some family over last night so people I could trust could lookit the house. Does is onboard with it.

—Onboard with ... !

—And I'm glad I did, cause your mom can't stay here.— He looks at me, —And you might as well know, too, if you're renting here. This place'll pay for real treatment, for a while.— He pinches the bridge of his nose. —I don't wanna think about what chances my sister may've lost from you avoiding this.

—Avoid?— Dave shudders. —Where the fuck You been, if you knew it was a problem?

—I was quarantined, Dave! Gloria wouldn't let me go to the god damn groshry store morn once every two weeks! I've had my whole life's freedom taken away, and couldn't endanger your mom more than anyone else!

—And I handled it, all of it! Didn't I?

—Anna last time I saw your mom in person, she talked, Dave. She talked! You said on the phone, no change.— Dave flexes his elbow, looks away, Manuel steps to follow his face. —This needed to be communicated!

Where he'd pop at me or Chava, now Dave's real hesitant. He's forty-one! I'm not ashamed of my life anymore. —Don't criticize me. My guy in Oakland's livin like this, too.

—That's great.— Manuel gives me another emphatic look and I grin apologetically. —Sorry, I'm not listening.

—Sure,— sighs the uncle, morning light creeping around the windows onto his aging nose, gives the house one of those all-encircling looks that people have once they've owned private property, all plans, makes you wonder if slaveholders had that look, —kind of a shaky rental situation.

Dave throws that one up to me, one last shield. —So's you can see, Gil, like I said, we need space during this time.

Oh, during this time, how nine-eleven. —It's fine. Just gimme my rent back minus ten days.

—Yer rent?— the prediabetic rocket launches an inch again on his toes.

—Yeah. My rent. No stay, no rent. Sorry to bring this up now, tío. Relax, I'll take a check from Katie. That's the right way to do things, ain't it?

—You ... ! You ... !

Manuel gives me a look that invites, with conditions. —Dave, you'd better call me once you're through withim.

We're outside again. I show Dave that the garage is in strapping order.

—Better than the situation I got inside with Fryan and Chava. They jist thought my mom's ginna die soon, and just move shit around as they please. They don't have the planning that went into that lazyboy and all those moves that I made, with My resources.

—See, man, that's what you gotta do, is just say what you mean. You keep throwin up these hieroglyphics for us to guess about, touched by an angel and stuff,

—Joke's fuckin on them! Now some fuckin cousin's gonna end up my landlord, or some fuckin Chinese investor with cash!— That's



adorable how he moves to commiserate with me simply because he can't bully me. As if I don't know that one.

—Yep. So what, you gonna keep the trampoline? I ain't been on one of these since I was fourteen.

—Jump on it. Gahead. Before you leave. It's good for yer equilibrium, Gil!

—That's no joke, Dave! I'm surprised you weren't too fucked up to remember I said that.

Now he's climbed up and bouncing next to me. Not as pleasant as my bounce-flight dream. —I said that! Yer ginna need yer equilibrium when you can't even hold the back of yer couch while yer takin it in the ass at Boccardo!

—I'm not goin to Boccardo, Dave.— We both speak with this goofy pant from the bouncing, knees sore and hips stiff, —I have a job. This town's fascist property lotto's the problem, not me.

The neighborhood bounces in and out of view, rich with avocados, citrus and conifers. The fog's cleared over the observatory's ivory domes out east, and only clings to the pass over Los Gatos out west. These life-changes are all fine, as long as I'm through pretending to be positive. It's going to be a beautiful day for whomever has the time to live it.

—Wait,— stiffens Dave, —yer keys.

—When I get the rent back, man.

—Just,— Dipshit reachers for my pocket while I come up. —Cmon, you don't have a leg to stand on! I ast you for one little thing, to keep an eye out, and you couldn't even do that! You don't prioritize the house, I ain't prioritize the money! We both lose!

—The deal is this, Dave. If you wancher keys back, you can unnerstand how much I want my rent back. I'm just proposing a simple exchange of confidence.

—Yer not funny nal! Yer always makin that move where you act like somethin's funny cause things're already goin your way withalt payin any attention seriously to what I'm sayin. So take this seriously, cause I can talk to a loyer too while you're avoiding.— He finally must've stopped to concentrate at some point. —Halbalt a move-out statement, signed, that's like every tenant and landlord do. Where I got all the damage to the halse itemized, and you pick what you saw or didn't bothering seein happen. It ain't signed, the rent's mine.

I think I got all of that through his jumps and choking. Does he not get hungover, able to party all night and then jump on a trampoline at his weight?

—That ain't gonna hold up in court. You and,

—Not yours! Chava's. You wanna halp him,— we're both panting like dogs now. —Dave. Don't you fuckin dare. This has nothing to do with yer deal with Chava.

—That's priorities! Try passin that up with my fucking dick in yer malth!

Then he comes down first, on the word dick, and tries to give me the launch.

—Priorities? I wasn't thinkin about the house, Dave, I was thinkin about how my dad's probly dying alone!

—Your dad's thinkin abalt last time he got wood before he was paralyzed when he should be thinkin how his life's abalt to be over forever! The last thing my mom said to me out lald was put it daln. I dunno where she even meant to put it daln!

—You tell me this so I feel for you? That’s the George Bush, Trump, equity, fascist defense. My meaningless privileged self-inflicted suffering is equal to your struggle with a system that never wanted you, Gil. My expression of vulnerability is not just an order to you to feel bad, but also to forget everything else I might have done!

I catch my breath before I can yell at him more, come down on uncoordinated toe-knee spring, him after me, or ahead, depending on how you look at it, so I jump low to time it. —You want someone to watch the house, you hire a property manager!— Then coordinated again, and right about when I say property manager, I get him. The good news is he doesn’t clip the eave with his forehead.

—Gil, you mother ... fuck!

—Later.— I spring off, land on my toes, cyclist hips are tight so my back takes more of the landing than it should. I catch a glimpse behind me of Dave’s gut battling the gutter. —Gil! The fuckin shingles’re gonna come apart on meaaaahhh!

I wouldn’t hear him yell except the rental’s window is down a crack.

—Worst way to recover a stolen car.

—This one was stolen, too?— My heavy boots slip on the step, don't know why they do that sometimes. —Wheresa other car?

—Gone,— the cop looks around the block for emphasis, —won't be easy to hide. Almost hit that guy.

—Gil?— I spy him in the handful of neighbors, none of whom look at me. Gil trots his bike over to us. —Chava! Hey, it's my man the towtruck driver. It's bad, Chava, don't look. I'm not gonna lie, I came back to rubberneck.

I adjust my beanie's pull on my hairline, squint away from the departing ambulance's lights. The cop seems to be waiting, so I give her the thumb up and drag the chains down from the towtruck toward the bloody splintered hole in the windscreen.

—Sure you didn't see anything else?— she asks him.

—No, nothing,— Gil sounds like he's repeating himself to the young sexy cop, who still has the face of an enthusiastic public servant, —I barely dodged him myself, I thought I was dead.

—So he zigged and you kept going, and he zagged around someone else.

—Yeah. He was behind me then, I don't what it was.

Cop frowns. —Homeless like to cross the street, and that doesn't mix with the joyriding.

—Yeah that's funny, I also like to cross the street. That's it. Not dead!

—Be careful.— She goes back in her coptruck to type.

Why did Gil say he just came back to rubberneck when he was involved, and why use a tone like he's being improper? He gives more of his own perspectives on his own actions at once than I can use. —Didja see the driver?

He talks down to my squatting back. —Yeah man, facedown on the hood. He had a passenger, too, probly younger than him. And on top of that, it's stolen! Barely kids, man. No one's happy till they're dead ... the cop said the joyriding's outta control since April.

I step back to the truck's control panel and the winch-ramp pulling dance begins. —Not my first crash this year.

—So dude, I been out all week, —he nods at Palm Street, —what's goin on?

—I haven't been since Monday. There's no point, I got a furlough notice from my boss.

—Ah, shit! So that's it?

—They're gonna sort it out this week. Either way I needa get in a place with a legal rental deal so I can apply for rent relief if I need to. I think I got furloughed cause Trump lost.

—Yeah, isn't that somethin?— Gil's eyes bulge with what looks like anger above his mask. —Pretty sure my guy at work too got fired cause Trump lost.

Now he stops like he's trying to contain rumors. —You haven't uh, talked to Dave? Or he sent you texts?

—No. Why?— He jumps, his head snaps around, as another engine noise belches over my voice, this time a motorcycle. Big straight black hair spills out as the rider's helmet comes off.

—Brian!— calls Gil, —Shut that thing off, I'm stressing.— Brian obliges, the ramp and winch fall into place, and the red evening is still again. —You guys see some blood?— Takes charge, inspects.

—I almost was the blood, dude!, —stretches Gil, —I'm tellin you, September, October, is when you need headlights inna afternoon. Specially when heading west.

—When was this? He went through the windshield? Shit. Oh, dude, Chava! What were the odds of seeing you?

—Like ... almost an hour ago. All I wanted was a michelada con camarones. Weren't you at the famous Halloween party? Put a mask on, man!

—Sorry,— Brian fumbles in his library for a mask. —So we all got kicked outta the house?

—That was not a fun night,— is all I can express from beneath the weight of everything unsettled.

—Yeah, I dunno,— sniffs Gil, who never told me everything that was said between him and Dave, —somethin about keys and broken windows, and Chava's all behind it, but I don't buy it. He's got somethin he's hiding.

—That's what I'm saying!— I insist, stretch my shoulders.

—Then the next morning,— Gil goes on, —he's gottis buddy tryna use Dave's and Chava's rooms for a broadbanging cell, and then his uncle comes over, and Katie's his mom ... ! And you didn't tell us shit, Brian!

Laughing hair shakes, past caring. —You guys never asked!

—Brian! There is such things as being too stoned. What if, I dunno, what if we'd a did things differently if we knew Katie wasis mom?

Brian uses the upper-hand tone: —Don't hang that on me. You guys're the new ones. You had a chance that I didn't, and you used it. Yknow, his uncle was there cause they wanna sell it.

—I know, cause he told me, on Sunday morning. Katie's, I mean, look atter.

I take my gloves off, eyes rolling between their voices. —Look guys, I gotta tow this. So Brian, you were at the party?

—Yeah, I mean, I was masked the whole time, but it was a lotta relatives. I get it, let's catch up in a few days. I guess I'll take my turn and get a test.

Brian looks like good riddance at Gil. —Yeah, do that.

Gil misses the look, happy to see us again. —Howbout I'll call you later.

Brian starts up and chugs away. I look at Gil's bike. —You wanna put that up inna back and ride with me? I haven't been anywhere with anyone.

—Hell yeah! I wanna see where the evidence gets stashed! We can eat afterwards.

Gil spies like his eyes record everything. —When I was a kid on the bike I useta imagine the Desert-Storm government was testing invisibility technology in public and I would just get creamed by a cloaked tank. Never see it coming. Never forgot that, specially when I'm this stressed out, cept now it'd be Tesla's invisible electric semis. I swear, it was like that just now with this car, total near-miss. Wait, it's behind the Popeye's? ... Dude, I can't believe it! You just pass this warehouse alla time, you never think,

—Yep. Gotta put stuff somewhere ... don't follow me! Stay inna truck.

—Aw, we're not goin inside?

—No. It's evidence, man.— I close my door and Gil's eyes say right, before they sink below the window's red sunset.

We grab Popeye's because it's there, and Gil doesn't fuss too much about eating at the corporate store. I guess he forgot about the shrimp-beer. I park the truck on Virginia and we start to walk, still licking frygrease from our fingertips. Headlamps glitter over the never-swept streets and dazzle our faces.

—Headlights, dude,— Gil shakes his hands out, —It's still in my knuckles, man, my ankles! That nerve up from the kidneys and neck, over the face to the crown chakra, it's like a lightning scar. And my ears always work! I never miss an approach. Itscuz I was rage-riding, dude. I'm gonna kill my shitwit aging Young Republican boss for shitcanning the useful guy cause he's the newest, I'm gonna get coronavirus and inject him with my blood, I'm arguin this case to management bout how Thomas obviously can't mishandle the shop, they can't save their balance-sheets from a bad economy by shrinking the staff by one, they've been pullin this since Bush, since Reagan, since Harrison, since Grant. So he came left outta Vine onto Virginia, made one block, I didn't think twice about it, then outta Almaden came a halfsecond of acceleration and shift,— his voice swoops, —I never heard it comin up the block. Aftermarket lights blowin up my brake levers and toptube, man, this was it!

The old Indian lady at the end of the block seems to be in about the same shape as Katie. But the lady on the corner's eyes are wide open, peering intently through her glasses, wandering into the crosswalk.

The only thing I clearly hear her say is, se van a quemar mis frijoles, calling across the street to the people kitty-corner. They respond



treating her as they always have, and ask for clarification, they don't treat her like something's wrong.

—¿Tú sí entiendes español, verdad?— Gil's voice has the educated energy behind it, not the struggle for attention that some people use. —Claro. I heard what she said. I guess her life's bigness has always been governed by smallness. Or I don't get it. The frijoles, feeding people, is the bigness, she's the smallness that keeps it all together. Or something in those directions.

—Yeah. Man, how many demented old ladies they got on this one block?

—A lot.

—That's gotta explain somethin,— calculates Gil immediately, —the politics of your voting demographic being renters that no one listens to, and homeowners who don't vote cause it's Chinese nationals or demented old ladies.

—Was probly like that a hunnerd years ago, too.

—Yeah, probly was.

The autumn flash falls behind Biebrach Park, the big ash-lined one attached to the Gardner Center, where they give food out to the old people.

My dad, a private-garage-dweller, might've complained in this park that the wetbacks have taken over the picnic area. I might rush to respond that the public picnic area was built for exactly that purpose. This would of course be a cover for facing him straight about racism, a call to logic that's cheapened by cowardice into a platitude, like diluting his opinions with mine to protect myself more than challenge him. I've already had the last of those kinds of conversations with him.

Without saying anything, Chava and I silently get to exercising, the

perfect moment to start stretching our thirties weakness, cooperating on something we both believe in. The air is free of smoke, the live oak's summer musk rising in drifts from knee-height. A footrace around the track, then the playset.

—See, it ain't that you lost yer balance, —I tell Chava, and hop from toe to toe atop the downcurving monkeybars, —Physical weakness makes you think you got bad equilibrium, dude. Balancing wakes up the core.

—Yeah ... man, those barely twunny pullups just pumped the fear right outta my blood, like those past two weeks didn't happen. Isat what we're sposed to learn from all the cabin fever we've had, just to exercise?

—The lesson of yoga wives. Kill George Floyd in front ofem, they just do some stretching, and poof, it's all just a parade of news updates in fronna their lifestyle.

—That might be a little much ... So Dave lives withis mom, and he's getting us to rent so he can stay living there, and he's not putting his mom in a home cause he wants the place for hissself?

—Well yeah, I'm thirty-seven myself, and all the real estate in the world's still locked up in my folks' hands, way outta reach.— Gil takes a rest from accusing everyone of individual evil intentions and wanders picking up trash, finds something non-trash. —Ahh, this button has no front on it! Who does that? ... I'm gonna put a beer cap on it so it has a picture again. Hi, my name's Corona Extra. So, where'd you go all week?

—Nowhere.

—Don't tell me you been sleepin in that towtruck!— he speaks from having other choices.

—Worked for a long time ... wish I coulda washed my clothes there one more time. After that good workout, I can't say I wanna curl up on the seat neither.

I try to do some more pullups, but I'm already pumped out. —Dude, I hadda hotel room for two nights just now, we coulda partied!

—I don't like to put the money out,— pouts Chava.

—Well, I don't either but I can, so.— I say that to test his response, to see if he's also graduated in the thirties to being ready for generosity and not just paying his own part, like kids do. He doesn't react. —Rented a car to go see my dad on Saturday, that set me back. Couldn't help but notice that Enterprise only had extreme small-dick success-mobiles to rent like Aston Martins and Beamers. Least onna internet.

—I thought about texting you but ... I thought we weren't gonna hang anymore.

—Just cause we weren't texting? Cmon man,

—No, no, cuzza Dave and the house.

—Forget Dave!

—No, I'm serious. I didn't know whose side we were all on.

Chava folds his arms into another of his inventories. —When we talked on the phone, it felt like you weren't gonna be like you were, yknow, back when we first hung out. I thought you were cool cause a what you said about still being responsible to people even when you break up. Member how we agreed on that the day I moved Liset's stuff? So I figured, if you moved back up here and still bothered to keep in touch,

—Yeah, and I don't think I stopped being that way. Cause I kept in touch outta friendship, not cause I wanted you to find me a place to live!

—And then if you said the other night that you'd help me get through how Dave talks, I was lookin at it like we were a team that saw how he wasn't acting right.

—I can see how you saw it that way, but I wasn't caught up to that. Look, Dave lookin for reasons to throw us out, and we stand up to him, ain't the same as me still caring enough about Liset to make sure she's set up on that day you and me met at the U-Haul. That's my, uh, my problem. My fear of rejection down to its last thread. If that's the connection you're thinking. I wasn't tryna be short with you on the phone, or hang you out to dry with Dave, I was reminding you to use the resources you have, since you have the legit rental deal.

—Yeah, I know. But I was so, I guess attached, to the house, to what it meant for me to lose it as fast as I got it, I couldn't see it from that angle.

—It was the real angle, though,— I don't know what Chava wants me to do about the conclusions that I can't reach inside his bubble. —There's what we believe in, then there's the law, the deal.

Our shoes dangle down between the monkeybars into gray night. Gil chucks the button back down on the woodchips. —And yknow what else, when he acts like there's rules about how Katie wants the house done, yknow, you were really tuned into that, doncha see that he's makin that up to cover up how he's not prepared to have us live there?

—How do you know she doesn't have rules?

—I'm sayin look at it like what we can observe, not what we can assume. If she's not tellin us what she wants, we don't replace it by falling for Dave's uh, mime routine. You see? Don't fill the unknown with the worst that can happen. That's where I come in, how you thought I was given up on you on the phone.

—I think we agree that his solution is to manipulate people. I just ... when I read into it like I did, part of it was I knew you'd probly see the importance of tryna help us with Katie! I wanted you to bounce ideas off, to get her through this,

—I can't, man!— he interrupts me before I can say the most important part, how bouncing ideas off him was a normal step, something people do to find out what's safe when they've just got to know each other, a step that's needed before deciding together how deep to problem-solve. People around here skip these steps every chance they get.

I've lost track of what Gil's saying. — ... That's a nice idea, and I appreciate it. But the whole four months of my dad's being sick, and moving and being stuck, I just wanna scream it all out, and I can't, and I'm chokin on it. I've got nothin up here to work with but this job, no one up here anymore but some old guys from school ... I'm not even holding myself together, I won't be any good to Katie. I'm sorry, I'm just not the guy. She needs a specialist, not me.

—I mean just to start, to know what our choices are,— I still say it, to illustrate to myself how him not seeing the other step could make it look like I expect him to have a solution to what I said, when I don't. I don't want to be misunderstood.

—Sure, but dude, you don't really have to set that limit,

—I didn't mean to pressure you. It's like, normally you can handle stuff that comes along, but right now, if you add on one little thing else, you crack completely.

—Yeah, that's about it.

—When we're each talkin to a different thing but don't say so, you can see how we're gonna start makin lists that we don't need. Cause we wanna find the middle agreement, right? Like, look, when I was tryna show Dave the broken glass inna kitchen sink's pipe, he didn't see that I was tryna figure out what it might mean, and then he got pissed, like I was blamin him for the broken glass,

—You said somethin to makim think that?

—Well, I thought it. Cause he's a psycho, and I thought besides that, maybe he locks her up besides breaking shit, but no, I didn't say anything! You know how we're always talkin the way we are cause we can't say what we mean.

—I mean, I like to be tactical,— Chava should know, —but, it does get to bullshitting, like my dad and his brothers.

—Sure. And he turned it around like that was,

—That, what's that?

—Me blaming him, was already true, cause if it was, that would be a reason that he wouldn't be reliable, which I would see, you unnerstand? That he wouldn't be reliable for deciding if they shid get ridda the lazyboy! He didn't want me to see him unreliable. So he put everything he had, so not to let it look that way!

—Wow, that many turns?

—Us not saying what we need to, and him hiding what he wants to, it's one cover-up that ... I guess we all do. We've been operating that many turns for how long, it's just normal! Even with when Trump or

anyone in the news and social media says something! So he twisted it that many times, just cause it was more important to be ready for conflict than to just say it.

—That’s cause he thinks that turnin to stone is the same as controllin a situation. I bet he does muscle her around.

—Now you’re assuming, Gil!

—Alright, so I am.— Gil does a movement with his left fingers that must belong to the guitar. —But remember how I asked you if Dave said in that many words if he was gonna kick you out, last week?— I look at Gil’s silhouette, night curved under the poolhouse’s lamplight, unsure if his starting with the word remember means that he’s found a fault in my reasoning, or if he’s going to add something he agrees with. —I was tryna focus on what we really had, so we could avoid all these things we just said. You get so focused on how Dave wants to argue with you, you forget to listen to what he wants, and so then it’s just assumed that there’s a disagreement.

—Yeah, but you can’t reach up and peel people’s defensiveness off, or else one of us’d done it!

—Like when Chilindrina winds up Chavo with her contingencies, and then he hauls off and hits Quico over nothing. On top of that, Dave doesn’t probly think anyone will think either way about what he says, he just says it for himself, expression, defense, all in a package. I know I do it. Easier to put somethin convenient and react, cause it’s no use stating how hopeless I feel in the middle of a argument that has to go somewhere.

—Do not show people the desired things, so their hearts will not be confused.

—No, that ain't what I mean. I mean, like, that cheap move where he said he doesn't think anyone's gonna agree on what space is, much less talk about how to share it.

—When was that? I wasn't there for that.

—Oh. Did he say that on the cat hunt night? Have we really not been together talkin to him for this long?

—No, dude. Now you can see why I wanted to work together on Dave.

—Shit. Anyhow, if you listen to what he wants, you get that control over the outcomes he gets. That sounds horrible to say out loud, but ...

Gil is the toughest of all of us, at least considering the situation at Palm Street, but I can see he's suffering. He looks like he's counting an instance of unreliability against himself, on my behalf. But beneath that, he's lost something and doesn't know where to turn.

—It's my fault for wanting a more honest life that hits a craton of self-referential bullshit. When Brian said people say and do two things simultaneously and you have to straddle those two rails to know which is which, it doesn't matter if I ever find out whether he was joking, cause he's got it right.— He takes his phone out and keeps talking, —This's the same thing with Dave, like you said, and with waiting for Elena or my brother to text me little shit about how they view my effort to interact with Dad.

It's hard to tell if he's going on about something previous or what he just read on his phone. —Why, what'd they say?

—Just now my brother, he hasn't helped me out with a single line to Elena in like three weeks, and now steada just encourage her, he says Dad's gonna get better and we're gonna sue the VA. Now, this's after I just saw with my own eyes how messed up Dad is, and my brother's just



makin shit up and bragging about something he didn't even have any contact with! Cause neither of us really like him.

—So,

—So it's my participation in the middle of it, in an impossible task that neither of them shares, that's now the center of attention, steada what's really going on, but I gotta self-apply the potential conflict steada be honest, cause it's been parked on me. Like you said, we been this many turns deep for our whole lives, just ready for someone to find something wrong with you steada do their part.

—Yup.— I swallow dry, and my dispatcher's probably buzzing in my pocket. Gil does something with his face that tells me he's about to go off the topic to the dark side again.

—The thing at the house was another impossible task. Workin service jobs in stripmalls from seventeen to twenty-two should've been an indication, uh? The rest of my life is gonna be hibernating like a frog in the desert, with all the work I've done to communicate with people, all my potential, seen and heard by no one, buried under layer after layer of their mental quarantine convenience, their mind games. What's the point of talking to anyone? And if they're on the side, and this is what your analysis is missing, dude, if all this is happening in a context of they're only on the side of monologuing to themselves, why's everyone so upset if I do talk, if I do joke? There was never a chance in an antisocial system. Same thing with planting trees and pickin up garbage. Just me can't fuckin do any good, the next pig'll just cut down the tree in a few more years cause it's in the way of his lifestyle.

—So you just wind yourself up day and night about all the stuff that could be better, just cause you can see it?

I can tell I've poked his ethics by how he replies fast: —Yeah, dude. I mean, before I worked myself up about all that, it was that many hours a day at least to keep a band together and try to volunteer back in Sannacruz ... I'm serious! It's not winding, it doesn't start as winding yerself up, it's, you hafta be ready at any second to put a new festival or show on yer calendar, to remember a new club or gig, to call someone and try to get involved. Trying to stay DIY makes you hyper,

—Hypervigilant.

—Hypervigilant! So when I see people ignoring homelessness, ignoring invasive ailanthus trees, which are literally eating the town whole, I just see one big complacency, one big wave smashing me. It ain't a secret.

I laugh against the too-quiet night. —You shid do some more reps, you'll feel better. So when punkers get old, they do this? Pick up trash and pull weeds?

—The Dryheavers're, like, social workers now or something. It feels during quarantine that we lost so much time of life just surviving, and now we really can't work on stuff that had been put off because of the quarantine. The Sierra foothills, Juristac, anywhere. Our parents had money to waste, to build outward into what should be wild, rather than spend their money enlarging parks or native land, and now I'll never have that money or land prices. It took too much of my own life to figure out my parents' world, and only because I put the time in volunteering at WSWA, making my own way with the band, and staying involved. To say nothing of how long it'd take if I was just normal. Now there's neither time to make change or to gather the resources I'd need to do it. There was already no time after work, and now it's like time got lost in triple time.

Gil sounds like he's pretty convinced of why to keep winding himself up tight as a sailor's fist in the bunk. —You talked to her since you been back?

—No! My cousin just asked me that. Why would I bother her more after I went through all that from disappointing.

I feel a sudden aching in my joints, restlessness over break in routine. I want a beer, need to hydrate. —Wish I had a room to go hide in ... I went to see Dashboard Confessional live, for her.

—When he was young?

—No.

Chava always looks and talks to me like he wants to ask something. Now he does. —Why'd you guys break up?

—She never told you?— Chava's look is suddenly clear. I'm asking you. —I didn't wanna have a kid.— It snaps between my lips like a confession. —She could only see how time was running out, and once one wants a kid, the relationship's never gonna be equal again. We don't have convincing arguments for existence-level stuff, dude.

—So you didn't wanna break up?

—No, dude! But that, havin a kid, was just the part of it that more faced her. Truth is, what faces me more, it's really hard to be ethical by yerself, man. Neither of us make enough money to be there, to raise a kid any better than we were raised, to skip the ignorance and fear that we had. It was gonna stretch us past what I felt like it was worth living. It was gonna set the kid back where we started. And now I can't be ethical at all cause I don't have pig private property to do it in. You're right, I'm just goin in circles.

I wait for him. I want to hear more, see more proof of how we can see things so much the same, regardless of how one can never say it so

the other understands. I realize I've been here, mentally, before. When I ate mushrooms and watched *El Topo* during the comedown. He goes on after a breath: —But you can see how puttin myself through that out of love for her, that's now part of how people see me, dedicated, it gets taken for granted, put on my back for my dad's situation too, and I can't stop feelin responsible for his situation, and I really can't tell the difference between if Liset didn't like me or was just complaining, cause my dad, it was the same way.

—Exackly!— my breath-bubble pops and cold night air sucks after it into the corners of my lips. —That's what it's like with takin care of my mom! The constant, just, responsibility of it, you can't switch it off without a consequence waitin to jump on you! I been on that shift so long, the muscle just naturally pushed me to worry about Katie.

Only now the real shape of exhaustion hits me, the fatigue from setting down what I was holding up for Chava, for everyone, to understand. I think he gets that I could consider helping Katie, and why I don't. I can't communicate with my dad, and we can't communicate with Katie, at least not surely. So nothing finishes or stabilizes, we can't stop moving, spiral around the common ground like toilet water. I should show him that it's good to sprint a ways with him, that we're friends, but I don't want to talk anymore. I'm going to start cutting corners if we keep talking. To stay this open aches in the chest as much as being shut up did.

Just like when I wake up after drinking a hair later than seven, or don't do the hydration routine, now I've got amnesia and wonder what the hell I said to Chava this evening, or what he understood or concluded from me, even though we just talked. Afraid that anyone anywhere might think I'm slipping, might take away my reputation.

Overhead curled brown sycamore leaves rasp together in the breeze, as if we were hearing them dry up.

—So, a cat hunt night?— He must be playing on how it's easier to talk about other people than yourself.

—Wasn't our finest hour,— I say out to the eucalyptus, where paper plates lie piled with cheap catfood, —Shit, the other day when we met his uncle I thought he was gonna tell on us. My guy Jimmy Mazerik was a cat cremator. He drove a truck, like a dogcatcher's truck, only they're all dead, when I was like 20. And he made good money hauling euthanized cats to the crematorium, to the point that he had real recording microphones. I wonder what came of him. His band Rufus and Jamal was great, they used to play the Ugly Mug in Soquel. I can't remember now if he ever complained about burnt animal smell.

—Dave was making a ruckus in the closet, that night he went out with you two. Is that why?

—I guess. I didn't go inna house before we did ... the mish.

—Yknow, he basically asked me to get your housekeys from you. But then at the end of the night, I saw Katie had keys she was fidgeting with.

—After he lost some keys!

—You knew about it? Why didn't you tell me?

—I didn't think I had to! I figured you and he had something going on.

—Is that the same as you've known since Sunday they wanna sell the house?

—I assumed Dave told you, yknow, since you called me Saturday to tell me he was already after you to move out.

—No, Gil, I didn't know anything! We just agreed ten minutes ago that he manipulates people! How long's it take before,

—Well, what difference does it make now.— I can't believe Gil's using that old macho evasion of how intentions don't make impact. I lean right up to him. —The difference is, if you knew something, you should say, cause it would help us stick together! ... But that's not where you were at this week.

Gil's quiet for a long time, then sighs out over the monkeybars.

—He wants you to basically sign a confession, a move-out document, where he has a list of ways you may've messed up the house,

—I never ... !

—Listen!— Gil swings down onto the ground, backs away from me toward the babies' playset. —He wants you to pick from his imagined list of ways you messed up the house, and sign, to force you to negotiate how much rent he gives you back..

—But he never cashed my check even last time I ... I never messed up the house!

—I'm sure, man. I know.

—Why didn't you tellim that when he told you this? Why couldn't you just back me on that point that was already determined, steada,

—You think he'd listen to me? And cause then I would know something, Chava! And I toldim over and over, that I don't know nothing! Is it more unstable to not go with your story while it changes, or change what I actually said to him?

I breathe, get perspective. This conversation has already taken a big place in my life, a memory of narrow concrete night-vision, like from childhood. The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows, empty but never exhausted, it moves and produces more.

—I know places that can take care of her are like five thou a month anymore. Even in this looter housing market, this place isn't worth that as-is, so that means we've got a good chance of staying while they fix it up. But supervising her, and especially dealing with Dave, that makes it musical chairs as much as any crashpad I've had.

I pull my phone out. It turns out Brian was buzzing me, not my dispatcher. I put on speaker-phone, try to turn from frustration. —What's up, Brian?

—Chava. I texted Gil but he didn't answer.— Into more frustration.

—Gil's right here.— A busy pause on Brian's end, probably checking his pockets and zippers. —You guys wanna use the Marco Polo app?

—What the ... no, dude,— decides Gil. Another pause from Brian.

—So, Dave has covid. He's quarantining innis room.

—You saw?

—No, his uncle told me. I gave him yer numbers.

—Oh, great, thanks! We can use that connection.

—Right ... But I did hearim on his phone a few days back, he's moving his ex in there, with his kid.

—His kid?— yelps Gil. Behind us two mushroom-permed kids have materialized at a bench. A third looks behind his shoulder at Gil while he pisses on the poolhouse.

—Dave's kid, not the uncle's kid.

—I get it!— yelps Gil again. I feel confused now. Gil doesn't return my look. —But isn't he planning to sell it?

—That's the word.— Brian doesn't go for the contradiction. —You guys been stayin there?

—Nope.

—Where, then?— Gil and I exhale cold out the corners of our masks. —Nowhere.

—Me too. Or me neither.

—So Brian,— gets Gil suddenly to business, not staying out of the middle, using his resources, —what else do you know? Like, for example, who's the guy was trying to bag the broad in Chava's uh, former, room?

—The room he turned me down for? How shid I know? Proibly Memo.

Brian's upset. At Chava or at me? He's not saying everything. —Keep us in the loop, though, Brian. Yknow if we and Katie're movin on, they're gonna have another party at the house. Let's crash that shit.— Chava's jaw flies open behind his mask. —And invite Covid into your life? What good'll that do?

—He owes me money. And you, too, Chava. Focus on the legal!

—Brian, sorry to interrupt,— I hold a hand up to Gil, —someone's callin me. I'll call ya later.— I turn the speaker off. —This is Salvador, are you trying to reach Alongi Brothers?

—Hello, my name's Manny Facundes. I was given your number because you live at Katie Dutra's.

—Yes!— Gil's waving at me, I think he means put the speaker back on. I put a finger up. —I was living there. It's been difficulties with communicating, mister Facundes. Dave, you know him, he's kicked us out. Both he and,

—You and the other guy're looking for your rent back, right?

—Essentially, yes, sir. Speaking for myself, if I get my fair rent back, I'll get outta your way. I know you wanna sell it. I mean, eventually.



—Yeah, well, it's gonna be a process for me to get power of attorney and ... anyway, nothing you need to know. Look, I'm sorry I'm calling so late, but why don't we meet up at the house sometime this week and get started settling up.

—That'd be great.— Gil is still waving at me, me waving at him. I don't want the speaker to change my voice signal and give Facundes doubts. —Is it true Dave has Covid?

—He does?— A less-busy silence. —I'll find out. But anyway, he can stay innis room.

—I'd really prefer that, sir, that'll be fine.

—Does Tuesday work? And bring your keys.

—Right. Tuesday at five? ... thanks again. No worries, thanks.

—That was Manny?— Chava nods, his eyes change color again, even in this dark and pupil-dilating cold. —All we gotta do is give our keys back.

—Shit,— I motion with my shoulder and we start back to the overpass, to Chava's truck, —Dave already tried to grab my balls for my keys. Gotta stand our ground till we see the money.

—You can do that part, then,— announces Chava to the neighbors' flashing windows, —especially if there's some confession to sign.

I speed up right behind him, drop my voice. —For real, if Dave's there, and he decides not to cooperate with the deal with the uncle about the keys, maybe I shouldn't kick the beehive.

—Beehive? I could really use the backup, Gil. I don't wanna wait two weeks and watch Dave move his kid in there, then they lose the place and the kid's on the street cause Dave and his ex're probly useless.

—That's likely true. Hey, but maybe we should stay close a few weeks. At least to do laundry, right? Shit, it's gettin cold.

I give the coward his bike back and start up the truck. We part ways, each to different ends of nowhere.

Was just looking at the flat fall light falling into my aunt's, reflecting how attachment vanishes, footprints erased by tidewater, impressions in the carpet of her old collections, when collections calls me. That last Economic Impact deposit wouldn't even help if I still had it. I set up an appointment to get on a payment plan. The woman has a southern accent and I always mean to ask if these phone operators are incarcerated, but I don't.

Pound a bunch of water now, in case I sleep in storage and can't piss after closing time. But then, if I do go to see Chava and Gil, and Dave's quarantined, might as well try.

The bike purrs and talks to itself, decides out loud whether to shift. Maybe it's the colder weather. The other neighbors have their Christmas lights strung up on the fence in words that say PEACE and NOEL, but these people next door's lights on the fence just spell out NIN NIN NIN, I don't get it.

The van's on the street in front of the banana trees, spilling cat dander and stink, but the car is back rusting where it goes. In front of it, they left the trampoline up. And the rollaway's history. They'll sell this decayed stucco litterbox for a million and a half. Door's unlocked. Post up on the couch, only unpack the basics, to relieve stretch on the backpack, wait.

Dave's bags and piles of stuff have grown back since the party, like a lawn. And the coat of spilled litter on the floor from his elbow-turning hack.

I don't bother knocking at Dave's room, and use my ipad on the house's wifi to start a text with Chava and Gil, so they can tell me they're here without knocking. But then Chava's door opens and out comes Memo and throws his snotty inbred cat-eyes on me. Neither of us says anything for a whole minute. I'm kind of nervous, but it seems like he is, too. I put my mask on, and he shuts his gaping lips and leaves.

Outside it's the coldest afternoon yet, feels like it could rain in the mountains, even if not here. —You took your test?— nods Chava.

—Yeah, negative this morning.— I nod, adjust my hat. Chava comes in for a shoulder-squeeze, seems happy to be back. —You been here long?— he looks around at the house, wanting easy answers.

—No, just a few.— I turn from him, look at the garage, test the door. —I have some tequila in here I'd like to recover. Wanna do one?— The door shudders up, unlocked, huge 1960s springs still fooling trespassers today. —You see they got rid of the rollaway? Just threw it away, that much metal.

—Maybe they called a metal guy.

Chava's random sprays of optimism make him sound white. —When this eventuality presented itself, I shoulda been able to buy the place, if things'd let up even just a little between the dotcom bubble, invading Iraq and now ... Dave just wants to throw away all the house's potential. The rollaway, the rental potential ... We all three of us, all four of us, could be workin on passion projects without our lives being dominated by rent, and even takin those projects to profitability.

—That's what I'm sayin, Brian!— stretches Chava.

—He'd rather we all be useless, homeless. You sure you don't want one?

—If we get drunk, I don't have the money to buy a round.

—Me neither.

Test the pouch, one two three inside. Chava blinks at it. —What’s in that one, anyway?— with two fingers loosen the drawstrings, push the mouth of the pouch open and fingers supine to let the weight roll out of the pouch’s mouth. —Whoa! Surprise eggs?— Chava raises his reverent gaze to my face, the eggs’ sparkle in his pupils. I roll them back in, all one-handed, two-fingered. —Dude, how did you,

—I gottem from a fandom dealer. Outside Fanimecon, couple years ago. This chick’d just dumped me for having an opinion on a costume that wasn’t cannon lore. So I’m out a hotel room now, for nothing, and this guy was slinging full fandoms to kids who were waking up not wanting an imagination anymore. He bet me a life deal on Firefly for the equivalent of a Starbucks shift manager’s paycheck, I hit him back with how I got a story proposal in front of a Netflix producer, when they first got big. He forfeited me these eggs. Never saw his face. Gil hasn’t said nothing, is he coming or not?

Chava’s face peaks up above his mask. —Doesn’t seem like anything’s important to him but whatever he’s workin on at the moment. He could tellya about passion projects.

—What happened?

—I was so worried that he’d get kicked out cause of my miscommunications with Dave. But it’s just a big joke to him.

—I dunno if it’s a joke. I just know with you it’s about contingencies and Gil sees the potential for contingencies elsewhere than you do.

—I appreciate that, Brian. But then, look, Gil’s so confident that Dave’ll listen to the law and everything, like this thing with Dave and losing some keys that he didn’t bother telling me about, when Dave

already'd played me against him ... he doesn't think he hasta be involved.

—Dave doesn't want Gil involved. Plus he only has to say one side a things and you two chase it around and around, so he wins no matter what. And Gil'l get in the way of anyone's arrangement to feel like he's on top of the wave.

—And he doesn't see how his way of chasin things around and around, steada listen to my plan, just gives Dave more ideas. I can't believe I just listened to his insecurity about himself all night, all this,

—Emotional labor.

—Emotional labor, and meanwhile I'm wondering if you were holding back cause you're pissed at him.

—I'm not gonna waste time being pissed at him. I can't do nothing but try to survive and deal with other people complicating the situation steada live and let live.

—I know, I can't either! I'm over feelin like everyone's blamin me for how hard their life got!

—And I don't know everything about these people, like you think I do. I just wonder if he's gonna do somethin stupid again tonight like,— Our ears drown out our voices by the snap of wood and lisp of brass. We look, the light's on against the outdoors' pillowed fog and Katie's there, cleaned up, but like before, both lost and right at home. —Hi Katie,— he stammers.

She ignores him. Down the driveway come other footsteps.

—Ahey, it's our party guy!

—Brian,— I set the record straight. Manuel's handsome unmasked Just for Men chin rocks in the air and then points at me. —See Kate? Good as new. Too bad someone destroyed the bathroom.

—Bathroom?

—Vomit, hair, everything. I didn't know Dave had that much hair.

—Or Memo.

He frowns at me and Chava twitches. —Or who? Was that the other tenant?

He comes up close, extends his hand to Chava. —I've thought about what we talked about, and I brought Katie so we can agree on the rent, in exchange for the keys. Like we talked about?

—I dunno if,

He searches Chava's face, then looks at Katie, then settles for me.

—This ain't him?

—That's Gil.— Manuel looks again, gives Katie an impatient look.

—Well where's he at?

—I'll tellim to come.

—We did say Tuesday,— tries Chava, but I can't manage his management of Gil's potential mismanagement, —So, how much you want to sell the house for?

Manuel looks the place over, but with his nose. —Well, I ain't gonna let you steal it like they stoled the election ... ! We're gonna hafta have all these cats put to sleep.

—Yeah, about that,— I stop, my ears hear before I do. Someone a few blocks down, like on Vine, starts a bike. Maybe we could ride together. —I uh, wish I hadda down payment. I'd make this easy for everyone, and uh, fix it up. Maybe Dave and Chava could stay.

—I appreciate that, Brian, and I'm sure lotsa young guys your ages would. So, did he say he's coming?

—Whatcha looking for, Katie?— Chava's up close to her again, running his fingers on the railing going up the back steps. Kittens roll at

her brand-new slippers. —It's okay, Kate,— Manuel assures her, —you're home, and the van is just parked on the street. Remember we moved stuff around for the trampoline?

Katie's looking into her memories, but she steps where Chava just was and her fingernail scratches at some cut or splinter in the railing. —I think she's looking for something important,— Chava's voice is certain, or at least saying a long consideration. I set down the tequila bottle again and look around the garage. Night already drowns over the east hills. —Are they storing something in here that she'd be lookin for?

—Kay, we don't have much time,— complains Manuel,— but let me get her comfterble again while we wait for, Gil it was, right?

As soon as the door closes, Chava gets to work with something he's been bottling up. —So, I understand you and him and Dave went on some cat hunt. But Gil didn't wanna talk about it.

Gravelly acid from an old hose down my throat, tequila in the spitting muscles under the cheeks. —He probly doesn't member!— Backpack between my shoes, I fill my water bottle with tequila and set the rest in front of Chava. —Cmon, let's go see if I can fit this in my saddle bag.

—So Gil says Dave wants me to sign something that says I messed with the house. But that night, I saw Dave puttin away a suitcase. He told me it was none of my business. Did you see,

—Hold up. Where the fuck's my bike?

—It was here?

—Yeah dude!— I sprint north up to Virginia, down to Edwards, slow and breathless like in a dream. No way it's on Willow out in the open. —Fuck!

Can hardly breathe when I get back to Chava, don't have a cigarette to open the lungs. —Someone took your bike? ... Just now?

—This's never been an issue here, ever, since I've had the bike. God dammit!

Chava looks around helplessly. CBD on my lips, need to get either through or around this situation. Call someone for a favor, call insurance. —I'm gonna be in Ubers again. Uber all the way to the city, if there's ever concerts again.— Dry fingertips on my temples, the drive-way spinning around me. I can't stay here tonight.

—We still haven't talked about what comes next, now that Thomas's gone.— Jorsh gives me the eye, like, prove it. —I was able to delegate so much of what I hafta do to him and Pereira, so withoutim, it's gonna slow me down.

—But Gil, I can't slow you down withoutim if you were slowed down with him. Yknow, Thomas just didn't keep up, and it's like I say, it's the impact, you just can't turn in votes after the polls close. Look what's happenin now from being permissive. That doesn't make any impact, if it's slower now withoutim!

—So what broke the camel's back? Did he request time off to go vote?— I ask because he's being told by his phone to be mad about the election.

—Go vote? He was working from home half the time, how's he gonna gahead and ask me for time off to go vote? And that's the problem here, Gil,— here he goes, —this mail-in ballot hoax has completely decided the election! Sent to people who didn't even ask for one!



It's the rigged system deciding for us ... so, uh, well you said it yerself. Why doncha delegate more to Dennis?

Out beyond the parking, that RV rolls by and its plywood side tears away, revealing two old people arguing, one on the toilet. —Forget it. Do it myself.

—You have choices, Gil.

—None that I'm gonna take, besides do it myself, if I'm gonna keep my reputation with you! Only faggots try to work together in the workplace steada play cutthroat, right Jorsh?

—That might go a little far,

—But if it's a little far, that would mean yer mentality's got limits, not really up to where you can keep managerial authority on yer people enough to run the shop according to the profitability models, right Jorsh?

—Gil, I can handle this.

—So cause I'm not the authority either, and I'm thinkin outside the model, even if Thomas was a good team player, that makes me a pussy, right Jorsh? Why doncha fire me?

—You don't need to be fired, Gil.

—But I'm the faggot, Jorsh! Anyone besides me, who you need something from now that we're understaffed, you'd say it. Yer depriving yourself of your right to say it, now that you don't have enough people to fire me! Go ahead, I can handle it! ... What're you scared that Streakwave's young black director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,— I take a heavy step at him with each of the three words, —is gonna come haul you fronna the Better Business Bureau if you fire your token spick? Why don't you put your foot down?

He's sweating on the personal, human level, his boss-self is cracking, he can't calculate and connive everything I'm throwing at him, pathetic little stupid white man tied up in his own phony-non-macho liberal power trip, melting like a Willow Glen Creamery cone, and that's enough for me. —Gil, I dunno why you'd wanna sow doubts with me. You're a legal citizen, educated, reliable. Clean. You're not in the same boat as Thomas was. Productivity-wise. Whatta you gotta do today?— He looks around the place, grimy and stacked with boxes as ever.

—Nothing. I can close orders from home.

—Kay, why doncha do some mindfulness practice about what yer really mad about. I can recommend an app ... Gil? ... Bye.

Fucking chickenshit, I say it out loud, once I've ridden past the carpenters. Here I go, close orders from home, homeless as I am, call clients from a coffee shop, or don't. I opened it wide open for my boss, let him finally have that indulgent nicotine moment of deciding everything with the boss's decree, without phony-equity concealment. Old-fashioned power, environment and truth be damned, and he was too suburban lazy to use it. At least Trump would passive-aggressively flame me electronically, he can't even do that. As I speak he's probably having a weed gummy, bought legally in a plastic package.

I pour a tall Modelo down my face right there at the bus stop and rage-ride south until Mabury calls to me. In two blurred, shrunken-brain hours I cross over Mabury and up Alum Rock to Mount Hamilton Road, all this thriving dustperfumed oak and bay forest that I want to join with, the will to abandon my irredeemable humanity and be a coyote brush, private property insulting and belittling and shouldering me out and away, having determined all of our lives before

we were born, left across the shoulder of the hills on Clayton, through autumnal apricot orchards, vultures gliding at my eye level, sorry pal, you can roll and worry, but we can live in the sky, and down Story in a phalanx of unconscious half-car former-humans, former-animals, back to downtown. A car gets near me in the right lane that goes to the 280 ramp. I kick its mirror in memory of last night's close call.

Hope I don't get wet with that sky the way it looks. Now both text messages, the private one with the uncle and the one with Chava and Brian, are blowing up my pocket. Tuesday's appointment has become today. Another missed stop at La Ceiba.

At the house I find Chava, Brian and the uncle circled up by the open garage. —Is Dave inside?

—Don't worry,— says the uncle at normal volume,— I worked it out with Dave.

—When did you talk about this?— demands Chava with unusual impatience.

—Gil texted me,— Manuel puts palms down to all of us, —I'm handling the money and the keys. He doesn't need to go on the offensive.

Pretty soon we work out the rent-return and Manuel agrees to let us keep our keys as collateral. My eyebrows raising do not successfully show Chava that I thought of him and took care of it. Manny scratches his temple. —It's not gonna happen overnight. I needa get power of attorney, probly run through probate. I'm awful sorry, guys, this was just a lot more complicated than Dave told you.

—I mean it's only a couple grand all together,— I suggest, —why don't we just settle the rent with you, personally, and your sister can owe you? Services rendered, right?

—That could work.— His face, posture and hairdo do not support his voice.

—Wait, Gil, don't change the deal now that you just got it!

—No deal yet about how, Chava, just what. Or evict Dave and let us stay the money out.

—That could work!— hopes Chava against hope, —but if Dave gets pissed, I dunno if the house can keepim out. Would you back us, Manuel?

—Okay, lemme go find something to write out a contract, he's gotta have a yellow pad in here somewhere left over after all those years. I gotta check on Katie anyhow, we're talkin too much out here.

He goes back in the house, kicks two cats away as he closes the door. Chava's impatient to talk. —You said that the kitchen window was broken?

—I did?

—No, wait. Dave did.

—He's been at this,— says Brian with uncharacteristic anger, takes tiny careful sips from his water bottle. Chava's finger comes up in the air. —When he yelled at me during the party. So, he took out that suitcase for your thing, and then later he washed it and put it away, and that's when he dropped the statue on the windowpane. That adds up to when I heard the glass break. But wait, why'd Katie wash the suitcase, too, the other night?

—She saw Dave do it, and put it away, and then did it again.

Brian says it, then looks like he wishes he hadn't spoken.

—Why're we talking about this?— I ask them.

—Chava thought Dave'd been threatening Katie. Meanwhile my fucking bike's gone.

—No fuckin way. Here, just now? Shit, Brian.

Manuel comes back out with a yellow pad, just like he said.

—But Brian’s probly right!— Chava sticks to his story, —She saw Dave do it, and did it too, to get his attention! Inna same way, maybe she found the statue while he was out with you two, and she stuck it there to askim about either the case, or the statue, doesn’t matter,

—Is that what she’s been doing?— Brian’s interested, or at least concerned, —showing Dave what he did to askim what happened? Is that why she’s always moving those towels and those sandals?

—Isat what happened?— Now Manuel is in, too. —God, if I knew what Katie’s thinking ... so that’s how she asks?

—And he didn’t see it there,— concludes Chava, —cause he was in a hurry to clean the suitcase, and he knocked it into the window.

—Okay, Manny,— I slow my voice down as not to hurry us, though slowing down is a kind of hurrying. —You ready to get it down nice and clear?

—Now, are you boys really serious about trying to stay out the rent?

—Uhh,

—No, man, no. It’s fine. We can wait.

Katie has joined us, and the legally-binding negotiation stops. Manny turns to her. —You wanna wander in the garage for a sec, Kate?— Her thickening face doesn’t seem interested, as always. Looks like she washed her hair, though.

—There’s nothin really in the garage,— comments Brian, —I think someone cleaned it out at some point.

—Let’s find out.— I step into the garage. Since now is precisely not the time, now is when the terminal, final fear of my dad’s situation

blacks out my peripheral vision, and I see my life passing between my hands at the ends of my arms.

I just now notice that this big beautiful heavy iron clamp bolted to the workbench has the initials JD welded on it, welded by living hands. But here in this garage or where, and under what pressures?

A whole person's life of movement and work in this dusty garage. Posters and clothes and crap get thrown out when a human life goes, elevating this still-useful clamp to archeological find. For a second I imagine what was in front of my dad's eyes day in and workday out, when he worked. An aluminum oilpan full of gasoline with a toothbrush swimming in it, Indian valve covers, sparkplug packaging, my mother's face smiling in some past I never knew, my mother's swollen wet face turning away. Now I want to take stock of my own eyes' spaces, land rushing by on a bike rather than out my dad's truck windows. Might be compassion, or just delusion. An immortal sun's light on the meniscus of oblivion.

I look up and remember that I put that box above the garage door. —Hang on, guys ... I confess that I moved this,— Brian reacts, steps heavily over himself. —Whoa, that's a TV, it's heavy!

—It's just the box, Brian, there's no,— I wheeze, hand the box with the leather-armed jacket on top to Manuel. —You wanna see if that means anything?

—I guess.— Manuel holds the box at arms' length like a dead raccoon. Katie passes a wrinkled disdainful glance over it, then her eyes return and go wide, she whips the jacket off the top of the box and buries her face in it.

We all stare. Chava vibrates like the magnetic pole went up his ass.

—Tony.— The jacket comes down to her breast and tears stand in her eyes, scared to fall.

Manny's jaw drops. —Were you ... were you looking for that, Katie?— She marches up to him, sticks the jacket in his face. —You smellim?— He turns to us. —Cat litter ... you smellim on that jacket, Katie? Cool old Goodguys jacket, isn't it?

She blinks and the tears fall hard on her cheekbones, tears I wish I had, tears I could drown in rather than go on trying to sleep, two tiny blades of foggy sunlight on living flesh in the masked fossilized seizure we've all been living. The finality's not on her. She's beyond it.

—Dude, how much you wanna bet she's been movin stuff around so she could ask Dave where that was.

—It's always that simple,— declares Brian, —right Chava? I guess that's why she kept given me the sandals.— Brian swings his arms, knocks together his fists. He's pissed. I feel bad for him.

Manuel shoots me a dirty look. —You stuck that inna garage?

—No, no! I moved it from on the floor where the cats were gettin at it.

—You wanna go check inna house for something else, Kate? Cmon, it's cold.— Manuel puts a disposable blue mask on, conducts her up the stairs.

—I needa make a police report.— says Brian, and breaks off.

—Jesus, why?— frowns Manuel. Chava raises his eyebrows. —His motorcycle got stolen.

Soon we're stacked like beer bottles in the kitchen. I pour myself a glass of water from the tap because my trachea's been rubbed shut since riding down Clayton.

Something's burning. Maybe she microwaved a dinner. Manuel arches his shoulders and heads around the kitchen doorway.

—Now, you stay in your room, Dave! Your mom's not wearin a mask. No, Kate, don't wear it yet. I know you smell him, but let's clean it first. Kate ... !— He and Chava exchange some awkward whispers, Chava says he was trying, and Manuel thanks him.

Chava seems to snap to attention a microsecond before the glass-crackle paws out from inside the oven. —Whawasat?— I shut the oven off, pull the door down an inch and peek. —Ah, shit. Later. Later!

—Wait,— says Chava, nodding at the impact-spiderweb on the quarter windowpane, —might as well see if she knew to look in the kitchen. Everything's hiding the truth.— He looks around, then turns and opens the cabinets above the fridge. —Man,

Manuel pulls Katie back in, bothered but light on her feet, glaring at us both.

—Here, Kate, let's look and see if there's anything else you're missing,— Chava directs her, points up, —You looked up in the cabinets lately? Maybe there was nothing, yknow, last time you remember, but maybe somethin got moved, right?— Manuel slinks around her, we all back up toward the shitcat graveyard, Chava folds me right toward the back hall and pushes a chair from the cleared-off table toward her. —Go ahead.

She looks at Manuel, looks down. —Here, Kate, I'll do it.— Up he goes and pulls down the first thing, a big plastic shopping bag balled up and stuffed in as to cover whatever else is up there. He puts it in her hands so he can climb down.

The smart old hands, now more fluent than her head, fumble with the plastic-slicked bulges of weight, and the bag's top spills over.



—Help her, man!— shouts Chava. He and Manuel bump heads over the linoleum as glass clatters from her palms.

—Don't shout, you'll scare her!— We all look down at the spilled stuff.

—Man, what is all this?— The uncle picks up a silver spoon, holds it up so she can see it. Chava fearfully presents her a china doll, almost lifesize, with its cheek freshly cracked open. Lucky she does not hug either to her heart, but stalks right back off, probably to nest her husband's jacket.

—Cops're on their way.— When the air was out of the room, Brian snuck up on us. —Tsall that crap?

All of a sudden Katie's back, and starts rummaging through the wreckage inside the bag abandoned on the floor. She pops back up with a pair of pennyloafers, not so different, damn it, I bet the same ones Dave was wearing Sunday morning. Manuel breaks off around the wall towards the sounds of *Turtles in Time*, and we hear him knocking on Dave's door. —Dave!

—Ah, great,— sighs Brian, and Chava and I cower in the laundry-room, fully in the shit. Dave stomps right into the kitchen, a bandana around his face. —So Manny, you finally shakinem all down? I heard their voices.— Manny opens his mouth, but Dave goes on, —cause I knew you were comin, so I could get Memo in and outta here without no drama!

—So it was Memo. In the bathroom?

—What bathroom?

No one's impressed. I throw my eyes across the kitchen to Dave. —Crown Royal Coupon Man's here?

—He's gone, Gil, don't have a tubal queef.

Brian's on top of him. —Where is he, Dave? Gimme his phone number, now.

—Fuck you. Gimme yer keys, now. I'll nut and give ya Covid.

—Those keys're spoken for.

Dave sneers uncomprehending, then his eyes go wide and he looks down helplessly at squatting Manuel, shoulders never arching over, but retreating. —If you guys hadn't all played detective in a halse that's none a your business,— he scowls at me, —you'd a been achieving goals right now. This is not about what you find in that bag. It's about you chose to look for somethin you don't unnerstand.

—Dave,— Manny's voice is more regretful than even on Sunday, —What did you think you were helping by not telling me?

—Sometimes it's already Judge Judy, and tellin you'd be startin the sweep, then askin to snap. How many hours a day do I hafta worry abouter? I gotta work to keep this halse.

—Why isn't there a pension, or life insurance? Tony's been gone for,

—Tony died with hella credit card debt, and a car bill. Which I paid! Thanks Dave, yer welcome for nothin, everyone.

—We'll find out. I'm getting power of attorney, so ...— The uncle stops, holds up a broken crystal champagne glass and a Nichols Brothers knife, —why's everything innis bag have a price on it?

We all squint, and the broken glass has a sticky note in its cup. The knife has one, neon pink, on its blade.

—This's your houserules, Dave? Yer priorities?— I still have the rage from work, the same muscle flexes. —Stead a your mom's health, you were lookin for ways to pay your ticket out? We gotta know our place so we don't find this?

Brian vanishes in a lunge down the hall around the kitchen, backpack tight on his shoulders, reappears in the blink of an eye at our right, he's on Dave, masked, but on him. —My bike! Where'd he go?

—Brian, don't,— says Manuel, off-balance, and knocks into Katie before he can stand again.

Not as tall or heavy as Dave, Brian foregoes the safer shove for a strong cross to the nose. Dave oinks and bops his head against the wall.

Katie grunts, too, and I look. She's still holding a crystal champagne glass but it's streaked with greasy red.

—All of you, stop, god dammit!— shouts Manuel louder than Chava did, —if you want any rent back, stop! None of you owns a shit, so when the cops get here I'll throw you all in for trespassing, you punks!

There's the truth. Over thirty-five and I'll always be a punk kid to people. Brian obliges, steps back from crooked-bandana Dave, who doesn't even try to hit back. —Either gimme his number, or your name's goin on the police report first.

—I was inside private property when the fuckin thing got took,— Dave warbles, —I'm not the one's trespassin,

—Get back in your room,— Manuel commands him, —your mom could get sick! I needa taker to the emergency room for her hand. Soon as I bringer home, Dave!

—You want me to go in my room or not?

—What're you talkin about?

—Wal, yer talkin to me, so it's a mixed singles if you want me to listen to you, or go in.

—The second I bringer home, Dave, I'm tryna tell you, first thing, she gets hurt! Wonder what else happened to her while she was alone

with you, when she took a bath last! If you think you're gettin a shit from this house ... Get back in there! I don't wanna see you.

—That's assault, Fryan.

—Here, Katie, doncha,— he opens the drawer in question, withdraws the harassed towels. —Cmon, squeeze this down on your palm. You gotta push, Kate, I can't do it for you!

Chava steps in and takes her hand, runs dish soap and water over it, pushes the balled-up towel down hard and then wraps another around. She doesn't pull away, but sets her watery eyes, a young girl's trapped in the future, on his. —They're not even gonna let you in the emergency room without a Covid test,— Chava tells the uncle, —yer gonna be waiting. Go see if there's pain pills in the bathroom, and keep this on tight. Gil, see if there's a water bottle and somethin she can eat while they're waiting.

Brian's in the hall. —Whatsis real name, Dave? What's Memo's real name, motherfucker? I'm callin Safeway!

The goodguy pushes my real enraged self away, wipes a drop of blood from the pennyloafers for the uncle. —Giver these. I mean, puttem in her room. You go on, we'll figure it out later. Get her looked at ... and take the jacket with, too!— He rushes her off, then yanks her back into the hall. —Dave! Where's she keep her ID? Her Medicare card, something! Brian, later! Go! Dave? Open up and answer me! God dammit,

And somethin to read, Manuel,— adds Brian, cutting his roar completely, —I know she uses reading glasses.

The uncle rummages in her room, and Katie retreats out to where the lazyboy used to be and starts piling her favorite stuff up on the floor. Maybe Chava was right, maybe it's a pile of questions.

Manuel desperately takes her. Just as he touches the front doorknob, the cops knock twice.

—Hi, excuse me, I needa get her to the hospital. No, it's fine, thanks, bye! They were all just leaving.— They turn gray under the red east hills and depart, leaving a blacksuited cop like night from a tear in evening.

Chava and I watch from the kitchen, gathering up the bag and the broken stuff. Lots of silver spoons, a white-gold ring, pricetags on it all. Brian strides into the living room, gestures at the cop with two fingers, then ignores him and talks into his phone. —Yeah, so, uh, I'm calling with a safety concern. You have an employee, uh, called Memo? ... you're not the manager? Lemme speak to the manager, then ... I wanna fill out a report, um, officer, I'm just layin some groundwork here.

—Groundwork?— mumbles the cop.

—The guy who stole the bike. I'm gettinnis real name.

—You're reporting a bike stolen, then?

I grin behind my mask at Chava. —Two cops in two days, shit! There goes the neighborhood.

—I didn't think you'd come. Thanks.

—I figured it out, later. I'm not selfish. Everyone knows ... I dunno, Chava, this's a messy situation. Raise yer hand if you walked away tonight with a plan to get paid.

—Too messy to get your rent back?

—No! Too messy to help. Maybe we shid go in on a notary and give Manuel a little push.

—This happened because we thought it was messy. Now look. We shoulda done more.

—Like what? ... I'm not mad at you, Chava, I'm honestly askin. What in the universe would we've done better?

—You said literally the same thing the other night to Brian ... ! I was scared of Dave's temper. I wanted a place to stay, I didn't find balance here.

—Ain't no balance! You've been under homeless house arrest for six months! She's not your mom. Wrappinner hand up just now's the best you coulda done. And when I said that the other night, I meant, well, yo sin embargo, I'da handled Dave with a firmer hand. Get yourself outta the middle of it, give them the responsibility! Tellya what, let's put ideas into practice, I'll get us a motel room for the night and you can just chill out and find your spot. Whatta ya say?

Brian's pacing the living room faster and faster. The cop tells him he can't just wait there all night for him. Silent as he must only be when pissed to the top, Brian puts his phone down and submits to the cop's intake.

Chava whips his phone out and looks surprised. —What is it?— He nods back at the bedrooms. —It's Dave. I don't think he wanted to text all of us. It says Manny, I have a buyer for the house. Then just now, to just me, he wantsta know if Brian left.

Speaking of whom, Brian steps away from the cop back toward us.

—What got burnt, guys?

My heart sinks, but not like I'm sad, like it's funny enough that my chest unseizes for once. I get another handtowel out, reach into the oven, scoop the Tollhouse cookies into the trash and walk the cracked warped ipad over to Brian. When the word fuck booms from the depths of his black islander soul, the cop spooks and touches his impotent stolen-election little pig gun.

—Anything new?

—Just Shelly. She and Ted didn't get Covid in Hawaii. But then they had it when they got home. They're okay, Ted's only vaping these days, so it's fine.

—He could still die! He's smoking now, while he's sick? ... Jesus. What about Deanna?

—I dunno, hon. I didn't ask. I don't have the energy for more bad news. How's your new place?

—I got, we got, kicked out.

—What did you,

—We didn't do nothing! The lady who lives there's got dementia and they hafta sell the place to put her in a home.

—She wasn't already in a home?

—Obviously not, cause I just said! Are they shopping for you?

—Why would they be shopping for me? ... hello? Are you there?

—I shouldn've said anything ... I asked cause I'm low on money. I got furloughed at my job and there's problems with my rent. I'm worried about if I hafta shop for you last minute.

—I thought he wasn't cashing your rent check.

—He didn't,

—So what's the problem?

—Now he did, now I don't live there, and I need to know what I'm gonna have.

—Then you shoulda cancelled your check! I don't unnerstand. Your dad'd bought our move-up by the time he was your age. Are you really living that tightly, hand to mouth?

—Since I was eighteen, mom! I didn't cancel the check cause I wanted to keep the upper ... I'm gettin a nother call. I'll call you back, okay? Bye. Hello, Dave?

—Chava! Time to settle up. The halse's changin hands.

—Already?

—And I needa quitclaim,— he chuckles at something away from the phone, —Know what a quitclaim is? ... It means you give up. And fuck yer key. While you were playin hide the pickle, I put new locks onna halse.

—I didn't need to get in it. Didjou tell your uncle?

Super Nintendo noise crunches against the mic. —None a yer business!— He almost shouts through the phone. —You sign this quitclaim, I'll give ya five hunnerd bucks.

—Is that what you got for your mom's rings and the gold off her wine glasses?— He just yuks three times in his throat. —I'm askin, did you tell your uncle? Cause he told me and Gil he'd handle it.

Another chuckle. —Fine, I'll sign the stupid thing, as much as it's gonna mean. I'll come to the house and sign it? When? You gonna have a mask on?

—Ah ah ah! Gil, too.

—Gil? No! What makes you think I'm even talkin to him after that show at the house last time?

—Wal, thinka how many cobs you won't hafta nobble with five hunnerd smackers. You can stand Gil one more day.



—What does the quitclaim say? Do I still take the blame for you breaking your mom’s stuff?

—Don’t try to gimme terms.— Dave sounds actually dropped on his head as a kid.

—I’m askin you for your terms! Plus, how do you have terms when your uncle’s gettin power of attorney over the house, and saw the stuff break?

—My uncle’s got Covid, poindexter!

—So do,

—I gotta independent buyer. I stay where I am, live happily ever after!— His voice is like a *Mortal Kombat* badguy. My face gets hot, I imagine Katie isolated, not going to the bathroom, starving in a narrow white woodpaneled room. —What about your mom? Who’s taking care of her? ... Dave! Are you there?

—Not at the pad. Aaahh, god dammit ... those fuckin paisa kids,— he drops his voice, —those paisa friends of Junior’s pissed in the fuckin fridge drawer!

Does this family hang with any paisas? Just because they’re Mexicans doesn’t necessarily qualify them for paisahood. Did he get that word from a Peter Malae book? Probably not. —How do you know it was them?

—They were in here laughing!

—You were just laughing, too.

—Shut the fuck up, Chava! Yeeewerjist laughin teeeew. That’s all you fuckin college boys know how to do, you think yer educated cause you can take what anyone says and try to turn it around, as if the other way you see it means a fuckin thing in the situation! Fuck you, Chava! ... When yer ready, tal me. I’ll give you the spot. And bring Gil.

—Spot? What if I'm ready now? Are you still quarantining? Dave?

I text my mom, the car is clean and unmolested. My left hip glows like a headlight with pain, I pull with my weak lats, can't turn over in the sleeping bag, flop my face over on the rear-deck carpet. Maybe I should've called Gil's bluff with the motel room, and then asked Brian if he had a place for a few days. After all, he got me into Katie's house. My hips and lower back don't let me think of what she's going through, or where Manuel's taken her.

I stand up on the curb and stretch, but I can't stretch deep enough. When will the tires I hear screeching through the downtown air come and end my work furlough?

I creep the hatchback down Needles and make a right into Wool Creek. People still only speak Viet down in this 1950s narrow walkup neighborhood, a whole other level of anonymity except for the neighbors' mad-dogging the car and me. But the guilt from meanness won't go away, intentionally camping out around the corner from my mom, the quarantine's wall of daylight between us solid and aggressive as ever. On top of not being able to ask my supervisor if he furloughed me because he found out I slept in the trucks, it feels like honesty will be prohibited forever behind six feet of neglect.

I stroll down toward the creek, try to help my hips with natural movements. Focus on getting my rent back. My mom's right, and I feel stupid for being honest with the check. Now I know why Facundes hasn't responded to my concerned text about the rent. Nothing to focus on.

The day is short, the trash everywhere, I hate daylight savings. At five, when the sky is closing down, Facundes comes through with a text

message. He doesn't answer my question, like people never do, but asks me to do him the favor of checking on the house.

—Hey, Chava.

—Gil. Manuel asked me to have a look at the house.

—Did he? Why? What'd he say?

—It was just a text message, he didn't say anything. Member Dave texted us the other night, probably without meaning to, that he had a independent buyer? Just now Manuel texted me to go look and see if there's a sign. Like a wood, real estate,

—Lynching-tree sign.

—Yeah. Lynching?

—Lynching, dude. What else do private property owners love?

Gil sounds busy with his what else, like he's showing that he can handle me putting one more thing on his plate. —Okay, let's be serious for just a second. You haven't gone by, have you?

—Why don't we just go tonight?— Gil's voice grins, —Maybe there's still a party.

—I think you might be right. Dave said Junior was over.

—Junior?

—Who pissed in the fridge drawer.

Gil laughs heartily into the phone. —That could be why Dave's in such a big hurry.

—Yeah, true ... look, when we get there, let's talk about how to keep Manuel on our side for getting our rent back. But he's havin me look at the house probably, cause, Dave told me, he's got Covid. And Dave's still on my ass to make me admit under pressure that we messed up the house,

—Wait a minute. Dave said when? You said Manuel called or Dave called?

—I said,

—Shit, did they find Brian's motorcycle?

—What? How should I know,

—Kay, I'll call Dave. And there's apparently Dave's kid moving in? Might wanna yknow, fact-check, cause he changes his mind alla time.

Or he doesn't trust me. But it's the same practically. —Yeah, but let's hook up at the house and talk it out, first. He'll turn us against each other to sign off on his thing.

Gil laughs. —Oh, I'll sign off onnis thing! I'll call you when I'm close. I'm bikin, so.— Did he mean it seriously, or he meant Dave's thing like an expression?

He calls me back, breathing hard, about two hours later, just as I'm finishing a can of menudo I brought to the 7-11 microwave. In front of my turning bumper there are kids on the trampoline and relatives drinking diverse things they must've brought with.

No sooner am I in the driveway with my last clean mask on, one middle-aged relative opens a shiny foil-wrapped box and the other starts bawling disconsolately. From the box fly fake butterflies aflutter down onto the concrete. Then they see me. —Who're you?

—I'm uh, I'm here to see the house,— I look both ways, no realtor sign.

—Are you one of Ryan's friends?— she sets down the box and wraps an arm around the sobbing one. They both look exhausted. —Ryan?

—The Filipino. With the hat.

—Oh, yeah. You know him? Is he here?

—Haven't seenim. Here, I needa take her inside. You don't need that mask.

—What happened?— I ask because showing concern makes people trust you. She reaches up and wipes the bawling woman's eyes for her with a hanky. —Her husband just died.

The sobbing woman adds: —The shyster doctors stuck a pipe in Heitor's throat and he suffocated on it! But all you hear is how overworked they are, how traumatized they are! You get a pipe stuck in yer lung!

—He died of Covid? Was he at the last party here?

—We can't prove he got it here!

—Yeah. I'm really sorry. Take care. Is Dave innis room?— She shrugs with an apologetic grimace and takes the other woman away. I try my key on the front door. The locks aren't new. Maybe Dave meant he changed them in the past because he planned that it'd be done by when he thought he'd see me next. I chuck my key down into the oleander and catshit. It looks like someone spilled a whole lot of catbox down there recently.

In the fridge I don't see any sign that a kid pissed in the crisper drawer. The TV dinners are gone from the freezer, Dave probably shoveled them down as granted during his quarantine.

—Are you one of Dave's friends?— A woman approaches me, about my mom's age, Willow-Glen thin and sunburnt. —Yeah. My name's Chava. I'm here cause I thought Dave wanted to see me. I moved out last week, but we're not square for rent money yet.

—Not square as in you still need to pay?

—As in I paid for a month but moved out sooner.— She looks angry that I saw that she missed the obvious interpretation. I add, —I’ve been talking to Manuel, it’s above-board.

The two women from outside gravitate toward us, the grieving one still really upset. —I see. You don’t wanna buy this place? We need to get Katie looked at, and besides this place has too many memories. My name’s Gloria. These are my husband’s cousins, Josefina Antonieta and Griselda.

—Nice to meet you, officially ... we met outside.

—I see. Oh. Judy! That’s my youngest. Judy, come say hi to Josefina.— The young woman comes over to us and now we’re in a knot in the doorway of the kitchen, me standing right where Katie cut her hand. —So, did you talk to Manuel about what Dave’s been doing around here? Dave offered to settle with me for five hundred bucks, but it’d be nice if Manuel could back it without having to come to Dave’s terms.

—What terms?— Judy takes over for her mom, —yknow, Manny’s gonna get power of attorney over this house. If you’re pre-approved, you can ask us to drop the five hundred from a sale price if it means that much to you. And then you can put an ADU where that garage is and make income from this place.

—Oh, ADU, ADU!— advises Josefina through a disconsolate heave.

—I dunno, I’ve had a hard run in my life, I’m not sure I’d have a down pay,

—You needa know how credit works,— persists the young yuppie, —if you charge market rate to rent an ADU, that’s like three grand a month in San José. Think about diversity. If you’re not renting part of

your property for market rates, how can you support communities of color?

—She always comes up with that to backhand at me for just living with my husband,— Gloria gets in edgewise. Judy steps back in, the boss-checklist unwavering: —Um, well, I took a class at UCSC about equity and inclusion for housing providers? And, homelessness isn't gonna fix itself. And on my self-care Tiktok, I've been getting clips from a podcast that reminded me, you could be preventing the next George Floyd if you're providing housing. I'm doing a remodel on my place. It's my second re-fi? Get a jumbo mortgage loan, be represented as a person of color. That's your people.— That last part with a tone that at one point in my life was seductive, like, if I get the loan, she'll go out with me, but then suddenly disgust. —But I guess maybe you're education's not up to it.

—How'd you get money so young?— I ask honestly, flabbergasted.

—My husband works for Twitter?

—So ... I don't have a husband.— I shrug and they give up on me. Some other dude comes in with a barbecue grille scraper and goes to work on the oven rack.

—You ride?

—What? Oh, the mask? I just thought it was funny.

—That's pemp, dude.— Poor guy's probably been spitting when he talks his whole life, and now the world's turned to suspecting spit categorically. No mask, of course.

A tap at the broken window. It's Gil, finally. I run outside.

—Has Dave called you?— he's breathless and looks unusually dirty, scratching at a knee.

—No. He's not in his room?

—Okay, good,— he tries to grin, —I had him take his big idea for a spin.

—When? ... Whadjou do? Whatta you mean a spin? What's funny? I asked you to do one thing for me, Gil! Just come talk to me before you try to save the world with, your, whatever! And you couldn't even do that! Couldjou? You already screwed it up!

My attention seesaws desperately for a moment. Did he intentionally do the opposite of what I asked him? But why. He doesn't get it.

—You said we don't needa know what he wants, but just distractim when he gets weird. And Brian, who knows everything, or basically everything, just let me be the target of Dave's moods, and didn't bother explaining why Dave has moods, even know he knows, cause he's working with Dave, and you didn't even see that cause it's all about you!

—How's Brian working with Dave?— Gil's voice is patient but he does angry things like clap both hands over his eyes. —Look, Gil. He's probly mad at me cause I got the room!

—Look, he asked me if you were okay plenty times. He's not mad at you.

—He said he wished he had a place to come take a piss anytime of night.

—No he didn't. How do you remember him saying that word for word? He said, he felt, when he said it, that he felt lucky to have a place like this. Your having a room didn't decide if he could come take a piss.

—Fine. That idea went too far. But if we're all gonna cut ahead and not say what's really important, this's never gonna end.

—What's never gonna end?— Now Gil's hands encircle like he thinks he's found the logical center of the whole conversation, and he's calling me out to say it so we can continue. I know that if I answer, now



it'll sound like I'm making the whole thing about me. He can't trap me like this!

—There you go again! You said it yourself, you've got an impossible job to stay in agreement with people,

—Which you agreed with in your life ... ow! My fffffriggin knee.

—who don't see the need to agree, and that's now what they see as the problem, steada the real problem. That's what I'm tryna get you to see, Gil!

This is now a competition between us to show who agreed more with the other and whom now, with that in mind, should be accused of breaking the deal about agreeing with each other.

—You do it, too, when you try to fix things. Yknow what, you can fix things by just giving me five hunderd bucks, since now Dave's, what,

—Hopefully a milkshake,— offers Gil immediately. We go on and on but the answer never comes out. —I'm sorry, man. But let's take a walk, Manuel could be here any minute, and he's sick.

—Since when's it bad that Manny could be here any minute. Gil! Why's it bad that Manny could be here any minute?— The other night we said this on the phone to Facundes. Gil's craning his neck all over now, the top half of his body fleeing but his feet stuck where my voice grabs him.

—There's nothing I can do, on your schedule, Chava! I'm screwed!

Then he limps away like he hurt his leg, but we get pushed back together when the old van explodes, like a firework setup getting out of hand in someone's driveway. I run over to my mom's hatchback, no sign of tampering. Gil disappears on his bike just when I think I'd better go before the fire department and police show up asking questions.

—What happened?— It's a little girl, not the neighbor's girl, holding the hand of a large-chested chaparrita in a panther haltertop and sandals in this cold evening.

—It just caught on fire,— I start. She looks at me disgusted. —Duh.

—Excuse me, do you know if Dave's here?— says the mom, clearly used to dealing with Dave's people without proper introductions. I smile at the little girl, realize now that her mom's got bedrolls tied to that one suitcase. —No. Are you meeting him?

—I'm moving in.

It's easier to carry an empty cup than a full one. I wink at the girl. —Good luck.

ow where Dave is. He was sposed to call me an hour ago and tell me when he's coming. You feel okay, Kate? You can breathe? Here, let me smell. Do you still have Vicks, or do you need more? Yknow, there's so many trends and advertising for everything ... I think fewer people'd be dyin from this if they'd just remember to buy Vicks, that we know helps, steada something organic from Whole Paycheck that's too lightweight and evaporates and just cause it's new. Here. I'll put some more on. I'm not tryna get fresh. There. Can you smell it? You might just have allergies from that jacket. Here, look, yeah ... sat better? Look, I wiped it clean, but the inside still has Tony in it, right? Speakinna ... where'd you put the photos? ... Hey, did you see what happened to the photos?

What photos?

The ones for Kate!

No idea. Is she movin stuff around in there? Is she rearranging?

I got an inhaler, too, if you need it. It's, look, I hung it up from this string from the fridge, okay? If you feel like, are you listening? ... Kate, can you just look at me and tell me if you're listening? Yknow, you might be listening, and you've gotta plan, but if you don't acknowledge me. You got me? Okay? Look. Here on this string, on the fridge. That's for you, you just, here, watch, I've got the cover off already, if you feel like your throat's tight, just put your lips on it like I do, see? And push down. Right? Kate? Did you see the last part? Why are the blinds so important? You look fine, but let's make sure you can be comfortable. You feel up to takin a walk?

Manny,

Did he call back?

Kaiser called.

Not Mitch? The lawyer?

No, Kaiser called. They can't tell me if she's been there. They said Tony's and her's coverage was up years ago.

Kay, all I could find in the house was an address book with Wood, down Story.

*mp mp mp mp mp mp*

Didjou callim?

Yes, I'm not an idiot! Whatta ya think I'm sittin here playin with myself and checkin stocks?

You were worried about yer carnival ride.



—Don't be ... cmon, that's silly. This's how crappy businessmen run their little crappy castles. Unless you got a dark embezzlement secret,

—I guess my parents' public service didn't prepare me for the finer details of,— Thomas just called me back when I got a text message from my brother, and I can't keep focused. Following up on how Dad's going to get better and we're going to sue the VA for not caring for him, he says Dad's the toughest shellback, with his usual bragging voice that comes through text message perfectly. Is he serious, did he get something from Elena that I misread? Or saying what he said as not to say what he means? The tension only lets me think of my dad's beernut-enclosing fist shaking back and forth from the elbow, a maraca treatment before each mouthful of nuts.

—How're you?

—I, yknow, I gave myself a hangover, disrupted my hydration schedule. I didn't even drink.

—Time to switch to gummies.

—Nah, I quit in protest when they legalized it. Look, I tried to convince Jorsh not to let you go.

I suppose I sound apologetic. Thomas hesitates. —What'd you say?

—Spineless little shit wouldn't even stand up to me. He thinks he's being an empathetic boss, absorbing employee stress, yknow, by letting me have at him, but I know he's hiding his just, total, dearth of personality and self-determination up the corporate privilege's asshole.

—That's what you said?

—No.— I tell him approximately what I said, with audible mala gana.

—I know you're an old punk rock guy or whatever, but you're nuts yelling at your boss.

—I didn't yell at him! You can't yell at someone who can call the cops and have me gunned down for opening my mouth! Whatever I can say to him, from down where I am in the corporate obsequious to where he is up on the corporate omnipotent, doesn't count as yelling.

Thomas sighs and thinks. —There were times,— that adult white-people cream-whipping tone of reluctant listing, —that I fulfilled orders and wanted to make sure there wasn't a return request, cause I was still learning to handle the workflow, and I'd had early failures with handling sales and return requests in one day, mostly from phoneline availability, so as a consequence the sales got logged late. I'm sure if I'd communicated with Jorsh better,

—Why you standin up for Jorsh?

—I'm not, I'm reflecting!— Silently I'm glad our tenuous work relationship has survived this much of the conversation. —Did you say you liked me? When you yelled attim?

—Course not! You can't just say what you feel. I hadda put a workload-reason on it.

—Hmm ... did you have to use the F word?

—It's his people's word!

—But you said it!

—I used it for his comfort! To come bearing tribute to his unilateral corporate power ego!

—What're you, Electra?

—How was he ever gonna unnerstand a word I said unless I translate it with faggot and football and real estate and yoga? You're right, teacher parents don't prepare you for that. So. The thing about

baiting white people, or latinos or Asians, with being bigots, is that they never have a defense, at least not in this country, so it always works.

—Anyhow, I called cause I know you were looking for a place.

—You know of one?

—Well, I'm unemployed, so I could use help paying my rent for the interim.

—Dude!— A crust of me lifts off like a toenail pried loose, like burnt beans deglazed by water from a pan, flies off into the dark matter, leaves me head to toe bare to the November cold. —I could be totally unobtrusive. And I clean out of respect for the house, not judgmentally. I've never missed rent in my life.

—Okay, well, my landlord's pretty cool, it's not a company. I just hope he doesn't make us do a new lease, cause that'll increase the rent.

The crust's particles suck back out of space into perfect shape and clamp back around me. —Yeah. I'd understand, if that happened. We'll see. Either way, dude, thank you, Thomas.

—I'll letcha go, job hunting.

—Peace.— The sky sits low on Sierra Vista, but no rain. Why doesn't it rain? Back to 2012.

Elena's update about Dad sits there awaiting the back-and-forth. My brother hasn't said anything since the suing the VA line how many days ago. I can't say what I want to, so I ask if he's been back in the cardiac chair, the same old attempts to get him to move.

The back-and-forth works, she comes back with his pneumonia hasn't gone away and the doctor says the virus is in his spinal cord. What virus? I choose to just believe her. It's an autoimmune disease, of course we're all full of viruses that we don't care about until we have to.

She reiterates how much she misses him and how much she wants him to come home. I reiterate my gratitude to her for looking after him. She responds of course I'm taking care of him. I feel regret now that she says that for my benefit. After my dad's second wife ran away with his credit score I was wary of Elena, like I ought to be, and she still reacts to me sometimes in her own defense. But this woman dumped her husband of forty years, complicated things with her kids and grandkids, to be with my dad. And now look what she gets after six flighty years, from a romance to a mercy mission.

Chava calls me and things accelerate. I can't believe I'm calling Dave. —Wild Gil Dickock!

—Hey, someone called for an exterminator?

—You're still Chava's man, uh?

—You can tell that through the phone? He asked me to call you.

—He shoulda aksed you to taughtem how to be a roommate, maybe you'da come through. Till you bounce him up like a scared pussy up on a Fuckin Roof cause yer scared to fight.

—About Chava. I thought we had a deal where your uncle'd handle the cash and the keys.

—No keys. He's got Covid, he's down for the count.

—Really.— Shit. The rent is out the window. Closure, I guess, no more worrying about it. —You gonna sell the house cash to the Chinese?

—You both sign this quitclaim, I got five hunnerd bucks apiece for you.

So why should the rent be gone? Manny will do business. —I don't get it, what's the quitclaim worth? Your uncle's requiring it?

—I said don't worry bout my uncle.



—I said I'm not in the middle of nothin!

—Cmon, Gil. Do it for Chava.— I put on a disadvantaged voice.

—So where you gonna be?

—I'm takin care of my uncle's business.

—If that's what you wanna call it.

—I mean I'nginna be, I'm answerin your god damn question, Gil, I'nginna be where I am, which is on Story.

On my bike I call Brian. —Brian! Didjou getcher bike back?

—No.

—Dude. I'm gonna see Dave right now at the dope spot. I've got him right where I wantim. It's like George Sand said, dude, deception is the tool if not the right of the poor.

—Oh. Did he do a Ted Talk? ... So, wait, Gil. Don't rush in where fools dare to tread. I went to Safeway and got Memo's information.

—Did you blow the whistle on Dave, too? I feel awful about Katie, it's gotta be,

—Not yet. I don't have a case.

—A case? Detectives figure that stuff out, Brian! Just addim to the theft, god! No one's gonna blame you for adding information. You sure you don't want me to pushim?

—Memo got arrested and charged. Just move on, Gil. I got insurance.

I come over 101 on the Story bridge, where the whole Santa Cruz mountains are revealed when I look behind me, fog pouring off the long even ridge down into the dent of Los Gatos. I find the gravel lot and fence outside Prusch Park, just like he said. Well well well, our rendezvous point includes a gravitron! And it's not even on one of

those pedestals, ass in the dust, its fancy light-up marquee off somewhere disassembled.

—No carnival, Dave?

—Last minute cancellation,— Dave spits and scratches, —he’s tryna store it in town till Christmas in the Park. Return to normal.

—I’m sure it will.— My brow drops by itself at Dave. —Wheresat quitclaim?

—Where’s Chava?— counters Dave, dust blown about his boots and over his pompadour.

—He’s onnis way. Come on, I just want the five hunnerd bucks. Lemme sign it.

Dave vacillates, hands empty, likely he doesn’t have the quitclaim written, yep, pulls a ballpoint pen awkwardly from his Safeway uniform. —If you don’t have it, Dave, I gotta defer to my deal with Manuel.

—Make it quick, then,— Manuel steps down from behind the truck’s driver door, —Katie’s waiting on me at home.

—Manuel?— I ask like a moron in a movie, —Nice four-fifty you got there. Shouldn’t you both be at home quarantined till you get better?— I look to read his name on an operator badge, don’t find one.

—Tchú!— Evidently this was not part of Dave’s plan.

—Well, since we’re all here, howbout do us a favor, and hook me up with five hunnerd, and the same for Chava, so Dave’s got no tenant problems to hand over to you. You can just leave it on the generator there, I’ll go pick it up.

Manuel starts, but Dave intervenes: —No tenant problems! They got no fuckin legal ...! Tchú, you’re makin tenant problems if you reconnize these two. It’s not scientology.

—You see how he did that, tío? I'm impressed! He did the thing where he rides what someone else says for his own reasons, and managed to land it on his side, even know it came from a disadvantage.— Manuel turns green on me behind his mask. Dave's lucid enough to know that I just did the thing where I take power from someone by saying their intentions out loud, the emperor has no clothes defense. —I guess we better wait for Chava then. Hey, tío, yknow I've always wanted to ride a gravitron.

He cracks a huge leer. —You never rode a gravitron? Where's Chava now?

—He said you asked him to check the house.

Dave's eyes go wide at his uncle, but he doesn't protest. Manuel continues: —I spose they're havinna nother party.

—It hasn't even been inspected,— he says to Dave, not to me.

If I get coronavirus from either of these louts, I swear. Measuring my distance, I pepper Manuel with questions and eagerly hear his business past until the huge diesel generator's thrumming out its tall black stovepipe. But he doesn't put down any cash on it. He watches it vibrate like he's considering something. Why doesn't he just pay me? Dave tries to chime in but only gets as far as complaining about his dead dad.

—It'll be ready in a sec. Thanks for dropping by,— the practiced landlord line, thanks for the call, even when a nuclear bomb is dropping.

—Anyway, how's Katie?

—I dunno, Gil. She won't tell me what she needs. She has the jacket, and the shoes, and she doesn't ask to go home. She's not coughing. We're okay. I appreciate your asking.

Has he taken her to a doctor beside the emergency room? —We really wanted to helper out with money, yknow, for treatment,— I assure him, —plus beat the housing market, yknow, mutual aid! But I guess it's bigger than that. Dave, you were the one establishes the context in that house, but you forgot to do it, you jumped to yellin at us and makin us guess what to do.— My rage at Jorsh is leaking out, I have to contain it before I get in a corner, —Who knows if we coulda done better if you'd been clearer about her situation.

—He's tallin me how much to talk. Like I don't have women to tal me that already. When'd Chava say he'd get here?— Dave's looking at his car, I wonder what all that 1960 sheet metal would say if it could talk. —You got a piece of paper to write on in there, Dave? ... If you don't even have the quitclaim written, why'd you even ask us out here?

—I didn't, you invited yerself over! You can sign or I can put yer names on somethin you don't get to sign.

—Cause Chava told me you told him to come over! Everyone who matters already knows you were sellin your mom's stuff and that we didn't mess up your house. I'm the one found the stupid jacket that she wanted so much! Tío, you sure you don't just wanna settle up and shut him up?

Dave looks mad at his uncle just for hearing it all again, like repetition gets him in more trouble. Here we go. An impossible deal, one side gets to offer a choice of more chaos and aggression or a phony deal to avoid the aggression, the other side isn't allowed a counter-offer. Time to give these men something I don't get to sign. —It's cool, man. Let's take a ride, yeah?

The gravitron's dark inside, the same dark as a house in escrow or a shipping container hiding immigrants. —It's an electric motor, then, yeah?

—Whattaya got, a theodolite, Steven Hawkins?— Dave coughs. —Come stand onna wall.

Manuel mutters lemme turn things on. The inner lightswitch works, bulbs wash even bluegreen around the angled afternoon framed in the doorway. Let's try the console. —Hey, it's plugged in! So it turns on like this, right guys?— Turn this key, right. Twist the knob this way since it can't go that way.

—Don't touch that, god dammit! What're you doing?— sings Manuel's voice, absorbed by the motor clearing its throat all around us. —Okay, but just for a minute.

—Yeah, just for a minute,— pleads Dave, and commences to stick to the wall. Within about ten seconds we'll have exceeded the gravitational force equivalent and Dave's feet will leave the floor. Normally everything inside one of these is moving with you, so you can't tell that you're moving, and it's quite peaceful, but reality flashes sickly outside the trapdoor that I left open.

—This isn't safe,— Manuel's voice wavers, desperate, about to lose his livelihood. His ringed knuckles and index finger hover for a second pointed at the console, then flap up over his head. —What're you ...!

—Gil!— If Dave spits coronavirus, it just slaps right back into his stubble under three times the gravitational force equivalent.

I judge the jump, jump to the door, stick next to it, peel myself to the verge, and vacuum myself out. I miss the steps and railing but land such as to fold my left ankle in and dig a post-hole into the gravel with the right knee. Now the thing's really going and Dave's and Manuel's

voices blend or process or juice faintly between the generator and the gravitron's motor. I get on my bike and jam through the splitting slicing throbs. I'd rather see Bush and Cheney getting their brains scrambled in that gravitron, but Dave'll be a good little Eichmann for now.

Good, bumpers and grilles are piled up on Story like always, quarantine or not, red lights that I can run and Dave can't, if they've even got out of the gravitron yet, if Manuel hasn't had a coronary. A delicious invisible cloud around King Eggrolls. The only tricky light is the Lucretia dead-end with the Walmart, so I do the right-in-left-out U-turn special in the Walmart easement before cars come. The 25 bus honks discreetly behind me as I clear the Walmart bus stop. Legs hurt like hell, knee is swelling. This'd better be the last time I have to do a show like that with Dave. I need some last times in my life, some ends.

When I arrive at the house there's a thin party going on, bottles swinging, a cold wind from the bay creeping down the dry trash-choked Guadalupe's bed, autumn settling in. I look in the infamous cracked windowpane and see Chava watching some unmasked person's hammy elbow scrub in the open oven with a barbecue brush. I tap on the window and out he comes. He says Dave hasn't called him, which is a good sign, and I try to tell him that Manuel hesitated on paying us, but his corneas change shape again.

—I asked you to do one thing for me, Gil! Just come talk to me before you try to save the world with, your, whatever! And you couldn't even do that!— I've never heard Chava scream, it's like the whole quarantine came out of him at once.

—But dude, we needed to hear it from his mouth!

—Yes, we!— he screams again, —the both of us, not you! You said all I had to do was come talk to you! Remember that! You were reliable!

—I’m still reliable, don’t play with words like that. I’ve been absolutely consistent. Look, he’s not in a position to make demands, and that’s what I demonstrated to him. You can blow the whistle for elder abuse anytime, and meanwhile we can wait out Manuel’s check, —I speak faster so he won’t know I’m bluffing, —and it can just be a check for you, I don’t care about the rent anymore, I’m putting it behind me.

—Neither of us has the money for court if Dave sues us back.

—¡Y bueno, Chava! La hacemos de redentor, salimos crucificados pues.

—¡No hay nada de redentor! Don’t you see yourself, Gil? When you’re off humiliating Dave, cause I asked you to help me understand the situation here, you’re not paying attention and you replace the help with jamming him into the shape of what you think of the situation! And that’s only gonna show on you, not on him! No one needs you to put a gold asshole frame around his face!

—What’s the alternative,— I lean against the house to get off my knee, look both ways for attentive relatives, —do nothing and then you think I’m not reliable?

—I couldn’t even rely on you to come get my point of view, so you’d know how heavy the situation was!

You see what happens when you try to help people. Another impossible situation, he offers the choice of me indulging his emotions or letting the situation get out of control, plus jumping from the reality of it to his prosecuting my handling of his feelings, with no right of counteroffer for me. No different than with Dave or my dad.

I'm such an idiot. Mixing up in these people's feelings was not compassion. A reflex, a movement, a tool of compassion that never developed into something healthy. —There's nothing I can do, on your schedule, Chava! I'm screwed! I chose to help the situation along steada help you feel better about it. I couldn't say nothing to you, to Liset, to anyone in the world, all I can do is the most good for everyone involved!

—Except yourself, your own happiness. You just blew yourself outta situation that could've been,

—Could've, should've, you're gonna drive me up the god damn wall with that fake perfectionism.— The rage at Jorsh flares up again from my screaming patellar tendons.

—I'm talkin about renting here, not with Liset.

—I'm sorry, man. But let's take a walk, Manuel could be here any minute.

—Since when's it bad that Manny could be here any minute. Gil! Why's it bad that Manny could be here any minute? We agreed on the phone, at the park!

I grab my bike and mount one leg on. —Later.

—Gil! ... Why're you stumbling like that?— The air whooshes and one of my right earbones goes not just silent but hollow for a second. Then the crackle.

—Now what?— We trace the yellow flashes out to the sidewalk where the van sits like an old rusted-out firepit under a virgin blaze. It smells like good real leather roasting under charcoal.

—The van!

I look down the street for someone fleeing, but nothing.

—Whoever was staying in it tried to build a woodfire to heat it.— I can hear the hissing of the shitcats in it too, either their shit is accreted



densely enough to loudly sizzle or the heated air in their lungs is farting out their throats like from a balloon's drip-point. Chava stares at it, how many ideas, each a tongue of flame, peeking out from his brain through his eyes.

—That's the end a that van ... Like I said, I'm sorry, Chava. It was never for you or me to control.— All this talking I did the past few weeks, I don't even know what I said now, how it's going to come back down on me, or if the consequences will be cut off by more isolation. Maybe this won't all be over as soon as the vaccine's out.

Kind of an idiot move, I set up here in the garage to have a place to sprout native trees in buckets for the winter, now I've got no buckets and spent the whole time talking, tied up in problems that were never going to get solved, feelings that were never going to be spared.

Maybe I should buy an old truck and keep the seedlings in the bed for the winter, stay up off Clayton or Quimby or somewhere nice for the winter. Speak to no one just as long as during the quarantine, but now with a reason I can get behind. And if my dad gets better I can post up in the truck wherever he is. What are the odds of that. But to have silence and isolation to myself, for myself, owing it to no one, that might be nice. What else should I probably say before

San José,

Halloween 2020 - Halloween 2022

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