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Edward Hopkins
edward.hopkins@student.shu.edu

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LEAVES RIPPED FROM WET BRANCHES

Edward Hopkins

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Angela Wed for Nathan Oates

Nathan Oates, Thesis Mentor

Angela Wed for Mark Senvold

Mark Senvold, Second Reader

Introduction

My thesis, *Leaves Ripped from Wet Branches*, consists of three short stories with the same narrator, Rupert Fabber, who, from the perspective of time passed, relays his pathetic memories of a school day, a week at summer camp, and a cruise to Bermuda. In the following introduction, I will not relate the stories thematically, since my aim in story writing is not to essay my own notions of good and evil, for example, but to depict what it is like to live in a world in which one oscillates between good and evil. Nevertheless, thematic notes will surely be struck, for I will discuss the stories in terms of genre and structure.

The first story, “An Extraordinary Day at Lyle P. Porter’s Elementary School for the Gifted,” functions via the realism of Franz Kafka. That is, an absurd premise appears in an otherwise real world, and the premise is treated as if real. In Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” Gregor Samsa transforms into a bug, wherefrom his family regards the change as actual. Similarly, in “An Extraordinary Day,” the teachers of the school carry firearms loaded with blanks and discipline the students in unreal (but not unreal) ways. Robert Coover, who claims to have learned “realism from guys like Kafka” (Kunzru), illuminates the purpose of this perspective:

“Fairy tales, religious stories, national and family legends, games and sports, TV cartoons and movies, now video and computer games—it’s a metaphoric toy box we all share. Sometimes all this story stuff feels like the very essence of our mother tongue, embedded there before we’ve even learned it...The best way to expose that and free ourselves up is to get inside it and play with it and make it do new things.”

(Hudson)

The shared knowledge, then, in “An Extraordinary Day” is the experience of studentry, particularly in an elementary setting. The social pressures amongst one’s peers; the often ridiculous authority imposed by teachers; the lack of freedom and thus meaning; the sexuality and violence that ripple

underneath it all: as a child, one feels these things but is unable to articulate them. These latent (or sometimes not so latent) forces are brought to the fore in “An Extraordinary Day” by the unreal premise of teachers armed with unloaded weapons. Fear, confusion, unexamined happiness, tenuous bonds, meanness, and compassion all manifest in result.

Note that in “The Metamorphosis,” the narrator never explains Samsa’s transformation, nor do characters question its plausibility. Likewise, in “An Extraordinary Day,” the teacher’s weaponry receives no explanation. As such, my story straddles the genres of romance and realism, as defined by Northrop Frye. Frye writes that the “romancer does not attempt to create ‘real people’ so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes,” (304) and in result, archetypal characters become “heroic and therefore inscrutable” (308). In contrast to the romancer, “[t]he [realist] novelist deals with personality, with characters wearing their *personae* or social masks” (305). The distance between these two genres lessens with the realism of Kafka and Coover: The symbolic and the literal assume equal import; the story becomes both strange and identifiable. This negotiation between romance and realism, if successful, does not mitigate the dramatic force or multivalent resonance that such a story can effect. Playful yet sincere, the story can strike all notes at once.

The mixing of romance and realism occurs in my second story, “Kid Vicious’ Camp for Ungrateful Children,” as well. Though here, the strategy differs. No unreal premise exists; rather, a seemingly unreal—a simply strange—narrative ploy develops throughout the story. Kid Vicious, who runs the camp for maladapted middle schoolers, speaks only in Spanish, disciplines oddly but effectively, has an affinity for raccoons, and cooks sumptuous Latin American meals. He seems to be a romantic archetype, a symbol for *something*. Yet as the story progresses, Kid becomes increasingly real. The reader learns of Kid’s backstory, although not wholly. His characterhood slips from the seemingly archetypal to the real, reflecting what he tells the narrator, Rupert Fabber, atop a

sandstone overlook: “Yo enseño que es importante saber lo que es importante saber” (I teach that it is important to know what is important to know.) That is, the symbolic stuff of life matters, how and why one does and is. But Kid doesn’t explain his message any further. Just as his characterhood only suggests at archetypal depth, Kid merely points toward a path with an unknown terminus.

The final story, “The Age of Ana Gatita,” departs from the realism of Kafka/Coover in “An Extraordinary Day” and the measured strangeness of “Kid Vicious.” “The Age” abides by traditional realism. As such, the social relations between characters serve as the primary sources of drama. Much is not said but implied, following Ernest Hemingway’s “iceberg principle,” in which great material lies under the story’s surface, creating the sense of a full world. If the story proves successful, the reader will feel, and perhaps even understand, the familial histories; issues race and social class; and the characters’ prejudices, desires, and vulnerabilities that inform the literal narrative.

While the first two stories, by employing romantic devices, explore the universal, “The Age,” by assuming realism, depicts the particular, namely a week in the life of Rupert Fabber. Even so, “The Age” exhibits a minor metafictional twist for its falling action and denouement. At this point, the “author,” the “real” Rupert Fabber who has been narrating all the stories (which are all explicitly his memories of younger years), enters this one. He talks of his wife editing the story (the preceding narrative) and then narrates to the reader what he told his wife “really” happened with him and the “real” Ana after the week-long cruise. This doubling of authorship (or tripling, if counting yours truly) has two purposes, structural and extra-literary.

Regarding the former purpose, “The Age” assumes the traditional structure of what Kurt Vonnegut calls “Boy Meets Girl” stories: boy finds girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl back forever. Rupert’s pursuit of Ana in “The Age” fits this structure—with a minor alteration to the typical ending of boundless good fortune, the part of this old form that seems (to me) most hokey and

saccharine. Instead of Rupert achieving immediate happiness, he fails with Ana. However, the metafictional twist lets the reader know that, in the indefinite future, Rupert marries and, given the brief glimpse provided, seems to find contentment. This structural deviance, then, allows to the “The Age” to bypass a contemporary reader’s aversion to cliché and leave the reader with the fulfillment of “Boy Meets Girl” stories. In “The Age,” boy meets girl, and boy ends up happy—in the future, with some other girl.

The extra-literary purpose of the metafictional twist involves my predilection to view art as not needing to be mimetic but rather as establishing itself as an aesthetic object. With the latter stance assumed, one can deploy what John Barth calls “ontological mirror tricks” (*Further* 145)—e.g. “The Age”’s holographic authorship—since an aesthetic object, no longer required to hold a burnished mirror to the world, abides by its own rules of being.¹ William H. Gass writes of the possibilities of such abstract fiction: “dream remains a dream because now language *is* the land—in fiction...there is no out-of-doors in the world where language is the land” (*World* 316-17). The landscape of fiction is, after all, only linguistic, a fact which gives rise to Modernist literary innovations and beyond. Many varieties of these abstract innovations exist and continue to be published, each with its own theoretical and dramatic purport.

Yet all abstract art, by in some way highlighting its own aesthetic objecthood, “give[s] us the clues for its own interpretation,” as Gass writes (*World* 328). He continues that “it is by means of the interpretation that the fictional world arises above the page” (*World* 328). An ontological statement, then, becomes an epistemological one; art’s comment upon itself becomes a call for the reader’s service. As Wolfgang Iser writes in *The Act of Reading*, “it is in the reader that the text comes to life”

¹The representational and the abstract, it should be noted, exist on a continuum, rather than as opposites. Both, therefore, possess the same ontology, but each seeks a different aim, one no nobler than other.

(19); “text itself simply offers ‘schematized aspects’ through which the subject matter of the work can be produced, while the actual production takes place through an act of concretization,” i.e., the act of reading (21). The being *and* doing of the text itself thus move to the fore in abstract art. For this reason, such art is not inherently aristocratic and exclusionary—a criticism one often hears (more on this point later).

Abstract art gazes upon the world from a different hill than representational art—but both see the same world. Donald Barthelme, considering art after Modernism, writes of the importance of perspective: “What is important is that he [the artist] has placed himself in a position to gain access to a range of meanings previously inaccessible to his art” (6). There are as many different authorial positions as there are texts, but the one I find myself most drawn too is that of play. “Play,” writes Barthelme, “is one of the greatest possibilities in art” (10). One can interpret my proclivity for play in all sorts of ways, but in truth, I find myself, at the moment, unable to work well (or at all) in any other mode. Moreover, I prefer art that plays (although not disliking the serious or tragic) and simply wish to align myself in that tradition.

Well, as for the theory, that’s that. I should note in closing that notions of genre are dubious terms that, if examined closely, feature aspects of its assumed opposite. And as aforementioned, I take for granted that all texts (and works of art) are aesthetic objects, that both abstract and representational art play by the same rules of aesthetic objecthood—the former simply foregrounds, ironizes, and/or questions these rules. Further, John Barth notes that, from the perspective of an artist at his writing desk, “[t]he particular work ought always to take primacy over [cultural] contexts and [critical] categories” (*Friday* 200). That is, my ultimate aim is to aptly place word after word, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph—which is all I *can* do, really. There is no other option.

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LEAVES RIPPED FROM WET BRANCHES

By Edward Hopkins

Whose curved hand controls,
Francesco, the turning seasons and the thoughts
That peel off and fly away at breathless speeds
Like the last stubborn leaves ripped
From wet branches?

—John Ashbery, “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

An Extraordinary Day at Lyle P. Porter's Elementary School for the Gifted

Because my friend Jimmy Potluckler forgot to do his homework, the teacher brought forth the barber's razor, unfolded and handed it to Barbara Lee to begin Jimmy's punishment. Jimmy began to sob, clutching his strawberry-blonde hair, tears rolling over the soft hills of his sanguine cheeks. Hands down now, James, Ms. Turtle said.

Barbara Lee smiled at the blade and then made hissing noises and slice-and-diced the air above Jimmy's head. She passed the razor to me and I scratched a few scraggly hairs off the back of Jimmy's neck, neating him up kindly.

And so it went, everyone getting a chance to be part of Jimmy's penance. Jimmy lost a few unimportant strands of hair. The rules, Ms. Turtle had said on the very first day of class, in the thick August heat, With the rules I will not be lenient. You're in fourth grade and must act like it. When she said this, I remember how the fiat gravitated her face toward its center: her eyes narrowed, her nose scrunched, her lips pursed. At these times she was especially beautiful.

But now, Ms. Turtle, depositing the razor back in the top drawer of her gunmetal steel desk, in which she also kept a pair of shears, a two-man saw, and a vintage Colt 1911, said, We're going to learn about rocks today. And as she wrote HOW ROCKS ARE ESSENTIAL TO CIVILIZATION on the Smartboard, Jimmy, who had made peace with himself and stopped sobbing, slipped me a note across the aisle. *Thanks for the trim ☺. Rumor: Burritos for lunch.*

Ms. Turtle turned and eyed the whole class, fifteen of us in total, before I could ask Jimmy what kind of burritos. Jimmy, my best friend since first grade, was quite husky, so such particulars didn't matter to him. I prayed hard for beef.

Rocks, said Ms. Turtle, deftly pulling her long, deep brown hair into a tight ponytail with one hand and snapping a pink band into place with the other as she strutted to the front of her desk, Rocks exist up to 1,700 miles below us. Below that there's no rocks.

We clicked away on our laptops, taking notes. Ms. Turtle sat on the lip of her desk and crossed her legs, her wine-dark skirt hanging just below the knee, her muscular calves smooshed together and bulging.

The lesson went on, but I, never an apt learner, daydreamed about the adventures Ms. Turtle and I would have together on my dad's two-man kayak, sailing down the river that ran behind my house...Eventually, the roars of lions boomed from the loudspeaker, signaling lunch time.

In the cafeteria, Jimmy and I purchased our burritos and sugar cookies and decided to eat outside under the cherry tree. Jimmy and I were friends the way two people whom no one else will be friends with are friends. That is, today Jimmy ranted about how the *Glories of War V* videogame he received for his birthday last week was just a disappointing reboot of *Glories IV*. I listened to his critique while also attending to my schoolmates, observing.

Most of Lyle P. Porter's Elementary School for the Gifted's fourth grade class, about seventy of us in total, plus the other grades as well, were eating outside. All sat in groups entirely boy or girl, except for a mixed cluster of fourth graders and another of fifth graders, both occupying the basketball court, each at opposite ends under a hoop. The boys, either having started to like girls or become aware that heedlessly pursuing them was something they must do, had one day decided to plop down next to the girls and made a habit of it since. I knew better, I told myself, fashioning disinterest under the just-bloomed cherry tree atop the minor hill that overlooked both the soccer and baseball fields and the basketball court, demurring from the other boys' silly game alongside Jimmy Potlucker.

With lunch and recess over, we reentered Ms. Turtle's class. Immediately, she withdrew the 1911 from her desk. That meant we were having an assembly, although what it was about I hadn't heard from Jimmy or anyone else. Line up, she said.

The class did so, Ms. Turtle going down the line and pressing the pistol against the head of each student who stood askew until the line was perfectly straight. Proceed, she said, tucking the pistol into the waist of her skirt and signaling to Lupe Gatita, the class leader, to start walking. No talking in the halls.

The whole school gathered in the gym and sat crossed legged in neat rows. Ms. Turtle went over to chat with Mr. Ruminoid, the fifth grade physics teacher who had an SPAS-12 shotgun slung over his shoulder. Jimmy claimed to have once witnessed Ms. Turtle fornicating with Mr. Ruminoid when he, Jimmy, walked by the science lab after comic book club. I knew Jimmy had no idea what fornication looked like, so I didn't believe him. He now nudged me and pointed to the two teachers conversing. Ms. Turtle ran a coy finger down the barrel of Mr. Ruminoid's shotgun. Jimmy said, See, I told you. They're in love.

Principal McFerrin then took to the stage, its mauve curtains still closed, and fired off a whole cylinder's worth of blanks from his chrome .44 Magnum. Everyone became silent; someone nearby passed foul-smelling gas, and Principal McFerrin tapped the microphone. We have a very special educational performance for you all today, he said. Help me give a hearty Lyle P. Porter welcome to the Gravel Gang! He clapped his meaty hands together and the school clapped with him as he hustled off the stage.

The stage curtains flew open, revealing the backdrop, a pixelated image of silver-specked, mineral-rich dirt. Two tall men and a short woman in big, gray round rock costumes skipped onto the stage. We're the Earth's crust! the woman announced.

The day was all starting to make sense. The actors sang a ditty. I'm igneous! You're ignorant, Jenny? No, silly! And so on it went. The younger grades were highly amused by the whole thing, whereas me and the rest of grades four and five only laughed at the physical humor, like when the male rocks belly-bumped each other and fell on their backs and flailed like overturned beetles.

The first act went on until all that could be said about the Earth's crust was said, and then the troupe bowed and received their applause. The curtains closed and soon re-opened for the second act. The same three thespians emerged from stage left, dressed now in spherical costumes that matched the new backdrop, an animated screen of wavy iron ore with thin flames running through it.

What's below the crust, Tommy? Cheese and tomatoes? No, silly! The mantle! Man, I'll tell you, Jenny...And so on.

About half way through this second act I glanced up at the clock on the rear wall. Almost 1:45 p.m., which meant that the third act—I was assuming, of course, that there were three acts—would probably carry on til the end of the day and we wouldn't have to go back to real class. My chest loosened with relief, and I tapped Jimmy and informed him of the good news. As he pumped a fist in celebration, Ms. Turtle saw us chatting and stomped down our row. She knelt next to us, the air filling with her vanilla spice perfume. You're already dancing on glass with me today, Jimmy. If I have to come over here again I'll embarrass you both.

I smiled and we nodded and Ms. Turtle shimmed back down the row. I nudged Jimmy and we both eyed the backside of her tight skirt. When she returned to the aisle Mr. Ruminoid came up behind her, his face expressionless, and whispered something into her ear. Then he pointed down the row at me and Jimmy.

Damn, I said to Jimmy. Ruminoid saw us ogling his lady.

Jimmy winced, and Ms. Turtle gestured with a finger for both of us to come hither. Oh man, Jimmy said, I'm gonna get the saw treatment again. Don't worry, I said, whispering with great calmness as we climbed over our classmates' legs, Just deny whatever they say.

Boys, Mr. Ruminoid said when we got to the isle, I'm told that the Gravel Gang wants you to volunteer for the final act. Us? said Jimmy. Mr. Ruminoid rolled his eyes emphatically, leaning back and slapping his hips and grabbing his shotgun. Who else could I be talking to?

We'll happily participate, I said, upon which the troupe concluded the second act with a three-way hug that had something to do with the mantle's density.

Come on, Mr. Ruminoid said, leading us all the way down the aisle toward the stage. Go up the steps and behind the curtain.

Jimmy and I did so. The next backdrop, warm holographic flames, was already in place. The woman of the three-person troupe, having removed her mantle costume and wearing now just a gray body suit, skipped over.

Hi there! she said, and hugged me and then Jimmy. My name is Jenny Blitzer. That's Tommy and Jimmy Chong.

My name is Jimmy too! Jimmy exclaimed.

I know! Jenny said. She pointed to me. And you're Rupert! I'm told you two boys have the highest grades in your science class. So you've been chosen to be our—

Assistants! said the Chong brothers in unison. They were identical twins, I could see now as they made their way across the stage. One handed Jimmy and me black bodysuits without a word and then disappeared off stage right; the other slung an arm around Jenny's shoulder, and she looped her fingers through his.

Go ahead and try these on, Jenny said. Jimmy began to take off his shirt. No, silly! Over your clothes!

Oh, Jimmy said, his face filling red. Then, without warning, a metal contraption descended from the ceiling like a giant iron spider dangling from a pole, its spindley legs limp.

The MIA Chong brother came back onstage. He pointed to the apparatus, which, I saw now, were two oddly rigged harnesses. A piece of cardboard, attached to the central pole, had INNER CORE written on it in white paint. It's like, you know, one of those lie-down-on-your-belly-tilt-a-whirl rides, he said.

Jimmy knew exactly what he was talking about. He slipped on his body suit, on the chest of which was emblazoned a white question mark, and slid into the harness like a pro. A Chong brother clicked the harness closed. Jimmy now hovered a few feet above stage and extended his arms and legs like Superman. Strap on, dude! he said to me.

What will we have to do once the thing starts spinning? I asked Jenny. Just enjoy the ride! she said. We'll do all the talking. You're just like a demo piece, one of the Chongs added. Don't worry 'bout nothing.

So I gladly put on the body suit and had a Chong brother lock me into the harness. Jenny winked at me. I hope you boys didn't have a big lunch!

The troupe then donned their costumes, fire red orbs that glowed from within. A Chong brother disappeared off stage momentarily and activated the contraption. Jimmy and I rose up about halfway to the ceiling and began to spin, still hidden from the audience.

Wow, he said. Man, I'm so glad we study!

Me too, I agreed, my heart racing from the ride's increasing speed.

With everything in place, the curtains opened. The audience cackled riotously at me and Jimmy, holding their stomachs and pounding on the hardwood floor. Jimmy, with a fist on his hip and another straight forward, struck a noble superhero pose. What the hell, I thought, and proudly

assumed the position too, which increased the kids' spasmodic laughter so much that the teachers shushed them into silence. Then Jenny sidled out, front and center.

I'm the outer core! I'm what creates the Earth's magnetic fields! And do you know what magnets do, kids?

High-pitched screams emanated from the audience. Teachers aimed hushes at the loudest.

Did I hear someone say *attract*? Jenny said, and at once the Chong brothers sprinted out from opposite sides of the stage toward Jenny. As they were about to sandwich her, she stepped back and the brothers collided, belly-bumping and reeling back stunned. My schoolmates' laughter boomed. That's when I saw a man open the back doors of the gymnasium. He pushed the doors open so hard that they cracked off the cement wall and made everyone turn to look.

This is when the day became extraordinary.

The ride had reached top speed, and I could only see the audience for about a third of the spin, so everything was blurred and assembled piecemeal. The man who had entered brandished two AK-47s with drum mags from under his beige trenchcoat and menaced them generally at the students. Jenny and the Chongs froze on stage. The teachers didn't move.

How long before the intruder noticed that each teacher had a gun too, that the teachers lined both aisles, flanking him? Fearstricken by the teacher's display of arms, he may have chosen not to shoot, unaware that all their guns were really loaded with Hollywood blanks. Or maybe 350 children's mouths agape and eyes agog evoked empathy for the lives he was about to extinguish, and the weight of guilt stopped his hand. Or maybe he did indeed squeeze both triggers at once, to mow down us all with the weapons that, as the media reported that night, he'd stolen from his disaster-prepping brother-in-law, but, not knowing the guns' safeties were still switched on, jammed his fingers down to no avail.

But I do not believe that any of those explain it. I believe in another case, one that embodies the heart of my experience at Lyle P. Porter's. It is just as likely that I saw the man smile at me and Jimmy, or maybe just at Jimmy, so petrified that he held his superhero pose all this time as we twirled above stage. And that the man realized, for the first time in his life, that he, forever the receiver of meanness and hate and failed kindness, found the courage to endure, decided he wanted to live, that it was possible to affirm each moment, again and again. That he didn't have to shoot, that even a wretch like him could plop down and crisscross his legs and learn about the onion-like layers of the Earth.

Kid Vicious's Camp for Ungrateful Children

From the parking lot where we said *adios* to our mommies, all fifteen of us walked three miles into the woods with Kid. The trails were well worn but full of rocks, so you had to watch your feet each step. Kid didn't tell us not to talk; he said nothing, in fact. Still, we felt—or at least I did—that Kid was listening hard to the chirps and rustles of the trees and underbrush. What I'd heard about Kid from my older brother Red and his friends was that you didn't want to disrupt whatever flows Kid could get himself into, walking the trails or otherwise.

A clearing in the woods indicated the camp grounds: one large cabin, a mess hall, a half-basketball and tether ball court and a swing set. Along the path to the cabin, a sign, a sheet of ply painted green with butterscotch-yellow letters, read *SI NO CREES UNA PROBLEMA, NO ESTARÉ UNA PROBLEMA*—If you do not create a problem, it will not be a problem. A few campers asked Kid what this meant, and Kid repeated the sign's words in Spanish. It soon became clear that a rule of camp was that Kid, although understanding English, would answer us only in his native tongue.

Kid stood outside the cabin as we campers chose bunks. The other dudes, all my age, twelve or thirteen, taller and broader than me, would have trouble fitting comfortably in the short, narrow beds. I reserved the bottom bunk in the corner nearest the cabin's only bathroom, as my brother had advised. No one selected the bed above me; the fourteen others all had bunkmates with whom they dapped and performed those complex hand shakes and back-slap combinations that I never could learn.

The chatter become so loud that I, chilling alone on my bed, could not discern one conversation from another. Then Kid entered. No one seemed to notice. He threw his backpack on the bed above mine.

My brother had set me up.

Kid scanned me up and down. You are the brother of Red, no? he asked in Spanish. The nose and the mouth.

Yes, I said. *Sí*.

Only a week, I told myself, just five days.

The other campers suddenly sensed Kid's presence and hid their smartphones, *numero uno* on the camp brochure's contraband list. Kid made no indication of noticing, although surely he did, and went into the bathroom for what seemed like a gratuitously long time. When he emerged everyone became silent again. Let us go, Kid said, and walked outside.

We all followed and gathered on the porch. Kid, heavily muscled and no taller than 5'2", stood below us. His long, apeish arms hung loosely from his shoulders, his thick neck untensed. He was the only counselor.

I will teach you how to live with gratitude during the five days of the camp, he said. I am strict but fair.

The other kids muttered in confusion. But I understood, Spanish being the only subject I'd gotten higher than a B+ in since Ms. Turtle's science class in fourth grade.

Now you all are permitted to introduce yourselves. Your name and favorite animal. Start, he said, pointing to me.

Rupert Fabber. Snow leopard...And so it went.

I call myself *Muchacho Vicioso*, Kid said once everyone had gone. My favorite animal is the raccoon. *El mapache*. He made little circles by connecting his pointer fingers and thumbs and held them over his eyes. The raccoon is a survivor. He can adapt. It is necessary that you all adapt here in the forest too. He gestured with both arms palm-up and looked over each shoulder, signifying the entire woods. Are we in agreement?

Kid nodded as if we were supposed to too, and we did.

We eat at seven. See you all later. Kid then left for the mess hall, leaving all fifteen of us alone on the porch.

For me, Kid's camp was preventative, my mother had said, prehabilitation for the vicissitudes of adolescence. Immediately I knew that this was not the case for my fellow campers, who quickly decided they'd pass the time till dinner with a sumo wrestling tournament. One camper, Billy Luncheon, drew up a bracket on his iPhone. I was to wrestle to Rob Botz, the second biggest camper, but sneakily lighted out into the woods as the others debated the size and roundness of the sumo circle being drawn in the dirt. I roamed around the camp's environs until dinner.

In the mess hall I sat at the end of the long single bench. The other campers, all scuzzed up, smelt sharply from the tournament. I overheard that Rob had won and felt clever for ducking out.

One thing my brother didn't lie about was that Kid fed you good. Kid served us *aguas frescas* and hearty bowls of *chile colorado*. He sat at the end of the long bench opposite of me as we ate. He let the kids' talking reach a loudness that would apoplex any cafeteria monitor. He did not shush us. Then he went back into the kitchen to finish preparing the *dulce del leche* we'd be having for dessert.

This was when Rob Botz snuck behind me and dumped a full glass of milk on my head. What's your name? he said, standing over me. I turned in my seat, my legs trapped in the bench, blinking the milk from my eyes, and told him. I know it is, he said. Why'd you cut out before? Because I didn't want to wrestle you, I said. I know that too, he said. Because you're a pussy. You know why you're a pussy?

Suddenly a tan hand reached around Rob's face and slapped a big round sticker onto his forehead. It was Kid. Rob stumbled backwards. Like what the hell? Rob said.

Kid just went back to kitchen. And no dessert too, he said over his shoulder. The sticker read: *SI NO CREES UNA PROBLEMA, NO ESTARÉ UNA PROBLEMA.*

What the fuck does this mean? Rob said, not so loud that Kid might hear him, not so quiet that the others might think he was afraid. I translated for Rob. He stared at me with incomprehension and anger and sat back down.

Rob didn't bother me after that, but I don't think Kid had much to do with it. Rather, since the beginning of middle school two years prior, I'd developed the ability to blend into social groups, adopting their humor and patterns of speech, learning, if you will, the rules of their game. As a chameleon I avoided meanness and exclusion, what I was most scared of. But I also precluded the true affection of anyone that mattered, male or female, a fact I'd realize many years later after much time alone.

Still, I was glad the next day to be welcomed to the three-on-three games on the half-basketball court—sought after, in fact, basketball being the one sport that, despite my height, I was not unskilled at. My team, Mel Standard and Salt Smith and I, had a deep understanding of pick-and-roll and backdoor-cut dynamics and ran riot on the others all afternoon.

That night, after a sumptuous dinner of *sopa de tortilla* and *carne asada jinetes*, Kid gathered us around the fire circle. He showed us how to arrange the wood *como una pirámide* and ignited the stack with lighter fluid. Do you know how to start the fire with like two sticks and a rock or rope or whatever? I asked him. Yes, Kid said. Can you show us, another asked. No, Kid said. Sit, children, please. And we all sat on the surrounding logs.

Look, Kid said—in Spanish, as always. He grabbed a headless, wooden shaft of a shovel from the ground and drew two circles in the dirt. Then a larger circle around those, then two triangles on top of that bigger circle. Finally he added a tiny inverted triangle below the two small circles and a line that was a mouth. This is the raccoon. Yes? Are you all familiar with the raccoon?

¿, I said, the only one.

Have you all seen the raccoon in the forest since you all have arrived? He looked at me. No, I said, Raccoons are nocturnal. My dad told me that if you see them during the day it means they have rabies.

Kid laughed and shook his head. *Los gringos* and the rabies. What is rabies? How a raccoon has rabies?

I was embarrassed and shrugged. The raccoon can obtain his food during the day, he said, Or in the darkness. He does not prefer. The raccoon is the bandit of the forest, the suburbs, and the cities.

He poked the shaft into the fire, rearranging the blackened logs, sending sparks skyward. There is a war occurring in the forest between the raccoon and humankind. But humankind knows not that it is a war. It thinks it is a game. For this reason the raccoon will win.

Was this suppose to teach us about gratitude? I understood Kid's words perfectly, but they didn't aggregate into any real message. What about being grateful? That we did not live as raccoons, scavanging day and night, mistaken for rabid and avoided like lepers, forced to exist in the cold dark woods? Plus, as far as I knew, no one else spoke Spanish. The other campers understood only the vague meaning of cognates and gestures. So could the lesson have been, impossibly, just for me? I thought these things that night as I drifted into sleep, Kid snoring above me, the others texting and masterbating under the cover of their bedsheets.

The next day we all peed on Gunther Chop. Gunther slept in the lower bunk in the corner opposing me. The first time I had really noticed Gunther was a few hours earlier at breakfast when he literally slipped on a banana peel thrown into the aisle by Rob. Kid didn't see it and Gunther didn't squeal. Gunther was shorter and much skinnier than even me and wore rec specs, despite never playing sports. He wielded branches like swords and struck a tree again and again at the edge of the camp grounds during free play.

At lunch Rob had spiked his Gatorade and those of his three or four main cohorts with the liquor he smuggled in shampoo bottles. He schemed that all fourteen of us pee on Gunther when Gunther had gone back to the cabin to nap off a cold instead of staying outside for free play. Kid would be occupied in the kitchen, neatening up the mess hall and preparing his elaborate dinner.

We all filed into the cabin and Rob ordered Jimmy Socks and Rocco White to trap Gunther by pulling tight on each side of his bedsheet. Like a gay sausage in plastic wrap, was how Rob put it.

They did so, and at first Gunther groaned sleepily and laughed and said Haha, guys. But then Rob stood on the bed and straddled Gunther bodily pulled out his wang and urinated onto the lump in the bedsheet that was Gunther's head. Gunther squirmed and yelled Hey-What-Come-On!, but Jimmy and Rocco yanked harder on the sheets until Rob ran dry.

And so it went, all of us getting a chance. I went second to last, by which time Gunther had stopped struggling and maybe started sobbing. My penis size, meager then and now, received no comments from the other boys. I aimed for his chest.

It would be easy to say I only took part in the peeing incident so that Rob and the others would not target me again, that I had been wholly conscious of my fakery amongst these boys and would later apologize to Gunther and conduct due penance. But the unweighted mind with which I assumed the basketball court afterwards and then dined on *cochinita pibil* did not support that explanation. Nor did my laughter when I saw Gunter sneaking from the cabin to the dumpster behind the mess hall to throw out his wet sheets so that, presumably, Kid wouldn't know.

But Kid did know, somehow. That night, after the camp fire singing of folk tunes, back in cabin while everyone brushed his teeth and prepared for bed, I was fishing through my suitcase for pajama pants when Kid stood before me with a yellow legal pad.

Rupert, he said. *Sí*, Kid? He scribbled something and handed me the pad: It was the outline of a weiner from which an arc signifying urine splattered onto the head of a stick figure. My throat

occluded with remorse. I now realized, finally, that I'd done wrong. I nodded sullenly and handed him back the pad.

You were drunk too? No, I said, I swear I wasn't. You think that your urination on Gunther was an act of gratitude? No, I said. Your brother Red taught you nothing of the way of the raccoon? I guess not, I said. He just told me what bed to pick and to be the first one in the bathroom every morning.

At this Kid laughed. His face lightened. Good. But we have a problem, yes? What should I do now? What can I do with this information? I don't know, I shrugged. I don't know too, he said, tapping his pad. But tomorrow, I will know. And then he leaped onto his bunk and began snoring before lights-out.

Instead of our usual morning free play, on the fourth day Kid took us hiking through the woods. He brought us past the little waterfall, *la casacadita*, through the old mill ruins along the brook, and to the abandoned copper mine, explaining the history of each as we went. On the way back from the mine Kid said, Now you all will see the life of the raccoon. He smiled. His face, smooth and lean and tanned ochre, caught the sun and gleamed. Kid could have been 30 or 60; I never knew which. Sometimes, like when effortlessly bounding over a stream that half us youngins would fall into, Kid seemed to be, well, a kid. And other times, like when he wrote in his pad, the thick pencil gyrating in his leathery fingers reminded me of my dead grandpa.

We stopped on the trail by a stone building, bathrooms whose doors and windows had been boarded up with sheets of iron long ago, now covered in neon graffiti. Do the raccoons live in there? I said. No, Kid said. He started off the trail and into the woods past the building. Let us go, children.

We followed until he stopped about a hundred feet in. Look, he said, pointing to the girthy birch tree in front of us. I wended through the other curious campers and saw, inside a knot, balls of fuzzy gray fur expanding and contracting rhythmically.

Are they hibernating? I said. Kid laughed. It is the summer, Rupert. And the raccoon hibernates not. They are sleeping now. That's a mother and her pups? asked Billy Luncheon. Yes, Kid said.

Kid stepped closer to the knot. Back up and sit, children, he said, waving us back with his hand and running a finger along his lips, as if zipping them shut. We all understood and backed up silently.

Kid slid his hand into the knot. He turned to us with a sleeping pup balled in his palm. Without waking the pup he gently pulled one of its arms away from its body and moved it as if the pup were waving at us. Look, he whispered, The hand of the raccoon. See the fingers, tiny and black. One, two, three, four, five. Then he kissed the pup and returned it to the knot.

Kid sat down on a nearby log and gestured for us to gather around. We campers sat cross-legged on the forest floor. Kid held out his hand, extended and counted off each finger, just the same. The hands of the raccoon are like the hands of humankind, yes? But unlike humankind, the raccoon uses them not to construct his house. He lives in the trees, like that, he said.

Now, children, Kid said, Answer me this. How the raccoon uses his hands? The campers, who'd by this time figured out that I was the only one who understood Kid, all looked to me for an answer. I don't know, I said in Spanish. I mean, for food maybe? To eat?

Correct, said Kid. But humankind uses its hands for eating too, no? How is the raccoon different? I don't know, I said. The difference, said Kid, Is that the raccoon always washes his hands before he eats.

And with that Kid stood up and led us back to camp. We dined on the *burritos con puerco machaca, huevos, y patatas* that Kid had prepared in advance. For the camp fire activity afterwards we made smores with high-cocoa *chocolate de Ecuador*.

That night Kid approached me again as everyone was showering and prepping for bed. I thought he was going to ask me how the grateful lesson in the woods had gone. Still unsure how much of Kid's message the other had campers understood, I would not have been able to articulate a good answer and probably would have lied to appease him.

But instead Kid said, You want to hike, Rupert? Now? I said. I rubbed my sore feet. Yes, he said. The moon is bright this night. Ok, I said, Since the moon is brilliant. He laughed and I slipped on my shoes and we left.

When we passed the sign, I read its motto and remembered the camp brochure stated that the camp had existed since 1962, originally as Lester Grimspoon's Camp for the Uncouth. Kid, who was referred in the brochure as Tomás Basura, his real name, had inherited the camp in 1992 from Lester after having been Lester's "most successful camper and assistant counselor," whatever that meant, and renamed the camp at that time. The towns and boroughs neighboring the wooded reservation have been entrusting their maladjusted youth to Kid's summertime care ever since.

We walked in silence to the nighttime melody of the forest and soon reached a sandstone overlook. Below us we could see the camp ground, an oblong clearing in the woods. A dumpster lid echoed. Raccoons, I said to him in Spanish. *Mapaches*. It could be, said Kid.

Kid and I sat. He rubbed his hands on the sandstone until his palms were coated with orange dust. This is my place for thinking, Kid said.

The air was cool and the trees below shook in the wind. Kid, I said, Can I ask you something? What do you think you're really teaching us?

Ask your brother, he said, his voice uncommonly piqued. He was a good camper. I'm asking you, Kid, I said. He slid his palms together, feeling the rock's chalky residue. What you want to learn? Mathematics? History? The rules of American football? What is there to learn, Rupert?

That last one is a question with no answer, Kid.

Rupert, he said, gazing now at treetops waving below, speaking in a measured tone. I teach not what is important. I teach that it is important to know what is important to know. Understand me?

Yes, Kid, I said, although I didn't, his meaning bouncing off me like light on glass. But why don't you speak in English? It might help you teach the other campers.

Kid laughed. I speak English. Lester taught me. I just have preferences for Spanish, he said in English. Can you see why that, Rupert? I nodded, but again I did not understand.

You have many questions this night, Rupert, Kid said. His accent, not interfering with pronunciation, magicked his words with music. Well I'm here, I said. I'm here and no one else is. Why me, Kid?

Kid laughed. Another question. Yes, I said. Another question.

Kid was silent for a while. I recalled then, watching the dim moonlight flitter along the lush treetops giving to the wind, my brother's return from Kid's camp three years ago. How he stopped coming home reeking of pot and cigarettes, how he hung a raccoon poster above his bed. How he and his friends would say *como el mapache*—like the raccoon—anytime one of them would hold the door for a lady, take out the trash, recycle, or the like. I would not be the same.

Do you ever leave here, Kid? I asked. Don't you want friends, girls, more than these trees and rocks? Sure, Kid said, resuming in Spanish. I leave here. And then I return.

And that was that. We returned to camp soon after. Surprisingly, the lights were off and everyone was asleep. Kid tapped my shoulder and whispered, See?

No one cared to say anything about my absence the next day, the last day of camp. Mel and Salt and I dominated the court; Gunther battled the tree with his branch; Kid cleaned and prepped the mess hall. Rob twisted an ankle over a tree root and cried a little but no one made fun of him.

We had *mole poblano* over *arroz con pollo* for dinner and *buñuelos y miel* for dessert, still one of the best meals I've ever had. Joking, I told Kid he should sell the camp and become a chef. Sure, Kid said. I will be rich and I will buy proper houses with big beds for all the raccoons.

For the campfire that night Kid sat on a rock and told me to tell everyone to stack one log each in the fire circle, arranging the wood in the pyramidal fashion that he showed us. I set down a large rectangular piece as part of the pyramid's base and then sat on the ground next to Kid.

Kid, I said, looking up at him, Why do they call you *Muchacho Vicioso*? You're not, well, vicious. Rupert, Kid said, pinching his face in seriousness, When I was an adolescent, I discovered my girlfriend making love to another man. I killed the two with a knife and put their bodies in the river. I was then sent to the camp of Lester for uncouth children.

Jesus, Kid, I said. He laughed and clapped. I am joking! He laughed some more and slapped me on the back.

With all the logs in place, Kid grabbed a cluster of bushy pine branches and stuffed them into the pyramid's center. He poured lighter fluid on the wood stack and more onto the pine and tossed in a lit match. The pine branches caught fast and spread. They burned a thick heat hotter than wood and soon there was only the stack.

The Age of Ana Gatita

I was very drunk when I first saw her, and her twirling amongst the gyrating streaks of neon light made her seem holographic. Her ass shook like firm jello and the decision was made that I wanted her. Those on the dance floor had formed into a loose circle, and I stood from my chair and grabbed my brother Red and told him, Let's go.

We joined the circle next to her. Someone would jump into its center, bust a few moves as the others cheered, rejoin the perimeter; another would go, and so on, in no apparent order. Soon she hopped into the circle's center and erupted all at once, as if a rainstorm, sudden and ruinous to those unprepared. Her black hair flashed across her face like a silk handkerchief, concealing and showing in play. The words *raw* and *total* and *latina* blipped behind my eyes. At this moment I was surely clapping.

Suddenly she slid back into the circle's edge, took my wrist, and slung me forward. I should have expected it but was too drunk to care. I moved epileptically with closed fists for only as long as wouldn't seem cowardly and then retreated back into the line.

That was great! she said. The obvious nicety registered, so I placed a hand on her hip and got close to her ear, as if to whisper, although with the music I had to shout. Can I talk to you? I said. What? What's your name? I said. Ana. She held her hand out professionally. I'm Rupert. Hi, Rupert! Do you want to sit over there, I said, pointing to the seats behind us, So we can talk? Sure! she said.

We went over, my brother following. I introduced Ana to Red, who smiled and immediately resumed with his drink.

You dance wonderfully, I said. Thank you! So do you. Don't start lying to me, I said. She laughed. Where are you from, Rupert?

-----, I said. Your face indicates that you have no clue where that is. That's right, she said. It's North Jersey. She nodded. I sipped my drink and she eyed the amber liquid. You?

Union, she said. Ah, I said, I lived there till I was ten! What? The music had become louder. I repeated myself and she still didn't hear me. So I stood up and she did too. I got close to her again. Let's go to the lobby, so we don't have to shout. Ok, she said. I told Red we'd be back and took Ana's hand and left.

In the lobby without strobe lights I realized how drunk I truly was: The room spun and sights blurred, but the liquor had kindly left my mind fluid and my movements unstuttered. Ana and I sat on the lip of what I think was an inactive radiator. The lobby was no more than empty space and two bathroom doors and us.

Ana smiled invitingly. Are you in school? she asked. You look like you're in school. I just graduated, I said, From -----. English major and journalism minor. Me too! she said. English major I mean. I felt in my belly that this was good. I have a year left, though, she said. I go to Kean.

The conversation then lulled and I leaned too close to her. Behave yourself, Rupert, she joked. To not indulge her I said, Did you know the port we left from today opened for cruise ships in 2004? Before that there were only a few cruises from Hoboken. No, she said. I didn't. Did you know that in 2006 this very ship arrived in Alaska with a humpback whale dead on its bow? No, she said. That's horrific. And in 2010 a guy fell overboard and swam nineteen miles to shore, I said. Isn't that incredible? Well, she said. I guess so. I can't swim. She laughed. You're just full of facts, Rupert.

She stood up. Come on, she said. We have to go back in. I'm traveling with my friend and her family and I can't duck out for too long or they'll think crazy things. Ok, I said. Just before we reentered Club Silencio it dawned on me to ask her to breakfast tomorrow. Meet me in the library on the eighth floor at 8:30, I said. Ok, she said, and walked away, and although I did not watch her go I felt her measured footsteps shake the floor.

I was still drunk when I awoke the next morning. I called room service for coffee and quickly showered. A carafe on a silver tray was on my bed when I finished. Red was still asleep. I slipped on a collared tee and shorts and drank two cups of the strong coffee and poured myself a third and brought it with me.

The small, rectangular library had glass walls for two sides of the room and half-filled bookcases for the other two. The leather chairs were uncomfortable, the seats too long, but the room's mahogany features, warm colors, and dim light lent a pensive vibe. It went two levels with a metal spiral staircase in the corner. I was on the lower floor.

Ana entered through the glass door just as the caffeine switched on and my nausea receded. She wore a green hoodie from her school and the same sort of tights as the night before and, now, had on glasses with large, speckled, angular frames. I like your glasses, I said honestly. Thanks, she said. She had her hands clasped in front of her and I knew she was nervous.

I stood up and made toward the door, leaving the coffee behind me. Let's eat, I said. I'd love that, she said, patting her stomach.

Anything good in there? she said, referring to the library as we went up one floor in the elevator. I saw a really thick biography on Barthelme, I said. Who? Donald Barthelme. He's the exceptional kind of writer whose life wouldn't inform his work, really, or at least you wouldn't think so. The elevator doors opened. Maybe it does, she said. There's the book, after all.

We went into the massive cafeteria-style breakfast room. It was very crowded but we easily found a seat. Suddenly I was worried that my parents would be here too, and if I had been wholly sober the worry would have stuck instead of swiftly passing.

We made our plates and met back at the table. I took only eggs and bacon, never a heavy breakfaster; she had much fruit and two biscuits and a scone. No fruit? she asked. No, I said.

Allergic. Oh wow, she said. You'd have a tough time being a vegan. This indicated that she was one. I nodded and didn't know what to say, so I told her I forgot coffee.

At the big Bunn brewer I remembered she lived in my old town. I summoned memories of it but could not recall the town's specific streets and corners, my childhood hideaways: I saw only my dead grandfather cracking bell peppers with his giant leathery hands and my dead cats lazing on the sundrenched porch and me noshing on burritos with Jimmy Potluck and my brother and I playing ice hockey at Warinanco Park and Michael Strutmaster smashing my face into a chainlink fence and my father with shoes on at the shore and me spinning around in circles to dizzy myself just before going to bed each night.

Back at the table I brought up the ice hockey. Warinanco is the Indian word for peace, I said. More facts, she smiled. The rink's still there, right? Yes, she said. But today people just sell drugs in the park. I would have laughed and said How are their prices, but her tone was too serious.

The eggs started to calm my stomach and clear my mind. You said you're traveling with friends? Yes, she said. My best friend Minca and her stepbrother and mom and stepdad. That's fun, I said. It's alright, she said. They just want to hang around and drink and relax, and I like, you know, want to do things! I admire your passion, I said genuinely. I marked her eyes, deep hazel, and the two tiny freckles just left of her round nose. Sitting around is *boring*, she said, exclaiming with her arms, a knife and fork in hand.

I nodded and then realized that all I had left on my plate was the bacon, thick and fatty. Don't worry, she said, reading my face. I don't mind. Ok, I said, not believing her but eating the bacon anyway. Why'd you make the decision to, you know, veganize? Well, she said, I watched a few documentaries and thought how awful for the animals, and I couldn't eat meat anymore after that. Just cheese is all I'll have. You must have to take a lot of vitamins, I said stupidly, as if defending myself. I do, she said. Her eyes peaked. It's expensive.

But it's very empathetic of you to think that way about animals, I corrected. You know I once saw a man hold and kiss a sleeping raccoon without waking it. You're lying, she said. I'm not. It was a baby. A pup. Why? she asked. Why what? Why'd he kiss it? I don't know, I said. The pup was fuzzy and very cute. She considered this. That's a good reason.

I had finished my food before her and waited while she ate. I drank more coffee and we chatted about her English interests, how she works in the writing center at her school but does not want a career in academia, how she'd die alone on a hill defending the Oxford comma, how she wishes her community was more accepting of literary studies, how she feels too anxious reading only one book at a time and brought both *Antigone* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* with her, how she loves Greek drama as a whole, how she forgot to bring a pad to write in, and other things that I do not remember.

I have an extra notepad if you'd like, I said. Really? I brought several, I said, which was true.

We looked for where to deposit our empty dishes but could not find the spot. We asked a staff member who said in a heavy but unplaceable accent to just leave the plates on any table. We did so and left and took the elevator up to her floor, deck eleven.

Let's meet tomorrow so I can give you the notepad, I said when we arrived in front of her room. Same time and place? Ok, she said. She handed me a piece of paper from her pocket with her number and email address and full name already on it. Thanks, I said, But so you know I didn't bring my phone with me. She smiled so I kissed her on the cheek. She reddened, the corners of her wide mouth rising like a happy cat. See you then, I said. And that was that.

Ana Gatita, although in memory the primary force of the vacation, occupied little of my real time during the cruise. I spent the rest of that first full day at sea with my parents and Red, at the pool or sundrenched lounge or in the café. Dinner was served in the ornate dining room with a large chandelier and massive bay window through which the waves of the Atlantic Ocean rolled. At

intervals the boat rocked and my mother felt unbalanced and lightheaded even in her chair, and my father gently suggested that tomorrow she could wear a second anti-nausea patch and that would help.

That night, after a hokey musical performance in the ship's theater, Red and I attended Club Silencio again. We both had a quick double and ordered another. Fewer people were there than last night: Over half the seats in the club were empty and the only other patrons my age were a squad of sorority girls who drank from tall glasses with straws. The deejay ran the same playlist of terrible pop and trap as before.

After two doubles and still not seeing Ana I became agitated. Red sensed this and said, Maybe she's not coming tonight. Maybe, I said. I'm getting tired and I don't want to wait here forever, he said. What he meant was that he wanted to leave and smoke the pot he'd smuggled aboard in tiny mason jar stuffed inside a tube sock. Go if you want to go, I said. The waiter walked by and I ordered myself another drink.

Soon Red kept yawning obviously and reminding me of the time, almost 1 a.m. She ain't coming, man, he said. He was right and I became angry at him. It was not his fault and I knew this but didn't care. I shot down my drink and stood and said Let's go and led us back to our room.

Our room was in the center of the ship and instead of windows had a mirror for the entire rear wall. I ate a piece of the complimentary dark chocolate from my nightstand and undressed and did not talk to Red. He did seem very tired and did not take out his stash. He went to go into the single bathroom, but I had to piss and told him so. So? he said, walking in anyway. I grabbed the back of his ribbed shirt and yanked him out and he tripped and smacked his head on the closet door. You're a dick, he said, standing and turning away and going toward his bed. Yes, I said, and urinated with the door open. Then I set a wake-up call for 8 a.m. and that ended the night.

I readied myself the next morning in the same fashion and waited in the library for Ana. She did not arrive by 8:50, so I gave up and woke Red and told him. I apologized for last night. He accepted and said that my parents called the room to see if we had eaten yet. We all met in their room, a nice big room with a balcony, and had breakfast ordered there.

We spent the day the same as the last, swimming and reading and eating and watching buzzed adults do the planned on-deck activities like karaoke and line dancing in the subtropic sun. I'd have one glass of white wine at lunch with my mother but nothing else until dinner and after.

That night was the first formal dinner, which meant serious dresses for the ladies and a suit for me and tuxedos for the rich passengers. In front of the big bay window we had our picture taken, which I still have. About two months later, if I'd seen that dining room's looming chandelier or any other, I'd start to wonder, for strange unnamable reasons, whether it'd hold my weight. The chandelier was unlit that night.

We had cedar plank-grilled black salmon for dinner and **crème brûlée** for dessert. We were served by the same waiter, Paul, who was my brother's age and from the Philippines and very kind and competent. He spent only two months a year with his wife and newborn girl, he said, because of work. Our prepaid fee included the gratuity but my father tipped him extra in cash anyway.

Red did not want to go to the club later but I convinced him that we'd only have one or two drinks and leave. We sat in the chairs nearest the dance floor. Eventually someone tapped my shoulder from behind. It was Ana. I hadn't seen her walk in. Can I talk to you? she said. Sure, I said.

We went into the lobby. She wore a thin red dress that had prints of warm-colored flowers and gathered at her waist, showing off her hips. She was not wearing her glasses but had on purplish-silver eye makeup—the first time, I noted, I'd seen her with any. I like your tie, she said. It was just a thin black one I borrowed from Red. Thanks, I said.

During the day it hadn't irked me much that Ana skipped on breakfast, but now, with her starlike valence pulling me toward her, I felt wronged. She sensed this and said, I'm really sorry I didn't make breakfast this morning. Minca and her family, they cause all this drama and give me shit for just wanting to do things on my own. Not just with you, Rupert, she said, pronouncing my name with an affection that surprised me, But just activities in general. And it's supposed to be vacation! She threw her arms up in emphasis. I remembered how she did this at breakfast too and laughed.

Okay, I said. So you see, she said, I tried to leave them to meet you this morning but it was about to cause problems, and they think they should be looking after me on this trip, which I appreciate and all, but, it's just, you know? It sounds frustrating, I said. But I'm sure they'll loosen up. Don't let them get you down. I know, she said, tousling her hair. So I can't promise to meet you at breakfast anymore because they'll expect that. How about we meet at the beach party tomorrow?

I didn't know what party she meant but said okay. But, I said, if you don't come this time I'll never talk to you again. She was hurt and stood back. That's extreme, she said. It was, so I pulled her in and kissed her. She felt soft and relaxed against me. Then I let her go and took her hands. I like your dress, I said. She laughed. Okay! she said. I'll see you tomorrow.

We reentered the club and she went over to her group and I sat down next to Red and slapped him on the knee and smiled. Good? he said. Very, I said. He had ordered drinks for both of us while I was gone. Thanks, I said. Let's finish these and go.

As we did so Ana and her group assumed to the dance floor. Her friend Minca was railthin and tall and seemed uncomfortable to be in public. Minca's mom and stepdad looked young, early 40s. The mom was short and also thin, and the stepdad was very rotund but smiled and laughed and danced well. Minca's stepbrother, whose name was Alejo or Alex and about my age, looked like her stepdad with his thick jowls and lazy beard and big eyes and pug nose. They all danced together like cogs rotating perfectly into one another, as if all speaking a language of soundless words. Ana

danced mostly with the stepbrother, but I felt no jealousy because he was unhandsome and wore a white t-shirt through which his pudgy breasts and stomach shook. He danced very well, though, and I was pissed to be outdone by him even in this regard.

Those Hispanics sure can groove, my brother said. Yes, I said. Let's stick to what our people are good at. I clinked my glass to his and we finished our drinks and left.

By morning we had docked at King's Wharf, Bermuda. Red and I met with my parents for breakfast. Through the porthole window we saw the wharf's white stone rectangular buildings and white sidewalks and white cars and white ships and the rest of the island obscured by distance across the cerulean sea. Eat a lot, my mother said, I don't know when we'll be stopping for food.

We left the ship and crossed the long hookshaped dock to the ferry station on the other side. My father secured the tickets and we soon boarded. My mother's walker skipped on an unlabeled drop in the floor, and a deck attendant immediately apologized and then stood close to warn the rest of the boarding passengers.

We sat by a window and I removed my sunglasses. It was warm but not humid and few clouds crossed the bright blue sky. The wind pulled mildly. I wonder how anyone ever gets work done here, I told my father. He laughed and said, Because the food isn't free.

Soon the ferry left for Hamilton. Many passengers wore the same unfashionable collared shirts and strawbrimmed hats as my father did. I pointed this out to him. Posers, he said.

My mother struck a conversation with a crew member. He was the oldest, perhaps the head deckhand, with tanned mahogany skin. He mistook us for Canadians. You are all so slim! he joked. He told us all about Bermuda: its colonial history and tightly knit familial structure; the price of a house and an iPad; the manner by which Bermudians buy goods in America and lie on their Customs reports to pay fewer taxes; the good government jobs, such as the ones he and the rest of the crew had; how to spot a British business man by his Bermuda shorts, boat shoes, and high socks;

how proud he was of his great-great-great-etc. grandfather, a successful and locally famous privateer; the problematic influx of meth and heroine on the island; how Bermudians in the service industry speak patois to their friends but proper King's to the tourists; why there's no crime on the island; the annoyances of Hurricane season; what beaches to check out; and so on. When we docked in the harbor he wished us a good day and said that he looked forward to seeing us on the return voyage.

In the territory's capital the first shop was something like a big wooden second-hand store. Here I bought my only souvenir of the trip, a three-inch tall brass penguin that still sits on my desk and bears no green rust. Red and I then went one way and my parent's another along Front Street, a row of pastel-colored shops. Red and I scoped out a book store and found the novel that I was currently reading with an alternate cover. Red bought a pocket-sized version of the *Tao Te Ching*. My mother, when we met up, complained that it cost three times what it would online at home. Had to do it, he said, slipping the book into her purse.

We then waited at the bus stop. Here many dark-skinned Bermudans wore old, dirty clothes and had bad teeth but did not emit any latent hostility, none of that sharktank feeling like in the city at home. The bus itself was crowded but pleasant, a mix of tourists and locals but none of the whites who instead rode mopeds too fast through the streets. Red and I had to stand but this was no problem.

Outside Hamilton was residential and uncrowded, almost desolate. The driver navigated the narrow streets expertly. He and oncoming buses and cars honked cheerfully at one another. We alighted at a bus stop that, unlike those in Hamilton proper, was made entirely of cement and featured an unadorned wooden bench.

There were few street signs, so we had trouble finding our way. Eventually we saw a wooden sign with an arrow and the words "Elbow Beach" and followed the street. It was steep decline and

the road was cobbled and rough, but we soon saw the beach's white sand marbled through a high row of wholesome green juniper trees.

We made it down. On the whole stretch there were only three other people and I could not believe this, especially with the magnificent Easter-yellow hotel jutting out from the hill of verdant flora to our left. I ever get rich I'll stay there, I said to my mother. I kicked off my flips flops and helped carry our things nearer to the water.

We laid down two towels. My parents sat, and I pulled off my shirt and Red and I went toward the Sargasso Sea. Red stood at the edge and I waded in up to my waist and received a not unpleasant shock. Come on, I said. Too cold, Red said, testing the water with his foot. The water was indeed frigid—it was only late May—but I didn't care and swam out to the boulders that pebbled the shoreline, from boulder to boulder, resting atop one when needed and then diving off. Be careful! I could hear my mother shout. But with the water so clear and the bottom deep there was no need to worry.

I swam until the sun lightened and my father called me in. My mother was getting too hot and he and Red were hungry. I left fatigued but satisfied and ready to eat. Going back up the steep hill was difficult for my mother; she had to take several breaks, but eventually we made it to the bus stop and from there to the dock at Hamilton.

On the ferry ride back we saw the same old deckhand. My mom thanked him for suggesting the beach and Red asked him why all the buses and cars honk at each other. The man laughed. Because everyone knows everyone! That's why no one gets in trouble. All your friend's moms or grandmoms are your aunts or cousins or friends of your parents, and if they see you acting wild they smack your head and keep you good.

We said goodbye to the man when we returned to King's Wharf and wished each other well. Walking back to the ship I saw a poster for the parties on the beach that night and the next. The

cover was \$15 and there was a special on festive drinks. I pointed this out to Red. We're going, I said. I have plans to meet Ana there. You can go, he said. I don't want to go out again tonight.

I knew Red was going to be difficult. I tried again at dinner, offering that we'd never get the chance for such an event again, but he complained that he was tired and hadn't sleep much the past two nights. My mother intruded and said that she didn't want one of us going off the boat if the other didn't go. I was twenty-two and this was ridiculous and told her so, but she was adamant. I looked to my father and he shrugged, unwilling to argue on vacation. I dropped the issue and would bring it up again later.

We both napped for an hour after dinner. Better? I asked when we woke. I'm still not going, he said. You can bring a joint to the beach, I said. Imagine the view and the music on the beach. That sounds really terrible, he said. Come on, I said. No, he said. You're not going to convince me so stop trying. I knew this was true, and anger zipped through me. It was nearly 9:30 and if I was to go I'd leave by 11.

I did not mind disobeying my mother, but I did not want to go by myself. I'd seen other passengers, other dudes, at Club Silencio alone, and no matter how they strutted or wound-up their faces they stunk of desperation and embarrassment. I imagined not being able to find Ana or not being able to extradite her from her group and sitting at the bar alone and becoming one of those men. It was a silly but real fear, and when it came time to ready myself I instead left Red in the room and went to one of the minibars strewn throughout the ship where it was okay to sit alone and ordered two shots and a double. I put back both shots and thanked the bartender and took the double with me to deck ten.

The pools on deck ten were closed by this time, so no one was here. I slid a bright orange beanbag chair up against the glass banister and plopped down without spilling my drink. Ana would forgive me for not meeting her. I would explain to her that Red did not want to go and that I was

very tired from swimming that afternoon. As I thought this I indeed felt the bone-level tiredness that I'd been repressing, and I stood and left my drink untouched on another minibar aside the pool and went back to the room.

Red was not there but the room reeked of his pot and I knew he'd be back soon. I was asleep when he returned and did not wake until 9 a.m. from my mother knocking on the door. I'd slept ten hours. We had another ferry to catch so I hurried myself and quickly ate the three orders of eggs my mother obtained from room service.

We made the ferry in time. The weather was as placid as the day before and the ride was a bit longer. It was a different boat, so we did not see the same old deckhand. We arrived in St. George's, a northern region of the territory, by midday.

It was less crowded than Hamilton, and we checked out the old historical buildings and museums and churches and shops and the little square in which a reggae trio played. I wanted to try some Bermudian cuisine for lunch, but we couldn't find a place run by locals and settled for a restaurant with an American name that served Bermudian fish chowder. We ate outside along the water and everyone was very calm and happy.

We returned to the ship and sat by the pool until dinner. I began to worry about how to see Ana again. I could probably get Red to the beach party or Club Silencio tonight, but I didn't know which Ana would be at, if she'd even be at either. I felt in my belly that I had to see her tonight or whatever contingent force that drew us would be nulled by time.

We ate dinner. My mother asked our waiter Paul whether he had some time to relax on the island yet, and he said he did and enjoyed himself a big strawberry ice cream cone on the beach. My father tipped in cash again afterwards.

We attended an impressive acrobatic performance in the theater, and then my parents departed from me and Red for the night. Red said he'd go to the club for a short while but not to

the beach party. I acceded, having no other option. When we arrived later there were maybe a dozen people in the club, two of whom were those guys who came here alone. I felt like I was one of them despite being with Red. We drank slowly, and I became increasingly annoyed at the music, the same radio-clean songs that played in the same order every night.

At midnight, when we were about to leave, Ana and her group walked in. Ana did not see me and went right to the dance floor and started dancing by herself. Minca's stepbrother soon joined her and then Minca and her mother and stepfather. After a few songs they all sat down to order drinks, except Ana, who kept dancing. I stood and made horribly like I was dancing up to her and said, Hi. Rupert! she said. She faced me but kept dancing in place. Her black hair stuck with sweat to her face, redacting its features. I'm sorry I couldn't make it last night, I said. What? She tried shouting over the music. I repeated myself and she grabbed my shoulders and leaned in. I'm really drunk! she said. I've been drinking wine all day. Then she flittered away and kept dancing as if underwater.

I went back to Red and was pissed, not so much at Ana herself as at my inability to further advance whatever connection we'd had for the past two nights. She's too wasted, I told him. Let's go.

We returned to the room, and Red pulled out his stash and asked if me I wanted to join him. Pot either made me too anxious or muddied my thoughts, and right now I wanted to think. I told him no thanks and he rolled himself a thin joint and left.

I undressed and lay in bed and assessed my situation with Ana. I figured that at best I would see her each day in the two days left of the cruise. At worst I would not see her again. Then I recalled that she had given me her number. I checked my bag and found the paper safely stowed away. So at worst I would not see her on the cruise but would call or more likely text her when we

returned home, and we would reconvene then. I was at peace with the latter and fell asleep soon after Red returned with pizza from the cafeteria.

The next day we took a bus to Horseshoe Bay. Another very steep road led down the beach, but for five U.S. dollars you could get a ride in a worn white van back and forth. My father paid the driver and we packed in with others until the van was full.

The driver welcomed us to Horseshoe Bay, assuming a proper British accent. Bermuda, he said, was first settled by an English ship called the *Sea Venture* in 1609. The *Sea Venture* intended to land in Jamestown but was blown off course and found safety here. The storm and passengers' survival were the basis of the William Shakespeare play known as *The Tempest*. On the *Sea Venture* was John Rolfe, who later married Pocahontas. He then explained to us why the sand is pink and delineated the flora and fauna of the island and wished us a good and happy day.

The beach was almost as densely peopled as the shore back home was in late July. My father rented two umbrellas and four chairs, and we set them up about thirty feet from the water. My mother suggested I put on sunblock, but I hadn't the day before and only got minorly red so decided that today I'd be okay without it too.

Huge limestone rock formations protruded from the beach. Many climbed up their grooved sides, a rough and unforgiving surface, and most came down with their feet and ankles bleeding. I noted this and decided to climb myself. I ascended carefully, stable with my hips and torso close to the ground like a snow leopard. I did not get cut and took wonderful pictures of the sea and the beach and the inland from the rocks' peak. I thought I saw Ana below, but I was too high up to be sure.

I then swam for a while with my father, who swam better than I did, not fighting against the water so much. Red stayed under the umbrellas with my mother. Soon my mother got too hot and a bit anxious, wanting to make sure we'd arrive back at the ship in time before it departed from the

island that afternoon. We gathered our things and returned the umbrellas and beach chairs and took the van back to the bus stop.

My parents and Red and I sat in the front of the bus that was to take us back to the dock. I looked up from the novel I was reading and saw Ana and her friend and friend's family enter. Ana walked past me and said hi. She giggled. I thought it might have been because the book on my lap was a proper tome, almost 1100 pages, and had received incredulous comments from other passengers about its size. I realized back in the room that she had laughed because I'd become lobster pink, having underestimated the subtropic sun.

At dinner my father told me I'd have to deal without the aloe vera we'd forgotten and my mother reminded me our family's history of skin cancer. The ship had left Bermuda but was not out far enough yet to start rocking and dizzying its passengers. We all ate roasted quail with truffle stuffing, except for Red, who had beef tournedo. It the best meal of the cruise and went well with the white wine my mother had ordered.

Ana and her friend Minca and Minca's family were already in the club at a booth when Red and I arrived that night. The room was more crowded than ever, although still by persons a generation or two removed from me. Red and I sat in the back, behind the bar and deejay booth, along the thick glass window through which the moonlit ocean rippled far below.

We ordered drinks from the bar. I hope Ana is not too drunk again, I said to Red. Yea, he said. I'll have to figure out a way to separate her from her group. Ok, he said, staring out the window. But I don't think I can help you with that, man.

I drank with Red and felt more unsure than yesterday where I stood with Ana. But I remembered that I had her number and so, at least, time did not matter.

With the bar blocking my view I had to half-stand to see Ana. She sat in a booth on the right side of the club, and neither she nor any of her companions had danced yet.

Soon she appeared behind the deejay booth. She didn't see me. Minca's brother, Alejo or Alex, trailed close behind her. Ana said something to the deejay, who slid off his bulky headphones to listen. Alejo or Alex then said something too. He placed a hand low on Ana's hip and perhaps squeezed. Oh buddy, said Red, seeing it. Yea, I said. Don't worry, Red said. You can take him, Rupe.

I was not worried, and Alejo or Alex must have soon felt dumb and went back to his seat while Ana stayed. She had her head pushed forward and gestured wildly with closed fists, yelling, it seemed, with unfeigned anger at the deejay. I stood without thinking and walked quickly over to Ana and did not acknowledge the deejay who was then talking and turned Ana gently towards me. Hello, I said. Woah she said. You surprised me.

Her makeup was the same purplish-silver as before but her dress was dark violet and layered like a windblown flag and perfectly matched her green eyes and black hair and deeply tanned skin and light yellow oval earrings all at once. I told her so. That's very sweet, Rupert, she said. I stepped closer to her and she pushed a hand against my chest. Not here, she said. *Them*. She eyed over my shoulder at her group. I knew they would not be able to see her from my seat behind the bar. Come say hi to Red, I said. He misses you. She smiled. I'll stay for one drink.

I took her hand and we went over. She ordered red wine, and Red and I reupped our amber drinks. We talked about our experiences of the island. She seemed disappointed in hers. We spent like half a day yesterday on Horseshoe Bay, she said, and a few hours in Hamiltown I think it was called until Minca and her family got bored and wanted to come back to the ship to drink! She gestured with both arms in that exasperated way again. At least the beaches were very pretty, I said. That's true, she said, settling back into her seat. Was that beach party fun? Red asked. Oh my god. She shook her head. People were such a mess. I figured that, Red said. A bunch of people got basically naked, Ana added. She waved a hand in front of her face. I couldn't take it.

I told her about all I'd seen and heard on the island. Red seconded his more general impressions. The stories seemed to cheer her up and bum her out in waves, and she sipped her drink accordingly.

Red then excused himself and went to the restroom. Ana pointed her empty glass at me like a dagger. One drink, she said. I took the glass and set it down and kissed her. It was more intense than before and I told her we should plan to meet tomorrow. Yes, she said. I was thinking of a plan and I think we should meet at the pool on deck 10 at two. That's definitely where they'll want to go and I can make an excuse and sneak off from there no problem. Ok, I said. I kissed her again and squeezed her thigh and she smiled then stood and left.

When Red returned he slapped me on the shoulder and sat back down. I saw what you did there! Progress, man, he said. That's right, I said. We stayed for another two drinks. Ana and her group did not dance at all. Red offered several explanations for their inactivity on our way back to the room but I wasn't listening. I had drunk just enough and was very happy about Ana and walked as if floating and could not eat anything in the cafeteria when Red had us stop there. It took very long to fall asleep.

I spent all morning and afternoon with my family the next day. We were situated alongside the indoor pool on deck nine, where it was cooler for my mother and I wouldn't get more burnt, when I lied and said I was going to eat a second lunch. My mother said okay without suspicion. I dried off and slid on my shirt and flipflops and headed to the elevator.

There were two pools on deck 10 and Ana didn't specify which she'd be at. She was not at the first and I thought about ordering a drink from the minibar before I scoped out the second. Then I saw one of the thirty-something men who went alone to the club. He sat in a pool chair with the recline set way back and leaned up to sip his beer. The white towel over his belly slid down, displaying his full hairy torso. I forsook the drink and went to the second pool.

I saw Ana with her group in the hot tub on the side of the pool opposite me. They had drinks on the tub's edge and were all smiling and laughing. I stared at her until she saw me. She made like she didn't and shortly excused herself from the hot tub. It was the first time I'd seen her in a bathing suit, and her legs were thicker and her breasts bigger than I'd judged. She went to the towel rack and wrapped a white towel around her and nodded for me to follow her into the hallway off the pool.

I did so, and once away from her companions Ana turned to me and hugged me and kissed me on the neck, watching the white mark of her lips appear and fade like invisible ink. You're so pink! she said. I forgot sunblock, I said. She laughed and took my hand and said, Come. We went down the hallway and turned right then left and entered the wet sauna.

Steam rolled from the vents and we sat on the wooden bench along the pebbled wall. She untied her towel and I slipped off my shirt. We were the only ones in here, and I put an arm around her and cradled her legs over mine. Talk to me, Rupert, she said. You weren't dancing last night, I said. At first, she said. Eventually we did. I had to keep telling the deejay to play different music! She listed the genres of music she preferred to dance to, whose names I loosely recalled from a cultural studies class. Did you dance with Minca's brother? I asked. Yes, she said. She sounded nervous. Do you love him? No! She laughed and squeezed my hand.

I never asked you what you do for work, she said. I tutor at this center and sometimes freelance for a paper. Wow, she said. That's exciting! What about you? An ice cream shop! she said. I love it. When I was in high school all the pretty girls in town worked at the local ice cream place, I said. The girl I took to prom worked there. Do you still talk to her? she asked. No, I said. I saw her once after we graduated at a party and haven't since. We were never close. Then why'd you take her? she asked. Because, I said, she was popular and attractive and at the time that was enough. I see, she

said. She stared into the steam and I couldn't read her, so I turned her head toward me and kissed her.

We did this for a while until she pulled away and said, Tell me something no one else knows about you. The things I've cared for most, I said, have been killed by weather and distance. What do you mean? It'd be boring to tell, I said. Okay, she said, perhaps hurt. Did you notice, I said, changing frames, That there wasn't much seaweed on the island, and what seaweed there was didn't stink and actually smelt pleasantly salty? I did not, she said. She eyed me deeply, almost trance-like, as if parsing my face into little square regions and cataloguing the terrain of each.

I ran a hand up and down the tight gap of her folded legs. She was seriously sweating and so was I. What did you tell your group? What? she said. What did you tell your group to get away? That I was going to nap, she said. I don't think they believed me. Am I going to get you in trouble? I asked. Maybe, she said. We started kissing again but I soon told her that we should go somewhere that wasn't going to give us both heat stroke. She laughed and agreed.

We took the back stairs. Walking down she made me promise to call her when we returned home. I said of course and meant it. We went into my room and I put the Do Not Disturb sign on the doorknob and grin stupidly and she smiled. Then I scooped her onto my bed and we pulled free the few strings that bound our clothes. She was soft and warm and could not stop laughing at the tan lines around my waist and upper thighs.

Afterwards her hair smelt earthy on my chest. What do you know about rocks? I said. She grabbed my crotch and I laughed. Did you climb the rocks on the beach? I asked. No, she said. Everyone was saying they were too rough and dangerous. Did you swim in the Sargasso Sea? I asked. The what? Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea, I said, quoting Pound. What? She giggled. I rolled her off me and rose up. She lay there nude and propped up on one elbow, with a leg

and arm folded over her body like in all those eternal paintings. You look unreal, I told her. She smiled. Do you want some water? Please, she said.

We put on our bathing suits and lay there chatting for a short while until she realized the time and became nervous about her group and jumped up. They've probably been back to the room, she said. You can tell them you went to the cafeteria for a second lunch. That's good, she said. Okay. She draped her arms around my neck and kissed me hard. I don't know if I can sneak away again tonight. That's all right, I said. My dad wants to take me and Red out later, so do not worry if you don't see me at the club. I won't, she said. I'll see you again, I said. She kissed me finally and left.

Red entered the room not long after. He sniffed around and read my grin. My man! he said. I joked that I used his bed and he told me to fuck off and get ready for our last fancy dinner.

Red and my father and I all wore suits and my mother wore an elegant long blue dress peppered with silver scintilla. We had another picture of us taken by the dining room window. Since it was the final dinner of the cruise my father tipped Paul enough extra that my mother complained afterwards, and he reminded her for the thousandth time that his own mother was a waitress and what tips meant.

When my mother became tired around nine my father met up with me and Red at a minibar on deck four. We went down the hallway into the casino. Red and I both wanted to play blackjack and we secured a spot at a table. Two men were already dealt in. One was in his early thirties with his black hair slicked back and wore black sunglasses for no reason and a tee cut short at the arms to show off his muscles. He was not drinking, and, although I could not see his eyes, his face read of seriousness and the strain of unusual focus. The other man was older than my father, with thin white hair and happy jowls and a loose polo shirt. He drank a vodka tonic and greeted us warmly. The deck is hot, he said.

My father stood behind Red and me. He handed the dealer two hundred-dollar bills and said to split it between us. The dealer, an Eastern European woman who couldn't have been older than Red, wasted no time sliding stacks of multicolor chips our way.

I knew little about the game except the basic rules and figured I would lose all my chips too quickly and feel guilty about it. I did. Red managed to survive for about twice as long, advising me on the intricacies of blackjack logic after each winning hand. The man with the sunglasses was still in the game after Red but had about as many chips as he started with. The older man was much ahead but cashed out after his second drink.

On the way out of the casino we saw a man by himself distribute what must have been over a thousand dollars in chips on a roulette table. People gathered to watch him spin. The little silver ball bumped around the thirty-eight pockets of the wheel until it landed on nothing special. All his chips were swept away by the croupier's reaching hook as the crowd dispersed. I thanked my father for taking us and so did Red, and he said no problem and then left us for the night.

Back in our room Red said that he would attend the club for only a little while. I told him we didn't have to go; I could think of no better conclusion with Ana than this afternoon and wanted to leave things as such until resuming at home. Red happily acceded and soon withdrew his stash and rolled a joint. He asked me if I wanted to join him. Although pot had made me anxious so many times that I'd stopped trying it, tonight the setting was surely right and I accepted. As long as we grab a drink first, I said.

We did so, stopping at a minibar. We asked for our normal doubles and I ordered shots of whiskey for us both. Cheers to Red, a wise and humble man, I said. To me, he said. We clinked glasses and shot them down and went up to deck 12, the top deck.

No one was up here and we stopped halfway down along the railing. The chilly wind blew steadily and Red couldn't light the joint. Make like a phalanx, he said. I cupped my hands around the joint and he succeeded.

Red had rolled it tight and thick and we smoked it down slowly. The ocean below us was unseeable except for the lit portions aside the ship. No other boats cruised the waters, and we were still too far from land to see the coast. Red took long deep hits and enjoyed the rough smoke in his lungs. I coughed heavily throughout and soon finished my drink. I threw the glass over the railing as far as I could. Yea! Red said. He threw his too and shot a fist into the air. Fuck the maritime police!

My head felt very heavy when we met the warmth back inside. Panic tickled up my spine and I told Red we should go back to the room because I did not want to run into Ana like this. That was okay with him and we did so.

In the room we both realized that we were still wearing our suits, jackets and all, and felt ridiculous and stripped down to our boxers. All loosey goosey now, Red said, shaking and patting his belly like a tambourine. He flicked on the TV and turned to a station that played reggae music nonstop. He grooved goofily up and down the aisle between our beds, and I lay in mine and closed my eyes and smelt Ana and her earthy scent on my pillow. I wanted her beside me but knew that was not now possible.

Stop dreaming, Red said. I looked and he was now standing on his bed and jumping in place. I flipped him off lovingly and shut my eyes again. Then I heard Big Splash! and felt Red's weight crashing down upon me.

He bounced up and I clutched my ribs. You bastard, I said. You twenty-five year old child. Yes, he said. Suddenly he paced around in tight yearning circles, as if an ant on a mound of sugar. And this child is hungry! Let's go to the caf.

I propped up and felt as if hot water sloshed between my ears. I thought again about running into Ana. Negative, I said. We'll order room service.

Red's face brightened. That's perfect, Rupe. All my days stoned aboard and I never thought of that.

We perused the menu and both ordered burgers and fries and chicken fingers. When the food arrived on covered silver trays we inspected it and immediately agreed that this would not be enough and sent the nice room steward for two bowls of chocolate ice cream.

We ate it all and were very tired soon after and shut off the lights and music and went to sleep.

We docked in the morning and had to wake early. Disembarking spanned several hours with much waiting and jamming ourselves into lines. Many passengers complained to the staff, demanding an explanation for each momentary pause. I searched all around for Ana as we left the ship and eventually entered the dockyard but did not see her. My uncle picked us up in his truck and drove us home.

My wife, when I first asked her to edit this story for me, had joked, Will you ever write like this about me? I've never known you to dance, I said. You'd have to die a terrible death instead. Suffocation, strangulation, exsanguination. Et cetera. She smiled and nodded at the tea kettle on the stove and shook her empty cup at me. Fill me up, please, señor. I did so and she asked me if I ever saw Ana, whoever she really was, after the cruise. I told her that we texted steadily for a week afterwards, and that I called Ana once to make plans and she did not answer. Becoming worried about the advances of Alejo, I texted her outright that we should reunite.

We agreed to meet for lunch on Wednesday. She sent me her address, which was in Elizabeth and not Union. I knew a bakery close by that we could go to. But when I googled the bakery I found it had closed three years prior. I searched for others places that were vegan-friendly

but could not find anywhere within a thirty-minute drive. I had to work later that afternoon and could not take so long, so with no other option I texted her and explained the situation and asked how about that nearby pizza place she once mentioned. She said sure and it was set.

That Wednesday I drove forty-five minutes to her house. As usual, I had smoked too much pot the night before, and my mind still felt unbalanced, the firing of neurons stuttered. My air conditioning stopped working halfway down. It was at least eight-five degrees out and I sweated through the back of my shirt and the seat of my boxers. My shorts were navy blue and my shirt dark red, so I told myself that she wouldn't notice. I arrived a few minutes late because of traffic and parked along the curb. Her house was small and the lawn was neat and a Puerto Rican flag flew from the porch.

Ana was waiting at the door and came right out to the car. She got in and I kissed her on the cheek. She received it with a nervous laugh. How are you? I said. Good, she said. I'm happy to see you, Rupert. I told her I was happy to see her too and apologized for the broken AC. It's okay, she said. In my dad's car that I drive sometimes the air doesn't work too. The drive's not far.

She directed me the few turns to the pizza place. I asked whether she'd finished reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* yet, and she said she was almost done. Vonnegut was really important to me, I said. The lean economy. How each part like blooms from what comes before and wastes nothing.

She didn't understand what I meant, so I explained how writing a story is like performing those spinning plate acts from the Ed Sullivan Show and how Vonnegut does this perfectly. I sort of get it, she said, as we arrived at Gomez Bros' Pizza. I dropped the topic and we went inside.

I told her I'd probably get two slices. Might as well just get a whole pie. The special, she said, pointing the banner above the counter: \$8.99 for a large pie and two-liter soda. Sure, I said. I slid open the door of the fridge. Get Sprite, she said.

I did so, cradling the big bottle as if it was a wet baby. I hadn't drunk full-sugar soda for years prior or, in fact, since that day. She laughed. You look like I'm making you do something you're like out of your comfort zone with. It's fine, I smiled.

I told the cashier we'd take the special and paid. I like your dress, the cashier said to Ana. Thank you, Ana said to her, and explained to the cashier where she got it and for how much. I suddenly felt stupid for not having complimented Ana yet. I glanced over as I put the change in my wallet and saw Ana's necklace, a golden figure-eight that I'd realize days after was really a lemniscate, and noted to compliment that later.

We sat and chatted and soon the pie came. We talked about her father, who works as a commercial painter and who she'd implied was divorced from her mother; her older sister, who she hadn't mentioned before but whom Ana now noted was overweight and had giant breasts; Red and his recent hiring as a guidance counselor in a local public school; my mother's first place victory the previous weekend at a local 5k race for charity; Minca's stepfather, who started having serious heart problems a day after the cruise; Minca's bad luck in general; the reading lists of the early American and Victorian literature classes she'd be taking next semester; my post-grad plans; the difference between lesser and fewer and further and farther; how she might have difficulty coming to see me since her father used their car for work; how I was willing to make the drive; the raccoon she found with its head stuck in a peanut butter jar and freed; her plans for the rest of the summer, namely a road trip to Florida with her mother, if funds allowed for it; how the Jersey shore would be a bumner after the clean beaches of Bermuda; and other things.

When we were done there were a few slices left and most of the soda. We had the pizza packed to go and I carried the box and bottle out with us. I placed them in the back seat of my car, which had become so hot in the sun that I had to let down the windows and crack the doors to let it vent for a few minutes.

Sorry, I said to Ana. She stood facing me on the sidewalk. It's alright, she said. I like your necklace, I said. Thanks! I got it for my birthday from my father. Then I pulled her into me by the waist and kissed her. She felt my back and laughed. You're all wet, Rupert! I kissed her again and she pushed me away and said, We're in public now, you know.

We drove back to her house, and I told her I had to get to my tutoring job and couldn't stay. Okay, she said. I kissed her quickly and she left. I pulled away and did not watch her walk up the lawn and into her house.

I sped home and, running late, dressed for work without showering. I left, realizing now that I'd forgotten to give Ana the rest of the pizza and soda. I drove to work with the windows down and the terrible radio loud.

I was tutoring two juniors, a guy and girl, for their SATs. I'd been tutoring the guy for months, and he was witty and potentially smart but gave no effort and had made little improvement. He said he had forgotten to do his homework. I told him that this test mattered, and he eyed me skeptically. I told him that he had to care about something or the world would swallow him whole, although not in those words. You're going to live a life after high school, is what I said. Start imagining what that might be like, maybe.

But the girl I was tutoring was smart and very pleasant. I was reading a book for school today and wrote down the words I didn't know, she said. I looked them up and thought how proud you'd be. I am, I said. It's a good habit. I marked a question wrong on her homework. What were you reading? She pulled on her pink scarf and shrugged and smiled. I forget, she said. But I do remember the words!