

OSMAN

To Osmantan Erkir

"After all, a rose is a rose is a rose. That's not bad. It should be quoted."

Calvero

September 7

Ever since he has moved in there is an empty gas station in front of his apartment. The lights are always on at night in the abandoned convenience store. It looks littered from what can be seen through the tagged windows. The only wall in the station, the one connected to the city's network of buildings by mere contact, houses ambitious throwups that burn for a couple of weeks before they are patched over by an unknown.

‘Urban Romanticism’ (COLIT-124) is offered every year as the introduction class to prospective Comparative Literature majors—students who would rather benefit from a more intimate discussion and a chance to expand upon their ideas, as opposed to the traditional, constricting lecture. This year's course, as with every year's course, is about ‘one's own place and the journeys one can take in the city as it reflects one's consciousness’, which are then interpreted by students as nothing more than basic tenets of psychoanalysis. Once a serious discussion of how modernism and individualism developed along with metropolitans, the lecture has been dumbed down to a required seminar to provide a buffer zone for the young pupils still adjusting to the hectic urban lifestyle, as if they ever could. Still, the curriculum is an acceptable cornucopia: Starting with *Street Haunting*, giving the students some translated *The Black Book* for international appeal, brashly going forward with one third of *Falling Man* depending on the students reaction to the Middle Eastern, or else bringing it down with a chapter from *Portnoy's Complaint* for some male-but-cozy comic relief before the first midterm. Give them some Balzac and a simple Sennett, and let everything simmer until you end it with *The Walk*. The usual.

At 09:59, there are fifteen kids in the underground classroom labeled STNLL172 of the Stein/Stone Building. The dark red fabric walls of the classroom absorb some of the fluorescent light to make the room smaller. The only other color in the room is the light grey of the round table, the color chosen to stimulate objectivity, the table chosen because of a bulk deal. Some students sit and wait, some sit and watch, and once in a lifetime, but not in these young ones, someone will start talking to the stranger next to them.

Like the university, everybody dons on their favorite identity on the first day of school. Outside, blending with the city, there are varying tones of skin covered by colors ranging from white to black, with names, paintings, or simple designs on some of the t-shirts that proclaim their allegiance to something art while the banners and flags of the school give their own tint to the parade.

Osman X. Johnson (no relation) arrives just in time; he knows how the first day works. He carries a faint scent of chlorine from the morning workout, of which he hopes that instead of bothering anyone, it will give the impression of a professor who is not totally lost in his own mind.

Don't get him wrong, he would have loved a dais, but he settles for and into his special chair, the only revolving one in the room, and the students look deep into his mouth for the vital information that will spill out. His spiel (not really a spiel, but something that has become more of a routine after many years, repeating his past teachers' methods because to be honest he couldn't find a better alternative when it ain't broke) consists of telling his full name, making a joke about that, asking the students to call him by his first name, not by the name of Professor X, receiving no chuckles but

some smiles, so then going around the table, asking the students their own names, where they have come from, their years, majors, and finally, just to jazz it up, a good book they have read recently. The undergrads usually give off benign answers. To top the rest there is the predictable person naming an unpredictable book, ranging from potboiler to poetry. International students may give a book from their own nation, but Osman knows that they take too much time to explain before the little interest anyone has had wears off.

The kids' names are Carrie, Alan, James, Alice, Linda, Luke, Alan, Meredith, who is unaware of the prison she has created for herself sitting in her chair pushed extremely close to the table in order to sit up straight, Christopher (not Chris), Emily but she is from China, Wei who is also from China, Shirman from the business school next door, Yukio from Japan who is a sophomore and an exchange student, Sophia who has a French accent but actually from Yorkville, and Gideon, who says the last good book he has read was the early poems of Ezra Pound. With a grimace on his face he says the work took him to "New Directions". Is this kid for real? Though he might be an cheesy smartass, it makes an impression. Apart from Gideon, Osman remembers only nine of those names, two of them being Alans. The tally is surprisingly good compared to his colleagues. The rest will come to him in the following classes; some won't come at all. He's okay with that.

Osman doesn't tell the students where he comes from, nor the book he has considered to be worthy of his praise, and in turn they see him as the quintessential professor burdened with too much knowledge to favor anything, no personality nor any choice left, even though he is just an assistant professor five years into a tenure track. At least he is not a TA too old for his age.

In a lapse of Osman's reason, the syllabus gets passed after the naming ritual. It is promptly read aloud in turn, paragraph by paragraph and Osman ends the class by taking a couple of simple questions. Since the students will say the same words about themselves over and over again in other classes, refining their lines to perfect little capsules of identities, he benevolently releases the students to the last days of summer.

At lunch, Osman's colleague Zhang is back from the University of Kentucky summer camp, where he has delivered a lecture on quantum physics and Fluxus.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't have believed it. I have been on this topic for seven years now, and never have received a standing ovation after a lecture."

"Congratulations, Zhang." Even though Osman doesn't know any Mandarin, he can perfectly pronounce his friend's name.

"I mean, they were screaming. Like I was a rockstar."

"You are a rockstar."

At 17:00, his alarm goes off and he sends a humorous reminder of a text to Laura. No worries, Laura hasn't forgotten about tonight. Confident, he walks over to the water cooler, this time sans-Zhang, but he is not alone, Hafiz is reading aloud somewhere. Osman pours himself the second, and the last, coffee of his day, every weekday, this time for a personal project for The Conference.

Last year, Osman had caught a student plagiarizing, taken off guard because nobody plagiarized anymore. The late millennials, too smart for their own good, thought

there were apps or websites or even old school programs that ran on MSDOS, but the department had stopped using PlagScan a couple of years ago because the fear instilled in students was enough to keep them straight.

Osman had only spotted the student's deed because he (the student, not Osman) was stupid enough to not change the font of the plagiarized paragraph. And the necessary disciplinary action was enforced not by Osman, but with a streamlined process by the administration. Nevertheless, all kinds of second-hand Foucauldian implications aside, it had actually felt jarring to discipline someone. No professor guilty of the same/any crime had any action taken against them, give or take a few leery tenured staff, who got a slap on the wrist only to realize that the pleasurable taps made them feel alive, just like their transgressions.

So, after enough inspiration and justification, Osman decided to craft an essay entirely out of quotations and nothing original from the author. It was to be a cheeky but enlightening and diligent process from and for academia, a playful attempt to shadowbox within the confinements of research methods, Baching his way through as he risked raised eyebrows from his peers, annoyed at Osman his meddling with classical education, annotated and everything, but annoyed more at themselves for not having thought of the concept first and jealous of his deserved Guggenheim.

Although he was going to get out two stops before to enjoy the weather, Osman has lost focus. He is on his seventh subway stop right now on the 1 line. Eighth is Laura. Outside, looking for a chocolatier, he spots one immediately, gets in, gets out, pops a

chocolate in his mouth, pops the paper bag in to his satchel. He has more than enough left for him and her.

The Met's fountain drops Cupidly to reveal Laura shimmering behind the aquatic curtains. Laura: all-American, bright blue doe-eyes, full set of smiling teeth between defined cheekbones, and this is just the face. She is wearing a winsome button-down dress, modest cut but vibrant design, which goes very well with her enthusiasm in seeing Osman, her exo-quixotic man for tonight.

“Hello.”

“Hello!”

They had met at a party, and it was *not* the dinner kind. It was where people stood up, conversing instead of dancing with each other, switching topical partners every now and then just like swingers who are seemingly only interested in spoken coitus. On the surface, they looked interesting—here was a mid-career artist living in the Bronx, here was a lawyer about that thing maybe you heard in the news? no? well, it was a big deal.

Osman, being an academic, thus finding the interesting in anything, was a delight to talk to in parties. Laura was expecting the normal but awkward silence that ensued preliminary explorations; he had countered the dreaded possibility by asking her about her very recent move to here from Pennsylvania with a sweet position secured at the a top-tier consulting firm. Turns out, it was pretty surreal, the surreal gave Osman enough material to dive deeper into her past interests, which she would restart with her new life in the city, and before she knew it they were on a closer level of sincerity and body after the first glass of wine.

Now, they are tasting happy hour oysters and drinking Prosecco at a restaurant. The crowd is still pompous as opposed to the more expensive alternative at Time Warner Center, but Laura doesn't know that. Laura is happy, Osman is happy, but Laura has never been here so her happiness has the fresh tinge of new phenomena.

“All these people here,” she says, but the temptation of another oyster is too good to resist. Osman waits attentively.

“All these people here,” she says, fixing the past, “they are *all* eating oysters and drinking and going to go to the opera. It’s like we’re a herd.”

“You have to be lavish on opera night,” Osman says. “Otherwise you can’t enjoy it.”

He winks. She catches it with her eyes.

Laura has been on a photographing frenzy since her arrival—everything is just so *new* again. And you know what?, she doesn't care if you don't like it, she wants to remember tonight with pictures as well. She asks Osman to take a photo of her in front of the fountain, on the balcony, sitting down, this time together, because nobody should think she is alone at the opera, as they act being excited for the phone’s camera and the photograph’s destination: the social networks, the final frontier.

When the third act gets too sappy even for historical or campy appreciation Osman finds the perfect window for the chocolates to resurface back into the narrative, this time inviting Laura to be a little puckish together. *He thinks about the little things, like a surprise truffle! And if the little things don’t matter, what does?*

For example, it doesn't matter what opera they are watching. Osman didn't ask Laura whether she wanted to see something specific; Laura didn't ask what was playing. The spectacle is the experience of going to the opera, not the opera itself. The actors have experienced the same emotions, betrayal, sadness, joy, whatever the piece brings, for years; they probably don't care about you. Where they stand on is simply symbolical, pretend topos. But you, you the viewer, the given, the possessed, you are the real stage where all the drama happens, emotions find home, and the dialogue takes place only as clusters within the audience, amongst many many small groups, and only revealing something between.

When they leave, they are different from the crowd because for Laura the theatre they were watching is over, along with her and Osman's inside choco-joke. Her rate of words-per-minute has increased dramatically and in volume as well, talking about this and that, actors and scenery, while Osman as her guide imparts his precious knowledge (imported from his friends next floor at the Classics department) whenever it is necessary, or when Laura wants to catch her breath. It is not only the opera; the opera merely catalyzed everything Laura has seen about the city to pour out in a long catharsis. For example, Laura did not know this brand of artisanal chocolate, Laura did not know that the opera night was so fancy but so fun, Laura thanks Osman for being there as she discovers the secrets of the city, especially in this city where people are supposed to be so unfriendly, she knows she is exaggerating the last couple of claims, they will get lost in the stream of words, but really, Laura would love to know other 'secrets' of the city that Osman can show her, Laura would love to get a drink somewhere, thank you very much,

but would he first would like to walk through Times Square, because Laura did not know that it was so close to here?

“Surely you’re joking?”

She is not, and don’t call her Shirley. Instead, she is daring him to be more adventurous in her court, which is filled to the brim with tourists. Laura is still a tourist. Osman is always a tourist.

“I guess I can take my line from there as well.”

“Sure.” Her smile is half-shy, half-tempting. Osman knows that Laura knows that he knows it is going well, almost too well, too easy, like a freshman hook up.

The commercial kaleidoscope welcomes them like a light trap, first with David Letterman, then, coming from north to south, with McDonalds, Bank of America, Adidas, MTV, Toys ‘R’ Us, Kodak, advertisements for Broadway shows and TV shows and movies, Disney, H&M, American Eagle, ABC, and many more tucked away in smaller, cheaper parts of one giant billboard, finally culminating in the totem of Toshiba, the top reaching to a sky that is never dark in Times Square, the global empire on which the sun cannot set.

Laura takes Osman’s hand with the pretense of not losing him in the crowd. He squeezes tight and wiggles her fingers once they are locked. Exhilarated to be with the rest of the lit people to the point of forgetting the drink, they take Laura’s subway line without the necessity of verbally communicating desire.

Entering through the door between the cars, a homeless man begins his story. He has been out of job, he is looking for some food, anything helps, thank you and god bless you. He is a stinky behemoth, lumbering through passengers, using his phrases more economically now, simply going through his anyone?s or thank yours.

Laura looks at Osman to see how he will react to this imminent issue. Osman is facing a catch-22 here. Either he can:

- a) Ignore the homeless person like a lot of other people on the subway, thus be subjected to a subconscious derision by Laura. The smiles she will give for the rest of the night will be tainted by her conditioning of helping others and choosing a gentleman for a partner. But this might also lead to Laura asking herself who is she to judge this person she is on a date with?, thus examining gender roles, her self-esteem, the whole kit and caboodle of critical introspection.
- b) Or, give a dollar to the homeless person, make eye contact while bowing the head ever so slightly, receive a temporary gratitude, look back at Laura to see her smile, brush the incident as if it was no big deal, because he is a generous man after all, and true generosity comes from not even being aware of it. “But is he really that unaware?” Laura might think. “Is he just doing it to get my affection on a date? Should the homeless man not have received any money from Osman then?” He will have to go on with the generous act forever if he doesn't want to be labeled as a hypocrite.

Osman lets the homeless person pass onto the next car. He turns to Laura as soon as the door is shut.

“You know,” he says, “it is really sad to see the homeless people in the city. And nobody does anything substantial about it. The state doesn’t find them a place and the society temporally eases its conscience for a dollar.”

Osman takes a short break before the turn.

“And don’t I feel guilty? I do. But I also don’t let this be a burden.”

“What do you do?” Laura is still smiling, but only out of reaction. She is awaiting something to save her own conscience as well.

“I don’t carry cash.”

Laura laughs, stops herself, but the dark mirth forces itself out of her: “I’m sorry, that’s a terrible thing to laugh about,” she says, still suppressing the aftershocks.

Looking for a way out of the comic relief back into a conversation, they look across only to encounter their reflection from the window. They need to be talking. They need to speak about something. So Laura offers the news, Osman offers a recent movie, and the friendly tennis match like the halfhearted BNP Paribas Showdowns goes on until Laura says “This is my stop,” and Osman leaves the subway with her.

There is utter silence in the after hours, both amongst them and on the barren streets of downtown. Where she lives on Church Street, where the only attractions are a liquor store and take-out Chinese, the empty bars close at 10pm and yes it sucks, but not when you are with someone. Sometimes they look at each other and smile. There are no need for words at the end of a third date except Laura’s casual good night to her doorman, a stereotype named Frank, who has seen this scene before where these people

relinquish any power, responsibility, or action to the slow burn of conventions, so much that even a slight movement of her cheek brushing against his shoulder is tantalizing.

Laura would like to offer some wine but it is getting late. At this hour she can only accept remarks about her new apartment, a company perk.

“It’s nice. Brick wall’s nice.”

“Yeah people seem to notice that quite a lot. But the place is not decorated, though I see stuff I want to fill it with every day.”

“Don’t worry, I lived in the same place for five years and it’s never done.”

She seizes a smiling yawn to indicate both her fatigue and the bed. The *mise en scène* is sparse but that only creates more room, all for the better. Osman feels as if he is being asked to change the tennis match into a silent, harmonious dance, fit for a different stage, one that is not so friendly but more passionate. Locking Laura around his right arm, he does an inside turn, releasing the arms for a residue of *dosado* towards a wall, finally ending with a closed change. Laura, tired and malleable in his arms, is finally relaxed after a long day.

“Osman, Osman wake up.”

Osman is at Laura’s living room, dangerously close to her front door. His head hurts.

“What’s going on?”

“You were sleepwalking. Trying to walk out the door but you couldn’t open it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve never sleepwalked before.”

“It was really cute. Come back to bed.”

September 8

Laura has left both her place and a pretty note to Osman, telling him “she has had a lovely time last night, hope his head is alright”.

The gesture belongs to an independent woman who is not afraid to have a man alone in her house. Not that she needs to worry. There is not much in the bedroom for monetary value, only personal, but the scant furnishing would appeal to any academic. On one of the plastic multi-purpose shelves, next to an unread hardcover of *The Goldfinch* and a slightly inflated copy of *The Little Friend* and, there are obligatory framed photos of parents and a sibling a waterpark.

Seen in the morning light, The Belle Epoque is the decorative choice of the living room, or at least that’s what Osman can gather from the *Le Chat Noir* poster blown up on a wall and a few Toulouse-Lautrecs accompanying it. Next time, he should ask her how long was she in Paris for. Maybe she stayed there for a year or two for the job, maybe she spent a college semester, but definitely not enough to break the illusion and treat Paris like its blasé natives.

There is nothing in the fridge except a carton of eggs and cheese. On the top, there are peanut butter and oatmeal for emergencies, and lastly, old cookbooks, bought from The Strand for a couple of dollars in one's first tentative visit, ready to be dusty again. A Drexel magnet is stuck on the fridge, lost amongst delivery numbers. A bowl for change is filled to the brim. Her work nourishes her better than her home life, but overall it is

messy and fast, exciting. Osman is starting to feel a certain envy and then an affinity toward Laura, a heartwarmer that can be developed for anyone with enough time, but his appreciation for her naked apartment and her assertive confidence propels the process.

He buys a bagel from a street vendor—like Laura probably did this morning—on the way to his apartment, which beckons him with heavy clinks and clatters of an excavator heard from around the corner. The empty lot in front of his building is finally changing. Into what, Osman wouldn't know, because gigantic cardboard panels are being set around the premises.

A crazy homeless guy passing by screeches “EEEEEEEEEEEEEE” to imitate a panel's dragging, stops, and then continues to screech, disowning any association between his own and the rest, until he is out of range.

“Anyone you know Gene?”

“No man no I don't fuck with those guys.”

Gene is the homeless man that hangs out around Osman's building since the beginning of the year. He says he has come from Haiti and seen everything a man could see including the supernatural. His history, along with his lack of teeth, may explain why he is not too talkative, choosing to be stationed next to the soup kitchen to be first in line with his designated chairs—a broken but rolling one, a stoop, a box—to sit and read whatever book he finds only to finish it in a couple of days. He finds an airport novel if he is lucky, a law book if he is not. Once he was reading an extensive history of the Latin Quarter in Paris.

Osman had struck up a friendship with Gene after both realized that they were going to see each other regularly. He had considered giving him a dollar at first, but then he brought the booklover some extra, unproofread books he had found around the department for a different kind of support. Gene still hasn't read *Poetics* but he knows its reception history until the 17th century all too well, and that's enough in some circles.

"This construction is going to be awful," relates Osman. "Do you know if they are just securing the place?"

There was a fire at the end of the block a month ago at Theodore's Steakhouse. Two people died but the rest moved on, although, surrounded by the popped light bulbs, the neon sign perpetually glowed TH ODOR' ST AKO SE.

"No man no I don't know nobody told me anything."

"Whatever it is, it was supposed to happen, right Gene?"

"Yeah man right right now it's noisy but whaddaya gotta do? It's always noisy."

He is used to his building's poor absorbing of the roadwork racket in his sleepy mornings, but this is something else. The continuous hums, rattles, and thumps coming from the panel installation don't get any softer as he enters his apartment, instead they bring along seismic implications, probably affecting the infrastructure. The wooden floors feebly shake and his bookshelves, "the only meaningful decoration" as Osman would say, shudder whenever a panel is brought onto the ground from the truck.

Fortunately, he needs to leave his apartment anyhow because Tuesdays are his busiest days. His graduate class 'Aleatory Dichotomies' (COLIT-GA-2821) meets at noon, and he has office hours for the rest of the day. It's a perfect combo of high and low. The former is a competitively driven discussion as much as one can have with students,

and the latter's boredom is overrated. Time passes quickly as he tries to explain the fundamental concepts to undergrads.

Osman has had the same schedule for his classes since he has started teaching in this school. The hours could caper a bit on the short and long hands of the clock, but the schedule luckily never really changed and he has always been assigned the first two days of the week. He has never had to compromise and he doesn't know why. In a casual way, simply out of curiosity, he wants to ask the administrative assistant but he is afraid it will disrupt the natural order.

Even though he doesn't need to be there, going early to the office lifts him up and puts him in tune with the majority of the complaining America in their cars, listening to The Boomtown Rats' forever-misunderstood "I Don't Like Mondays," the unacknowledged, but obvious bond between the radio DJs who play the song without fail in the beginning of every week and the commuters who sing "I wanna shoo-oo-oo-oo-oot/The whole day down" in a miraculous perfect pitch as a result of their fervor, separate in their cars but united in emotion, stuck in traffic, though Osman takes the subway.

When Osman is entering the department building, Pascal Milongo is leaving accompanied by two G-Men. He is not aware of Osman, or anyone else for that matter. His head is down, his body is slack in foreign arms, his toes graze the ground. He mumbles what sounds like a prayer. The security guard doesn't say good morning to Osman.

The department's floor hasn't been this chaotic since the end of the year party. Everybody is out of their office. The same questions that nobody has the answers for and

the same remarks that nobody can build upon are being thrown around the room. Osman finds Zhang and decides to join in:

“Hey, what just happened?”

“It’s the feds.”

“It’s the what?”

“The feds? FBI?”

“Yeah, I understand, but why? What could Pascal do?”

“They gave an official statement to the department, citing one of his essays as the reason. Apparently it was considered dangerous.”

“Which one?”

“I don’t know, I don’t really remember. ‘Echoes of the Epochal or some stuff.’ It was about realism and historicism or something.”

As far as Osman knew the man, Pascal could only write on 17th century colonial literature of South America. His African background aggravated his skeptics, who would never let go of the fact that Pascal once said that he found *One Hundred Years of Solitude* okay.

“Yeah, but he was trying to branch out. He told me that he wanted to get more metaphysical in his studies and focus less on being bound to time and space. As if not enough people do.”

“Would that be dangerous?”

“According to the government it would be.”

Pascal could have been considered somewhat provocative in a couple of his recent essays, trying to out-Fanon Fanon, but provocative in academia doesn’t really mean a lot.

Even if it does, it always stays within the boundaries of the campus, especially in Comparative Literature. A scientific research on the side effects of a new pesticide can get you assassinated, or lobbied until you surrender, but an opinion on the cracks in contemporary analysis of archive will elicit a scoff at best.

“Maybe it has something to do with... his race?”

Nobody has an answer for that. Osman backtracks from the dead end.

“Is he Tutsi? Hutu? What Congo is he from anyhow?”

“Dunno, but he once corrected me to say Zaire instead of DRC. Apparently people over there still call it by that name. Don’t know if that means he was from there, though.”

“Ok, everybody,” the Chair says, calming the expecting crowd, “I’m leaving now to talk to the President of the university. We will get to the bottom of this and try to get Pascal out of custody. Meanwhile, you can all go home if you want to, I have cancelled classes and meetings for today. We’ve all had a rough morning.”

Pathless, the academics disperse. Some manage to find the elevator in their daze, while some still need to walk around in the hallway to calm down.

Osman doesn’t go home because he knows that this empty environment will be much better than his block. The unusual quiet—surprisingly more noticeable than the soft, hushed drone of people working—and the vanished workload have made this Tuesday afternoon a rather pleasant one. He goes to his office with the intention of taking more coffee and bathroom breaks than usual to relish the opportunity.

The two sides of his office, apart from the door and the window, are slowly becoming literal walls of books. A bank manager can have two or three of his favorites on display to evoke empathy from a customer, but an academic's office has to be an extension of his private life, simply because the books have reached full capacity at home. Or rather, the private life is the extension of work, because at least in the offices the books are put in use, if only for intellectual intimidation.

Judging from the same muffled recitation as any other day, Hafiz is the only one except Osman on the entire floor. He probably didn't come out in the stir, so he must be thinking he is alone right now: The delivery is louder than his regular ASMR, which sounds like dikhr:

“The notion is the principle of all life, and thus possesses at the same time a character of thorough concreteness. The notion is what contains all the earlier categories of thought merged in it, an infinite and creative form which includes, but at the same time releases from itself, the fullness of all content.”

Osman realizes that Hafiz has left his door open as well. Nobody has seen Hafiz reading and rarely one sees Hafiz outside of his cubicle or his class. He usually gives a small “Salam” when his head isn't down, meant for nobody except to satisfy the minimal condition carrying out a pleasantry of recognition throughout history.

Too tempted not to miss this opportunity, he walks around the square layout of the floor to get a better view. From the gap of the door, Hafiz's head bobs in and out of the frame, religiously swaying to the text. Osman is fixated on the trance for a while, but pulls himself out before he starts to mirror Hafiz.

Tired of dilly-dallying through a loose schedule, Osman reaches Janet through the closed telephone line of the university. She has already heard what has happened to Pascal; news travel as fast as the unconscious in the Psychology department.

“I don’t think there is a Congolese restaurant nearby, do you?”

“Nope, I’ve checked.”

They agree for lunch in half an hour at a nearby Ethiopian place for Pascal’s sake.

“Hold on, I’m fluent in menus, let me get this one. Let’s get some azifa, some special tibs, Janet you wanted miser alech? That sounds good. Ok? I think we’re set. Oh, and lots of injera bread please.”

You wouldn’t think that this couple dated for some years when they were both newcomers to the school. When you learn that, you wouldn’t think that they broke up amicably, deciding together to see other people but still keep in touch. When you learn *that*, you wouldn’t think that they still do keep in touch, that they are still good friends with sexual tension erased in passionate conversations about something else. They are ideal former lovers and a paragon of post-relationship couples, if there ever once was one.

“How’s Steve,” Osman asks. He likes Steve. Steve is good for Janet.

“He’s fine, he has this presentation on Friday so he has been worrying about it. The kids are doing okay as well, but we resorted to a babysitter for this week.”

Janet had moved to south Brooklyn because raising two kids was harder around Orthodox Jews, sources had said. Their meetings have gotten rarer, but it was just everybody on their own lane going through life.

“What do you have on your agenda?”

“Just polishing something for The Conference.”

“It’s never polishing with you. What are you writing on?”

“I have to keep up with the rest of the world. But enough about me," she pops her eyebrows. "How was the date with Laura?"

Osman's raised eyebrows say "Really?"

“What does she do again?”

“Consulting? But no real definition. They constantly complicate the names and positions to keep them on their toes.”

“Hard knock life for her.”

“Eh.”

Their tray arrives with an extraordinary stack of injera bread. He pushes it aside to see Janet’s face.

“So when will you think about your future?”

“Our future or my future?”

“They’re related.”

“Too soon to tell, for now I think I’m just having fun. Maybe I’ll date someone different next time. Different culture and whatnot.”

“No,” Janet says, elongating, and Osman can see the diagnosis at the end of the tunnel, “you are dating Americans because you have an obsession. That’s why you dated me, because I was the only American, except you, in the entire career fair.”

“This wouldn’t be because of my infant stage, would it?” Osman digs.

“That’s what Sandy is for, not me.”

“How are the twins?”

They had broken up because Osman didn't want start a family. Neither had Janet until she hit 30. He understood, though he compared everybody else to her for two years.

"They're wonderful," she replies and Osman hopes she means it. "Looking back, I can see how wrong I was. I don't know if it is having a kid, but being a mother changes everything. You see things differently. I wouldn't even say it was biological. I think society is an awful influence on kids, even parents. But, at the same time, you feel like you're being pushed, maybe by your own will as well. I don't know. I try not to analyze myself. It's just the way it is."

Walking back to school, they say hello to Günther Jaspers, who is leaving a deli with a 40 in a paper bag and gives a grunt back as a howdy. One of the oldest professors in the institution, he is too bored these days to teach textuality to incoming graduate students so he just draws a magnetic field on the whiteboard every class and leaves. Word is, he used to draw lovely Klein bottles in the 80s but arthritis prevented him from drawing the third dimension as well as before.

The Chair is waiting for him in the lobby.

"Osman, glad to find you here, come into my office for a second?"

Osman follows. Her office has one extra table and two more chairs to entertain more distinguished guests than pre-exam students. The extra space allows for more books, which allow for more pressure.

"Osman, I'm going to be blunt. Do you have enemies?"

"What?"

"Adversaries."

“Like competition in the department?”

“Any.”

“Some people might sneer at my essay I’ll present at The Conference, but I don’t think they care.”

Silence.

“I talked with the authorities. Pascal’s situation doesn’t look good.”

“Do we know why?”

“No, which is even worse. Anyhow, this is a wrench in the machine and now I have to plan the next semester as if he’s not going to come back, and even if he did, let’s be serious, he would be decimated within the first week. Just between us, he was actually supposed to teach abroad next year, but now this...”

Teaching abroad is for faculty too focused in the fun of a foreign city for their own good, a first year tenured’s honeymoon, or it’s where they exile and ostracize the people they do not want, no no no, this is not for Osman.

“I know what you are thinking,” he starts.

“And I know what you are thinking too,” she finishes. “You are thinking study abroad is for deadbeats. But Osman, if we don’t fill the space it will be an embarrassment. You are not helping out just Pascal, you are helping out the department, and that will return to you with dividends.”

“A favor?”

“A time-off. Pick a place. It doesn’t have to be where Pascal was going to go. I’ll just send a tentative application, maybe you won’t even be qualified. We just can’t lose face.”

“But I like this city.”

“Do you like Buenos Aires, London, Accra, Milan, Rome, Shanghai, Kyoto, St. Petersburg, Paris why wouldn't you want to go to Paris?, Madrid, Taipei, Bogota... We don't have any in Istanbul but I can give you Athens?”

The possibility of gaining an edge in Greek tragedies excites Osman, he can go for one semester and come back with a heart grown fonder. But the resistance comes from somewhere else, a suspicion that he is being pushed around too easily, which, taken too far, might mean never coming back after a cheering farewell, stuck as an expat forever across the world.

“You will come back. I promise.”

September 9

“Hello Osman.”

“Hey Sandy.”

“How have you been?”

“I'm well, the date with Laura went really well.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

“I sleepwalked into her door though.”

“You are sleepwalking?”

“I don't think I ever did before. Maybe it's that second glass of wine.”

“Maybe. Let's see what will happen with this. But it might be more physical than psychological.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Silence.

“You’ve heard about Pascal?”

“Yes, I’ve read about it.”

“Yeah. They are trying to send me abroad next semester to fill his space.”

“That’s nice.”

“True, I want to go too, I just don’t want to be a pushover in their eyes.”

“I see. How were the first classes?”

“There’s someone from Berkeley in my graduate class, though I think she is going to drop out. The undergraduate class is like any other year. The freshmen are eager to learn but more eager about each other. I’ve adapted to it by now, we don’t need to go through my personal needs in the classroom every semester.”

“Okay.”

“It’s the same class as last year anyhow.”

“Urban Romanticism?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“It’s fine.”

And then they sit in silence for the session’s remaining 40 minutes. Osman would blink and Sandy would smile. Towards the end of the hour they both become aurally sensitive to the rustles, the (in)voluntary smacking of the lips, the movement of the eyeballs. Sitting across each other, they would see the same person but feel much more.

“Yeah, my shrink told me...”

It was fashionable in social sciences to see someone, it was obligatory in Comparative Literature to be going to the top doctor in the field in order to be up to date with new psychiatric breakthroughs. Many academics had tried to burst through the psychoanalytic mold and transcend over to the empirical side as this would provide a new approach to conceptual theory. Osman, on the other hand, had the money to pay for one. Even though he had finished his psychotherapy treatment in his late 20s, he continued seeing the same therapist even when his self-esteem was booming at the end of several years. Sandy had become a wise, cozy grandmother Osman had never had, she was only missing milk and cookies. Whenever she was available during the week, he would go to her to practice his knowledge, or just to relax if he needed, similar to meditation.

Like a cruel joke, as soon as he is outside of therapy, his phone is flooded with texts from his mother.

“Osman, where were you? I tried calling you-”

“Mom I was in a doctor’s appointment-”

“Are you okay? Are you sick?”

“No it was just therapy. Stop talking about me, what’s going on.”

“Oh Osman, your dad, he... he...”

The phone shuffles hands, he can hear his mother sobbing and saying “Please”

“Mr. Johnson, I’m Dr. Patel from Albany Medical Center Hospital. I’m sorry to inform you that your father has had a stroke and is in critical condition right now. We were thinking maybe it would be better if you come here and we can... discuss.”

The Wednesday afternoon Amtrak is peaceful due to train's lulling rumble and the few quiet passengers. Nobody on the train knows how Osman is feeling right now. They have their own things to deal with. A law-abiding citizen is sipping a tallboy. The conductor is taking his time, sauntering, chit chatting with the few people remaining, might as well interact with others since we are on the same road. Although ending up in different destinations, planned or unplanned, the roads' relational liminality help one to contextualize themselves. The lanes, tracks, paths, even dead-ends are hundreds of branches that force one to imagine what it is like to be at the end of it, and how different two point can be when the routes that take you there are the same.

The train moves between the Hudson River and the side of a steep, rocky hill. Trees whiz by in a steady, green rhythm. The river's glare is getting into the left side of the railcar, into the passengers' eyes, and onto the stapled paper Osman is trying to distract himself with. It is an essay on the third volume of Athenaeum, but it doesn't work its magic and doesn't transport Osman to a soothing, magical dimension. At least it is soporific, and Osman manages to pass out with his head hanging back.

How nature in all its seasons is so colorful and how a hospital is so standard, he will never understand, even with the common and correct explanations. The white does resemble pure, sterilized health, but then again, everybody, even the visitors, look sallow under it while watching the news or a reality show in the day room. You are not at a hospital for fun.

He is sent through hallways, past ENT and pharmacy and a roster of the -logy family, with its members onco, patho, radio, derma, and cardio. Looking at the floor chart

he can see the hierarchy of the hospital, the administrative top floors as the superego, trying to balance the Hippocratic Oath with financial demands, as the fight's casualties appear on the main floor, ER, insurance, what have you, not to mention the banished psychiatric wards lit by the ambulance lights seeping in through the little ground level window, where if they can't treat the afflicted, they can at least create a place so horrifying so that nobody will never consider suicide again.

Ending a hall, Emergency is hiding chaos behind flimsy swinging doors. Intensive care is the next one. Every part of a hospital is depressing, but not as much as the heavy contrast between the silent ICU and screaming doctors and patients at the ER.

His mother is waiting for him, dozed off on a seat attached to the wall. Her teeth are missing and she is wearing a fading dress, put on in a hurry, otherwise she would never go out like this.

“Mr. Johnson? My name is Dr. Craig, we spoke on the phone?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Can I speak to you for a moment in private?”

Osman's mother is not going to wake up soon and there are not many places to go in the dreary hallway. The doctor has probably asked this question mechanically, but still they walk towards the less critical side, where Osman came from.

“Your father, Mr. Johnson, has suffered a cardiac arrest last night. His internal organs are fine at the moment, but some of the vessels around the brain are not receiving enough blood. We are keeping him in an ICU but we don't know how long he will remain stable.”

“You're ruling out recovery?”

“I’m afraid when he wakes up he will be in a vegetative state. It’s not to say that it’s impossible, but... Your father has had a history of... complications, I’ve been told.”

More like a rupture. Osman’s father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s two years ago, and the easy-going family man slowly drifted away in front of his wife while Osman was starting his job. The tangled battle between Osman’s sadness and his ambition was one of his main attractive qualities, especially for Janet, who liked complicated people.

“I... I suggest you start making arrangements.”

There are a couple of keywords missing in that sentence, but customs fill in the blanks.

“Thank you, doctor,” Osman says.

“I wish you the best,” the doctor says before vanishing in the white of the deeper regions of the ICU.

He wakes his mother up, she must have already gotten the news. The hospital kindly gives them a ride home in the back of the ambulance.

Osman X. Johnson was adopted by Jane Johnson (née. Smith) and John Johnson, two Midwesterners living in the same suburb of Normal, Indiana, not doing much in their salad days until one day falling in love first with the sound of folky Bob Dylan, then with each other, finding the power within to elope and go to Woodstock, where the town hippie taken for the village idiot had said the world would change. Dylan wouldn’t perform in the festival, but they had seen his queen Joan Baez, The Band, Hendrix unfortunately not burning his guitar as he did in Monterey Pop, but still, drugs, lots of

drugs, a priest who married them, a more suitable father figure offering John a job at his farm, looking over a hill and saying “It’s somewhere around here...”, peace, love, and whatnot, but most importantly, a young wealthy Turkish couple inviting them to Istanbul.

Having no money, thus having no choice, they had accepted the offer. John’s memory is either gone or irretrievable in another dimension, and Jane doesn’t remember much except sightseeing at the Old City, as the new city wouldn’t offer anything different than a knock-off mixture of Eastern European pragmatism and Western values. But their Turkish friends, with whom they would lose contact around 1980, had told them about the poor conditions of the country during their stay, the conditions unseen on buildings but starkly exposed in political discussions, and had unconsciously convinced the Johnsons to adopt a Turkish baby and bring him back to America, where he would have a better life. Adding one more to the population in this age of nuclear reactors was regarded as a crime amongst their kind, so instead, why not help someone, anyone, down on their luck?

They weren’t going to discriminate, nor they had to. The first child offered was called Osman, and the Johnsons didn’t want to take away the orphan’s inherent name, his fate. He could always go as Otto if the situation called for it, John had joked. As for an American middle name, the couple couldn’t agree on anything, and they were smoking this hash that was grown over at Southeast Turkey, the batch literally wrested away from Iraqi peshmergas’ hands by the Kurds in the Turkish border, so ‘X’ seemed apt for a child who didn’t have, but was going to, have the letter in his alphabet soon.

Osman doesn't remember the orphanage in Turkey where he spent the first year of his life. Nor can he. Nor should he. He considers himself as an American. The Turkish part of his life only comes out to charm the people who are fascinated by the Oriental.

When they came back to the motherland, John had thought that doing farm work would be enough for them, until Osman entered the education system and the farm was going to be sold in a couple of years. They couldn't go back to the Midwest, so the couple, now a family, found an acceptable representation of the American dream with a small, two-story house in the heart of the suburb, where anywhere is the heart of the suburb. The mortgage was paid by John's new a position at a bank and Jane's temporary part-time odd-jobs around the town until Osman would come back from school.

Osman's relationship with his parents could be described as 'pretty good,' and not even relatively. Like the rest of the world, but more so for disillusioned hippies, the Johnsons took all their love for the world and invested it in this one child. Sure, there were obstacles on the way, but the family dynamic was pretty standard. Osman went through his mirror stages, Oedipal stages, puberty, "You're not my real dad!"s, curse words, and the relief the child has with the parents at the end of puberty followed by guilt of the past until he felt he had endured enough to accept himself and be a man on his own. With Sandy, he had worked out his adopted childhood issues long ago thanks to his lack of infant memory. His childhood is not something to be analyzed anymore, and Osman only looks back with happiness.

Now, even with his mother demurely staring into a blank space on the wall, sitting on a couch that's pushing a half-century, he doesn't feel unresolved, angry, nor hurt when

his father is going to die. Alzheimer's, as an ender, isn't the worst because it is not too sudden. Osman, being too complex, has always wondered the primitive state of mind, especially his father's. The heart attack might throw a wrench in the mourning process, so of course he is downcast, but the last five years have been preparing him for this, with his father slowly decomposing into an unshaved, disheveled, hollow shell of grunts sitting in front of the television all day, unknown whether he is watching or just wanting some unintelligible movement of colors in front of him, just like back in Woodstock. Hence, when the time comes, why not let him go and instead cherish the life of John Johnson, a complete stranger, who had given Osman, another complete stranger, an amazing life, full of security and magnanimity, in which Osman, in turn, learned from his father to build his own stable life, the one he enjoys in the city, away from them.

If he feels sad it's because of his mother's sadness. Though she is also in her final years, she became a mother once again to John during his sickness and has come out battered at the end of it. The mark of 80, when the body plays overtime, had come to her earlier as she has also grown silent in a silent house. Osman had offered to pay for a nurse when things wouldn't get better after the onset, but she had said no, they would weather through this together. She had asked him to teach at a closer college, but Osman refused. A tenure track wasn't something to meddle with once it was on its way. The overbearing filial responsibility had to wait until Osman would be in a more comfortable position. Still, he would call home often to check up on how they were doing, but since there were no new news, just that they were doing 'alright', the communication faded to a usual biweekly routine.

While the usual talking with his mother is traditionally boring, the silence is too powerful. Osman turns on the TV for background static and sits next to his mother. Reruns pass them by and they can only smile on cue until his mother falls asleep with her head on Osman's shoulder, snoring after a long day.

While lying in his bed with a foot too short so he needs a chair to be fully horizontal, Osman takes an inventory of his past accumulated in his room but stopped after he went to college: participation trophies, cheap medals, books, Lego, stickers from god knows where but stuck by the side of his desk for infinity, a poster about animals and traffic signs from when he was a baby. Along with his room, the rest of the house has stopped renewing itself after Reagan's second election.

That night he sends an email to the department's Chair describing his family emergency, and gets a professional but kind reply back dated 4am, absolving him of his duties for next week. Someone else could fill in for his classes. Hoped his father would recover. Best.

His mother is cooking him eggs. There is a 'You know you should retire when...' joke calendar, still stuck at yesterday.

"I may stop being a wife, but I'm still your mother."

That sounds more Oedipal than expected. He doesn't know whether she is in shock or not.

"Mom I'm going to talk to the services today. Would you like to come?"

"No, you handle it. I might go to the hospital, um-hum."

She had developed a verbal twitch cleaning up after her husband's mess and his constant demands.

“Are you sure you want to go alone?”

“Who says I'm alone? Patricia said she would take me yesterday.”

He met Patricia once or twice in a holiday, only a vague plump figure comes to mind. Her personality is mostly created from telephone conversations with his mother. So far she is Jane's bridge partner, she has a daughter who is a doctor, a son in venture capitalism, though his mother called it banking. “He's also in the city, maybe you guys should talk or something,” his mother had said. “No harm in having too many friends.” But going back to Patricia, Patricia grows flowers but doesn't like magnolias, she had a huge fight with her husband, the dentist, about them last summer, she brews a mean tea, and her favorite show is Golden Girls, even before she was Bea Arthur's age.

The Reilly Funeral Home—‘The Town's Own Funeral HomeTM’—is not where Osman thought it would be. It has moved to a new location, now two avenues over, in what used to be a Pizza Hut—a reference lost to the new generation. Underneath a spilling red brick roof the funeral home has less of a homey feeling. But Osman doesn't judge, rather, his birthday memories in the restaurant come back to him. With the emptiness of a suburb avenue pleasantly smoothed over by passing cars, he feels bittersweet.

Somebody greets him at the doorsill, Osman outside, him inside. The interior looks completely renovated, though Osman can no longer remember where the kids' play area was in the first place.

“Hello, my name is Riley, and welcome to the Reilly and Associates Funeral Home how can I help you?”

The funeral home smells like fresh pies, sweet instead of savory this time. Riley’s smile is so professional and infectious Osman can’t help but to mirror him.

“Hello, I had called you this morning, about the Johnsons?”

Without any irony, Riley lowers his smile into an understanding, compassionate face while Osman is left with the stupid grin.

“I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Well, my father hasn’t passed away yet.”

“Yes, yes of course, you’ve told me. I’m sorry, it’s just a habit.”

And with that, the proceedings have officially started. Both parties adopt a position that is humane, because this is a serious matter, but also business-like, because this is a business. Riley especially goes back and forth between clear, detailed explanations on the types of services and coffins, but giving Osman full control of decisions, asking again whether he is sure he wants the mahogany and not the more somber oak, which is cheaper, because Reilly and Associates Funeral Home, ‘The Town’s Own Funeral HomeTM’, cares about its clients as much as its clients care for the deceased.

He walks around the sparse town, watches Monday Night Football on a rainy Thursday afternoon in an empty bar because it is before happy hour. The Mets lose, but the Yankees win, and Osman goes to the hospital to find his mother.

“It hasn’t improved,” she says, “I think you should call the family.” She seems more resilient today; she can face the facts. Maybe it’s because Patricia is next to her, she

is less plump than expected. She is unwilling to interrupt a family talk, and her mouth is clamped shut so hard not even her faded lips are visible.

John Johnson might have pissed off his close family when he took Jane on a cross-country trip to find what his parents would still have called ‘the devil’s music,’ but his going straight after Osman had thawed what was left of a relationship more than the arrival of the new family member. Still, random relatives, usually cousins of John, would pop in reluctantly and only for a while when they were on their way to the ‘Big Apple’.

Osman goes through a dusty contacts book and see whether they can make it to the East Coast for the weekend. After the fifth call Osman can play the conversation flawlessly in his head.

“Hello?”

“Hello, [Osman’s relative]? This is Osman, your [relative].”

“Who?”

“Osman... X?”

“Oh, how are you?”

“I’m well, thank you, listen I have to tell you of something. Are you sitting down?”

A flood of “I’m sorry”s, sometimes hitched to the back of “I can’t come”s, and Osman is drained through the family tree, three uncles, six cousins, one great aunt, her two feuding brothers, and their countless kids who live all around the country in this globalized age, adding up to 40 phone calls in three hours.

Turns out, none of the family can come in such short notice, so they agree on Thanksgiving, with or without John present, but about John regardless. His mother is tearing up in the kitchen, far out at the back of the house.

“It’s good,” she says when Osman finds her. “It’s good that they can’t come, um-hum. I don’t want to see them now. I wanted them to come for John, so screw ‘em if they don’t, um-hum.”

“We can have a small service with the townsfolk,” Osman offers reluctantly.

“Maybe.”

The resident doctor is not in for the weekend. Dr. McGrath is a young intern. Normally residents are cocky and serious, but it seems as if he’s having a vacation on the beach.

“Dr. Patel is not here so I can’t give you the exact information, but your father has, how shall I put it, not... not improved, but he is not not-improved as well?”

“I do not understand what you’re talking about.”

“So, technically I’m supposed to say ‘He is comatose,’ but he was well in an ICU by then, so now he is really in a coma? Does that help? Well at least he is not in critical danger now.”

“I don’t want him off life support,” his mother, sitting away, echoes through the damp hall. Osman walks next to her and crouches.

“Mom, dad will not go on living like he used to if he survives this. He will be even worse than before.”

“I don’t care, I don’t want him off life support!”

Back to the doctor.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think life support is even an issue right now, since he is in some physical fugue thing. Unlike brain death, vegetative state is not recognized statute as death in many states, including this one, so you can petition to plug him off, sorry, *discontinue* his life support, but I don’t think that will work. The last three cases have been dismissed in favor of the hospital’s continuing of the treatment.”

“So is he in a vegetative state?”

“Yeeeeaaaahh? I think so?”

“Are you for real?”

“I don’t know, man, this is too much pressure on me. Let me put it this way, he is stable in his instability. Maybe this back and forth jolts him once in a while to a vegetative state and then back to coma, I don’t know, I’m not the doctor here.”

Osman is at a loss for words.

“Well, I’m *a* doctor, but I’m not *the* doctor for your father. All I know is that he goes in and out of many things, and I think the hospital would like to keep him in ICU because this is not like hospice. He may need attention 24/7.”

“Is insurance covering this?” He turns towards his mother. “Mom? Do you know?”

“I don’t care,” she shouts and coughs. “We will use his life insurance if need be.”

Not that he would have said anything different, but he doesn’t have a choice but to obey her. Osman is powerless against a marriage as old as him.

“Can we see him?”

“I’d prefer you not to. The legal troubles are too fine in a situation like this, and if something happens when the patient is this unstable, we might not be able to blame someone.”

“Still,” Osman insists.

“Please,” Dr. McGrath insists for the last time, “this hospital has its rules.”

Osman is pent up because even though he is emotionally drained, his body is still full of energy that wasn’t channeled into exercise. Anything other than jogging would be too ostentatious for the neighbors, so Osman takes out his gym shorts and sneakers out of his bag he has brought from one home to another.

Running in the suburbs he can only encounter houses. There are no distractions here like there are in the city. He thinks the population as attached to their land, their plot, in their houses that reflect the screen glares through closed curtains, other joggers running away or towards their homes, swaying away from Osman because he an intruder. The slow cars are not going any farther from their symbolic Brewer, Pennsylvania. Even the trees do not stimulate nature because they are planted deliberately in an order. .

On Sunday afternoon, when the house is so silent he can hear his heartbeat, Osman brings up the elephant in the room.

“Mom, I need to go back to the city.”

“I understand, um-hum.”

“I’m very sorry, but I have work tomorrow.”

“I understand.”

“Will you be okay on your own?”

“I’ll be fine, um-hum. I’ll play bridge and go to the store and... read the newspaper.”

She manages a smile to show that it will be all right. It will be all right, but mothers don’t tell their children what is really bothering them, won’t accept their help, actually want to be alone while at the same time desiring the presence of their loved ones. It is a paradox, and the only answer to a paradox is not engaging with it.

“Okay then... I’ll look up the train times.” She dials the station’s number from the house phone. The house doesn’t have any Internet and Osman has eaten up close to his entire data plan in the last four days. He doesn't know that though. Only his service provider does.

They hug once again outside, with her mother saying “Don’t you worry about me, um-hum,” a couple of times before urging him to go. His happiness is her happiness, and maybe it is not vice versa, but it’s enough to keep them going.

Walking to the taxi, he looks back a couple of times to wave. She is still there, anticipating his tactical 180 turns to show that he hasn’t forgotten about her. It pains him to leave his mother like this, but he knows it is for the best. This way, he won’t create tension in the household by unintentionally imposing his own demands or going against his mother’s, and she can hold onto life by herself, without becoming dependent like her husband.

He leaves the house in an hour before dusk when everybody is content to come back home after a long day on the town, watch, and meditate in front of their TVs and cease to exist to others until it’s time for dinner and one is forced to recognize the other.

Even a dog's casual barking adds to the suburbwide silence and peace. It is unbelievable, almost unnatural.

The city has laid an official claim to the gas station in front of his building. The panels have small windows to see the progress, but all Osman can figure out is a large dark hole, dug deep into the infrastructure to create anew. The light inside the old store is still on.

He has returned for no specific reason other than to be in the city. It is as if it had reminded Osman of their bond after he was away for so long. Emptying his bag at his flat, a closed yellow envelope drops on his bed. Her mother had picked important photographs of John's life as a husband, a father, a colleague, and gave it to Osman to send them to the funeral home for a booklet.

He didn't go through old photographs himself, nor did he open the envelope, because he had all the time in the world to do so when his father would really pass away and the absence would truly hit him. Now he is quite at ease at rolling with the punches. His father's situation can wait until it has something more definitive to tell him how to feel.

September 10

Osman sleepwalks that night. He unlocks his door, locks it behind him, and is off on the street with his t-shirt and boxers. He walks for something, to something, but neither he—since he is not awake—nor we (because we are not him) know what. For now,

he is only following the traffic lights, nonchalant, because the grid system is the best for a somnambulist. The only thing that will stop him will be a body of water.

He passes up-and-coming designer stores with provocative-yet-appealing window signs. He doesn't get any of the ironic and irrelevant words indicating something else within the person, e.g. their political stance, as they detour through useless associations until the right connection is made. Do you also hate your family during Thanksgiving? Then you should buy our shoes.

Places still look open as they waste their money on overnight lighting but compensate them back from nocturnal window shoppers. The same goes for the glowing neon of the kitschy-hence-trendy restaurants where yuppies eat uncomfortably just for the experience. The cleaning of the dimly lit eating establishments chimes a classic jazz that is not there. Osman passes by bars waiting for the last customer to finish their story and go back home and wallow in their pity there rather than busying the cute bartender, who wants to close before last call for once tonight. She is running on reserve fuel while trying to be sympathetic to the dreamy drunk, thinking about the late night, thank-you-for-your-company gratitude tip from the customer, who is nodding and sighing at the same time. Maybe he doesn't have any money left.

If he were awake, he would have seen street poles adorned with Tim and Eric promos, Make Meaning Toy Store, 4x4 of A4 papers pasted onto walls that just say 'Parallax' with a bearded black man's face on it, another one with a range of famous movies and shows where everything is replaced with the word 'Me', more obscure posters for bands destined for obscurity (Who takes the time to look any of these names online anyhow? How did they do it before the Internet?), a clusterfuck of information, a

mosaic getting more meaningless and futile as more things get added, tacked on with no regard for anything else, designed to wear you down and admit that you don't know anything, to make you buy the records that will never come out, only a couple of hopeful tracks lost in the virtual database, a mark in another time and dimension.

He goes downtown, not Petula Clark's downtown but way down, down to Wall Street and to a community college around the area, where the few remaining students, much less privileged than his own, try not to be bumped into by him as he rambles around the campus, faculty, and frat housing. The neighborhood is barren of people at night but it is still inhabited by skyscrapers hurting the out-of-towners' neck as they try to look up in awe. Osman looks, but doesn't see. His closed lids change color when hit by the lit-but-empty offices blocking the sky. Maybe the janitor lights up some floors and darkens the others to create an image, a joke only the building itself gets. Craning his neck for a better view of the top he looks consumed, his stupor in front of these giants tells us that he wants to worship them, not the large churches, but these higher superstructures dwarfing them, these idols of glory mankind has created in its phallic image, to feel small in the unkindly enormity of it, a glass mountain that will not let anyone climb it, only be a part of it, gain power through it, or simply be anyone, a passerby, a tourist, to stand and accept that the high rises have become the new gods of the modern age, changing the world's landscape, the wind's directions, the weather.

Osman will not remember any of the experience, not even the discomfort of the lactic acid after walking for a long time while he should have been in bed. He will not understand why he is tired, and when he mentions it to a colleague, he will receive the same answer about how everybody is tired these days. Maybe it is because Fall is

coming. Yeah yeah, Osman will say, absentminded, busy with the brewing coffee, that's the truth.

September 14

"Hello Osman."

"Hey Sandy."

"How are you feeling?"

"I think I'm fine."

"I'm sorry about your father."

"It was expected. I'm sad but that's life. So it goes. But we have resolved my issues long ago, haven't we?"

"Of course, I still keep the logs."

"Do you have a database?"

"I'd rather not talk about it. What else do you have in your mind?"

"I'm more worried about my mother."

"How is she coping with it?"

"I don't know. She seems okay one day and sentimental the next. But not peaceful sentimental. Despondent. I want to be upstate for her but I can't handle the suburban silence. Neither can she but she is more used to it than I am... I think maybe she is still in shock."

"Maybe you are in shock."

"Maybe. I have my work to keep me busy. But I think what I'm experiencing is very standard. It's just the real, physical absence that hurts, that should hurt. Emotionally,

I have been waiting for this for some years now. And not just because of my father. I've busted my head open talking about mortality. This is what the department is all about."

"Universities are also dying, so they say."

"Well, yeah. But there will never be a physical lack of universities. Far from it. They will just be... empty. Which is fine, then all you have to do is to keep your head above and live in ideas. I rarely have time to think about anything else anyhow."

It was true. For the last two days he had stayed at home while Gene was on the street with his newly found orange shoes, looking out into the slim sunset from an alleyway of a park before he left to who knows where, sometimes glancing two floors above him at Osman, who was working constantly on his paper for The Conference. It was time consuming, less to create but more to go deeper into university press books and read the same pages over and over again for a sentence fit for his essay when citation was everything.

He returns to the office the next day, if only to show up and show that he is back on track. The Chair is the first one to greet him, inviting him to her room for about two minutes because 11:48 to 11:50 was the only free time in her schedule, and then it was some other appointment somewhere else.

"The study abroad," he starts.

"I know," she finishes. "I know how you must be feeling. But I have already put in the application for you."

"Can't you take it back?"

“I’m sorry. The university functions like clockwork, your name is already in the system.”

Bullshit. He could have given a list of professors who have had last minute cancellations, additions, or any of their whims satisfied. Yet he cannot summon the giants to this debate when he is speaking to one himself. He can only say, “But the students get their things changed all the time,” even though he knows the reasons why, so he dons a puppy-face—a victim appealing to the bleeding hearts.

“I’ll look into it, but don’t trust me. And hopefully by that time... things have settled down.”

Somewhere in his brain a neuron fires, telling him teaching abroad might help with his mourning, when the time comes. But more so than his father he still cannot bring himself to leave the city and his set life he has made in the city. The deluge of information, the fear of missing out from any tiny thing. Just try not to think about it and focus on now.

“Hey Osman!” Tom, Dick, and Mary knocks on Osman’s slightly open door.

“Hey Tom,” Osman says, “Thank you very much for covering for my undergrad class.”

Tom, Dick, and Mary, three names for one person, is the TA joker for the department. Comparative literally, whatever you need, he will be there to help you. Born as Bjorn Olriksen to one of the more recent waves of Swedish immigration to America, he hasn’t had an SRS nor does he have a personality disorder as much as trying to provoke everyone to recognize that everyone has had a metaphysical SRS and a

personality disorder. Whether he is after fame or something more essential, nobody knows except him, but he seems to be following a calculated path than his peers. Most people get a tattoo when they are accepted into a doctoral program, but he had legally changed his name to Tom, Dick, and Mary, name and surname altogether, causing a lot of problems in the database but also skyrocketing his popularity. Everybody knew his names before he even stepped foot into a class. Truth be told, everybody knew Tom, Dick, and Mary before, only now it was personified.

“Oh no worries,” says Tom, Dick, and Mary, “I’m very sorry about your family emergency.”

Osman doesn’t want to trust the newcomer’s sincerity because his ‘split personalities’ have justified his actions in the past. Tom, Dick, and Mary were already compartmentalized in itself. Tom was a regular Joe, harmless, fun to hang out with but in moderation, and Dick was the ambitious prick who would make crass jokes at an inappropriate situation. Mary didn’t come out much, except when people took an offense to her.

“Thank you, we’re still figuring it out.” Now to change the topic as to not have the subordinate leave on a sad note, “How was the class?”

“They were alright, I gave them an introduction of what I knew from the syllabus, man, Balzac, really?, but they seem to be fine. We discussed what they knew, turns out, not that much, but some kids were from big cities in other continents so we shot the shit.”

“Ok, thanks.”

“You got a Raskolnikov though. He namedropped Dostoyevsky three times.”

Raskolnikov was a common slang in the Russian and Slavic department, but had made its way into Comparative Literature due to sharing the same floor and the latter's incessant need to devour whatever is out there. It meant a young student, almost always a freshman, who had read *Crime and Punishment* in their high school senior year and was hitting, usually his, head on a wall, retaliating against any questions from teachers while plotting within, on the outside having a conceited grin, inside screaming "This is not right!"

Osman hadn't read *Crime and Punishment*, but he read about it a lot. He doesn't know whether to share this information with Tom, Dick, and Mary. He doesn't.

"Yeah, I doubted that. He has Ezra Pound over the summer. 'New Directions'." he mimics Gideon.

"Cantos?"

"Only the early stuff."

"That's not too bad. Still, he wanted to know about your office hours."

"Ughhhh," says Osman in a mock exasperation. "I don't want to deal with Raskolnikovs on a fall semester."

"Why is it always the students you least want to spend time with who want to spend time with you?"

"I love a line from a novel: 'It's passive aggressive. They know you don't like them. And they're trying to catch you out—get you off your guard and tight enough, so you'll admit it.' I think it is so *fine*, don't you think?"

Tom, Dick, and Mary is caught off-guard by this off-hand reference.

"Is it—which writer is it?"

“Oh, I don’t know, I’ve forgotten it long ago.”

Laura calls. She has been texting over the weekend, she read about an apartment explosion near in his neighborhood, was he alright? Osman doesn’t have the time nor the mental capacity to form a coherent summary to relay. She is angry, she had been waiting for Osman to call and it had taken longer than three days so she was worried about ‘us’, and yes him too because maybe something happened to him that prevented any communication, but now she is sorry, sorry about her father, hopes that he would be okay, she is here if he needed to talk, or even not to talk but just to hang out, because there is supposed to be this new Vietnamese fusion restaurant, a speakeasy under a manhole cover, and whether he wanted to try it, maybe it would get his mind off of things.

He says yes without elaborating on the reasoning. It would be wrong not to see her in over a week. They are dating after all.

While the pho is cooling he mentions the study abroad debacle. “They’re sending me off without my will,” he says, “I can’t beat the system.”

“Where would you go?”

Osman, who has been troubled by the list all afternoon, gives an extensive rundown.

“Still, may all your troubles send you off abroad. I would take it in a heartbeat.”

This is unexpected. He had thought her reactions would be anywhere from fake indifference to a decisive coup de grace to their relationship, but not this, which makes him opens up to Laura.

“I don’t want to go. I think I’m more serious, more valuable here.” Laura may think the last comment was about her, so he quips, “I’ll miss the Vietnamese restaurants.”

“So you might be going to Rome? How romantic! I’ve always wanted to go.”

“It’s really touristy actually. If you want to go to Italy, you should do the coastal tour, it is supposed to be beautiful.”

Her face drops into her soup. He has said something wrong.

“Laura, I...”

“All I wanted was a ‘I’ll take you there.’”

“But—”

“Never mind.”

This was unexpected too. Osman slurps in response.

September 18

“You’re an idiot. You were an idiot, you are an idiot, and you will always be an idiot. Why wouldn’t you go abroad? Tell me where you will go I’ll meet you there!”

“I don’t know... Ghana?”

“Ghana? What is wrong with you?”

Believe it or not, Radu ‘The Handsome’ Ivanov—this chubby, balding, abrasive person, still with a thick accent, roaring “Hey! Waiter!” left and right until the saliva stuck on his lazy two-week beard prompts a short wipe down with a silk handkerchief—used to be a friend of Osman’s since his freshman year.

They met and (had to?) got along because they lived on the same floor. Radu was meek, from Romania, colloquially known as a commie state, but he had been subjected to

sufficient American culture with soft power. He grew up on seeing *K9* and *Red Heat* with his parents in theatres, *Home Alones* on TV. He once dozed off to *Commando* on post-2AM cable in a fuzzy purgatorial state and it is his favorite movie ever. This was happening when Ceaușescu was ruling, getting out of the chopper, being humiliated. Romania improved since then, but Radu had already said “Never again.” Once he was out he had gone everywhere except back to Bucharest.

Luckily his name wasn't too hard to pronounce in the orientation, so he avoided the few pitfalls of first impressions. Finally, after an hour of team building exercises reluctantly enforced by the RA, he was tagged as a weirdo due to his inability to synchronize on the levels of excitement people around him felt about things.

“What's your favorite movie,” a girl had asked him after they had partnered up for ‘Two Truths, One Lie’.

“Oh man,” Radu would go off, “there's this movie called,” borrowing the fillers of the language to appear casual, but the crescendo had already taken over “this slow, but not really, talking, but very Romanian, oh man...” until excitement gave way to shame. “Never mind, what's yours?”

He and Osman were on a “Hey dude.” basis for the first couple of days as their predictable possibilities of everyday interactions happened when they passed each other in the hallway, holding elevators for each other, seeing one in cafeteria... Until one day Osman and his roommates were involved in the male bonding ritual of a multiplayer game of *Goldeneye* on someone's N64. It was the first week of college. People would keep their doors open to appear open. Osman's door was ajar along with the others and Radu had softly knocked on it a couple of times, but didn't get any response except

“Fuck you you fucking fuck!” He knew that it wasn’t meant for him, so he pushed the door with a docile hello.

“Hey guys.”

“Hey Radu.”

“What are you guys—”

Radu was only exposed to *Goldeneye* only once in his life, in some random house, in some random birthday that he wasn’t invited to, in the late afternoon when most kids were gone and four of the remaining party just happened to be in the empty living room with the rare-for-Romania N64. They played until Radu’s mother came searching for him because it was time to go. Even though he was fifteen, Radu was on the brink of crying. His mother thought it was because he was leaving his new friends, but the TV screen had locked his tearing eyes until it was out of sight.

Now that another TV screen—a few years later and more palpable than ever—had found its way to Radu’s vision, so did the tears. Osman didn’t know why some Romanian kid, silent except snuffles, not even bothering to wipe away the shallow streams on his cheek, would be so transfixed on the 2x2 game screen.

“Do... do you want to play a round?”

Radu’s hands were trembling so much that he had scattered the bullets all over the place. He died more than several times and finished last. Osman allowed Radu to take his place for the next round as well. When Radu’s Bond finally killed Oddjob with the pistol, he gave the controller back to Osman, left the room, and switched his major from History to a mixture of Business and Computer Science.

Radu is done repeating his origin story that ends with him finding a startup company in California, where he decided he would remain in the state when he was 30 no matter what, filthy rich in Beverly Hills or homeless in Tenderloin.

From his look, you'd assume the latter has happened. But then again, no homeless person would be paying for your lunch at some Boulud.

"I keep coming back to *Goldeneye*," Radu says. "That was my holy grail."

"You know N64s are 30 dollars at most on eBay, right?"

"You don't need to tell me, I got seven of them."

Osman was going to his eyes, but Radu acts before.

"It is not about the money. It was never about the money. At all. It is about time. Now that I'm filthy rich, not only I can do whatever I want, I have the time to do whatever I want."

Right now what Radu wants is the last chunk of bread slathered with the remaining olive oil, the cure for the Soviet malaise of his lost years.

"It's not even about *Goldeneye* anymore." Semantic saturation has eviscerated the meaning of the composite word and only the personal attachment remains. "I don't play it as much. After so many years I got bored, you want to upgrade sooner or later. I have the new Play Station now."

"4?"

"5. Connections from the military. You have no idea how advanced they are."

"Video games?"

"Especially video games, you idiot! Where do you think the simulations come from?"

Radu the Omnivore is interrupted by an enormous bowl of ravioli ai porcini being put in front him. He starts devouring them in forkfuls of two, cleaning the sauce on the side with the fresh bread before Osman's dish has had a contact with the table.

"I've bought my future," Radu seems to be saying behind a curtain of cream covering his full mouth with an unfinished raviolo. He is done before Osman is a quarter way through, but it's all good, Radu has his second glass of top-shelf Bordeaux to savor. "I may be burning through things, but at least I can burn through them as many times I want. You should do the same. Go to China, teach at Hong Kong, that's where the future is. It's not here, and definitely not in your mind."

Osman's last conversation with Radu was at the class homecoming and Radu didn't want to talk too much about himself, constantly reeling the confab to the good old college memories. Now, five years later, Radu had changed a lot, as if steroids catapulted him from the small, diffident boy into being the rich, loudmouthed but also fun person that he is now, the capitalist without a past, the Silicon Valley entrepreneur, the modern gold/data miner, traveling the world with his new girlfriends on his boat called *The Bunga* as a tribute to his hero Berlusconi. For business, and nothing else, promise, he was going to be in the city for a night and wanted Osman to show him around.

So Osman brings Radu to an 'End of Williamsburg' party at a German warehouse/nightclub/performance space/whatever, which is supposed to be created by one of the founders of Berlin's own Bar 22. The venue, untouched until now because they charged 25 dollars for admission and had lines around the block even in the coldest

winter, would like to celebrate the demise with high spirits instead of sorrow as the mock-Portobello neighborhood finally gives in to the predatory advances of Starbucks.

In the cab, Radu is on the phone. “Yeah, yeah the number’s 385. 385. FOR GOD’S SAKE HOW MANY TIMES DO I NEED TO—Sarah I’m sorry but you’re being a bit of a pain in the ass right now, either come to this place or—FINE DO WHATEVER. Fine, love you too.”

Girlfriend, lover, who knows?

“Sorry about that.”

At the venue, the line is long but the weather is fair. Someone is whining at the two bouncers.

“Come on man, I told you, this is my actual ID!”

“Please. Please move away.” Even the bouncers act European.

“Is it because I’m Jewish?”

“What? Dude, no.” He turns to his double to say, “What the fuck?”

“It’s because I’m a Jew, isn’t it?”

“Man, get out of here.”

The kid is trying to push back the bouncers pushing him back.

“Aaaaarrghhhh! Aaaaeeeeaeaa! I was being ironic!”

He really gives whatever his drunken self has got until one of the bouncers literally carries him across the sidewalk and drops the guy on his back. The other one tells the kid’s friends to pick him up and leave.

‘Gone too soon!’ says the sign on top of the entrance.

The death of the counter(?)culture is celebrated with a cardboard coffin on the stage, around it dancers of the hall making strange, but liberally accepted moves. In every half an hour two people carry a paper sign, marking one of the five stages of grief, and then toss the paper into the audience who tear it apart in seconds. Once in a while the coffin gets to crowd surf amongst the chain-haired cross-dressers, a puppet dog prepped up for BDSM, three Hasidic Jews dancing their kvetch away, and lastly, someone, pushing the boundaries of creativity, in a move either too cliché to be true but genius in its simplicity, completely naked except a top hat with his crotch covered in dayglo.

In Berlin, when you close your eyes in a place like this, you hear the music. In a place supposed to resemble Berlin, you hear people talking. Words and conversations hover around without attaching themselves to a particular source.

“This is exactly like Danny’s party.”

“Yeah his dad died.”

“I know, so sad.”

“Where did you learn?”

“Facebook.”

“I’m still debating whether to reactivate my Facebook, it’s been five weeks.”

The DJ is surprisingly awful, perhaps being facetious by playing mainstream, but the crowd, and Osman as well thanks to Radu, is too intoxicated to care. Dancing beats can and have been making a drunken connoisseur groove like there is no tomorrow.

“A shot? You want a shot, Osman? Who are you? Do you want a shot too?”

Osman is talking to... a witch? Nevertheless, she wanted to be noticed with that hat, so here is Osman noticing her and even brining the topic onto Williamsburg, the

witch's neighborhood for a year now, and they are talking about the new restaurants and bars, one of which belongs her friend's friend or something, this new Nordic Cuban place where you eat upside down.

"It's a whole different experience," she says.

"I'm sure," he says.

"Gil! Scott! Heron!" the crowd says.

"Osman let's get out of here," Radu barges in. "I want to go to a club! A real club where I can pay someone to get in and where people can get rejected for no reason!"

The witch looks at Radu with mild perplexion—animalistic attraction to the loudest repressed with repulsion to this boisterous personality. Upon the hat's turning, Osman acquires a new perspective and sees a young kid dancing with his eyes closed. Once, he opens them, looks around sober, and then goes back into his dark trance. It is Gideon. Osman would like to go up and say hello, like he does with the graduate students, building a rapport because this classroom, department, college, university, city, world is a community, but he doesn't want to disturb the innocent state of his student's fabricated stupor.

Radu has noticed the witch as well.

"Would you like to come too?"

Not wanting to belong to any club that wants her as a member, she gives into instinctual rejection. For this thrift-shopper, the notion of a 'high-end club' is enough reason to break off the ties with her new acquaintances. Osman does a little "whaddayagonnado?" with his eyes and follows Radu outside. You don't know what you really want.

On the bridge and out of the car window Radu is screaming, “I love Williamsburg!”

“They take offense to that here,” says Osman, pulling him back in.

“Fuck it, what’s hip now? Prospect? Bedstuy? I love Bedstuy too! That’s where Biggie’s from. Ha! Look at blazing building!”

“The second one I’ve seen this month. Close to my place too.”

“Don’t worry Osman, I’m sure they will build a new one in its place and open a coffee shop. I love this city!”

“Why?”

“Because I have the resources to enjoy what is hip! I’ll be the first to plant the flag when Forest Hills is colonized.”

“How do you know so much this place when you are never here?”

“I have a newsfeed. And a few assistants are always showing me stuff to invest in. If I lose money I’ll double it next month with some tofu dog food.”

Pulling up to the curb with the black cab, the first thing that Radu does is to ask three stationary young women on the line to join them so they can apply the specific gender plus one rule that changes its genders according to cities. The West always values women more when it comes to lines. In the East it’s men.

Radu promises, but more so boasts, that he will buy the first three rounds, and won’t ask for anything in return.

He says, “We’re only here to have fun, ladies,” they laugh.

This time the club's ecology is more to Radu's liking. The loud music inside, unknown but poppy and bumping, prevents any talking. Right in the middle of the floor, in a dirty Jacuzzi, there is a group of strangers with their clothes on, acting frisky. Around them, people are bumping and grinding in a more civilized manner, groping less and dry humping through a fancy dress instead of a second-hand skirt.

Up in the terrace, Osman finds Radu for one last tipsy conversation before they switch to drunken monosyllables.

"Thank you for tonight Radu."

"Thank you Osman. To be a tourist one's own city is quite a treat."

"This is not your city."

Across the river, on the one of the darker high rises of gentrified Jersey, Radu spots the apartment he's staying at.

"Bought it last year when the interests were low but I still don't live here because I'd spend all my money. You always need to spend more to be on par. This city adapts to the age and gets one step ahead of you so that you can never be fully satisfied."

"Maybe today it does."

"Today is the only day, Osman. You're not going to get your May 68 back, even if you're digging for it in academia. This is not anybody's city. It's either for tourists or for the homeless. Stop being an idiot and go abroad for a semester. See something else."

Even when he was a shy college student, Radu would always grill his friends about wasting their time. Nobody would take him seriously because he hadn't achieved anything. Now that his golden life advices are blurbs on tech magazine covers he has become more ruthless.

“But-”

“Oh give me a break dude.” Apart from the accent, whatever Romanian in him is gone in the flow of the West Coast and the rest outsourced to technology. “You are too lost in your head. Look at me, I’m satisfied with material things. Sure, I used 1s and 0s to attain those things, but right now, my mind is grounded in reality, whereas your idiot brain is busy trying to... ‘grasp’... and ‘unpack’.”

Osman would like to indicate discontent with Radu’s tone and constant put-downs, but there is something about him (maybe the money?) that shuts him up.

“It is the money.”

“Not everything can be bought-”

“What? Respect? That’s a given. I can reach limit equals infinity in anything. Maybe I am not completely nor permanently satisfied, maybe it doesn’t come from within, but who is to say what is within me is good anyhow? There’s an entire world out there for us to buy.”

Radu has made this speech before, but it is still effective.

“So you’re a lion,” says Osman.

“I’m rich. I don’t need to be anything else. Let’s go downstairs.”

Money can also end a conversation.

Osman has enough energy and affiliation with this kind of upper-middle society to last a couple of hours, going up to the roof to chat with random people and descending back down to be fed shots by Radu. A young, little Indian-American with a loosened work attire befriends him because he is rolling and high-fives him after whatever he says.

“What do you do Osman?”

“I’m an academic.”

“Nice!”

High-five.

“What about you?”

“I’m a hedge fund manager.”

Someone shouts “Get turnt!” Taking the cue, Osman says:

“Work hard play hard?”

“Fuck yeah.” High-five. “I gotta be at work tomorrow, so I got two more grams with me to ride the night out.”

“You won’t crash?”

“Work gives me more serotonin than drugs. I never crash when I’m fully satisfied. I would be afraid that I’ll miss out.”

“Nice meeting you.”

High-five.

He sees Radu aligning physically and conversationally with one of the girls way back from the line. They sit on a couch while other people sitting on each other around them. Soon, unable to hear each other, they kiss. The conspicuous PDA is not unnatural if this is the reason why everybody came here for.

It’s 4am, and the club is closing because cities are different. Some people are leaving making out, will make out in the taxi, on the bed even though some people are only about penetration and no lip connection, some are vice versa, and all will continue to one last kiss in the morning if the night extends to an obligatory diner breakfast, paid by

the gentleman. Radu, who knows what Radu is doing? For now, he is smashed, living his life and leaving the place with the rest of the girls. He whistles a cab and gives cash to the driver.

Turning to Osman,

“Hey do you want a ride too? I love whistling for cabs.”

“No, I’m fine, the subway’s close.”

“Ok, ok, let’s meet tomorrow, hangover brunch, yeah?”

“Don’t you have plans?”

“The girls? They’ll leave in the morning with a gift bag.” Radu’s naïve Balkan face appears underneath his new feral grin. “You sure you don’t want a cab?”

“Public transportation is more interesting. There are more phenomena.”

And Osman wants to remember it all if he is actually leaving the city. There are vagabonds sleeping, homeless people eyeing others, a nurse coming back from a graveyard shift, a druggies in whose minds the party is still going on, a middle-aged woman and a kid, and Osman, on the subway. When he returns the grey of the street is opening to a light blue, and when he looks out of his window Gene is setting up shop under ODOR ’S TEA HOUSE.

September 21

Rikers Island, like countless other institutions that favor bland walls for their own reasons, is not a fun place to be as a visitor, though Osman probably wouldn’t know the other side. This prisoner’s limbo might be a heaven if you are the leader of a racial gang who rakes up the cigarette prices every week and spend the profit on paying off guards

for imported goods from Queens and the Bronx. Or maybe you may get raped and strangled by the guards for a minor offence.

Giving his wallet, ID, and (get this, this is funny, he will make a joke about it at the next party) keys, Osman passes through three different security checkpoints that have him open his package for Pascal, sniffing and flipping through the books—personally chosen by the Chair, given to Osman with an enigmatic wink and no other information—again and again because the movie night favorite here is always *The Shawshank Redemption* even if it is never shown.

The outer guards who take care of the visitors are constantly on the verge of dozing off. The almost-sleep is how the days pass: if you're lucky you can visualize a hazy mirage in the light's reflection on cheap marble. Metal doors here and somewhere else buzz and shut until Osman loses his bearings and just tells himself that he is on Rikers Island, but not for that reason. That's all he needs to go on.

Osman is on a line with four other twitching visitors. The guard slides open the metal door but still keeps them at bay. Looking at his watch, he drills:

“3...2...1... OK go go go go!” He starts pushing the back of the line. “You got exactly twenty minutes! No more, no less!”

Pascal is just staring ahead. After sitting down, Osman has to readjust himself to meet Pascal's blank gaze.

“Hey Pascal.”

Pascal, still silent, leans his head out, checks left and right under the guise of stretching his neck after a terrible night's of sleep on shabby prison cots. Finally, Pascal's face rises towards the glass, eyes glassy.

“Pascal? Pascal, are you drunk?”

“Yeah,” Pascal nods. “They got a mixologist from East Village a week ago on drug charges. He makes the best pruno. Gotta do it for you guys once I get out.”

His face is looks lit.

“Pascal, I brought the books you wanted.”

A shiver of the head, and Pascal is his old self again.

“Nice, thank you very much Osman. The Chair sent them?”

“Yes, she-”

“Cool. How are the others?”

“They were all busy today, so I thought I’d make the visit. You are getting a lot of support from people, you know?”

“That’s just to distract the public.”

“With what?”

“I don’t know but I can tell you it’s not about me. They want to keep me away. It’s better for them.”

“Them?”

“Them. The threat. The danger. They are after me.”

Chalking it up for stir craziness, Osman doesn’t pry and skips the study abroad discussion. “How are you doing?”

Pascal’s pearly white teeth—his character trait at the department, but probably not here—rolls back and his black lips shuts down on his smile. The muscles work their way upward to open his eyes wide, wider than stretch marks unseen on black skin, wide

enough so that Osman thinks through some trick of light and darkness, he can see the pink slit between the eyeball and the dermis, the only possible gate to the brain.

He mouths “Get. Me. Out.”

But as soon as a guard enters the window frame Pascal snaps back.

“Yeah, I’ve been well. They think I’m tough because they don’t know... my real occupation. But I be a good boy,” leaning back with a Southern accent, “I am a good boy, ain’t I officers?” he asks and receives a “Shut up, Milongo.”

Pascal settles back into his chair and normal cadence.

“I’m hanging out with this guru, he has helped me a lot. You gotta trust in some kind of authority, right?” Specks of laughter are coughed as they peter away like a dusty candy dispenser. “Like Monte Cristo’s teacher. He has read a bunch since he was imprisoned here since the-”

The guard is gone to put a visitor back in her seat because the twenty minutes are not over yet. Pascal’s idle hand is adamantly clawing the Plexiglas window. His heavy breathing through his racially set nose blocks the whispers.

“He has been here for almost half a century... I can’t... Talk bad... They know... They listen...”

“Pascal, you don’t need to worry, the law faculty is on your case.”

“Oh yeah? When is my trial?”

“What?”

“When is my trial?”

“I don’t know, shouldn’t you know?”

“I don’t have one... They will never give me one... still... I’m here... with murderers... rapists... psychopaths... maybe forever...”

“Pascal I’m very sorry-”

“Shut up!”

The whisper is so sharp it makes the second guard look over.

“Osman I need you to do something for me.”

“Of course.”

“I... I want you to send a paper of mine to The Conference.”

“Pascal-”

“It’s not incendiary. IT IS NOT INCENDIARY! It’s nice and easy. You’re the only one I can trust Osman. Just have them remember me. Please?”

“Okay... okay.”

“Just proofread it and then have someone else read it. Or print a bunch of it and leave a pile outside of rooms, I don’t know, I don’t care. I swear it’s not incendiary, it’s not even political. I just don’t want to be forgotten.”

“Sure thing,” Osman says, even though he doesn’t have any idea on how to proceed with this. He has his own paper to worry about and so does everyone else.

“I owe you one. I do. You saved my life.”

“One minute!” The guards are making the rounds. “Anybody who wants to leave can leave now!”

“And thank you very much for the books! I needed them...” Pascal’s eyes widen once again, “You have no idea what it’s like to be here.”

October 5

Osman is walking Laura home from the movie theater, located in a brand-new complex downtown, Jersey seeping into the city from the south with its open design malls usually saved for lonesome towns where there is nothing else worthy to look at. They are still together, if you are wondering, treating the relationship as if Osman is not going to leave the city, even though he still hasn't received any rectifying remarks from the administration.

“Even if you do leave,” Laura had said when they watched a cloudy sunset, not the best one but there would be more, on the opening of World Financial Center, the only place where you can see the Statue of Liberty and that giant neon clock from Jersey City together, juxtaposed with a woman in the middle, the auburn sky spilling over her, making her a perfect piece in the composition, until she turned her head to him and made herself his, hair flapping like an undiscovered country's flag, “I am glad I have spent my first months here with you.”

“Same,” he had said. Whether they would have been together as they were in Laura's current projection into eternity, who knows?, but she would have been an ideal lover until December. She was not an intellectual but she was intelligent, ready to learn, playful, the tennis match and the passionate dance still going on strong.

They saw a drama, which was okay, but it had a scene with red lingerie for comic effect, and now Osman is explaining how that can be a homage to Sean Connery's outfit in *Zardoz*. After looking up a picture on the phone, Laura is in utter feigned disbelief (“Oh my god! That is *not* true!”) and Osman, finding an in, describes *Zardoz*, Charlotte

Rampling's asexual Victorian stronghold, where no brutes are allowed, kind of like academia but even more full of itself.

"The title references *The Wi(zard of Oz)*: the master is just a puppeteer and so on."

"Is it like the movie?" Laura asks, because she can only allow Osman to go on.

"I haven't seen the movie. But it doesn't matter, really—"

"You haven't seen *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"The movie? No, some of my friends in college used to watch it with *The Dark Side Of The Moon*, and I watched the black-and-white-to-color scene with that and 'Any Colour You Like'. You like that song?"

"But you haven't..."

"No, I haven't, is that such a big deal?"

"Not even on Thanksgiving?"

"Dad usually had sports on."

Osman realizes he has walked the past three-four steps on his own.

"Laura?"

"I guess you haven't seen *Wicked* then?"

"No, Laura, I haven't. I'm not a big fan of Broadway—"

"*Wicked* is *not* Broadway."

"But—"

"It is so much more than that. You talk about things you have no idea about!"

"Teach me?"

She scoffs. "I thought you were the teacher!"

It shouldn't be that cold tonight, but Osman can see Laura's breath.

"Laura..."

"It's just that, it's such an American thing."

"Laura, just because I haven't seen the movie, doesn't mean I don't know about *The Wizard of Oz*. I've read articles and seen parodies of it, a lot of things I know reference the movie, so do all my friends. And I get those references, I'm not a foreigner to the land. Flying monkeys, witches, the tin man, the lion, I know all about them. I know a lot of other things. That's my job."

"Why, anybody can have a brain!" Laura blurts out, complete with flailing arms.

"What does that mean?"

"I thought you would get that fucking reference too!"

"All this just because of Oz?"

"Yes, maybe! Some things people love, they are just... important to them. And you love like nothing is to you. Everything is just so clinical with you. Everything has the same value."

"That's not true."

"You could have been with any other woman other than me over the last month and a half and felt the same."

So that's why. Defeated, they spend the remaining last two blocks to Laura's building listening to the wind. Laura is eager to get into her apartment. When she realizes Osman is not going to leave, she turns back, fully facing Osman, and gives a nervous "Ok, well, good night!"

"I... I can't come upstairs?"

"No, I don't think I would want that right now."

"Is this because of—"

"No, no."

"Then?"

"I don't know. I need to think."

"Can I at least kiss you goodbye?"

Cringing her body as it is being crushed under her timid smile, she says "No?"

"Ok," Osman steps back, "Good night, I guess?"

"Goodnight," she says, vanishing behind the door.

October 9

"Aw, that is fucking terrible. I'm sorry."

Giorgio Mondo is one of the more respected figures in the University's film school, simply because he is not bound only to film after becoming a tenured professor, nor to the school after winning the Best Director at Locarno for his sole film. He, but mostly his stature, exists through relations made here and there and then cemented into an exhibition at MoMA here and a book deal there. To see him work the crowd is to witness a marvel; people are not the same afterwards. When he flounders, his ethnicity—more *Mean Streets* than his home of southern Italy, but who cares when a simple reduction can make everything alright?—makes him retain his charm. When he succeeds, he is a beacon for his country overseas, the best depiction possible of the culture like a rare Medici portrait, if they could just have emigrated here.

Osman and Giorgio met at an event at the Casa Italiana, Osman first talking to Giorgio about the hors d'oeuvres—sorry, the antipasti—buffet without knowing his

reputation, and then talking to him again about how busy he is after seeing how he briefly chatted, smiled, and maybe even laughed with everybody in the building. After explaining his job (“I’m Giorgio Mondo.”) he invited Osman to a movie screening. Since both of them had their own personal and social lives already set, a faux-friendship, nourished with small talk, budded on the fringes of literary events, random discussions of obscure movies, and common remarks on standard students. Osman liked the erudite man, but he valued his connections even more, and Giorgio had added another contact to his phonebook.

Now, Osman is having difficulty on how to react to Mondo’s compassion. His father was still, according to the doctor, “Stable, yes, just like before.” and the inertia was enough to make Osman unable to keep it in and start divulging his family affair to others. For what, an advice or a hug, he didn’t know, but he just didn’t want to live it inside anymore and Mondo was insisting on empathizing with Osman’s issues.

“Yeah, well, he is really old. The only thing left for me to do is to keep on keeping on, I guess.”

Mondo’s eyes light up when he hears an established American phrase he has heard so many times in movies.

“Yes, keep on keeping on, that’s a great fucking line. You’re right, nothing else to say but I’m sorry.” Would Osman have said more? That question’s relevancy has passed. “Listen, I’m introducing a movie tomorrow night, I’d like you to come. It will take your mind off of things.”

Seems like everybody wants Osman’s mind to be off of things. Is this compassion, a stock phrase, or–

“Ok.”

“Ok? Nice, I have to fucking go, I will talk to you fucking later, okay?”

“Sure. Thank you Giorgio.”

“Of course. Don’t fucking mention it.”

There is a woman introducing Mondo to introduce the movie of the night.

“...profiled, not only once, but twice, by the Newspaper of Record,”

“godfuckingdamnit...”

“Giorgio Mondo is called ‘a one man institution’ by the press...”

“...every fucking time... every fucking time they say it the same way.”

Mondo has grown up on classic American movies, but his old-fashioned, lilting syntax is littered thanks to living in *The Naked City* for so many years and refining his English here. Amongst his friends, or even in dialogues of two, he swears copiously. Mostly ‘fuck’s, but sometimes a ‘shit’ finds its way, nothing creative.

What had surprised Osman wasn’t the contrast between the vulgar word and the kind act, it was how far Mondo had taken the dichotomy. Once, for what seemed like a grand gesture but usually given even to freshmen students if they tried hard enough, Mondo had invited Osman to his house for dinner. Located right next to Central Park, inside hulking cabinets of DVDs and Taschen books, Mondo also had his full family living in the building, including but not limited to his ailing mother, his aunt who fared better, his African-American wife to show how much he has acclimated, and his two kids, Federico and Paolo.

Warned for a big dinner, Osman was assaulted with biscotti, muffins, and homemade focaccia on his arrival. The appetizers kept coming until the last second from

a fast-forwarded kitchen busier than a family restaurant on Mulberry. Avoiding ruining his appetite, Osman had tried to focus on the family members to get to know this seemingly solitary man a bit better, to understand what the real Mondo was by asking innocent questions to the people who knew him in a different language. As if the failed attempts to connect with the parlo-solo-Italiano mother weren't enough, the whole house would be in a state of Omertà when the discussion got any deeper than pleasantries.

At the head of the table, Mondo directed the dinner.

“Paolo, how many times did I tell you not to chew with your fucking mouth open?”

“Sorry.”

“We have guests here, for fuck's sake.”

Osman wonders whether the swearing is voluntary, indicating the unseen, other Mondo, that he is not only who is on stage, talking, introducing, interviewing, or perhaps this pro(fessional's + fanity + fusion) has become a Tourette's like compulsion to free itself when Mondo is not giving his elegant introductions to a movie.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Giorgio Mondo!”

Mondo flashes a brilliant smile, walks up, kisses the host, sits down on his chair, all in one perfect movement. It's almost musical.

“Ok, so I'd like to ask a quick question,” Mondo says; does he have a more pronounced accent now? “How many here has seen this movie before?”

Only old people from the Upper West Side come to the Historical Society's movie screenings. Many raise their hand, some with a cough.

“Ok, I thought so, I have seen this movie a lot, and constantly cherish the new things I find with the others in the audience, and I’m sure you do too, otherwise you wouldn’t be here tonight. Actually, an old lady outside told me that she has seen this movie so many times and she cherishes the same reactions she has every single time. Laughs, cries, hopes, dreams...”

He surveys the room. The audience is content and smiling like he is. An old couple is holding hands. For a couple of seconds, she buries her head in his shoulder.

“And I think that’s the beauty of film, because you can always experience the same emotion—even the ones you wouldn’t want to in your lives—in the environment you are comfortable with, but find something fresh and rewrite the movie in your head again and again. Of course, the magic of making you feel anew lies in the production and its history.”

He then introduces his guest and they both spit out IMDB trivia like nursery rhymes they’ve memorized long ago and unconsciously.

“Excuse my French,” Mondo says, “or should I say, Italian,” to get chuckles, “but here’s something amazing: Apparently, William Holden claimed top billing over Grace Kelly for this movie. And, as you all know, they were having an affair.”

“But William Holden was always a business-,” says the guest.

“Right, William Holden was always a business-minded actor, very focused on the box office and his fame as well. So, for the top billing, when the producer told him ‘Ladies first,’ he said ‘This is a movie, not a fucking lifeboat.’”

Laughter. Wheezing. Someone takes it too far.

“So that’s why I said ‘Excuse my French’,” Mondo says.

A set of rolled eyes from the event coordinator means that he needs to fill more time until the showing, but he has run out of trivia, so he starts to connect. From *Some Like It Hot* to *Sunset Boulevard* to Buster Keaton to the newest Sherlock Holmes, Mondo creates a data tornado of people, names, and locations. In the end, what's left in the audience's mind are not the facts, but the testament to Giorgio Mondo's great knowledge.

Finally he sits down once again next to Osman.

"Did the old lady really tell you that?" asks Osman.

"What old lady?"

Silence.

"How many times have you seen this film?"

"I don't know... Twenty? I'm so fucking sick of it," Mondo whisperingly replies, and anticipates the forthcoming question, "But I can't leave now. People will know I've left. I will be dishonored, the Historical Society will be dishonored, even the movie will catch flack as 'the movie that Mondo left.'"

"Yeah I guess you're right."

Mondo waits for the opening credits until he lets out one last restrained, frustrated "Fuck..." like an addict smoking that last cigarette before entering indoors as the overture ends. He doesn't savour it; the profanity is lost in his discomfort. Anyhow, the movie has started, so nobody can say anything anymore.

There are only predictable awws, swoons, and laughter, prompted by the movie, by others, but especially, for many, in the experience of rewatching, waiting for it to hit the right notes so that they can hit the same ones as well. The room gets cozier when Audrey Hepburn first meets Cary Grant, anxious when Katherine Hepburn is really going

disheveled for his age, unshaven face and some shaggy hair, but then again, he doesn't have a case going for him as his now shriveled penis juts out of his zippers and the documents he was using to cover himself have spilled over to the ground. He makes a lunge for the scattered papers to cover himself again, but it's too late.

"I'm sorry," he is screaming. "I'm sorry, I didn't know!"

Everybody is looking at everyone else, just not at the old man.

"I didn't know! I didn't know, I'm so sorry!"

Mondo is looking at the host, hands signifying to get the picture rolling again. The host apologizes until everyone has calmed down and back in their seats. They weren't that far away anyway. The movie rolls again, and in five minutes, everything is forgotten in the flow of the film.

The after party is in an Italian restaurant full of Italian people, none of which were in the movie screening. "You're a guest of Mr. Mondo? Why didn't you say so? That's the password here." Mondo says hello to Osman one last time, tells him Milan is beautiful in the winter if he is going away, but doesn't wait for the other's remark since he has a crowd of high society to talk to for whatever reason, probably to organize another event exactly like this in the future. Even though Osman knows French, he finds it impossible to join a conversation in these thick Italian dialects. At least the wine, also from Italy, is, as an app would call it, 'Delectable'. Osman can only stand looking around and can only spot Mondo once a while, always with a smile on his face, probably the only person in this place for a real reason.

October 10

The Vice President of the United States is meeting with the President of the University about Pascal Milongo's detainment and naturally, the classes are canceled. The four-block radius is ready for the protesters with ample police and several ambulances.

Osman is looking forward to another day of minding his own business, but two Zen minutes into his office hours Gideon knocks on and enters his door. He sits down with his coat on and hurriedly stuffs his headphones in his bag.

"Hello."

"Hi."

In class, Gideon has been... lively, to say the least. But Osman is an understanding tutor, because in real life Raskolnikovs wane and at this early point in the semester, he is happy that Gideon's contrary opinions are at least creating class discussion.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine thank you."

Osman tilts his head with a questioning eye.

"So, I wanted to talk about Woolf."

Osman is silent, still on the same stance. Teachers usually are told to wait for students to talk in office hours so that they can learn how to get their point across and build real confidence.

"I get it, she is reflecting the outside and showing us her consciousness, and everybody is alone," 'solipsistic', Osman would have and had said so in class, "In the city we can't do it alone, we need to act together but we can only represent the city in our own

way since our consciousness and ideas can only belong to us, but we fight or engage with whatever is around because they have their own opinions too.”

“Yes.” He’s a good listener in class.

“And all this for what, exactly?”

Osman was more optimistic about the punchline. What a shame. Gideon is making a perfect example of what he is describing.

“Are you looking for a redeeming quality?”

“Not necessarily redeeming, but... a reason.”

“Well, Schelling—”

“Who?”

“Friedrich Schelling? German philosopher?”

“I guess.”

“Well, he has an idea that to willingly do something futile against an opponent you can’t win is to show one’s free will.”

“I guess. But... I don’t know I don’t think I’m satisfied with that.”

Osman has nothing left to give in this conversation.

“Maybe we should have read Schelling,” Gideon soldiers on without breaking eye contact. Though Janet’s Psych department says otherwise, Osman has read that keeping the gaze for more than three seconds means either intense love or hate.

“This is not what the class is about.”

“I know, but... I’m taking two more classes from this department this semester, and all of them are about different things, yet they only seem to be connected in...

attitude. I guess I just wanted to come out of your class learning something tangible... something..." he can't finish it.

Osman listens while nodding his head with a protracted motion, hopefully not too mocking from his ivory tower.

"You're trying to understand urban development? This is not the department for that. Even if it were you can't, you would still need the other departments."

"But then everything is incomplete."

"Our knowledge will always be incomplete. Whether you are, that's up to you," he adds with a smile.

Osman would have hated to leave this conversation, however banal and frustrating it is, on a sour note. Just like any other skeptical student who can't help it when bolstered by an authoritative support of his own ideals—ideals that he doesn't fully know yet but that will be kneaded into him and then forgotten but a trace as he grows older—, Gideon gets up and leaves with a mirroring smile on his face.

Like all students who want to 'engage' in office hours, Gideon is tiring. You can't block them out, there are no other students to divert the attention to, no topic to talk about except the one the student brings to your room. He would have liked to give one word answers, tell him that he should read more and then maybe he will understand, or just see it through the end of the semester when he will explain the academically established connections that they can regurgitate back in their papers.

Talking to students is not that hard, it's the mental minefield one threads on that's taxing. Give any abrupt answer and the student can get offended, get depressed, his or her

parents can sue the school, and lawyer fees, for Osman and for the university, will be trouble.

Going out of his office to get coffee he runs into Hafiz, who is putting his leftover Soylent in the fridge. Hafiz eats Soylent 24/7 and nothing else. He also wears the same clothing, an ihram, every day.

“Oh, oh, oh yeah, right there, right there!”

The muffled sound is heard behind a closed-but-cheap-so-conductive door. Even Hafiz would know what it belongs to, but he goes back to his office without even breaking a smile.

“Oh, oh, oooooooooohhhhhh!”

The source is coming from the German department. Osman doesn't recognize the name on the door. He knocks on it a couple of times, harder, harder each time, until finally someone says, “Come in!”

“Hey.”

“Hello!”

A blonde, middle-aged, but sprightly man with prescription glasses is looking back at Osman with the same inquiring face. He is fully dressed, most importantly his pants are on, but the porn is still leaking from a pair of earbuds on the table.

“Hey, man, not to disturb you or anything, but we can hear you outside..?”

“Really? With the headphones and everything... really?”

“Yeah. I don't mean to judge you or anything, but I'd rather not have colleagues watch porn in work hours.”

“Ah, fuck yes. Stick it deep.”

“Oh, I wasn’t *watching* porn. I was watching it, but not for the purpose you’d think of. I was *researching* porn. Come, sit down.”

Osman reluctantly does.

“Hans Schlük.”

Hans reaches out a hand. Osman doesn’t take it.

“Osman.”

“Oh we got a lot of you guys where I come from!”

“Ah, ah, ohmygod ohmygod, yes!”

“Yeah, I’m from upstate.”

“Really? True, you don’t have an accent. Anyhow, yes, porn, look at this.”

He turns his screen around to show a scene with a girl was inserting anal beads into another man’s empty eyesocket. Both of their faces are lost in ecstasy.

“I... I don’t understand.”

“Me neither. But I try to embrace it. I have been going through websites and watching every single video, or at least getting an idea out of it, to find the perfect one.”

“Perfect is personal.”

“Exactly! The subjectivity of the author, right? That’s what you guys are all about. So this is like a self-discovery as well. I’ve logged onto some weird websites, I can tell you that much.”

“What’s the weirdest thing you’ve encountered?”

“I’m sure I haven’t seen it yet.”

“What have you discovered about yourself, then?”

“I don’t know, it varies. Some days I like solo, some days I am a gangbang person. Nothing to do about it. I do have the cliché of repeating that ten seconds when the actress finally orgasms, if she ever does, when she can’t act anymore, where the performance breaks down. Because nothing else is real, nor sincere! How can sex, the most natural thing, be depicted in falsity?”

“It can if you theorize on it,” Osman says.

“That’s for your department, my friend. We care about the facts and I care deeply about porn, so we look at in an empirical way. I watch interviews, see how they are with different people, I keep a journal on my tastes, I also note the orgasm seconds if I ever need to... come back to it. I try to get to understand the actors, there’s this one that put an ugly photo of hers as her profile picture on Twitter and I melted, it’s a shame she is not a great performer.

Osman notices a wedding ring on the desk.

“Your wife doesn't say anything?”

“Well I usually browse at work, but don't do the other thing at work even though that’s what people may think. But, other than that, of course I do, I’ve been married for over twenty years. I don’t have a sex life. Just because I haven’t found my holy grail doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy what is awaiting me on my journey. Maybe in the end the perfect one won’t satisfy me, but there are new videos coming out every day. You just can’t lose with porn.

"In fact," he twists the subject as if he is giving an insider's tip to attract a potential customer/convert, "it has helped me a lot in my social life. No more adultery, no

more sexual tension to ruin potential friendships. So all my focus is finding that perfect one, and when I find it, I will desire it like nobody else did."

"Well," Osman exhales while getting up, "let me know if you do find your perfect one. It was nice meeting you."

"Remember," he shouts, "No libido, no problem!"

Osman, feeling unclean, embarrassed, gets an urge to call his mother. Or the urge might be explained as an unconscious, proactive measure taken before his visit to Sandy tomorrow, after which he will be drained of himself and without any desire to talk with his parents or whatever persons of interest that were discussed in the session.

Her mother picks up on the second ring, which is probably the first ring for her, because sometimes the call-progress tone starts without an actual connection being made, if only to bait the caller to stay on a little longer.

His father's levels, whatever they may be, remain the same. Patricia has taken in a stray cat they have found, named her Tabby, short for Tabernacle. She reassures him that it's going all right, she is working on her flowers to keep her busy, and even manages to send a photo of the blossoming lavenders to his cellphone. Tiny yet strong in a small pot, Osman hopes that they are a metaphor for her mother's improving state.

October 15

A voicemail: "Hey Osman, I tried to reach you but your phone was off, maybe you were in class. Listen, I'm sorry about not being in touch for a while, but I needed to think, and frankly... I don't..." it's not the tears, it's the corny saying that's holding

Laura back, “I don’t think this is going to work anymore. I am feeling very hostile towards you and I don’t think it is going to go away. Please don’t call me back, please, for our own good, I don’t want to get distressed again. I just feel like you’re schooling me whenever you want to give an interesting fact or a piece of information from anywhere. It feels emotionless,” she is reading some of this from a piece of paper, “You’ve just stopped being fun. And with your father, and what’s happening at your work, this is too much for our relationship to handle and I don’t have the energy for that right now. I am just starting to build my own life. Maybe if you weren’t leav—*To save, please press 2.*”

October 18

“Hello Osman.”

“Hey Sandy.”

“How have you been?”

“I don’t know.”

“...”

“...”

“How is your father?”

“He is still the same, I’d guess. My mother didn’t talk too much about him the last time I called. She told me how she woke up to a sunny morning with birds singing—”

“On October?”

“Yeah, right? And she felt happy for the first time in a long time because she realized she didn’t have to take care of my father that day.”

“So she’s doing better.”

“Yes, but nothing is decided. She still doesn’t want to pull the plug. My father is in a coma, he might come out today or tomorrow, and she is all *carpe diem*.”

“You told me that even if he did come out of the coma he would be unable to do a lot of things.”

“Yes, of course, but that’s no reason to... I don’t know, it’s not that bad, I think my mother has every right to be happy now and I think I’m finally experiencing the sadness, but now there’s nobody to talk to about it. I came late in the game.”

“The game?”

“I’m lucky I have a therapist to talk to.”

“About that...”

“What?”

“Actually, Osman, I was going to tell you this earlier, but I have decided to retire next month.”

“But, we were just making progress.”

“We have a couple of more sessions to discuss your father, and I think we have made great progress over the years. I can recommend many therapists who are excellent in their fields, but—”

“Isn’t there a protocol that you have to inform your patients?”

“Not really. It’s surprisingly lenient, especially if it is because of a personal crisis.”

“And are you in a personal crisis?”

“Yes.”

Silence.

“Because of me?”

“Of course not. I just cannot put my work ahead of my personal life anymore. I did it before, and it is never good for anyone.”

“But it is good for me? Sandy, I’m telling you that I’m in awful pain right now.”

“You told me that it wasn’t that bad. Osman we have concluded your treatment long ago. What you are experiencing is textbook mourning.”

“Oh fuck your textbook. The same institution that made you the expert about my mourning process declared me an expert as well. I’ve read my Freud and I know what I’m feeling.”

“Osman, I know what Comparative Literature reads. Psychoanalysis is not all of therapy.”

“You’re being selfish.”

“Maybe so, but it is for the better. I can’t help you if I can’t help myself. And I have helped you all these years. I thought you’d be happy for me.”

“So now I’m selfish?”

“Is that how you feel?”

“Stop playing the shrink if you’re not going to be one. And no, I don’t feel selfish, because I pay you money to help me. We have a deal.”

“I’m sorry Osman, whatever you say will not change my mind.”

“But you can mess with mine however you want, is that it? All these years you can lead me according to your doctrine, and then I have no reciprocal power?”

“Power? Your power was my income. I don’t need it anymore.”

Osman steals for the entire weekend, from yesterday's Sears catalogues, restaurant menus, obsolete romance books, fotonovelas, Iranian philosophers, road signs, Cosmo's lists, instruction manuals, craigslist ads, liner notes, food labels. In his undergraduate class (his graduate class is cancelled this week due to the required reading being impossible to find, and everyone letting him know about this a couple of days ago, he had thought he had given an order for the book for the university bookstore but they say all copies have been bought) he doesn't really listen to the students as much as wondering whether a line from the current text can be worked into his paper. His focus gets lost especially when Gideon asks a question that he knows the rest of the class will not be able to answer, so he has to repeat the question, this time with dejection, until Osman has to reply with twists and turns, referencing countless other things the students won't even get to encounter should they pursue higher education. Gideon also doesn't listen back. He jots down notes in the most random times for what may be the biggest charging up in history before Hadoukening everything back at Osman, or so Osman thinks.

Excerpts from Osman's Stolen Essay, "Maintaining Academic Integrity Today: A Multi-faceted Discussion on Originality"*

"Citation has always been at the top of our priorities."[†] 'Academic plagiarism will not be tolerated.'[‡] '[But] are we giving too much credit to these standards that may actually limit

* Quade, Quentin L. "Institutions and Integrity." *Academic Questions* 4.3 (1991) 68-72

† Carleton College, "Academic Integrity in the Writing of Essays and Other Papers" (2006), 22.

‡ Ibid, 23.

us’* ‘[from] achieving greatness, and actualizing ourselves?’† ‘We are all implicated, we are all subjects,’‡ ‘yet, to show it so blatantly can cost us a lot,’§ ‘including our oblivious nature to our being a subject’**”

“Using previous statements as truisms to support one’s points will not be satisfactory for points in originality.’†† ‘The subject of such a statement will be defined by these requisites and possibilities taken together; and he will not be described as a n individual who has really carried out certain operations, who lives in an unbroken, never forgotten time, who has interiorized, in the horizon of his consciousness, a whole group of true propositions, and who retains, in the living present of his thoughts, their potential reappearance this is merely, in the case of individuals, the psychological, ‘lived’ aspect of their position as enunciating subjects.’‡‡”

“Citations, if left unchecked, can lead to serious consequences.’§§ ‘There can be misunderstandings between parties,’*** ‘or even unintentional, provoked violence,’††† ‘when’‡‡‡ ‘words’* ‘are’† ‘inaccurately’ ‡‘being’§ ‘borrowed.’**

* Brown, G. W. "Standard Deviation, Standard Error: Which 'Standard' Should We Use?" *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 136.10 (1982): 937.

† Dyer, Wayne W. *Your Sacred Self: Making the Decision to Be Free: An Original Manuscript*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Print.

‡ Shildrick, Margrit. "Posthumanism and The Monstrous Body." *Body & Society* 2.1 (1996): 1-15.

§ Spley, Guernica. "But Why Male Models?: Window Displays in the 21st Century." (2004)

** White, Lynn. *The historical roots of our ecological crisis*. Pacifica Tape Library, (1966).

†† Gyro, Mama. *Debating for Dummies*, Wiley, (2009), 20.

‡‡ Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print

§§ Hall, Norman. *Norman Hall's Police Exam Preparation Book*. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2003. Print.

*** McLaughlin, Ted J., Lawrence P. Blum, and David M. Robinson. *Communication*. Columbus, OH: C.E. Merrill, 1964. Print.

††† Monte, Anita, and Gerald Leinwand. *Riots*. New York: Washington Square, 1970. Print.

‡‡‡ Mccarthy, Lloyd D. "Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1972,," *HELP! Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*1.1 (2012): 197-99. Web.

“‘What we are reading,’^{††} ‘are only,’^{‡‡} ‘words, words, words,’^{§§} ‘which are in turn representations,’^{***} ‘thus we have lost any claim in originality.’^{†††} With citing, we have lost the battle once again, because we have forgotten to accept the author, the cryptomnesiac, the collagist, as a subject. Treating it as if the work can be devalued through meticulous nitpicking of sources, we have forgotten that the whole is more important than the parts carefully arranged together.

October 20-27

The Conference happens every year in The City, in what the students think is a fall break, which means something completely different for faculty. Thousands of academics from all around the world flock into the buildings as each department has its designated time slot and place for their own presentations. Those who are famous are placed in fancy hotel chains on a discount. Those who are lucky grab whatever vacancies are left in B&B’s and semi-respectable motels. There are even people staying at and coming from shabby Super 8s (the staff don’t understand why the English professors

* Kaufman, Eliza. “Yabba-dabba for Ndugu: Parodies of Children’s Entertainment in Niger” *African Pedagogy Today* (1987): 312-320.

† "Exeter, N.H.-Based Tyco Prepares to Leave High-Rent New York Offices." *Knight Rider/Tribune Business News*. N.p., 9 Jan. 2003. Web. 2 Jan. 2015.

‡ Lietzke, Milton H., and H. A. O'brien. "Electromotive Force Studies in Aqueous Solutions at Elevated Temperatures. X. Thermodynamic Properties of HCl-KCl, I'M STUCK HERE! HCl-RbCl, HCl-CsCl, HCl-MgCl₂, HCl-CaCl₂, HCl-SrCl₂, and HCl-AlCl₃ Mixtures." *The Journal of Physical Chemistry* 72.13 (1968): 4408-414. Web.

§ Heidegger, Martin. "The Basic Question of Being as Such." *Heidegger Studies* 2 (1986): 4-6. Web.

** “to borrow”. *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d.

†† Tyler, Lisa. "The Hemingway Book Club of Kosovo." *The Hemingway Review* 23.1 (2003): 120-23. Web.

‡‡ *Current unpublished undergraduate essay, courtesy of Stephen Quigley*

§§ If you are reading this essay you should know where this is coming from.

*** Willitts, J. "LOL OMFG JFC: Depictions of Jesus Christ in the Virtual Age." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3.1 (2005): 61-108. Web.

††† **Not referencing** Lethem, Jonathan. "The Ecstasy of Influence." *Harpers Magazine*. Harpers Magazine, Feb. 2007. **Haven't even read the essay.**

cannot control their giggling) in Pennsylvania, every day, taking the last hours of their sleep while they commute half-bent in early morning trains.

Osman has allowed a houseguest, Professor Mehdi Youssef from Tunis University, who calls his family every day from Skype. For fifteen minutes in the morning the house comes alive in what ashamedly sounds like gibberish to Osman. Don't get Osman wrong, he loves to host an academic so that they won't pay for a hotel, and it is not like Mehdi is invasive, leaving his toothbrush and paste on the kitchen counter, lowering the shutters because the window takes too much light, vice versa for the adjacent one, but even the slight, singular presence of someone in the house, expressed in an unexpected flush of a toilet, rattling of the plates and silverware, a long sigh before going to sleep, feels like a giant, metaphorical mosquito that won't quit. He wants to leave early before Mehdi even wakes up but he feels uncomfortable with a stranger at his house. Academics are known to snoop around and judge your bookcase.

Even though he doesn't talk much to Osman, Mehdi's bottled up attempts to communicate pop up during brief breakfasts.

"You've ever been to Turkey?" he asks over coffee, the American solution.

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Didn't have the chance. Read a bunch about it though."

"It's beautiful."

"So I've heard. Do you like the US?"

Mehdi gives a "meh," a grunt from anyone educated enough to know how capitalism affects third-world countries, but also foreign as well to see the negative

effects because they didn't have the resources to begin with. Osman decides it's best not to probe, he has heard the same riffs on post-colonial imperialism from all around the world, including how research in Antarctica is stifled because more money is spent on bringing tourists who destroy the already scarce ecosystem.

Mehdi also gets silent when the talk tacitly hits the mark of political. Whatever brews within him is replaced with a calmness that only manifests itself in international borders. A reflex. He might be the king of toilet humor back in Tunisia with his life-long friends, but he appears subdued, recalcitrant even, during small talk. Maybe something is bothering him, Osman thinks, but that something might just be Mehdi's new environment, this pinnacle of consumerism, free market and free love and so on. If he weren't so racially sensitive (post-9/11 America didn't treat Osman badly, but rather molded his opinions within the boundaries of the social discourse. Osman, meanwhile, never was attached too much to the city until he started living in it.) he would have referred to his guest as a 'time-bomb'. Right now he is just glad that the construction site across his building seems to have stopped, or have changed to a quieter, interior focus.

The Conference's opening ceremony happens through a massive conference call where everybody else but the President of the university is muted. After taking his time to list the institutions that helped create this 'week of knowledge', accompanied by live free jazz from the music department, he lights a giant torch located on the roof of the university's library, which takes the color gradient of the sky a notch or two lighter.

Every department receives its own brochures detailing the events around the city during their stay. The physical geographers, biologists, and paleontologists have a 'no-

glass-barred' tour at the Natural History Museum. The Guggenheim, fortunately in downtime between exhibitions, is hosting a rave/reception for art historians, with a light show from what's left of the James Turrell gala. Economists get to go to a strip club with hedge fund managers. Political theorists too. Gender Studies push the boundaries every year at their parties, where whips, portable animals, drugs, condoms and other contraceptives fly around the room, people being slapped with dildos, but they like it, and last year, as a special treat, people had shots 'infused' with bell hooks' squirt. Pound scholars don't really talk but circlejerk each other at a retreat in far Queens because no urban night is like the night there, where new constellations can be made.

Comparative Literature scholars have a free pass to join any of the events, but have nothing on their own, not only because they realize that they are a construct through the other departments and that maybe the recent semi-scandal with Pascal has cast a shadow over the potential festivities, but what they are being told is that they are the key players for The Conference as they symbolize academia at its finest.

This puts a lot of pressure on Osman, who, even though breathing sterilized air, still feels nauseous after entering Pascal's room. He had been too busy with his own paper and life to tend to Pascal's, even though his morning alarm for the past two weeks was labeled with his name, no snooze. His hopes that the proofreading will only take fifteen, soon-to-be-forgotten minutes are dashed after seeing the mass/mess of papers on the desk. Pascal, the late revolutionary, left behind three hundred years ago, had started countless essays on specific colonial issues through selected books, but hadn't gone through with any of them. The drawer, possibly more valuable because it is locked, yields the same answers. Osman doesn't know what essay Pascal was talking about in the prison

visit. Maybe there wasn't a complete essay. Maybe Pascal was preparing something on his own, but leading Osman to a stack of inconclusive papers proves to be futile. What was Osman supposed to do with loose ends? Tie them up? Would Pascal even care or know whether another essay of his was chosen? Would anyone else care?

Osman flips through the papers, trying his luck in stapled groups, until he finds an essay with a bibliography and a passable conclusion. He sits down on Pascal's desk to read it. "The Human Condition in Bolivian Post-Modernism" is an easy essay both to write and understand, but Pascal still manages to sound hostile against the 'external forces', who brought the calamity with them. Perhaps a comment on Pascal's own inability to be objective, but people—especially nitpicky academics—are more prone to take away credit than give it. As Osman crosses the words 'the West' over twenty times, and erases a complete double whammy of a sentence involving a rape analogy and de Man, Tom, Dick, and Mary pops his head in the door.

"Oh, sorry, didn't expect to see you here. Didn't expect to see anyone here, actually."

"Hey Tom. Pascal just wanted me to proofread an essay of his and present it."

"Does the Chair know?"

What's it to him?

"Yes. She gave me the key to go through his room."

"Must be hard," says Tom, but Dick doesn't have the time to add "That's what the Other said," his trademarked catchphrase.

"Yeah. He is very passionate."

"Still no reason to be detained, though."

“No not at all. Any harm that comes from academia is inflicted upon itself anyhow. Only we suffer when something like this happens. Can’t even proofread my own shit and I have to deal with this too.”

“I can read it?”

Even in the usual one-way street of favors between superiors and subordinates, having someone do too many, or important, favors for you might bite you in the ass. “I owe you one,” if it is not forgotten, is a powerful phrase, but Osman is too busy to be in control.

“Are you sure? It’s all cited anyhow, all you have to do is to see whether the footnotes are in order.”

“Of course! I’m not presenting so might as well prove useful.”

“Sorry for the bitch work.”

“Nothing more appropriate for a bitch!”

Osman also doesn’t have time for self-deprecating consolations of paid students, their unions, nor their plight.

“Thank you, Tom, Dick, and Mary,” he says, with the full name to indicate respect.

There is a man shouting outside of the library.

“No? No? Well Barnes & Noble is sure as shit not buying any of these copies, so where else am I going to go?”

A scruffy sexagenarian, a million minus one in a million a professor, is pacing in front of the glass doors, arguing with someone on the other side while waving a book, the

missing piece in an easy puzzle of a box containing n-1 amount, with some copies spilling out like spoiled treasure.

“Don’t tell me what constitutes an archive, you punk! I’ve written books on archive! It is blasphemous, atrocious, and plain *unprofessional* that you wouldn’t check in my book!”

The lecturer turns his back once in a while to speak to his growing audience in the front.

“I thought this was a library! An important library!” The best in the country you say! Bah! I probably have more books in my own house than this place!”

Desperate, he starts flinging the books at the glass gate.

“I have exactly eight thousand books at my house. Do you know how I know I have exactly eight thousand books in my house? Because they’re all copies of this book!”

Someone behind the crowd, relishing in the comfort of anonymity, shouts, “Go back to where you belong, West Coast!”

“Who said that?” The professor’s ears pick up the bad vibe like radio antennas. “Come here and say that to my face, you prick!”

“You’re the prick, you hippie!”

“No, you’re the prick, prick! And don’t ever call me a hippie!”

He points fingers at everyone, and suddenly settles on Osman, whose memory, growing and fading away at the same time, makes an association that flashes only one name:

“Osman the Onanist!”

The epithet is coming from the man who, on top of the visual shabbiness, the shrill voice, and the contextual humiliation, also reeks of cigarettes, who reaches for one when he wakes up, smokes one on the bed before he goes to sleep, and has just lit one up.

“Bill... I’m sorry, I forgot what yours was.”

“Fuuuck youuu,” says Bill with a generous smile and a hug.

Bill 'the Bastard' (the part that Osman still kicks himself for forgetting because the balance is tipped from the start now) O’ Connor may be the exception to the Canadian rule, but he thinks he has a right to be bitter. Osman’s doctoral colleague from who knows when, Bill has resorted to teaching creative writing at a state university after his policy of ‘unargumentative reasoning’, a practice in non-political, non-dialectical confrontation was deemed to be too uncontroversial. “The ranking’s really high,” he had said before he left, but the ‘State’ is the mark of Cain in the field, a coup de grace to a Midwestern town that already evokes rural depression and frat houses, even less important than Canadian universities, to which Bill had rejected going back in order to retain some slight relevancy in the United States.

Osman grabs a slice of pizza with Bill and hopes the conversation will end before the latter wants ice cream.

“Bill, was that *your* book?”

“I know, right? How fucking symbolic.”

To nobody’s surprise, Bill is actually one of the most erudite academics in the world because the only thing the misanthropic hermit would do is read. Even his furniture back in the day was just books piled on top of each other to resemble a chair, a table, or a

bed. To whatever comment about his household, Bill replied “Fuck *Moon Palace*” with a reasoning only he could have known.

Bill never knew what to do with his life, so after getting his PhD and tenure track in record time, he blossomed his term paper writing for others into a full-blown career as a collegiate ghostwriter. He had stylistic perfection but nothing to write about, so he had helped numerous academics from a manifold of fields but received a lot of credit, just not social. Five years ago, realizing his amazing unpresence and doing good for the world, he had taken a big step by coming out into the spotlight with a work of his own. He unveiled ‘unargumentative reasoning’ but the world wasn’t impressed with the real writer. Hence, his banishment, hence Osman’s surprise at Bill’s new book.

“I know it,” Bill says. “I know how to write something so eloquent you will read a treatise like it’s a page-turner. I can rewrite Lacan to teenagers for god’s sake. Just because I don’t have any unique idea doesn’t mean the rest shouldn’t matter.”

“What is this book about?”

Bill pauses.

“Ramblings,” he says. “No cohesive framework.”

With that confession, he suppresses the anger that will come back in a temper tantrum out in a cornfield.

“I would give a copy to you but I think I might just burn them all.”

Bill knows everything within and about academia. On the walk back, instead of asking the native on restaurant tips, his faraway friend takes Osman on a tour of colleagues as they say hello to faces glimpsed in a rush and immediately forgotten like

the apartment interiors seen in a subway running on an elevated platform. To Bill, every encounter carries an unsaid jab at himself.

“Heeeeeey, it’s Derek Benson from Tulane, what’s up my man?”

“Not bad, Bill, how is your tenure?”

“Not bad, not bad,” he says before sending the stranger on his way, “*Fucking Freudian. I mean, what century are we living in, right?*”

Osman would like to imagine he is exempt from the wrath of Bill, due to their old friendship, but the switch between the persona and the self is immediate and unpredictable.

“Heeeey, Georgina! *She slept with one of her students, you know? What a fucking whore.*”

“You must have a lot of hippies in this school, right, old and new? Like Jerry Standohne? ‘The Village in the 60s, man.’ Fuck off. As if they could handle the conservative society.”

“Sal-ly! *She’s an awful writer. All academics are, but she’s abysmal. If I had my way, I’d have her people shot just for that.*”

“Hey isn’t that Vincent Renzi?–

You do not fuck with Vincent Renzi.

The Clinical Professor, one of the first faces you’ll see in the university when you are too busy finding out what bars allow minors, from your first core class that everybody in the university has to take, to sitting on the stage and waiting for you when you are grabbing your diploma, teaching the same class every year, wearing the same clothes and

taking off his corduroy jacket to roll the sleeves of his white shirt at exactly twenty minutes into every class, because these newbies need their heads need to be drilled with discipline—You freshman scum, you do not fuck with Vincent Renzi.

The man who begins the lecture by trashing anything and everything around him (“You know, at Yale, they would give us three days to write twenty pages, nothing else.”), covers more than two-thousand years in a semester, starting from *The Book of J*, Euripides, Plato (“Plato is the greatest writer, philosopher, period!”), with a detour at St. Augustine’s *Confessions* to *Genealogy of Morals*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *The Communist Manifesto*, none of them given as excerpts in a coursebook like his lazy colleagues do it, all of them—too many for an incoming college student to manage—required to be bought at the bookstore (“Don’t pay for Starbucks, pay for your books!”), and ends the semester on his own note with “Nietzsche is not saying life doesn’t have a meaning. Make your own goddamn meaning.” before leaving the room to a group of silenced students—You do not fuck with Vincent Renzi.

The embodiment of ‘tough love’, crucifying you in his office hours because you did not understand the concept of ‘signifier-signified’ through his metonymic retelling of “Hey Brooklyn!” or “Hey Little Italy!”, him already figured this out long ago, a Platonic ideal in his own way, bald from his own volition, who swims five times a week on the fast lane, looking bulky but you know there’s zero percent body fat, having a beautiful female TA who may or may not be his mistress, reading *Orlando* over the summer yet having problems with the opposite sex all his life,—You do not, I repeat, do not ever, fuck with Vincent Renzi.

Vincent ‘Lil’ Vinnie’ Renzi was born in Bensonhurst, “The Little Italy of Brooklyn”, to a Catholic family of five. Public school was in shambles, so there would be nothing else to do except playing hooky and throwing ball on the streets with his best friend Robbie. The kids would stop their softball for no one except the black car pulling up in front of the Juventus Club. It had tinted windows but everybody knew it was Don Cicero in the back seat, the most feared gangster in all sixteen blocks.

The neighborhood was pious but Lil’ Vinnie learned the least in church. He didn’t believe there was an omnipotent and graceful God because then why were they having problem making ends meet and bundling together on cold December nights? No, Renzi didn’t know the correct term for it back then, but he was a Manicheist through and through. He knew that Don Cicero’s benevolence came with a side of malice to his enemies, and this was what kept the world in balance. His mother would always say “Thank the Lord first, and the Don second.”

Before he knew it, he and Robbie were running errands on behalf of an associate. Take the gift there, take the money from him, that sort of thing; nothing a couple of ‘tough guys’ like Vinnie and Robbie couldn’t handle. Vinnie was intelligent, that olive oil from their home country was better than any American old wives’ remedy. Robbie was more street-smart, Sicilian, knowing what goes where and who did what. Together, they were jokingly called the dynamic duo but taken seriously in person. *The Godfather II* had just come out so the shop owners would treat them differently, giving an extra half a pound on the fresh catch from Sheepshead Bay or tossing them an apple on their way to work.

Their cries of joy drowning their mothers' lament, Vinnie and Robbie were made associates at fifteen. Shakedown was their forte. The bosses would ask them to throw a rock at a store window, quick and easy, but Vinnie would have too much fun drawing illogical circles around the confused shop owner while Robbie taunted him. Not only verbal intimidation was less expensive but also it was more efficient and overall, legal.

Don Cicero wanted to throw a block party for Vinnie and Robbie's 16th birthday, their introduction to adulthood, following an introduction to manhood by being made into soldiers. But Vinnie had doubts. Two guys of their own were killed a week ago in a cowardly car shooting them eggplants over at Flatbush called a drive-by. The situation would mean trouble for everyone if the killers weren't found. Robbie, on the other hand, was thrilled for a full-blown war like they have seen in the movies. Vinnie tried to talk him out of it—Robbie's grades weren't as good as Vinnie's but they would do to get him out of the city—but he wouldn't pay attention. Finally, a day before his birthday, Vinnie skipped town. Rumor was that he had stayed with his aunt in Long Island City until the acceptance letter came from Yale.

This was the story that nobody knew, but some years ago, when Vincent Renzi gave a notification to the curriculum board that he may not be back for the winter semester, everybody realized that this was a special occasion. He had never skipped a class for anything before.

With the mob now spreading to the other areas of South Brooklyn, business around the barren Coney Island in the freezing winter (“‘Seabreeze Avenue’, gimme a fuckin’ break.”) had increased under Robbie, who was very close to being made capo after making some lucrative deals with the Russian mafia down at Brighton Beach. He

had waited for this moment all his life, and had asked Vinnie to celebrate with him. Vinnie had said no at first, he couldn't show his face after being on the lam. Robbie insisted, saying that he had to be there.

Vinnie was going to be there. Just not for the expected reasons.

A gunshot to the head in an abandoned building doesn't explain much. Still, Vinnie wasn't going to pursue a trail and ask questions first. Robbie's murderer wasn't the only guilty one; it was the entire superstructure and birds of prey it engendered, who would even kill a made man if it meant advancing in this line of work. If 'will to power' was what they wanted, they would get will to power.

He knew this day might have come so Renzi grabbed his Colt M1911 from his office drawer and made his way to his childhood neighborhood. The face he saw on the cab's window showed a clean-shaven professional in a scholar's field, who would hurl constructive insults at students but wouldn't hurt a fly. But he wasn't going for understanding now. In Bensonhurst, he wasn't an academic. He was Lil' Vinnie, the prodigal son, the associate with one last job to do.

He started with Mario the butcher, his shop, definitely a front, tucked away on Avenue U amongst Puerto Rican rotisserie chicken and new Jamacian blood. Under a chipped banner the store now looked more decrepit than nostalgic, older than the Rite Aid next door with a logo still stuck in thirty years ago.

"Hey, it's Lil' Vinnie!" Mario the butcher shouted.

"Hello Mario. Who killed Robbie?"

When Mario showed hesitation, Vinnie used his old tactics. Just like in class, Vincent Renzi had no time for bullshit.

“I swear, I swear I don’t know! You can ask Joey, you remember Joey?”

Vinnie remembered Joey alright. Joey, the upperclassman whose idea of fun was jacking off into others’ coats and torturing stray cats for fun behind the school gym as a precursor to his bipedal subjects. The human garbage, a waste of a brain. Nobody could report him, not even the teachers, because his father was very ardent in PTA meetings, and a capo in the organization.

Joey thought his covenant with the family would protect him. Vinnie instead smacked him around with *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha*, 2416 pages with 8pt font.

“This ain’t no Gideon’s, Joey. This is my bible”

“But but but aren’t you supposed to be Catholic?”

A whack sent Robbie’s teeth flying.

“I lapsed.”

Joey gave a name and gave up the ghost. Vinnie wasn’t going to leave tracks in this spring-cleaning. The temptation to do this civilly had crossed his mind but he had to wave it away because in this rampage he was one with his Manicheist God, filling himself with it and steamrolling whatever is on the way. No theoretical approach, nothing from the thousands of pages he had read, could be applied to his plight. For the first time in his adult life, Vinnie wasn’t thinking critically. He was thinking with his gun, the only friend left for this knight of faith.

Joey’s name gave a name, who in turn gave an address, another abandoned building, which turned out to be and should have been predicted, an ambush at an empty lounge. “This is a test,” Vinnie would repeat to himself, shooting behind from a sideways

table, “this is just a trial.” After killing two men with miraculous accuracy, Vinnie gouged the eyes out of the last thug and left the blind man to find his own way home. “Motherfucker!” echoed the bare walls of the decaying structure, the reference lost to many but one.

Bensonhurst had turned into Sodom within a week and it didn’t look like it was going to end any time soon. Don Cicero called Vinnie to his office to talk with a note found in his cheap motel room.

“Enough bloodshed,” the note had said.

Don Cicero lived on the top floor of the oldest brownstone in the area. Twenty years later from what Vinnie remembered, ten years after his retirement, he didn’t look scary at all. The right side of his face was paralyzed and he would slur sometimes. Wearing his tailored suit, he looked like a ventriloquist’s dummy.

“Vinnie, Vinnie, Vinnie... Just as I think I’m done with my past,” he coughed. “I hand over the business to the new Boss, and look who shows up!”

“Don Cicero, I mean no disrespect—”

“Ha! He means no disrespect! He kills anyone he encounters and he means no disrespect!”

“I just want to know who killed Robbie.”

“A thug killed Robbie. You wanna go and find him? Thugs are... how you say in your yu-ni-ver-sity, Lil’ Vinnie—a concept. You can’t blame one of them.”

“I know. It’s the system.”

Don Cicero didn’t have time for this cerebral bullshit.

“You wanna know who killed Robbie?” The answer came in a mixture of stutter and laughter. “We all decided to kill him. The organization did. He was talking too much with the Russians. We warned him once or twice—”

Vinnie still doesn't remember what happened next, except that the lacuna ended with a vision of Don Cicero petrified and shaking in fear. Vinnie was trembling as well. From the blood trail, he could construct the narrative that he reached for the gun in his inside pocket while Don Cicero was still talking, shot the two guards through the back of his jacket, then the two who came from downstairs, and came back to his senses.

He wouldn't waste a bullet on this crumbling monument. With a carver stolen from Mario the butcher and a lesson learned from Vito Corleone, he gave Cicero the same ending as Ciccio.

There weren't any gangsters, let alone residents, out from 64th to 85th when Vinnie stepped out, his white shirt now soaked in blood. He grabbed a new one from a clothesline that reminded him of peaceful Tibetan lung ta flags. The neighborhood (Or was it Renzi?) had certainly changed.

He couldn't go back home for a while, so he stayed with his TA. “Oh my god, Professor Renzi, what happened to you?” she asked many times as he washed himself, and if the rumors weren't true until now, they were fulfilled when she kissed him as she caressed his scars, and they made love in the blinding, divine light of dawn.

Next morning he was in the first class of the semester at 11 am sharp. He gave the same speech, but without taking his jacket off, for he still had the Colt tucked behind. After the class, a teacher's pet, who hadn't outgrown high school, asked him inane questions.

He put the Colt where it belonged, the lowest drawer on his office. He looked at his face in the department's restroom. Same intimidating Vincent Renzi, his friends would joke, but he saw the small changes belonging to Lil' Vinnie.

The news was quick to portray the events as a bloodbath resulting from a turf war where an omnipresent violence was inflicted on everyone involved and without a purpose. Maybe they were right. Maybe they weren't. It was too late to think about it now. Whatever it was, the Bensonhurst Mafia would be in hiding for a while. Vinnie didn't know where the new Boss was, nor where the other capos were, but he knew he gave them a message:

You do not fuck with Vincent Renzi.

"Eh, Renzi seems busy," says Bill. "Oh shit, it's Derek again, you know the second time it's a coincidence and on the third time I gotta kill you? Yeah, man, carry on, carry on..."

Sometimes, someone will bust Bill's balls in the same way he pretends to do to other people, and Bill's eyes would freeze onto his enemy's face until they would leave from discomfort.

"Boris, you Russian bear, how are you? *Probably still jacking off to paternal authority, fucking fascist.*"

"That's not what the end of days mean, you stupid fucking cunt!" Bill screams at an old Chinese woman giving out pamphlets on why Halloween is related to the apocalypse.

Bill tips 10%, gives a penny to a homeless person, laments the capitalist takeover within the world's most capitalist city, shouts at a woman walking too slow, screams at another one for stopping to check her phone, disses technology, don't get him even started on kids these days, because Bill can see whether you live in the big city or in the middle of nowhere, you're at fault.

“Shut the fuck up!”

“You shut the fuck up!”

This can go on all day, this does go all day, until Osman is tired of the insults, barbs, disagreements, loudness, everything Bill. He uses Pascal's paper as an excuse to leave.

“Oh, ok Osman, sure. Nice to see you too.”

Looking deep into the bleak future, Bill can become any number of clichés: The old man on the porch with a shotgun on his lap, the curmudgeon scholar who derives respect out of fear, the crazy local who mutters obscenities whether to passersby or to himself, nobody knows, but for now he just looks sad to be losing a witness for his tirades. It's nobody's fault that Bill is angry at the world, and maybe it is not his as well. He just seems to hate the situation he is in, and that's not going to change when you're tenured. Stagnant, he takes it out on any kind of progress or sign of life, hoping that through engaging with them, he might also feel sentient.

Due to the sad, but encouraging, fact that every visitor to The Conference is also a participant, the turnout for presentations are low, save for the afternoons where the big shots perform to audience members spilling out from the auditoriums, stampeding over

each other to grab the empty water bottle from where an eminent philosopher had just been, competing with others, like sperm, for a home that can accommodate a lot but not all.

“She drinks Evian!”

“See if there are any drops left!”

Janet’s talk is relegated to a sixth floor classroom of the common building where big lectures’ corollary recitations take place. In the adjacent room there is just a name—Derin Emre University—and a person in front:

“Hey, hey want to listen to my talk?”

“Sure,” Osman lies, “but I’m attending one in the next room.”

“It’s okay. I’m here all week.”

“You mean the university is?”

“No, I *am* the university.”

“They allow you to do that?”

“Not really. It’s mostly symbolic. Like being a legal entity, but compartmentalized. All through the year I do research papers on different fields, my departments so to speak, and then I present it.”

“Every year?”

“Every year.”

“Forever?”

“I can only hope so.”

Osman says he would like to check it out, but would rather want a brochure just to be sure, which Derin Emre readily procures. The departments of his university include

Financial Calligraphy, English as Language, Botanical Sociology, Space Biology and countless other amalgamations, almost German in their audacity and length.

“Are you a joke?” Osman says, without intending it to be sarcastic, but it misses the mark.

“No, I’m not. If the names sound silly to you, maybe it is because you cannot appreciate a self-taught individual. Go to your Economics, Literature, and Physics departments and be complacent in the boundaries set six hundred years ago. What’s your field anyway?”

“Comparative Literature.”

Derin bursts out laughing, though maybe he would have showed the same deliberate reaction to whatever would have come out of Osman’s mouth.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he says, “I’m sorry, but you’re the joke.”

She is happy, not relieved, when she is done, and that’s what counts. In the room are Osman and Steve—very cordial but also very careful not to go to the restroom at the same time—along with the two toddlers, who have been subjected to what is jibber jabber to them, and a bit to Osman too, but love means supporting someone even when you don’t know what they are talking about.

“Thank you for coming, Osman,” she says mid-hug over Steve’s shoulder.

“Of course, now you’ll have to come to mine.”

“Bee-heyyyv-euurissmm.”

“Yes, Michael, mama is a behavioral psychologist. Now, can you say ‘conditioning’?”

“Con-dijjnn.”

Even bystanders aww. Who wouldn't?

They are walking along the park. Even the little kids are starting to block out the guy who wants your stories, the pianist who has existential doubts every night because the crowd will only tip him if he plays that familiar tune from *Amelie* again, Tarot by Kyle, the racist black guys who jump over some people after rallying up a paying crowd, the old man with the sunglasses who looks like Loudon Wainwright III but probably actually crazy because he sings the same nostalgic 60s hits with his friends from other corners of the park.

“I think the kids are hungry so we are going to go to Five Guys. Want to join?”

“No thank you, I would feel like a... fifth wheel. But Five Guys? Whatever happened to organic?”

“It's a celebratory day.”

“You've become a suburban mom.”

“Actually,” Janet says and the twist has already happened, the knife is in, “we were thinking of Long Island—”

“No, no, no,” Osman is thinking, but probably murmuring as well.

“The city is no place to raise kids, not even where we live right now. Metropolitan people are infantile enough.”

“And a suburb is the answer? Don't you remember all those people we made fun of on the weekends?”

“Yes, but—”

“How you said that the city feels tainted because LIRR has infiltrated the system?”

“Where else can we live, in the woods?”

“Don’t go.”

“What.”

“Don’t go.”

“Osman—”

“Please, you know it’s the right thing to do.”

“No it’s not. Janet, they are trying to kick me out of the city I don’t know why and you are the only person I can trust.”

“What has that got to do with me—”

Psychological drives can explain what Osman did next, but so can Hollywood movies. An urge, not repressed before but newly born out of desperation picks Osman up like a rag doll and swings him at Janet.

“Osman, get off me!”

“Forget the children, forget Steve, I want you! I love you! Just don’t go!”

“Osman what is wrong with you?”

“It’s wrong but it feels so right!”

A shriek and a push have Osman stumbling onto a wall. Steve and the kids were out of earshot, walking farther away for Steve to show that he is also comfortable, but now, with the physical declaration, they are not the only spectators in the drama. Only after feeling the shame emanating from the gaze of others, but more from that cliché line, Osman realizes that what he did was, in fact, wrong. There is nothing to do to save face

and the pedestrians are already losing interest. Janet is half a block away, walking with her family.

“Great talk, though! Your presentation, I mean! Not... not this.”

Tom, Dick, and Mary is turning the lights out at the department.

“Hey, Tom, do you have my essay?”

“Hey, Osman, my man, how are you?”

“Tom? Essay?”

“Yeah, well, I can’t talk right now because I have to go present my paper.”

“I did not know that you were—” The answer comes on its own. “You stole my paper, didn’t you.”

“I sure did!”

Osman lunges where the words end, bringing fists into a battle of words, but Tom, Dick, and Mary is so much more agile, not to mention younger, than him. Osman soldiers on, throwing empty punches, while the TA steps back a long hallway.

“I know what you’re thinking Osman: Dipshit TA, slimy bastard, finds me in a weak moment to help and then steals my work. Isn’t it usually the other way around, you are thinking, that I should be working my ass off and you ‘incorporating’ my entire essay in your book, without even an acknowledgement. But no, I am not who you think I am right now. This is not a predictable story, even if I am probably influenced by an archetype. This is not a textbook case of plagiarism. If it were, you could show your emails, your work, and I’d be fired.

“No, Osman, the department is backing me in this as well. You see, I *stole* your essay that you have ‘stolen’ from so many different sources. One essay, one citation. Yours was a great idea, don’t get me wrong, but what if you’d steal *that* essay, as a whole? Now I am making a statement on top of your statement. It’s like art, Osman, I feel like we’re artists in a dialogue.”

“Fuck you,” Osman says, too tired to believe in his conviction.

“Sure, but also, *thank* you? For, you know, the world doesn’t revolve around you and in the end it’s the progress that matters, right? Not the ego. Think of us as collaborators, which doesn’t mean that we won’t have... creative difficulties, but be glad Osman, for we have advanced the world of academia today.”

And with that, he’s off, or Osman let him get away, whatever it is he beat himself up for nothing. The catching of breath gets interrupted by a previously unnoticed group of loud people yelling over each other outside across the street and under a marquee that writes “ZHANG!”. Bouncers are patting the men down and giving backstage bracelets to hot girls. “One by one,” the doorman is shouting, “one by one. Let’s all be civil about this.”

“relational translatability in post-colonial discursive grammar of the Indo-Caribbean immigrants of China’s Cultural Revolution, the scope of Orientalism’s linguistics, verb, noun, pronoun, syntax, identification, and its tropes in poetic diegesis, polysemy, aphorisms, homiletics, with dialogical comparisons to noir literature, with emphasis on textual lighting, ethical ambivalence, biblical allusions excluding Job and

Joseph, counterparts, foils, authors, non-authors, metafictional narratives all under the dome of Goethe's Weltliteratur and theo-logo-rhetoric symptomology”

Osman knows that whatever's usually presented at The Conference is forgotten the next day, even by the people who make a big deal out of getting their hands onto the listings firsthand, some going too far and actually taking the time to critique the papers to the author's dismay. He wants to go to his designated stand and logorrhea all over the place, spewing the smelliest bullshit right at his audience's face, have them applaud, even if faintly, and then, like a villain who just can't wait for his plan to be fully executed before he gives a great speech, tell everyone that he thought about all this ten minutes ago, that it was all nonsense, not even carefully crafted nonsense like Alan Sokal's 'hoax', nor like his stolen stolen essay, but pure stream of consciousness, grade-A, 100% bullshit. The real damage to his career is done anyhow, and Osman would like to let it loose, if only for a while.

Yet, despite all the mental self-encouragement, Osman cannot bring himself to risk his future. It is not that what he has written isn't hogwash, or that his cause isn't noble enough, but rather how the others will see it, whether he will get any supporters. For what? For a crusade against education? Is he a... conservative? Does he hate moving forward? Whatever action he takes and whatever the results are, they will all be shrouded in resentment towards academia. He will be branded as an outsider, even worse, a joker, or just a nobody throwing tiny stones at a behemoth. After really sending him off to the lousiest study abroad center, in Mali probably, they'll say, if they take the time to waste any energy on the 'Johnson affair', that what he did was simply wrong, he wasn't

‘working from within’ or didn’t consider ‘the negation of the negation’, what childish behavior in the world of adults.

Defeated by his own logic, he chooses the benign and the foolproof option because his options are extremely limited, like Pascal’s days in prison.

He goes to the room he will present in, where, to his surprise, Janet is amongst the handful of spectators, along with the Chair. Any other person is probably a die-hard fan of the department. They don’t have a face, they are only registered as people stuffing the air while tapping their feet in urgency because they have more talks to be at.

Osman, at the dais, coughs to get attention, but there is no water bottle next to him to seek momentary solace.

“Today, I have relinquished my privilege to present something of my own, because I think there are others that need to be heard. Our friend Pascal Milongo, who is currently in a ‘Department of Correction’, has asked me to read his most recent paper. It is not much, it is not the final draft, but a voice is a voice.”

The uplifting introduction with spiky language directed towards ‘the man’ (always a man) who cuts the funding to education every year garners some support in the room. When he’s done emitting Pascal, Osman, or the symbol of academic cause, receives a bigger applause than if he had presented his own paper.

The Chair is the first one to shake his hand.

“You did great, Osman.”

“Yeah, right. Did you know about all of this?”

“Listen, I’m very sorry about what transpired between you and Tom, Dick, and Mary. I would have loved to be the villain in your story for a clear-cut good versus bad,

but I have got nothing to do with it. When we learned what had happened it was impossible to intervene. Imagine the consequences if the others had found out, on top of what we are dealing with right now. This will be handled correctly,” she continues with her dummy pronouns, “and your paper will be published, don’t worry.”

“But so will his?”

“Of course. Osman, As much as your situation is a sad one, what Tom, Dick, and Mary did is something revolutionary. Think of it as a silver lining for the world.” Realizing that Osman isn’t going to reply, she adds, “I’m sure we can think of some benefits for next semester.”

“I don’t want to leave the city,” he would like to say, but he how can he when he has assumed Pascal’s position just before?

“Sure,” he says and pretends to be busy with packing his papers. Pascal’s papers.

Before leaving the room, an old man who had asked a question, really a comment, also congratulates Osman on the paper with a handshake. “I’m sorry, my hands are clammy, but not because I’m nervous. They’re just clammy.”

Janet, approaching from the blurry peripheral vision, wraps her arm around him.

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care. It’s just bullshit. My department is bullshit. My line of work is bullshit.”

“Oh stop being a cry-baby.”

“It is, though.”

“Of course it is, but also what you both did are very important for, how do you guys say it?, epistemological anarchism. You cannot toss everything away because of a few sour incidents.”

When they first started dating, and Osman had gotten frustrated with one of his peers because he was a common idealist, he had laid his head on Janet’s bosom and Janet in turn had very slowly, even mechanically, like a Japanese fortune cat’s paw, patted Osman’s head a couple of times. Maybe it wasn’t the gentlest way to show affection, but the message was delivered as clear as possible, and Osman had loved Janet for that. Osman doesn’t remember this specific memory, so instead, to what he will cloud it as an act of strong nihilism, i.e. ‘destructively not giving a shit’, which is actually, even now, easily revealed to be another desperate attempt at selfish love fueled by promises of happiness drawn from advertisements, movies, Plato, he finds himself trying to grab Janet’s face and pull it closer to his with an ambiguous intention to kiss. Janet, standing, in a more advantageous position, gets away from Osman’s lock by kicking his shin.

“Goddamnit Osman, I knew this would happen!”

“So why did you come here then?”

“To support you because you are going through a tough time.”

“I wish I knew how to quit you.”

“Are you seriously quoting *Brokeback Mountain* right now?”

“Janet, I’m just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to love him.”

“Jesus Christ, I thought you’d be more mature than this. Maybe you’re still in shock. Osman, you don’t want me.”

“How do you know?”

“You don’t have to be a psychiatrist to know it. Whatever is going in your head I don’t know, but I’m not good for you. Call me when you come to your senses, and maybe... we’ll get coffee or something.”

Every year, at the end of The Conference, the Chair of the hosting Comparative Literature department gives a speech:

“So, to conclude,” she starts and slaps her head, “I’m sorry, Descartes have mixed up.”

Since the content of the closing lecture is going to be the same rousing speech if there are no unconventional circumstances, and the worn audience is just waiting for it to end, the Chairs every year have a bet on the most puns one can fill a closing address with while improvising it all. If the Chair can exceed the previous year’s numbers, s/he wins the pot, along with the vig for the host. If not, the money is left for the next year and the next contender. The betting pool is unknown to anyone else who hasn’t been a chair. This time the email exchange had to be done through a secure portal because the reward was around several thousand dollars after being unclaimed for several years.

“It is with great *jouissance* I’m speaking to you. Our *Hume*-ble colleagues, our friends. Friends we play games with, we be *Cam(us)* closer, more understanding of each other. But in the game of Truth or *Derrida*, I have always chosen the *Dare-rida*. Dare to be derelict, to lick the dire desolate landscape and *Mach-ia-veilled* meaning.” This last one doesn’t go so well. “Not to be *Bent(ham)* to the demands of Others, but instead *Flau(bert)* with the communal wave, waving ‘Hi’, going high, but also digging deep, so to speak a *Hei-digger*, these heralds of *Heraclitus*, *Burroughsing* [borrow? browse?]

countless books to find what we want, an ancient manuscript or a bestseller in a book *Schop(enhauer)*, we stride on like the unnamable, going on, must be going on, *Will* [James? Shakespeare?] go on, ugly as the Holocaust or as beautiful look at, literally *Beauvoir*, speaking to not have the silence of *Cricket*s, ain't no *Montaigne* high enough for us, us, us, us," she gets stuck until the words force themselves out, triumphantly roaring, "us and them, them who have themes, who have times, The Times they are a'changin', we have to *Chekov*, check them as much as ourselves, not the relation between, but the relation itself, the *realation*, when those *Kants* tell us that we *Kant*, before it takes its *Tol(stoy)*, but the toll for today comes to *Maorow*, *Tomorrow Never Dies* is the *Bond* between what I will be saying before, what I was saying now, and what I've said tomorrow, to *Ma-*" repeating a pun, a grave offense, "to make history," smoothly averted, "written in *Sand* as we *trace* the beach, like a beyatch, a bitch, returning to a *Home(r)* she never had, *Honoré*-ing the past but building our own, without an owner's manual but with a manual shift, shifting *Geres*, sans acting like a *Coc(teau)*, but always willing to jump onto a cactus, because this crown of thorns is what we call... Comparative Literature!"

The room erupts with a standing ovation, "Ahoohoo ahoohoo!"s rising from the other Chairs. Osman—who cares about Osman at this moment when the bet might be won? They were going to mention that they were giving him a plaque (hastily made at an exorbitant rate by the engraver around the corner that usually sells tourist memorabilia) thanking him for selflessly lending his voice for freedom. Another plaque, made for Pascal, was put in a small cardboard and shipped to Rikers Island, though everybody knew it wouldn't pass through the security.

Stepping back after her speech, the Chair disappears behind red curtains with some aides. No doubt in the times when people are having fun, the organizing committee need to be on their feet at most, especially when there's a potential conspiracy against the department. A political science professor once had drunk too much at a gathering and had told everyone about how conspiracies are giving way too much credit to the perpetrators' intelligence, and most of the Top Secret files actually contained detailed reports of fuck-ups across the world and how to cover one's ass, leading to another Top Secret dossier of fuck-ups and possible solutions in a never-ending difference of ineptitude.

All this happens behind the stage while the rest don't care. A flood of academics fills the streets, some drinking whiskey from paper bags, a 'lively' professor being restrained after attempting to throw a trash can at a copy center, chanting "Fuck the students!" amongst wolf whistles, screams, squawks, and other animal noises. They rekindle extinguished fires in abandoned buildings to symbolize the decline of the Western civilization. Residents of the neighborhood are shutting their windows tight and locking their doors. It's that night of the year again.

A bar has opened across where the construction site had been. The construction is still continuing on the upper floors but apparently the developers wanted to cash in quick and gave the lease to an establishment that would accept the conditions of not having a restroom for several months. Still, the place is packed. The space had been loud during the day and quiet during the night, and suddenly it is the opposite. With "woooo"s "fucking"s, let alone the people outside smoking, it's an orchestra of conversational resonance. There is a continuous base hum from whatever was already spoken inside, but

new customers join the constructive interference with their own riffs, going back and forth but mostly forth, amplifying their volume to be heard as they also amplify the total volume of the aural avalanche.

“Shut up, you little girl! Go back inside!”

“You don’t tell me what to do!”

“There are people sleeping in these buildings, go away!”

Mehdi has his head out of the window, a small opening of freedom he can allow himself, which is not very effective in America’s verbal warfare. He thinks he has home advantage, that if he yells long enough people will get tired and go away, but he underestimates the lengths people will go just to piss people off, mostly because they have got nothing better to do. He lost from the beginning when he exposed himself to the world with all his rage and started a useless exchange. Through exhausting circuitous logic, Osman entertains the idea that maybe Mehdi takes pleasure from these benign shouting games. By engaging with someone so blasphemous, he gets a taste of the forbidden for himself.

Pebbles from the bar’s smokers’ pole knock on Osman’s window. “You little shits!” Mehdi grabs Osman’s baseball bat—kept in the house less for sports, more for security, all for fun—but Osman, shortstop at PE, way back when, now fielding the door, finds out he still has good reflexes when he raises his arms to block Mehdi’s body.

“Mehdi, stop, you’re only making it worse.”

“I’m just going to scare them away.”

“Mehdi.”

“But they have to be taught a lesson, Osman, this is not how a civilized country works!”

“They will call the cops the second you step foot on the street. Do you want to be deported?”

Mehdi’s anticapitalist tendencies can only go so far with the threat of conceding his morning bagels in this vacation. His zeal dies down, so does the crackle on the window. The baseball bat, still rigid but feeling slack, rolls under the couch.

“You can’t tell people what to do, Mehdi,” Osman says affectionately to this uninformed outsider. “This is not what America is about.”

“I know,” he says, “the customs and practices are different. I should be more understanding. Oooooohaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa,” he says, an expression that hasn’t found much acceptance anywhere else but the Mediterranean countries where people don’t need to use too many words to show they are experiencing something, usually an epiphany, “I have just realized how terrible I was acting.”

Osman, ears ringing from the thick wailing, is glad that his ‘friend’ (once a friend [who is on your wavelength], always a friend) is sharing his outlook.

“I have been acting exactly like America!”

“Well...”

“Poking my nose where it doesn’t belong, telling people how to live without understanding their culture, being violent, aggressive,” he turns to Osman, and Osman doesn’t know whether Mehdi just uttered this because he knew he was taking it too far, or he literally just had a sudden, levelheaded turn, and says, “but the world really is messed

up, and the world asks for help, so America needs to be there to help. They have responsibility, and they are also held responsible. It's... it's messed up."

"Yeah, true. But," Osman says, testing the water and hoping not to have Mehdi's chilled core simmer again, "you don't have a problem with 'having responsibility' though? Because that can still get you worked up."

Mehdi, with a winning smile borrowed from the more southern parts of Africa, is shaking his head.

"No, I'm fine. I've figured myself out, so I'm fine for another week I think. Yeah... yeah..."

With his troubles gone, at least dissipated through accepting that he is a tourist, Mehdi stops the small talk as well. Once in a while, he would nod and repeat the comforting "yeah", and the rest of the silence is filled with waves of cars swooshing over the avenue with banging music, Dopplering in and out, giving their thoughts something to attach themselves to.

October 31

Professor John Wolters took a sabbatical last year to critique the famous Visiting Professor Slavoj Zizek's unique view on Lacan. The book's supposed publisher's bailed out after Zizek hesitated about renewing his contract for next fall. As the reviews define him, Slavoj Zizek is "the maverick vanguard of the times", "a hotshot superstar", "a(n)un)true philosopher," and absolutely indispensable to all academia, especially to his five institutions he drops by regularly, including the European Graduate School.

Professor Wolters is throwing a Halloween party to catch up. His way of dealing with it is in one, overwhelming swipe of a night, and for the rest of the semester he doesn't have to try so hard. Smiling, he casually drops the phrase "Slavoj would say he is the knight of faith tonight." in two different occasions to show that he's fine with it.

He would have said "übermensch" but he is Nietzsche tonight. Young academics are ancient philosophers as old colleagues break out of their departments, some return to Freud year after year, someone even being someone from TV, but no superheroes this year. There is a PhD candidate wearing scrubs. An unknown is David Foster Wallace and it's just so wrong.

Wine swirls into cups as people swirl from one to another, but wherever he is he can hear someone talking about the big Other in the room. "This is like our own symposium," Wolters ends the fifteen-minute discussion on modern tragedy with some people he has cornered in the kitchen. The party is slowing down. Someone getting his coat from the living room says, "Yeah, EGC looks like a cool place from what I've heard."

Resolute, Professor John Wolters enters the living room and literally pulls out a gun. He cocks the gun and presses it against his temple: "If anyone else says the word Zizek again," he says, "I will seriously fucking shoot myself!" There is an anxious silence until Derrida remarks, "That's so Zizek!"

The bullet spatters some of the brain onto evil Jesus, who says "Jesus," apathetic, unintentionally not breaking his ironic façade, and gets out of the front door, followed by the rest of the party people taking the leftover wine bottles.

Socrates asks Marx:

“You want to get some ramen?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

November 20

“Listen.

“How many years has it been since we have started working on my mind I don’t know—

“Listen. Don’t talk.

“I’ve been thinking a lot now. No talking, just thinking. Think, think, think.

Thinking day and night, about this and that, him and her, to and fro, everything and nothing. And I can’t help it. I look at everyone’s faces when I’m walking down the street. I look at their clothes, their faces, their postures, who they’re with, what they are doing, saying, not saying. I look at their style, their cap, their haircut, their glasses, their necklace, their nails, their shoes, ‘You can tell a lot about someone by looking at someone’s shoes,’ they say but you have to see the whole package as one and you also have to look at every single thing separately to see how they—the outfit, that is—make up more than the whole. What they project is as important as who they really are. But what they are, essentially, is this body they have been given, by god, by their parents, a scar left by an accident, a well-built body on purpose, also counts, the minutest detail counts as much as the flashiest accessory. Everything counts.

“But you already know that. Don’t talk.

“The city is terrible for me right now. Here you can’t enjoy soaking in the phenomena because all they do is give. Here they give it to you without asking you for it. Give, give, give. For 24 hours. Every day of the week. Everywhere from the biggest event to the smallest gathering inside a studio. Something is always going on, you know that, and you can’t appreciate that fact because they want you to know that they are going on as well, but this too, so is this, and this and this... Different colors for different things. Different people that want you to know they exist. The naked cowboy, the crazy bearded guy, ‘Free Hugs’— And that’s only the surface. They shout their mission out loud. But listen: Regular people, going to work on the subway, in their subtlest touches, make a statement. Anyone and everything.

“I guess the best way to is just go with the flow. Keep your head down. Do your own thing. Let it wash over you. Choose then. But I can’t. I turn my head to everything that wants me to absorb them—even to the ones that don’t—so much that my neck hurts.

“All those colors... I think about advertisements. The color, the shape, the curve, kerning, spacing, font, size, what celebrity is endorsing it, why there, why that subway stop. Everything is an ad if you desire the knowledge. Everything tries to show you something about itself. The restaurant you go to, their name is there to let you know *something*. The dish, where they get that meat from, the service, their waitresses, how often do they fill your water glass; they decide that. They want you to *know*.

“I look down at the pavement to see what kind of trash there is, even though in the end it is only what people decide to leave on the ground. Sometimes you can find something out of the ordinary. It shows how the personality of a whole, of one, seeps through their trash. I look at the trash bin that holds the garbage, why is it green, why is it

shaped like that, why the bars at the side that stick to the side, probably for the garbage men to pick it up easily, see?, everything has a point. I look at the top of the buildings, why that statue, why that gargoyle on that cornice, why that design, why that window shape, who lives in there, why do they live in there. How many floors, how many apartments, but it all boils down to ‘Why?’

“Insides as well. The interiors of a house. They show even more. Why does someone have a print of this painter instead of a that? Why do they put it on that side of the wall? Why would they choose that furniture, as opposed to a different one, with green upholstery? From where their bed is at in their rooms, the color of the toothbrush, the shampoo they use... The L-shaped couch. Why do they sit on that side?

“I can’t help it. I need to understand. And you definitely can understand what I’m talking about. There is an endpoint. You must know it, you’re a therapist. There’s always an answer. How many minutes do we have left?

“Listen.

“Of course the houses are for survival, and why they live in it is a decision on a whim: in this world, in nature, but in the world we have created as well, by people and for people. Of course that advertisement is there because it is targeted for a demographic that lives in that neighborhood that became the way it is after countless changes, precipitated by various things.

“And for personal choices? It’s just that people are spontaneous. They really are. Aesthetics. Different strokes. Subjectivity. But your job has you question that, and you should, because they just don’t know that spontaneity is the result of a chain reaction that didn’t only start with their day. It started with what has happened in the past, their

childhood, what they have absorbed. But listen. It goes deeper. Their childhood is shaped by the times. And times before. You can tie everything back to a point of reason, but the question ‘Why?’ looms above. Always. Always have and always will be.

“So I look for answers. I need to. I need to know. And sometimes it is easy. It is easy if it is scientific. Everything has a deeper layer, yes. That chair you’re sitting on right now requires scientific information, years to cultivate, to make it in the end simple enough for you to simply regard it as a chair. But you are just one entity that takes everything for granted. Everything goes through a meticulous process to be here, now. It’s fascinating.

“Nature is fascinating. They don’t teach you anything in high school. Once they build a concept they tear it down again in the next level. It goes deeper. Way deeper. Biology, geography, math... There are academics working on it. They will continue working on it.

“But science is easy. Science gives you the answer to ‘Why?’ You can read about woodworking, how textiles are made, why they are so detailed. Just sit next to someone at a bar and they will explain all the intricacies about their job to you in a second.

“Nature is easy. If there is not a concrete answer, you can always say that it is a coincidence. A mutation. Just the way it is. Billions of years in the making.

“But spontaneity is not the same as coincidence. Once you have the capability to make a decision, then the possibilities are endless. You know that. But you deal with something mercurial, it encompasses everything. A human does. No, a person does. A person is the present. A person is all the reality of the past and all the potential of the

future. One person contains that. Can you imagine what would happen if two would come together? Or more? Of course you can, you're living it right now.

“Let's start small. Let's take one person. Let's think about my most immediate surroundings. The interactions, from the most ordinary to the most sincere. The person who chooses that word over that, who hides something from me, who is willing to bear it all, what they know about themselves and about the world. How they show it. How they smile. How they cry. How they react. Why that... Just like that. Just like you have the smallest upper lip curl to imply that you understand me and we share this bond right now, but why that reaction? Why do you understand me? Why is it important to share this moment?

“Let's think about us. Do you? Don't talk. Just think. Because I think about this. Before I come here and I leave here, I have a thousand scenarios in my mind. I can say anything and that can lead to something different. But not today. Today, you don't talk, you don't get to shape anything. You listen to me, only me, to understand me as pure me. Not what I have hidden from you in other visits, what I omit, and what I want to talk about. This is me, in front of you, telling that I am everything. Insignificant because of the universe, of eight billion people and counting, but I'm the cumulative endpoint. So are you, but I cannot handle your life outside of this office because right now you are working, working keeps us busy, detached, another ideal, something to do, as you are supposed to act as my unconscious I look at myself, holding a mirror to the mirror.

“If I'm everything, and I think about everything, then I think about me. It works like introduction to logic. I think about my aura, that includes me, my friends, whom I'm interacting with, who is interacting with me. Why am I friends with that person? Why do

I say that at a party? Do I want that person to like me, or am I simply giving them an idea of who I am, saying 'Take it or leave it.' Why do I watch that movie instead of the other one? Does my upbringing have anything to do with this? Does that have anything to do with my life right now? And don't tell me that it does, or doesn't, because we both know that every option is true. My preferences are an accumulation of my own life, which includes other people's lives, also an accumulation, and this is not something like you're saying that I'm a child of the 70s, no, this is in a very essential way of how someone, by themselves, their own planet, are brought up, to be. And then they affect others.

"Others are everyone. I, one way or another, by purchasing, or even by emotionally feeling, affect someone's life as far as the other side of the world. Especially today, when there is Internet to connect us on another plane instead of our tangible terrain. Don't tell me that the kid in Africa doesn't have it and can't be connected, they discovered this family in Russia who had no idea about World War II. They can be disconnected, but their story connects to me, affects me. Everything contributes to everything.

"Think, think, think. I think about my thoughts, how I think, why I think. It becomes a self-feeding loop but it just keeps on getting bigger and bigger. In the end it will encompass the universe. But I'm already that. So why think about thinking? Why create fiction? Why add abstract thoughts that have nothing to do with the material world and what you see? Thoughts so abstract and far-fetched obtain an equal place with the rational thoughts. Because they might be true as well. You have to fill in every hole, and not leave anything to chance. If I can feel hate and love towards a single person, it doesn't matter whom because you are going to lay importance to it, and my emotions

change in a flash, be it because of a movement or a gesture or a saying, who's to say that I don't harbor other kinds of feelings towards that person, feelings that I have no idea of?

“The true solution to any kind of life's problems, whether you are a terrible romantic or a hardcore realist is irony. Distance. Distance to look at things, happenings, and people in another way. Assign humor to a sad situation. Think of something hilarious as a tragedy. Take it out of context. Mold it into the shape of your mind. But that distance doesn't help if you are away from a single point from infinite locations, for a different vantage so to speak, and all those infinite locations can pass a line through that point and there still will be space for another infinite set of locations. This is what they teach you in the first day of elementary school. One point, infinite lines.

“Of course you can analyze them to get the bigger picture, or at least some sense of it. But you can never reach the zero-point. Incomplete from the start, you study to further your knowledge, only to realize that the starting point was a lie all along. It's OK though. This is not what keeps me awake at night. It is that after that unknown starting point, everything is fair game. People bickering in academia about whether their claim is true or not, from where did Communism come to Southeast Asia, by itself or the Soviets, they are all right. Two different people from the same location can reach the same endpoint from different ways. One person can clash within itself to be inclined towards any idea, even if it is for a flash.

“And how does that relate to me? As you will, you are going to say that my excessive thinking might be a defense mechanism, which is true, but don't you also think that I can simply think this up for no reason? Am I not allowed to? Don't talk, for I will agree and disagree with everything that you say and will say and won't say. How my

current state of mind might be a result of an event, or maybe it is the uncovering of a trauma branded upon my brain years ago, finally letting itself out. And you might be right. You might be wrong. You might be both at the same time.

“How many minutes do we have left? Because this is just getting good.

“I’m not going to argue with you today as I had been for the last years. Every week I come here and lie, even by omission, dodge your questions and pose my own, retaliate and deflect, project my own troubles onto something else, hate something else instead of myself, love something else instead of myself, always one step behind the answer, whether because you can’t say it outright or maybe it is simply your principle to lead me, the one who doesn’t want to be led because I’m afraid of what I will find out about myself, about everything. Today, I’m going to be completely honest with you. I’m not going to lie about my past or how I’m feeling. I’m going to accept your deductions, decline only to bring up a point to take us further, you and me, we are a team, we are going to reach a conclusion, and this time, you don’t even need to lead me there, because I will give you everything I know, from the start to now. I will lead us to the answer, but this won’t require me to tell you specific events, nor especially will it require you to talk. For I have the answer. I had it all along.

“The answer is that everything is right. This truth, everything, me, built up by conceived notions coming from outside into me, and from me, as *myself*, the accumulation, pours out. I’m going to discover everything and myself by being honest with you, by giving you everything you want with this truth, which will gush from me, and it will fill every hole created by doubt and uncertainty. Nothing will be incomplete ever again. It is going to fill the spaces, the dark spaces of the unknown; what we don’t

know about the outside, what we don't know about ourselves, what we don't know about things that don't even exist yet. I will cover it, fill the plugs with the scorching truth and once it is in there, it is going to freeze. Rock solid. Impenetrable. No challenge can be issued to destroy what is complete, and no new holes will be created, because, for once, everything, with the known and the unknown, will be one. And I will be a part of that one, but also that one itself. So will you. So will the desk between us.

“And here you are, taking mental notes, thinking how this reflects my desire to control my life. How this is causal. That what I'm doing is wrong, if not impossible. If I can simply accept that I'm human, a flawed being, in front of you, accept that I'm asking for your help, a way out of this ontological loneliness and just relax, breathe in, breathe out, I will be alright, and maybe even happy. Isn't that what we are all looking for in the end?

“And to this, I will say, that you are right. I will also say that I'm happy. I will also say that I'm sad. There is a battlefield of in my mind, between everything and ideas and emotions and the entire battle, spanning across all time and land that my mind can conjure, is frozen right before the drawing of first blood. In the end, everything will be beset by something else. Ideas and emotions change in a flash.

“Use your theories against me. Give me a school of thought. I have no problem with it. I accept it all. I'm one with the universe. I'm Buddha, I'm Jesus, and I'm god. There is no reason to talk when I won't accept the truth about myself.

“But I'm also a human. No, a person. I'm a person. Don't talk.

“Listen. I know we are out of time, I caught an accidental, but maybe not, glimpse of my watch, but I didn't want to even experience time in this room, which is supposed to

be a safe place, away from everything else, but especially time, because that would go along so well with the point I'm making if we were lost in this room and in this flash of infinity, but it doesn't matter since the clock is still ticking anyhow.

“Because if you really think that this is my attempt to make my whole life ‘whole’ again, make it one so that nothing leaks at all, even though that everyone has this problem, maybe from time to time, or maybe forever, the feeling that, like the pithy saying, ‘You are the universe experiencing itself.’–

“Being that powerful, and yet, being a puny human being who will die soon and yet being able to have every possible effect on the universe, change something through encounters and coincidences, but still simply won't affect the absolute universe which will perish one day, come full circle and end up unscathed by whatever you and your fellow people have done to it–

“And all the while everybody's mind is exactly like that universe and it will be affected by things, just making their marks in your brain, which will, like the universe, like everything, would have decayed without interference anyhow, and still end up as nothing, a blank slate, when you die, no matter how much you have been affected, to come full circle and be pure again–

“If you still think that I'm exhibiting one of the most profound existential problems, yet experiencing it in the same way with everyone so much that it stops becoming profound, like trends, the only solution is to keep your head down, get your temporal pleasures or find your passion and make it your work and work forever until you pass out. Don't tell me that one can find happiness with one thing, it's a drug and you have to keep getting your fix day and night, it doesn't matter how temporary, short or

long. The fix affects you the same and you wait for the day you die only to become pure like the universe, one with the universe—

“And even talking about it to someone like a friend won’t do after a while because you are alone in the end, not lonely, but alone, connected, but alone, and even though that is the realest emotion you can ever feel, this dread, this exhilarating, euphoric, tantalizing, paralyzing dread, this desire to control this dread through controlling everything, the overwhelming wave washing over you that you are connected to everything, an everything in search of, in pursuit of attaining everything, attaining itself, but nobody has the time to listen to you because if they did than all we would be talking about would be this dread because nothing else is important, so you pay a therapist just to listen to you when all you have to accept, accept everything given to you, accept everything that you have been thinking because simply relying on the unknown is settling for you, so you think. Think, think, think. Thinking day and night, about this and that, him and her, to and fro, everything and nothing.”

November 15

They met at a performance venue/record store/barber.

Her name was Lola, and she was an aerial silk performer with a traveling burlesque group. She wasn’t a showgirl, she had heard the jokes, thank you Barry Manilow.

The troupe went everywhere around the country. Her favorite place was Austin, but right now they were here for one month for their final leg of the tour. After that she was going to Maine, for reasons she didn’t say.

He was Osman, and she thought he was a foreigner. Osman played along.

“You have an accent,” she said. “I like it.”

What did a Turkish accent sound like? Osman tried to hit the syllables harder, it came out Russian. She didn’t mind.

“Good try.”

“About what?” Still pretending.

“You tried. That’s enough.”

What was there in Maine?

That didn’t happen.

After the break-up with Laura, Osman finds ‘Lola’ on OkCupid, because he is horny and so is she. It is only a 60% match, but what the hell. Written under ‘Books’, Lola’s profile says, “I don’t read. I work on my body all the time.” It is the same on the other fields, but even from the pixelated profile picture belonging to somewhere before 2008, her eyes—big, blue, expecting—draw him in.

Having used the dancing metaphors for Laura, less angry about have breaking up than not having the last word of victory, Osman is all dried up when it comes to small talk. Thankfully, Lola is not very interested as well, but the rhythm and flow of conversational “uhh”s and coital “ahh”s are apparently good enough for she asks him to call her soon. He remembers only the eyes, unfortunately unopened when they are having sex on a Wednesday afternoon because Lola’s temporary waitress/babysitter/aerial silk performer schedule can only match with Osman’s.

Without a word passing between each other, Osman showed the city to Lola. They went to Corona Park and made out under the world like afterschool teenagers. They kissed in a trippy hotel elevator. He took her to the underground tunnels of the university, the webbed fallout shelter hidden amongst old furniture the place had no use for. They walked the city, then they came exhausted, dozing off to the daily practice of the saxophone player in the alleyway below.

She was a traveler, not a tourist, but when they had sex he spoke gibberish and passed it as Turkish dirty talking.

“You’re fun to play with,” she said.

She got food poisoning once and he made plain rice. Caring for her, he started to feel things.

“I may leave the city at the end of the year, and you are leaving in two weeks.”

“You do you,” she said, “and you do whatever you want to me.”

That didn’t happen either.

‘Lola’ is not her real name. The name belongs to her virtual profile; it must have been taken ages ago. Osman wonders whether she chose the name because of Anouk Aimée (“C’est moi... C’est Lola!”) or maybe the job chose her after she saw the eponymous movie. Or maybe it was ‘the lovely lullaby that lilts out whenever you say Lola’ that crawled into her ear and stuck forever. Or maybe it was just a name.

Lola doesn’t want company, she wants sex. The only time she shows any life is when she sighs about her upcoming performance at her experimental cabaret but Osman

doesn't catch that for he has moved his head towards her face, and once again pulls himself closer to the ocular oblivion in her pure orbs of azure on white.

For her last day they brought wine to Battery Park. They got drunk as they watched the ferries rolled in. Osman's eyes were blurry from alcohol. He kissed Lola until he had no depth perception left.

"Love is easy for me to feel," she said, "but I also easily forget."

"I love you," Osman said.

"I love you too."

Lola got on her feet and walked a few steps towards the shore. The wind meld the scenery and she became an impressionist painting, blending into the background as the sunset behind her exploded into a chemical sky.

And then she was gone.

That should have happened.

Osman finds Lola online, not on OkCupid this time, but on her own website, without any other name. Her CV, her height, some photos and videos, along with her students' testimonials with names like Caryn, too unbelievable to be fake, are all there for his viewing pleasure. Buried deep inside the press section is her stint on Jerry Springer where she performed a duo act, tied to chains, and the people were whistling wildly, as they should, in a cabaret number.

Her homepage has a huge banner that advertises the aforementioned last show, so Osman thinks that this is an invitation for him too. Not that she could have invited Osman

since they used each other only for carnal pleasure. He buys a ticket for one. He wants to go alone so he can surprise Lola. The website asks for 'The Name of the Party' and he doesn't understand that it is just asking for his name.

The Darwin Art Space was the pioneer institution in transforming Dumbo and leading its gentrification. Now it is being closed down because of rent increase, the Freddy Kruger of the city's collective nightmare. The ironic twist of events is not lost, but nobody dares say anything about it on the line outside. Instead, Osman joins the end just as somebody is saying: "Dolphins are ok."

People arrive in cabs.

"Excuse me," someone says, "is this cash only?"

"No, ma'am," the bouncer replies. "Can you please not touch the ropes?"

"Frank, come here, it's not cash only!"

"Ma'am can you please not touch the damn ropes!"

The woman hmphs, turning away from the bouncer to talk to the other people in line to show that she is not affected by the abruptness of the bouncer, who is explaining himself to the people he's letting in, while Osman is lost in the middle of the turbulence:

"I'm the nicest bouncer in all of the state, I'll treat you right, but I have one policy: Don't touch my ropes. You don't touch my ropes, man you just don't. They are boundaries and you gotta respect boundaries."

"Jack come here," she says to her halfhearted spectators. "He goes to a couple of restaurants and all of a sudden thinks that Dumbo is cash only." The people, out of pity, remain silent.

Jack may be wrong, but he is not illogical. Dumbo has turned into a residential ghost town like the Financial District at night. There are only a few banks to and everything, even a deli, is cash only. While random events like a light show or a pickle festival may temporarily bring the city life back for a weekend, the neighborhood, once shouldering both bridges, now seems crushed. The sights are beautiful but useless. Dumbo has become as dumb as its name suggests.

The receptionist, with a wide smile, welcomes him as a stranger and stamps his wrist with a lipstick kiss, but then her face turns puzzled when she reads the name. She leads Osman to his table where he is sharing the two-person with a supposed Jeffrey Micholwski who hasn't arrived yet. He knows this because that's what it writes on Jeffrey Micholwski's table card. Osman's table card is hard to read because the font has been decreased to fit in "Well, not really a party because I will be only one person, so that's not much of a party is it?"

Osman puts the card in his pocket before Jeff sits down next to him with a beer. He has his coat in his hands and is wearing a jacket from a car service.

"Osman," Osman says, putting out a hand.

"Jeff," Jeff says, shaking it, but turning his body away from the conversation to the venue.

Jeff's precautionary and precluding action comforts Osman because now he knows that nobody has to fill in the empty space, ask each other what they do, applaud the acts together and make a comment or two, and leave at the end of the night without saying goodbye, never to remember each other's names, like strangers on an airplane.

They are the only ones in this entire place to share a table and not know each other. While gazing at people being merry because it is their birthday or a regular Saturday, Osman unconsciously starts to mimic Jeff, taking a swig whenever the other does.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the last cabaret of Darwin Art Space! Now, stop fucking texting because tonight is an important night, and we’d like to share it with you, you, the audience who has been with us from the start, and I know there are people who were with us from our very first show!”

Jeff applauds heartily, but with a straight face.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we don’t give a fuck! Tonight will be unlike any cabaret you have experienced, because we have nothing to lose!”

Laughter and applause follow, but the MC wants to get on with it:

“Ladies and gentlemen, what can’t this group of weirdos do? Alright, here’s our first performer, and you better act like you are in the Roaring Twenties or she is going to whip you for real!”

The audience whistles and yowls for a burlesque where a flapper picks up a small American flag with her vagina, but wouldn’t show her nipples.

“Ladies and gentlemen, our of death defying Parkers will do their act without a net tonight, all the while one of them, and I won’t tell which one, has diarrhea!”

It’s Mama Parker.

“Ladies and gentlemen, here’s our very own snuff!”

The crowd goes wild. Someone sitting in the next table downs a glass of beer and doesn’t bother to lick the foam off her moustache.

“Ladies and gentlemen, here I am gouging my eyes out before the spectacular Lola!”

After all the edgy acts, now too corny to be true, but true nonetheless, Lola, all black, takes the stage to Massive Attack’s “Angel” in lights of red and blue hazed through Osman’s third-beer vision. The young Osman is feeling adolescent grumbles. Lola, on the other hand, is more assured. Wrapping one foot to the silk, she deftly slides herself up to the top, and then suddenly drops herself (gasp!) only to be held by the taut silk. She tugs differently this time and gets pulled upwards in a spiraling motion. She turns and turns with a leg held high like a figure skater. People are going crazy, but Osman remembers a foggy Lola in his buried memory, saying that it doesn’t matter how much you get cheered in the cabaret business. It is all about finding that audience member who wants to make you his or her impossible dream, and you work on them. They are not the easy targets, the Pavlovian audience is. These people, these dreamers, they are special and unique to every performer, or so they think. Lola is still twirling gracefully, now wrapped, now unbound—silk following body until her eyes encounter Osman’s for a moment as graceful turns into poignant.

Not that it’s apt to compare gentrification to the Nazis, but are cabarets supposed to be sad because of *Cabaret*? If not, then why is Osman crying right now, hunched over the balcony, his eyes blurry but still trying to lock Lola’s eyes?

“Ladies and gentlemen, I can’t see but I can feel, and I can feel the love of every one of you tonight. Let’s all give an amazing farewell to our cabaret! I want everybody involved in this production to be on the stage right now!”

SNL-like, the performers find themselves on the stage with a rush of emotions. All the while the crowd is watching them, the members of the cabaret are hugging, crying, saying ‘I love you!’s to each other. Even if it is happening on stage, the curtain call is the only thing that is not a performance tonight. Like someone who watches interviews for the celebrity breaking down or porn for the innocent face of an orgasm. when the actress stops being an actress, the patrons have paid extra tonight to see the performers break character and be human and sad for once.

“Unfortunately, that was our show, that was our *last* show, but the night doesn’t need to end! We thought, ‘If this space is going away, why don’t we leave this place exactly like how we want them to see it?’ So I say this to everybody here: Destroy the chairs, smash the glasses, and, if you dare, try to touch the bartenders—tonight is your night, so fuck the shit out of this place! Fuck Dumbo, fuck all these college kids around, fuck the high-scale restaurant across, fuck real estate, fuck the hipster writers who fucking moved here and this place is dying because all your shitty fans moved here you fuckers! Because of you! Fuck you!”

The venue erupts into an orgy of violence, sprouting from the stage onto the seats, as the MC, with red rivers all the way down to his pants, is wildly kicking the air and groping anyone on his way, inviting others to join. There is already a fight between two tables and someone is punching the wall.

Osman also feels a rush, and smiling, turns to Jeff, who has taken his coat with him any time he needed to use the bathroom.

“You know what Jeff? I was worried on how to interact with the other on the table, but your early stance has made it much easier for me.”

He has ruined the moment. Jeff takes his coat and leaves. Osman turns back to the stage but Lola is not there. He searches for her amidst flying plates, sticky floors, graffiti on the wall (who brought a spray can?), broken toilet bowls, ripped curtains, popping champagne, bleeding heads rubbed with alcohol that was for imbibing, and other people trying to leave. He goes out to ask the bouncer, but a rowdy pogo dancer pushes him onto the velvet rope, and then the bouncer pushes him out into the night.

November 25

There are murmurs outside of his window and they are not going away. He doesn't remember whether he locked his door or not. Too tired to get up, he rolls around, anticipating more calls to create urgency.

The call gives up reaching him through the ear and finds his nose instead. A tangy scent, light but provoking, stirs Osman out of his waking dream, or at least wonder what the source is. He always had a good nose, but Osman had never smelled a burning basement before, so the due attention for the issue at hand still has to wait until he opens the door to his living room and find out it is full of smoke. He can't see his kitchen, but now, after three sensory indications, he realizes that his building is on fire.

Somebody is knocking on doors in the hallway and calmly telling everyone to maybe put something on. The man simply knocks on another door if that one closes back. His assured, comforting tone makes one think he would have been a fireman if he weren't in plainclothes.

Even though he had time, Osman leaves the building in sockless sneakers, jeans, a sweatshirt, and his coat without his scarf. There are only two other residents outside, but already four fire trucks surrounding the corner.

Now there are too many residents to count and eight fire trucks, two vans, two cop cars, and one Beth Israel ambulance shyly checking out the situation. There is a dog running around free, who can but won't go far, unlike the three unknown pets in their taxis, with limited view and understanding.

Smoke, in dense bursts, gushes out of the basement apartment.

“Oh my god,” someone says, Osman's neighbor directly below him, “that's going right into my room! It will smell like smoke for at least two weeks.” She turns to Osman, “And I don't have any insurance.”

A fireman gets blown away by the backdraft in the basement, which ends up with more smoke coming out and more firefighters going in.

The same smoke, hopefully less, will also get into Osman's apartment, but Osman is Zen-like, simply happy to be out of danger, and if his books and his works will be destroyed, he doesn't care. Whether this is because he was disillusioned at The Conference last month, or he has made peace with his archive, or certain hormones are affecting him, almost, but probably not, like the calm euphoria one experiences when they know they are about to die, making it very strenuous to bond with other victims.

The neon sign says THE RE'S TEA T US, but people have more important things to do. Some other residents are talking to their family members on the phone, and Osman realizes that he will never talk about this incident to his mother. A young resident with expensive headphones, because priorities, is recording the spectacle for his personal

Disintegration Loops, while another is taking a video of her dog in front of the building and who knows where she will post that to?

Ladders claw the roof like spider legs, but nobody seems to be going up. The firefighters don't talk to anyone but each other, the paramedics hope they won't be involved with the situation, and the cops are there to calm down the crowd. The rotating siren lights are left on as they trace the nearby buildings with red and white, waking up neighboring residents, inviting them to join the late night event.

A man with a dog in his hand tells the residents his side of the story.

"So I wake up, and my dog is barking, and I look at my kitchen, it is filled with smoke, so I start screaming, grab Chase and knock on everybody's door."

"Thank you," someone says.

"I'm not saying I'm a hero, but what if I weren't there? What if I had died?"

The dog prattles around the block, finds the only unused fire hydrant and marks his territory, with the rest saved for the lonely telephone book. It makes people smile.

"His name is Chase," he says.

"Does he love to chase?"

"He sure does," and calls him back.

The dog owner, now named Tony, has assumed the role of the building representative, talking with the officers and informing the others, because the superintendent is nowhere to be seen except from what one officer is saying to his phone:

"Yeah, a fire. A fire." The policeman is staring into space, regretting the words he will say next. "You're the supe of this building and you don't know which one it is?"

Osman has only seen Ray the Superintendent once in all these months, and that was when he gave the keys of the apartment to Osman. Anything else, Osman had to adamantly call to even get Ray on the phone, knowingly raise his hopes for no reason when he would give a timeslot for Tuesday, and curse him when he wouldn't answer his phone on the day of.

"Goddamn Ray," someone says as if they heard his inner monologue. The others nod in the mutual hatred. A silver lining in terrible situations is rare, but the love for the dog and disgust for Ray give off a unique sense of pleasure, eliciting a vagabond down and out laugh at oneself. Call it a shock reaction to the facts of life.

"She's dead." Tony comes back to the crowd with a police officer who floats questions around. Osman is behind everyone but not out of earshot.

"How long did she live here?"

"Three?" The ambassador checks with the crowd. "Three years."

"Did she have any friends? Boyfriends?"

"She would have friends over. I have a restaurant close by so I would see them coming and going. She had a boyfriend, but I didn't see him after the first year."

"Thank you."

The cop leaves the crowd to its own thoughts. Osman inches closer to hear better since his questions are being asked by others.

"So, they think there was a girl from Airbnb staying over."

"Did *she* die?"

"They're trying to figure it out."

"Is it because of her?"

“I guess so,” Tony says, without making a clear distinction between the temporary and the permanent resident, “There was a fire two years ago on New Year’s Eve, do you remember?” Some nod. “And she was outside, but it was coming from her apartment. You know, to be honest, she, after that boyfriend, she became kind of... whorey. And with that hair...” This, along with the adjectivized profanity, gathers chuckles and nods from the crowd, even from the women, who have stopped sympathizing with the guilty perpetrator for putting them on the street at 3am. Anything for solidarity within the community.

“Yeah, and her dog? Constantly barking at the backyard. She must have treated him terribly. Just this dog, barking and barking and barking, would anyone else hear that? No? Am I wrong about this?”

“The dog is dead, too, I’m afraid,” Tony says, bringing a long latent gloom to surface. He caresses Chase and the other pet owners look through the mesh doors to check their loved ones, who are still wide-eyed and scared because they think they are going to the veterinarian.

“Dad,” says a small kid in pajamas.

“Yes?”

“In three hours you were going to wake me up.”

The dad smiles.

“You don’t have to worry about school tomorrow, buddy.”

Whether it is out of bitterness, or to remind themselves that someone is dead so they should be feeling sad, Osman doesn’t know why the others are waiting. Osman wants to leave, but like everybody else, watching a terrible movie but too late to quit, he

feels like he should wait for the stretcher to come out of the building. For him, he hasn't seen his father lately, and doesn't want to miss this opportunity to connect with others and tap into a collective suffering.

The stretcher appears, interrupting his thoughts, to display a thin, white, bulging blanket, a Jane Doe for the desensitized paramedics, but a blank canvas onto which the residents will project their unconscious death drive, fear, melancholy, their fallen hopes, their regretful decisions, missed opportunities, wasted youths, and the simple sad fact of death.

A police officer faces them before the ambulance can leave for the morgue:

“Okay, so, we're very sorry but you cannot enter the apartment just yet. There will be some investigations, but in the mean time if you want to find a diner or something, and then come back—”

“I don't have any money on me,” the father says.

The cop, who should have known this reply was coming, goes back for a second.

“Sir, if you wait ten minutes, someone will escort you in.”

The crowd is spreading around in all directions, with a new friendship budding on the southwest direction, as an elderly man is telling another, “I've lived in this building my entire life. The worst management, I tell you, the worst. Many, many accidents because of their neglect. Yet I'm still here. I guess that says something.” The other man will say that he has lived in this same building his entire life too, so how come they never saw each other? The two old-timers will have a great time at a nearby diner, reminiscing about their past, the apartment's past, before they return to their homes in the morning. In a week they will visit each other for a weeknight dinner, and some strange pleasant

feeling, like a coda to one's favorite book, a short final chapter to read slowly and savor before it ends quickly but it is something to hold on to for the while, connected to everything from before, will appear in the twilight of these two men's lives, a friendship in overtime, until one of them, who knows whom?, will have a heart attack while taking an afternoon stroll and die instantly, and the remaining will know because there would be nobody knocking on his door. However, like a silly twist, someone will, and it will turn out to be the daughter of the deceased who lives in Virginia, telling him that her father has left something for him in his will, an old pocket watch he had remarked in their first talk, the night of the fire, the night they first met, and he will break down and hug the daughter, tears staining her shoulder pads, and the uncontrollable urge to cry in random times will be there until he dies as well, but the tears will not be of sadness, but of something warm, something heartfelt.

But where is Osman? We seem to have lost Osman.

Osman doesn't know any of this because he has left immediately after hearing the official order from the police officer, content with finding a diner several blocks away in order to not encounter any neighbors. He doesn't think he can handle them, to include other lives in his rolodex of a memory, when one has perished so quickly and so close by.

Hair messed up, eyes puffy, the cold getting into his aerated sneakers and through his scarfless neck, he thinks he looks like a homeless person. Or at least the waiter at the diner thinks so, because until he brandishes his credit card to pay, he doesn't even bother to refill the ice water.

"Thank you very much for coming, Os-man? What kind of a name is this anyhow?"

He doesn't reply, he doesn't even grunt. Osman knows how much a restaurant staff takes shit from insolent customers, and how much they love to complain about them, so he acts like one before he leaves, no 'Thank you's, no eye contact. However, he knows he still needs to tip because this is America and the 4-6am cliques on the nearby islands don't look like they will change soon, so he gives 18%, hoping that the waiter will only interpellate him as a cranky, weird man.

The day breaks and Osman returns to see the aftermath. The department cars reduced to the bare necessity of a police car. Gene has sat down in his alcove with a book on his lap, looking at a cop talking to Ray, but not watching them.

"Have you heard about the fire, Gene?"

"What fire man what's going on?"

"There was a fire last night. Someone died."

"Really man really, man meanwhile I'm just reading man just passing the time, do you have a dollar, I have a knee infection, they told me no at the shelter man so I gotta get a dollar from somewhere something for tonight."

Gene is indifferent to eye contact, and quite frankly a bit delirious, nodding back and forth and repeating his wish for a dollar. It makes Osman wonder whether the homeless guy even recognizes him, if he ever did.

"Excuse me sir, do you live here?"

"Yes," Osman says with enough conviction to overcome any sartorial doubts, the tussled, greasy hair, the sad, low-hanging face, and that Ray doesn't even know who he is, so the police officer lets him in.

The apartment smells heavy with soot, but it is almost a quirky whiff like gasoline, reminding you once in a while what it is after it dulls your senses. Osman almost doesn't want it to go away, but he can't also say no to a free thorough cleaning provided by the insurance. Three Hispanic women barge into his house to create a cacophony of clatter and murmured Spanish. Osman feels invaded when they change the positions of his kitchenware after cleaning them, so he decides to stay in. In the afternoon, after almost five hours of cleaning the same room, rubbing the same counter several times before moving on, or just spending the time in a one-bedroom, Osman realizes the maids will not go away, so he should, and passes out first on the subway, then on his office chair.

November 28

A day later, he goes up to Albany (not *Albany* Albany, but who cares what suburb they really live at?) two days before Thanksgiving to make his mother happy but also to ward off the paranoia about the fires. The smell of smoke makes him doubt his sense as it comes back every night a bit subtler but still alarming.

Hastily packing his bag the night before, he hears a rumble in the building. His nose acts up again, opening the door and extending his head out. Tony is coming up the stairs holding Chase. It would be rude to shut the door but a sudden and swift turn around the volute decides it for both of them.

“Hi!” says Tony.

“The smell,” Osman says of all the possible ways to say hello.

“I know, it's unbearable, they told us this might go on for a while.”

“Do you know why? The fire?”

“No not really, it was in my apartment long before it was anywhere else, except the basement, of course. But I know I woke up, and my dog is barking, and I look at my kitchen, it is filled with smoke, so I start screaming, grab Chase and knock on everybody’s door.”

Tony doesn’t seem to remember Osman being present on the night of.

“Thank you.”

“I’m not saying I’m a hero, but what if I weren’t there? What if I had died? Then who would look after Chase?” Chase barks. “His name is Chase, and yes, he sure loves to chase.”

Both Chase’s and his owner’s builds are small but their voices boom. Through the narrow hallway they resonate up to all five floors. It is not grating as much as it is overwhelming.

“Was it because of her?” Osman says, trying to put a conversation back on track.

“Maybe, there was a fire two years ago on—”

“New Year’s Eve.” Osman says to tell him that he knows, that he was there. This puts Tony off balance, but he soldiers on:

“New Year’s Eve, right. And she was outside, but it was coming from her apartment. But they told me that she was involved with some legal issues against the management company of the building. Now I’m not saying *that*, but something should be done about this neglect. I’ll set up some form of communication. We should get everybody’s numbers, I’ll post a sign to get everyone’s emails.” Tony ends the savior’s determination with a personal comforting: “I’ll take care of this, don’t worry.”

Fresh steps climb the same stairs. It is the neighbor from below who had her apartment barraged with smoke made up of mattresses, doors, spices, plates, electronics, fabric, human, dog.

“Hey Alexandria,” Tony says.

“Hey Tony, this smell, huh?”

“I know, it’s unbearable, they told us this might go on for a while.”

“Any news on what really happened?”

“I don’t know, it was in my apartment long before it was anywhere else, except the basement, of course. But I know I woke up, and my dog is barking, and I look at my kitchen, it is filled with smoke, so I start screaming, grab Chase and knock on everybody’s door.”

“Thank you,” Alexandria says.

“I’m not saying I’m a hero, but what if I weren’t there? What if I had died? Then who would look after Chase?”

“We have to do something about this,” she says.

“That’s what we were talking about,” Tony takes the reins, louder than ever. There are at least three residents who are debating to come outside either to join the conversation, make this an interior block party, or to tell Tony to shut up.

“Even if it is because of her, because there was a fire on New Year’s Eve, and she was outside, but it was coming from her apartment. You know, to be honest, she, after that boyfriend, she became kind of... whorey. And with that hair...”

Osman attempts a chuckle but achieves tunnel vision.

“But they told me that she was involved with some legal issues against the management company of the building. Now I’m not saying *that*, but something should be done about this neglect—”

Osman grumbles so that the two, excluding Chase, will look at him, and he will mumble something akin to “Good night,” and Tony will say, “Yeah, good night, all right, good night to you too.”

The muffled voices diminish behind the closed door after Tony finishes.

It’s rather quiet on the Wednesday early afternoon Amtrak, give or take the train’s lulling rumble. Neither Osman nor anybody on the train knows how he is feeling right now. They have their own things to deal with. A child percusses on the window while his mother is asleep. The conductor breezes through the car, dual wielding ticket punchers, he is trying to break the world record, 14.63 seconds for a full Superliner passenger car.

The train moves between a shimmering Hudson River and the side of a steep rock covered with fallen leaves. Trees’ empty branches do not sway along with the train. The reflected glare is getting into the left side of the railcar, into the passengers’ eyes, and slicing the detective novel Osman is trying to distract himself with, but he just can’t get in the world. It’s not fun when you know the murderer is always the writer.

His mother welcomes him smoking a cigarette, her first in decades two days ago, and just the second one today. Osman follows her and the trail of wisp around the house into a sunny kitchen, complete with Patricia. The light rays through the pale grey of the

smoke give the women a rare allure. Maybe it's the head rush, but she is more energetic, and at least her mouth is not stuck in a perpetual frown.

"Mom, you would never smoke inside."

"Who's going to stop me, your father?" The joke hurts Osman, but Patricia joins Jane's laugh. "If you want to freeze yourself out there, that's your problem."

"Sure."

"You try cooking for Thanksgiving and not get stressed out."

Osman was going to ask how many family members are coming, but thinks the answer will not change anything but can only give a number higher than reality, which, in turn, he has to prepare himself for even more contact than the bearable level, so it's best to see it piece by piece as it happens, and Osman is drained from the train ride, so he is going to go to bed.

Only to be woken up by random tiny happenings—picking something ceramic up and putting it down, footsteps on the weak floorboards around the house that pierce the suburban silence. His father's brother Uncle Joe (Aunt Something died last year.) is chatting with the prospective widow over sizzling bacon.

"Hey, hey, big man, Mr. X!" Uncle Joe—ten years younger than his brother but still trying to prove he is as young as the youth—could never bring himself to say Osman's name so he always resorted to a jocular attitude to cover up for just saying X, or quickly sneak in the foreign name if he ever needed.

"Hello Uncle Joe."

"Where is that big hug of yours from last time? You're getting old, osmsmn, but don't worry, I'll give you tips to stay strong."

The day passes in between Osman's mother cooking copious amounts of food—food that Osman relates to, the 'comfort' in 'comfort food' doubled because of the content and the cook—, the men helping cleaning up the house and stealing a bite half the time they visit the kitchen. The table is decorated for nine people in total. The remaining six are all from Osman's grandfather's siblings: his first cousins, the family of the once removed, including twice removed, soon to be a third on the way—Dale, Cheryl, their son Daryl Johnson—their gay Uncle Eric, the pinnacle of liberal Indiana, an estranged, unknown Aunt Mary coming from Baltimore, and a nine year old obstinate boy named Derek, the real stranger in the house, the child of a distant relative who couldn't make it, but Derek had personally insisted to see Albany, infatuated with the grey city after finding out about Albany's most famous gangster Jack 'Legs' Diamond in the school's library when he was searching for... well, legs.

Taking a break from complaining about his back, his uncle teases Osman to show that he is fine with what he is still seeing as an adopted child. Even though Osman wanted to talk to him about whatever might interest someone from Normal, Indiana, he doesn't have the energy, so he rolls with the gentle banter.

They order Chinese for dinner.

"We should all visit John tomorrow," his mother says out of the blue, dipping into a sweet and sour sauce. "The rest of the family cannot come back for a funeral. Some of them are not even coming here for Thanksgiving,"

She would have ended it with a cartoony "those bastards" if it wasn't going to offend her brother-in-law. She had started to swear much more since remaining alone at

the house, mumbling to no one while reliving the past in pieces, losing focus, maybe an onset of dementia, but she wouldn't worry about it, she told herself, she wasn't going to tell Osman and put another burden on him. Unlike John, she was going to live the short rest of her life without causing trouble for others, nor for herself.

“She's right,” Uncle Joe says, “I haven't seen John in years.”

The elders sleep early and leave the house to Osman, who watches a washed out Seinfeld episode, reads one page of a book six times, drinks some milk and eats cookies that will be used as bait for Derek tomorrow, the ‘You know you should retire when...’ joke calendar is still frozen on September 9, the date bothers Osman enough to send him to the yard for some fresh air, but then settle for one of her mother's Virginia Slims in the kitchen after finding out for himself that it is really too cold outside.

Which is a bummer because Osman wakes up late to a full house of more family members filling up space, some even straight from the airport with their luggage, because Dale's family is staying at a motel on an hourly rate. From first impressions, Dale looks like he will always be wearing that trucker hat, Cheryl is a lovely woman who greets Osman with a sincere heart but can't seem to bring anything else into the conversation, though that might be Osman's fault. Uncle Eric is very eager to help with anything and everything, as well as whistling Dvorak for background music. Daryl is outside talking to his wife. When Osman sees him through the window, Daryl at first doesn't understand who Osman should be, so he squints his eyes while listening, and then jerks the head back in an ‘a-ha!’ to wave a silly hi.

Osman is supposed to pick up Derek from the Albany airport, but the knock on the door, presumed to be Aunt Mary, proves to be the little kid. He looks more pragmatic than nerdy, though his thick, red-rimmed glasses might get him picked on at school, .

“Plane landed early,” he says, “so I took a cab.”

“Early?”

“Too many delays that came out of the other end.”

“You didn’t call?”

“Mom and dad won’t let me have a cell phone.”

Derek is greeted similar to Osman was, with the same gestures and unconscious tics from the family members. Osman had thought that the Indiana Johnsons would interact with Derek like they do amongst their own, but apparently they would see Derek’s family only in Thanksgivings as well, the family connection lost in the day’s chaos.

Osman retreats into his room, hoping to read but instead just looks at his past, looked at too many times, so the artifacts are scraping the barrel of sentimental value. He would have liked to have a time capsule by now, bury something in Mother Earth, but the idea hadn’t come to him as a kid, and it would be too late now, not to mention unnecessary, thanks to virtual archiving.

A knock on the door announces they will be playing touch football before the lunch. Uncle Eric and Daryl are against Osman and Dale, with the oldest and the youngest sitting out for reserves.

Though his game is language, Osman, never a fan of sports because academics shouldn’t be in awe of spectacle so easily, finds touch football to be invigorating. The

rules are simple, the boundaries are set, and the only word spoken is “Here!” The game is played only for fun and fun only, but any competitive behavior makes the player a slave for the game in pursuit of repeating the same grace, same fun, and same feeling of victory, but it is only the game that repeats itself. The players,—be it professional athletes in the NFL or just a bunch of family members frolicking in the backyard—will always be lesser embodiments of the metaphysical ideal..

“Phew, I’m beat,” Dale ends the game.

“Yeah, it’s getting chilly,” Daryl agrees.

“Yeah,” Osman has to say.

Going back into the living room, they find Aunt Mary slumped on a couch, coat still on, smoking a cigarette.

“I’ll put my stuff somewhere in a second,” she says.

The Thanksgiving meal, like any other household, is a sight to behold. Saying grace, then chomping on the food without any of the aforementioned grace, the family, disparate, different, but together nonetheless, gets acquainted at the table as Osman’s mother lists the relatives she remembers and the Indiana folk comment one by one:

“Oh, Uncle George, he passed away not too long ago.”

“Wasn’t he very old, though?”

“93, and he would have lived a lot longer if he didn’t die from salmonella. We told him not to eat raw bacon, but he just couldn’t help himself.”

“I understand how he feels,” Daryl says before his mother mock-slaps on the arm, “What can I say, I love bacon in any form.”

Daryl's face has taken his mother's features, but the bodybuild belongs to the dad, the sphere already emerged around the waist, probably his child will achieve the smooth half orb much earlier than his father. Living in the city makes one very unaware of child obesity. Or children in general.

The main gorging is over and if the family nibbles more on the turkey that's just because they are bored. Osman's mother finds this an opportunity:

"I don't know how much you knew about John, but since we are visiting him this afternoon, I would like everybody give their thanks to him."

"I'll start," Uncle Joe says, and recounts a story about a lucky penny they had found on the train tracks one day. Both wanted to have it, so they had agreed to hold joint custody, switching from one owner to the other every week. When John had left the state, Joe was so furious at his brother to the point of forgetting all about the penny. That is, until ten years later, when Osman was eight, Joe had come for a short visit and John gave him a penny, *the* penny, the relic of their brotherhood, saying "I've kept it long enough." Uncle Joe taps his shirt pocket, where a faint trace of a slanted circle gives itself away.

The other guests are too young to remember Osman's father, so they tell the table whatever they have heard from their parents, "which weren't all nice," Dale impishly jokes. "But, yeah, he seems to have raised a great family, and we are thankful for being their guests."

"Yeah," Daryl says with each sentence, "Yeah!"

Aunt Mary, smoking on the table, says that he was a nice fellow, and a good husband for Jane. They realize this is all she is going to say, so the eyes turn to Osman.

Osman at first uses everything in his arsenal. How it is well known that professors (assistant or not) are terrible speakers. How tough the past few months have been, but grateful to have them all here.

“My father,” he says, searching for a story, though that option was taken by Uncle Joe, “was loving, caring, supportive, a true father.” He wants to continue with “whatever a father is supposed to be”, delve into an understanding of the concept, the abstract notion, because the real thing is overwhelming him right now.

Searching the expecting eyes and the mouths ready for a smile, he knows whatever he says will be accepted generously, maybe they are just waiting for him to finish so they can go watch the Thanksgiving game on TV, yet he wants to say something profound, to really describe his father and separate him from all the other ones, “But as a man, my father,” he starts, revving the engine, “My father,” once again but can’t seem to bring it because of a one-way or a two-way disconnect with the world around him, so he starts to choke up. People attribute the tears filial to affection, Osman accepts the verdict and sits back down, a bit more placid due to having pulled it off, one way or another.

During the game, when the commercials have started to repeat themselves, Dale turns to Osman to converse, but mostly projects his own thoughts while Osman nods.

“The state is not the city, and the city is not the state, it’s just a very small part of it, right?”

“Right.”

“So why does everybody refer to the city as the state?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would make my blood boil, I’ll tell you. You folks upstate must not be too happy about this confusion. No sir, I would never step foot in Indianapolis. Bunch of fancy white collars if you ask me. I’m proud of my damn state.”

Realizing that Dale likes to ramble, he asks about his job:

“Oh me, I just own a corn field.”

“Must be hard,” which is the gateway phrase for getting someone to open up.

“Oh, man, you have no idea,” Daryl flushes out of excitement and Osman tunes out. His ears only receive white noise whereas his eyes are oversaturated with commercials, presenters’ banter, technological filler of statistical analysis, until they switch the channel for the half-time and land on *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Oh man," Dale says, "what a classic. We used to watch this every Thanksgiving."

"Yeah," Osman retcons a memory as the Munchkins are greeting Dorothy to the Emerald City.

"Those midgets," Dale says, "Just when you think the song is over, more of them arrive. Makes you think where they find all those midgets—dwarves, sorry Osman."

Why should Osman get offended? Is it because of his inherent racial confusion?, or that he deals with such sensitive matters—race, gender, identity, taboo—in academia?, or that he is from the city where people assume political correctness comes from, but it actually doesn't because political correctness is mostly an institutional thing and not a very personal one? Or it is actually a personal issue to be worked out in one's head and that's why Dale apologized?

"I think dwarf accent is sexy," Cheryl says. "That tight nasal voice—Hey why did you switch the channel?"

Dale is swift and subdued: "We'll talk about it later, Cheryl."

"Dale..."

"I said we'll talk about—never mind the game is back on."

While Osman, his mother, Auntie May, sorry, Aunt Mary, and Derek are in the family car, the rest are split into two taxis. There are complimentary Thanksgiving snacks in the waiting rooms—turkey jerky, sweet potato chips advertised as the healthier option, and an untouched tub of gravy, into which Dale dips a pinky and says it's still warm.

Approaching the room, they are told that only two visitors are allowed each time. While debating who should go with whom and who first, Derek opens the door and walks in, then comes out weeping.

"I don't want to," he snuffles between stutters and hiccups, "see that."

They would have let Derek wait in the lobby, except the child is howling as if he has discovered that people do not necessarily recover in hospitals, and real life is much grimmer than the white walls suggest.

"I want to go away!"

Osman cannot bear the potluck of emotions that will simmer from his relatives around his father, so he suggests taking Derek out on a drive to show him Albany, the city he has come all the way across the country to see. The family is especially grateful, but not as much as Osman is to Derek.

"Where would you like to go?" Osman asks. "The capitol?"

Derek shrugs the offers off, and just tells Osman to drive around. He wants to get a feel of the city, he says. Silence reigns in the car, Derek doesn't care as long as he has his earphones plugged into Osman's cellphone, listening to Bessie Smith and then Jelly Roll Morton to really capture the spirit of the era of the gangsters. Meanwhile for Osman, an intellectual animal, this industrial machine is extremely difficult to handle, he hasn't driven in a long while, and the car feels like a foreign body to Osman's rusty handling. They do a tourist's drive-by from the easy residential areas to the dense downtown where Osman does hairpin turns to the streets above, because Derek would like to see it all.

"This is the bar that Goose got shot at!" he shouts at a standard Irish bar, and then deflates back to his seat.

He would have liked to know how Derek knows that, but he doesn't want the kid to lose his enthusiastic imagination, where Osman is feeding from. With short bursts the kid livens up about another key scene from the century-old Albany when they pass the courthouse, a lonely apartment building, and back at the hospital where Osman's father is dying, now turned into the one where Jack 'Legs' Diamond will recover.

They are back home in the evening, getting ready for dinner, this time self-served and eaten standing up. Dale, Daryl, Cheryl, and Eric leave for the hotel to check out at 4am so that they won't be charged for another day. They give everyone else a goodbye before inviting Osman and his mother (and Aunt Mary) over to Indiana as well.

The age difference in the remainders is too hard to handle, and Derek is the first one to go to sleep at 9pm, which seems an astonishing feat of self-discipline for anyone

who doesn't know that the kid will obviously play games in his bed on a tacky PS Vita, a gift from his out-of-touch parents, just to pass the time until he passes out.

So Osman is left alone on the grown-ups table, where Aunt Mary is making eyes at Uncle Joe. The generation gap is seen in conversations as well, especially when they are discussing something that Osman wasn't there for, or doesn't remember.

He excuses himself with some work reason. He would have liked to talk with Derek to get some idea on the zeitgeist, but settles for a lesser form of information, falling asleep across the nightly news on an old but soft couch, in a warm home.

He leaves the next day before Uncle Joe has taken Derek to the airport with him, citing how the university is draconian when it comes to holidays. His mother gives him most of the leftovers, a maternal sign worth much more than words.

Back in the city, the mood is still calm as the main population hasn't returned yet, but Osman is jarred from the festive spirit after he has an interaction with a local Pakistani deli owner, who is asked "What's your real name?" by a curious customer, who "means no disrespect", so he says "I mean, what do your friends in the store call you?" and stumbles upon the answer a couple of times until he is satisfied to leave the premises. The owner says something in Punjabi below his breath, but then turns to Osman.

"You're not Pakistani, I can see that," he tells him, "but I can see just by looking at you, that you are one of us, a Muslim. Where are you from, my friend?"

"T-t-turkey," manages Osman.

"Ah, beautiful place, and a great Muslim country. Love your president."

"Yeah, yeah."

“Listen my friend,” he leans in. “There will be a war. With us, and with them.” Osman, meanwhile, was trying to buy paper towels. “They are trying to stop Islam, these racist people, but they will find out that they can’t. To them we are just foreign, alien, nothing more. 2.99, please. Sorry card minimum is five dollars.”

After one more roll of paper towels:

“Alright, my friend, there you go, be careful now, don’t forget where you belong to. This city, you have the Chinese, Muslim, black, white, they make us think we can live together, but we know that’s not true.”

Coming back to his block, he sees the movers are still bringing out the debris and loading the trash onto the truck. Swept aside there is an undiscarded shell of a delivery meal, a chair too small to sit, a mattress with one corner burnt to reveal the naked wiring, and a door with glittering stickers, all that remains next to visitors’ flowers, tall mourning candles, fliers for restaurants, and promotions for everything affixed to the deceased’s door. UPS has also left something for her, a package from a better time, but nobody dares open it. Whatever it may have been, it serves its purpose as a cardboard monument instead. On the ground, nametags from various events she has attended in her life are bundled like a rat king. Right in front of a mover’s baffled look, Osman picks up the clump.

Her name was Evelyn Dwyer and she has been in many food and drink events around the city, the most recent being on 2010. Her name is erased by the smoke in half of the tags, but the burnt image of the Gowanus Wine Tasting Weekend onto the Williamsburg Smorgasbord VIP remain intact to give out a hint. He Googles her name to

encounter the news about the apartment fire, including her obituary. In one sweep he knows more about her than years of silent neighborly recognition. Evelyn Dwyer, 33, has lived a full life. She had written a novel, co-owned a bar, had a brief stint as an actress, and was supposed to move out from her apartment two weeks from now.

On one of the links, a special news section of a media conglomerate that tackles serious issues such as death like TMZ on TV, reporters discussing a local incident in the same studio, the same zooms, the same accessibility spiced with that good old sass:

“Tony Vallejo, a restaurant owner and a resident of the building, had this to say: ‘I know I woke up, and my dog is barking, and I look at my kitchen, it is filled with smoke, so I start screaming, grab Chase and knock on everybody’s door.’ Regarding the deceased, Evelyn Dahab, ‘You know, to be honest, she, after that boyfriend, she became kind of... w*****y. And with that hair...’”

November 30

Osman sleepwalks again that night. He unlocks his door, locks it behind him, and is off on the street. This time he is fully dressed, ready for the cold, though he is not looking for something specific, just anything that might shelter him. He debates going back to bed, to his original shelter, but after sleepwalking around his block four times, he gathers a centripetal force and slingshots into the night.

Osman, dissatisfied with Manhattan, crosses the Williamsburg Bridge, passing a couple who are fucking against the skyline, ignoring anyone else, yet he can’t help but to say “Great view, isn’t it?” His right leg has already given up by the end of the bridge but he doesn’t know it, limping through upscale restaurants serving diner food, trust fund

kids' apartments, death, an old man playing the sax in front of a Chase ATM. The music sounds elegiac through his heavy breath, but upon really lending an ear one discovers that he doesn't really know what notes he is playing, though that can also be called improvising, as we do, with words, made-up words, every day and every second, even if we are all alone.

Osman sleepwalks through department meetings, classes, evaluation forms, workshops with his colleagues, dinners, dates, yeahs, whatever, alights, fines, weddings, funerals, lives, deaths, random and coincidental interactions with people he will never see again, he sleepwalks in his own home, goes through loft parties where people smoke cigarettes in the building's hallway and scolding an old, retired artist who cannot handle these young kids anymore, forcing him to reconsider whether rent control is worth all the trouble.

He passes the real natives, a deli owner in Carroll Gardens lighting his cigar with a Zippo, an act so traditional that it is considered blasphemous to say that it ruins the tobacco, walks in front of houses in Park Slope where patches of gardens are left to wither away for the winter, with octogenarian women, one Asian, one Caucasian, smoking cigarettes outside of buildings they have lived in since they were born, with the gift of blocking out everything except their nightly cigarette as the smoke conjures their thoughts and makes a fog out of the world outside.

Osman sleepwalks through empty churches, seminaries, knocking on their doors to let him in, but only meets the silence of nothing echoing within. Priests must be warned to not open their doors to strangers at night, and forget about synagogues, so Osman, coming back from the Manhattan Bridge, sees the ironic Tibetan Buddhist temple

in Chinatown, and maybe it is the bright red door reflected from street lights, but he knows for sure it is open.

And it is. There is nobody inside and no sound except the soothing Hare Krishna chanting from speakers. But the lights are on, including what shines upon the souvenir shelves in the gift shop. An ornate water fountain is still running, feeding itself. Making his way through the reception area, after passing a donation box standing strong in a sea of fortunes, Osman encounters the main room that had to adjust to a metropolitan allowance of space, a temple, usually made up of three halls, constricted proportionally into a fairly large, albeit singular, room. At the end of the crossing lined with red leather ottomans, behind an offering of fruits that surround another donation box, to the right of an old TV and to the left of a rusty bell, symmetrically flanked by golden fairy chimneys that give off light from its tens of tiny holes, and finally, circled by two blue neon halos on the wall, one for the body and a smaller one for the head, making the neon formation look like a traditional snowman, and coming out of the eternal flame that is and will be behind everything forever, the Buddha.

Osman, lifted with the long Hare, crashes with Krishna in front of the statue. It is not allowed to have a religious frenetic experience in front of the Buddha, but shoes should be forbidden as well, and nobody is warning Osman, so he is free to bask in the glory of the statue, its meaning for others, especially Buddhists, not to mention tourists, its signification, glamor, an entire religion revolving around places and people Osman doesn't know, will never know because this is not his field, he doesn't read Mandarin, so he cannot read the thousands of names on yellow strips of paper behind him containing

names of people or maybe wishes, he doesn't know, all the lives untouched and untainted by close reading.

His face has gotten slack, his mouth gaping open and his tongue is limp. He is rendered emotionless because everything around him clicking together for his grand experience, but he cannot even feel awe. He is on his knees, tired and panting, gasping for air, intoxicated. After swaying enough, his eyes slowly come into being and he opens his eyes to the Buddha, the Buddha who is beckoning him to be one with him, to absorb him in his deep sleep, deeper than Osman's, deep as eternity, deep as a singular time, deeply rooted, lost and found again in books, rituals, and consciousness.

December 1

He is welcomed back from the Thanksgiving break with an email.

Professor Johnson, [he knows that Osman is only an assistant professor, but still uses the wrong term. Is it a dig or an overbearing reverence?]

I'm very sorry [no you're not.], *but I cannot* [it takes more time to write 'cannot' than 'can't', he must have taken his time, revising, and settling on an official tone] *make it to your office hours, I have a doctor's appointment* [he can't come next week/he can't change the appointment. Osman has to change his schedule.] *Is it possible* [no 'would you,' no 'can you,' when the second-person personal pronoun is both singular and plural, not to mention formal, the barriers break down, everything gets left up to an unknown entity: 'it'. Whether 'it' is possible or not depends on the situation, the relation, the middle ground, whatever decides the schedules of the student and the professor: the

institution, not the occupational authority.] *to arrange* [“Let’s work together”, he is saying. “We belong to the same body.”] *a meeting?*

Thank [Fuck] you,

Gideon

Osman wonders what his emails sound like. How does the recipient read Osman? Is his tone, even while being professional, subject to Poe’s law? His virtual voice is probably the same as everyone else’s, but then why does he immediately get a joke in a fiction book and not in a co-worker’s email? Is it because he is more trained in one than the other, thus expecting what is to come, even though every instance, every book, every sentence, every email is unique and different?

But of course he has to change his schedule around his students. They are the most valuable gifts, our future while the real future—future that is not wasted on the youth, future that grown people know how to handle and explore—that lies in academic research is relegated to students who will not use these theoretical approaches ever again. Definitely not after only taking an intro class.

Gideon is more relaxed this time around, with a question on *The Walk*.

“So by interacting with other people he is defining himself.”

“Sure.”

Gideon is unsatisfied.

“So Walser always has to move and find something new, that’s the point, otherwise the book wouldn’t exist?”

“Right.”

“I think that’s a bullshit excuse.”

Back in the day, when you were chums with a teacher, you could say stuff like this, probably only once, not make a big deal out of it after the word came out, but it would establish a bond between the two, that they were on the same page while the rest of the world wasn’t. Gideon’s “bullshit” is crude and not intended as a joke. Or is Osman missing the point here too?

“For what?”

“For terrible writing. He just goes through random characters. There’s nothing... there, just fleeting observations.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t say that we can’t read into it.”

“I feel like we are reading too much into it.”

“One, that can never happen. Two, it is just a book, Gideon, you should enjoy it. You learn about yourself when you read.”

Point no. 1 is a stupid and simple refutation. Point no. 2 is exactly what a professor had said to Osman when he was a freshman. Nothing original can come out from his mouth, which irritates Gideon even more, giving him opportunities to strike.

“I can’t when you are making us do a ‘close reading’ of a paragraph when the author forgets about it in the next.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Why did you become a teacher anyway?”

Osman's first reaction is to evoke the gods behind him, have paperbacks fly off the shelves and around the room like he is an arcane wizard, but the only thing that comes out is "Excuse me?"

"Why did you choose this job if we are learning about ourselves, and not learning about the book? Anyone can gain an 'insight' if they read too much—"

"There are methods," he regurgitates.

"Scientific?"

"Theoretical," And to twist a knife, "Even Ezra Pound had his own framework."

"Fuck Pound."

There's the chronic anarchist, the constant defier, the eternal teenager, the father-killer. Even though Osman is botching this meeting, it's clear that Gideon will not be satisfied with anything. The esprit d'escalier says "You are not special in your revolt, Gideon, you are just a cog in this revolving machine called 'progress', you are supposed to rebel, you are supposed to think you can do anything until you realize you can't." But what would that say about Osman, who has followed the same steps of this sappy, egotistical narrative exactly to this point, this word, this letter in time?

So Osman doesn't/can't say anything. He wants to end the conversation with a punch line, one last witty remark to show he is more intelligent than this student, but he doesn't know what to say at all. Gideon gets up to leave, but doesn't motion for the door. Instead, standing up while Osman is pretending to be busy with something on his computer screen, he looks at him, and for the first time the secure desk of Osman's feels like a barrier to him instead of a judge's bench. Gideon is still there, waiting for a look

back from Osman accepting defeat. Osman, with no choice, has to meet the eye that seems content, vain but glorious, another battle won against the authority.

“See you in class,” he says, and walks off.

Osman would like coffee, but the maker is empty. In order to buy a cup of coffee from two blocks away, he releases himself to a river of students, each with their own identity, distinguished by hats, beanies, shoes, heels, colors, t-shirt tags, attitude, gait, chatter, make-up, bags, books, iced coffees, headphones, shirts, fabrics, tattoos, everything making up a person and in turn making up the world.

There is a black cashier at the coffee shop. Osman has ordered coffee countless times in his life, but never like this:

“Hello, sir, what would you like?”

“Coffee. Please.”

“Sugar or milk?”

“No... just... African American?”

December 6

Osman is standing still at a subway stop. Motionless, without any cognizance, he seems to be, but not really, staring across the tracks at two young friends chatting loudly in a foreign language and eating popcorn.

From his side of the tracks he can hear a budding conversation.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“What’s up? Haven’t seen you in a while.”

The voices belong to the same person.

“Dude where do I know you from? I don’t know. I know you. And I know you, but I’ve lost all association of you.”

Osman’s remaining energy is spent on turning his head to this curious soliloquy, which the actor, catching his eyes, thinks it’s an invitation to talk to him.

“Hey, man, hey, waiting for the subway, man? Yeah, me too.”

A guy pushing the term twenty-something and probably grasping at straws when it comes to the meaning of life walks into Osman’s sight, blurring the couple in the deep background. He is holding a small video camera at Osman.

“Hey, hey so, are you wondering why I have a camera?”

Osman, older, would have shooed the guy away, or at least interacting with the person for a minute and making no sense he would at least appear crazy, hence left alone..He can give no such signals outside because I don’t allow it, which in turn emboldens the man with the movie–nope, not going to say it.

“I’m documenting my life, man! I show every interaction, my reaction, and reach for life in all its purity. Hey, can you step over to this side, the light is not so good—”

He takes Osman by the arm and is surprised how easy it is to move the man.

“Hey. Hey, man, are you okay?”

Osman doesn’t look like a bum. Osman doesn’t look unhealthy. Osman just simply is. The guy does the routine check of raising Osman’s arm and letting it fall with no resistance, looking into his ear and checking his eye, and, all in a violent crescendo of *Rhythm 0* proportions, kicking and pushing and threatening him.

“Wow, you really are–,” he says, and then turns the camera to himself: “Alright I thought I was gonna go gonzo like Herzog and find the,” he fakes an accent, not a good one, “*ecstatic truth* but this is great, too, as a foil. The one time I can deconstruct my experiment.”

He walks away, hits some buttons on his camera screen, and then casually saunters to Osman’s side again.

“Oh boy, this train just won’t come, huh—Here we are, we are both alone, and I’m starting up a conversation about nothing. This is the first interactive step. See, what I’m doing in this random interaction is using my surroundings. The grounds of reference are already established due to the shared place and action.”

Gets a close-up of Osman, puts two fingers on his jaw, pulling it down and raising it back up as if to imitate speech.

“We’ll dub over this if need be,” he says.

From the depths of the underworld, the rumblings of a train can be heard in bursting staccato. The guy pushes Osman into the car. “So,” he says, Osman sitting with his legs straight, occupying more space than socially allowed, but nobody can say anything, “Where are you going to—not too direct, not too creepy, after starting with casual points I’m letting the conversation slowly specify itself to get more personal. Of course, the personal’s depth of field is vast, so we are focusing on near, comfortable future. So why not show our own willingness for connection by giving a ‘I’m going to a friend’s house.’—not that I’m actually going to a friend’s house, but see how I’m giving a bit of a personal information to show my honesty. We are still at the identification level

of trust, and let's see whether taking the same subway, having friends, and going somewhere is enough to build some kind of camaraderie, or should I say, camaraderie?"

They are at a sports bar where corporate bros are drunk and acting as they should be, screaming at the camera because of the Kodak effect.

"Now, things usually don't rush this fast but I don't want to miss this opportunity, so we are at a bar right now, watching the game, drinking beer like buddies, and my friend here has generously offered to buy the first round. Don't think that this is a waste of money. I'll buy the second round, so we can both be doing favors to each other and be living examples of the Ben Franklin effect, something which I've talked about in my other videos."

Off the camera, Osman buys the second round. "So now we are getting tipsy, I have shouted at the screen because my team is making a play, in identifying I pledge allegiance, not only to the men on the field but to the spectators who may wish to talk to me about our team. If you don't come across a douchebag, even the supporters of the rivals can make small talk with you. Remember, myself, everything is an opportunity." And the third. "Past sports, because that was only the first level, I am talking about my life, my problems at work, in relationships, and the more I talk, and the more he listens, even without giving any unsolicited advice, I feel myself closer to him. As if he can be a true friend. We talk about the good old days, share memories and facts, and through mutual knowledge, we build trust. From getting to know him until now, I can predict that he is a nice person, interested in the same things that I am, and that maybe makes him a potential friend—Hello!"

The camera changes its aperture to include the two post-work women on a girls' night out. Ignoring the spotlight initially, the distant one is the first to break a smile for the camera. Her friend hits her on the shoulder in jest, signaling "Why did you give us away?" even though she is in on the joke as well. While explaining what's going on to the girls, the guy leaves the camera on the table as it records Osman's blank face.

"Ok, so here we are, at a bar, a setting to socialize, that's why people are here, and we have two beautiful women who have responded to my gaze, or rather, my camera's gaze, because perhaps they are intrigued?" One of them shrugs. "Or they just want conversation, like we all did, like you have seen before, caught on tape. So we move over, body language covering the space between, and do a similar routine, surroundings, reference, and such, but with a little more bite, am I right, ladies? We gauge each other to find out about ourselves, but also this potential partner we might spend more time with, temporally, but also on a traditionally assumed level of intimacy as well. We have the entire history of the world behind us." He winks. The distant one catches it. "Since we take ourselves seriously, we want the other person to be on our frequency. So we wear each other down with jokes, not to mention how playful one can get with alcohol, I might ask her about her job and how boring it is, she might ask me about my documentary, and whether I have recorded having sex as well. Now I might give the real answer, say no, or I can say 'Yes.' with a risqué look, or, if I'm an asshole, and correct me if I'm wrong ladies, I can say 'Wanna be a star?'" The women look at each other with smiling disgust with a telepathic "Ugh, men..." between them regarding all their wrong choices when it came to the opposite sex. "But," the guy continues, "as we get inebriated, the jokes get more personal, but less bitter. 'Oh yeah?' she shall say to some extravagant claim of

mine, surely I must be joking, but am I really?, and I shall say ‘Oh yeah.’ She can even smack me on my arm as a gesture of push-and-pull. But mostly pull, because we all want to be desired. Now, with the courage of alcohol and camera combined, I can make a move. Not a huge one, because that will tell that I am too forward, but a small kiss on the lips.” He kisses her. “Kisses don’t even mean that much anymore. It’s just having a fun time together. But like everything else it is also a level for more levels. Opening up to the others so you can find one to close down with and shut the rest from your life.”

The women are sucked into this deconstructive flirting, until one of them realizes Osman, whom she thought was part of the game, is not going to change any time soon. Irked out, she pressures her friend to leave. They give their numbers to the director, giggling, hoping that he will shoot more with them, and get out of focus as they walk away, lost in the camera blur.

“Well, we could have scored tonight, but then you wouldn’t be a malleable, immobile model, would you? You can’t have it all. But that’s okay, because now another aspect to our conversational field has opened up: women. You look older, maybe you’re married, so you can tell me that all the clichés about marriage are true, but it is also something beautiful and that I should try it sometime. Hopefully your wife won’t be looming over the conversation so we can talk about more than one woman who has affected your life. We can reminisce, remember the forgotten ones with hate, love, regret, passion in our drunkenness, and I’ll out of the blue, just ask a sexual history question, like ‘What was the greatest blowjob you’ve received?’, because we are that close now, and then, without waiting for you, I’ll answer on my own. ‘Claire Burton, from New England, sophomore year of college,’ I’ll say, not bitter, no no, but bittersweet. Lovely

Claire. Have I told you about Claire? Oh man I gotta shut this thing off to concentrate on telling a story.”

For rounds five to eight, the camera gets turned off for a break and the entire history of this guy, whom Osman is still not registering, rolls out. He laughs, he tears up, he lets loose. Finally, when he realizes he is out of breath for the first time because there is nothing more to say, a gratified tenderness forms on his face.

“Listen, man, I gotta tell you, this has been more rewarding than I thought it would be. I have documented hours, *hours!*, of material and none of it is as powerful as laying out exactly what is going on here. I mean, I have talked to many people, even friends, with or without this camera, and I haven’t felt so close to anyone like this. You are whatever I want you to be, and we are experiencing this moment of interaction, communication, relation together, in all its bare clarity. No bullshit, just simply what is going on, and the camera is recording the truth. All throughout this documentary I was using the camera as a gun, but only pointed at others. I thought that I was winning the game by exposing the game, but I was actually destroying the game and leaving nothing in its place. Wow. Thank you so much. You made me understand a lot of things I didn’t know. I would really like to hang out with you more, but I gotta go back home to edit, and I would help you if I could, with what I wouldn’t know because you haven’t said a single word tonight, I can take you to your home but I don’t know where you’re coming from or where you should be going to, and also for the sake of the movie I’d prefer for us to part ways, like a perfect night of true connection, so I’ll be leaving now, ok? ”

He bobs Osman’s head. Picking up the camera again, he is moving away from the bar to the door, the frame still locked on Osman. The guy zooms in on him as he gets

farther out so that Osman remains the same in the frame, but shakier with every step taken.

“And now, after all this male bonding, we say our farewells, our insides calm and empty, I can go home and *not* drown in my sorrows because we have drowned each other in our sorrows. Quid pro quo. Have I made a friend? Will I remember him tomorrow? Or will he just become a relic in my solipsistic, subjective history—a tool, a sounding board for me to talk to and construct myself in the process with no regard to the other? Does the question ‘What is it like to be you?’ ultimately answers ‘What is it like to be me?’ Do we just live for ourselves, make friends for ourselves, fuck for ourselves, and think about the others for ourselves as well, not only for pleasure and comfort but to make meaning because what we see when we look in the mirror in the dead of the night, a single, pale face with no context—unconnected from the life outside, all too much to absorb it all—, so small and insignificant yet so powerful, ourselves who are too much to handle and surprisingly too easy to get lost in? Only time will tell. We shall see in the next episode...”

December 10

He is sitting in a dimly lit dive bar, reading *Tropic of Capricorn*, drunk on Miller. Just like everyone else’s experience, he will remember the beginning and the end of his books, but the rest will be forgotten in a stream of consciousness. He is waiting for a woman to talk to him, because, gentlemen, and some ladies, *After Hours* or not, if a woman talks to you when you are reading any of his trilogies, she is down to fuck, right here, right now.

Her name is Ljófufjöll from a secluded village in North Dakota and she arrives on his seventh. She is named after the volcano Ljósufjöll in Iceland that means ‘Mountains of the Light,’ but a typo has made her name unique. That's as far he remembers about her. He should stop drinking, but that would look awkward when flirting. So he buys her a drink as well and puts aside the book.

“Yeah, yeah, Henry Miller is great...” they both seem to be saying. “It’s not misogyny, you know, it’s misanthropy.”

“Totally,” they say.

He doesn’t know what Ljófufjöll does for a living, maybe she is really a fissure vent system and central volcano, but he can’t ask now because he pukes onto the bar before they can get over the preliminaries. His body was turned to her, however, to show interest, and the vomit, mostly beer and bar snacks, gets Ljófufjöll splashed as well. Her face is covered in pretzel bites and something brown.

“I’m sorry,” Osman says, spit bungee jumping from the bottom lip. “I’m so sorry, can... can I kiss you?”

The first strums of “Fade Into You” are heard. The rest of the bar is swooning in the nostalgia of 1993. She looks at him with sheer-

“Yes?”

They make out, lip on lip, spit on vomit. Osman licks off what has been lost. The smell forces him to regurgitate into her mouth. When the emesis drools from the lips onto the floor, the bartender kicks them out. They put on their coats while kissing sloppy, Ljófufjöll burying her wet face in Osman’s chest. They dance, or more likely faintly oscillate for a couple of seconds as drunk, weak poles swaying to the bends of Mazzy

Star's guitars until the bartender reminds them that he kicked them out a couple of sentences ago. They leave the bar to make out in front of buildings, blocking people's paths, dry retching in the few unlit alleys of Lower East Side, who says punk is dead? They do it slamming bodies next to the Conde Nast sign in front of the Freedom Tower, taking a photo of themselves having sex on the Brooklyn Bridge.

She turns around.

“Say my name!”

“Is that a reference to Breaking Bad or Destiny's Child?”

Ljófufjöll slaps him cold.

“Ljöföggöröjj!”

Slap!

“Lgyofüfiyol!”

He stops her hand this time.

“No, you say my name!”

“Osh-man?” she says in that cushiony accent, words soft like snowflakes, enrapturing Osman with affection. It is going to be winter soon after all.

Still on the bridge with the wind tunneling between his legs, maybe she can have sex only in really cold places Osman thinks until the next thing he remembers is being in the same position and but this time with the relative thermal comfort of the inner city, against a display window that screams CHROME YOUR XMAS, so they scream as well, Ljófufjöll in carnal tongue and Osman reading the vinyl lettering. Being too into it, she bangs her head involuntarily and repeatedly on the display window until an alarm goes off and they need to run to Tompkins Square Park. An old homeless man says “Right on,

man!” and fist bumps Osman as he and Ljófufjöll crash on a bench to kiss more, even after the sun comes up like an aggressive metaphor.

December 3

After the cleaning of the deceased’s apartment soot enters Osman’s bedroom like a distracting old lover coming back. He goes to his office, dims the lights, and falls asleep on his single armchair, amongst his books, his external life.

Early morning, vague, but brisk, walking, talking, and some screaming wake him up. He listens to the commotion outside first, one ear on the door, but then finds an opportunity to lower the handle quietly when nobody is nearby, and is greeted by a tornado of papers, some burnt, some escaped and floating. He carefully ambles along a paper tiled floor with books are spread open. Front, back, and spine all gaze up to him.

Whatever it is, he is not in the mood. But that’s not up to him.

He knocks on the Chair’s door. She says it’s open. Her shelves are empty and the floor is a medium sized city downtown of randomly stacked books.

“Hello Osman.”

She is smiling, but not looking at him. Her eyes are fixated onto the paper shredder, where underneath worms of torn paper form a mountain of white and black.

“Paper shredder.” Osman cannot form a phrase but at least he can signify.

“I wouldn’t think I needed one as well. I bought one today. You can use mine after I’m done.”

“What’s going on?”

“You don’t know?”

“What?”

“They discovered the oldest Greek tragedy. Way before Aeschylus. It’s nothing like it. I haven’t read it, but they are saying that it will change everything. It must be a lie! It cannot be true! We are being framed. Comparative Literature is being implicated in a heinous crime against knowledge!”

The logic is circuitous enough to have Osman accept the conclusion without wrapping his head around it first.

“Pascal?”

“Pascal’s dead! I have no idea how or why but for the first time I believe that there are external forces who don’t want us to exist!”

“He’s dead?” Osman can only parrot.

“What are we going to do, Osman? Everybody is going insane. Zhang jumped out of his window but luckily it’s only two stories high so he’s fine, but what about his brain? What about all the knowledge we thought we knew?”

Osman wants to ask about the tragedy, what is it about, who wrote it and when, at least some empirical research might help them in this situation, but either he is also as stupefied as her, or something is holding him back as the Chair keeps talking. Fortunately, asking questions to a lecturer is frowned upon.

“Oh I’ll be fine, don’t worry,” she answers a question Osman didn’t ask. “Being famous does have its perks.”

Osman doesn’t know how much she is pretending, whether the leaders in revolutions rise up to the occasion because they simply cheerleaders while privates die on the battlefield.

“But I think I might be in shock. They told me that this new tragedy changes the way we see morals and customs in the subsequent plays. Think about it, everything we have built upon is false! It was false anyhow, but now that the false is false!”

The light bulb above bursts its tungsten into orange sparks.

“Hold on, I think I can work with this from now on. Yes! From now on, the false is false!”

She leaves the room screaming “The false is false!” and people join in either with melancholy or with misplaced fervor. “That’s a great idea,” Tom, Dick, and Mary says. He writes the phrase on his naked body with an idle marker and drops back on the floor to continue rolling around in worksheets, drafts, and manuscripts.

Osman tours the floor and finds himself drawn closer to a source of heat. He can recognize the smell of smoke now. Günther Jaspers is drinking vodka from the handle while burning his library with a torch. He looks at Osman and douses the flames with the rest of the bottle. Next door, Fiona the administrative assistant is sobbing on her desk. When she raises her head there’s ink smudged on her face.

“Of course, I know what I’m going to do,” she says, but Osman can read a strange trace on her face indicating otherwise, “I’ve always dreamt of leaving the city and spending my last days in my grandmother’s old house in Colmar. I don’t know why I haven’t done it. Maybe the city is like an addiction and you get lost in the current. Or, maybe, maybe,” tears once again, she wipes down the askew Rorschach test around her mouth, “maybe it’s because I don’t have a grandmother in Colmar! She lives in Quebec City, okay! Okay? What if I never leave this continent? What if I’m stuck here forever! Get out of my room! I said get out!”

The receptionist student is on the phone.

“So the English department is fine? What about German? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah, I’ve heard that. Classics are suing the university? As the entire department? That’ll be fun. It’s a shame I’m graduating.”

Hafiz’s door is open and he is silently examining at his white walls. A PhD candidate is lying next to the kitchen area with a fruit knife in one hand and strings of shallow blood streams lazily trickling from his other.

“I’ve heard someone from Latin jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge. What a bunch of fucking posers! They don’t know how deep this affects us, man. They don’t know...”

Günther Jaspers’ literally burning plight has influenced other offices as well, even if it is by force, which means that he would personally request setting his colleague’s libraries on fire and wouldn’t take no for an answer. He lies, passed out, torch vertical and alight, in front of Osman’s office. Osman steps over him and sits in his chair. The smell doesn’t bother him, and the flames warm him in this cold, bleak winter day.

Outside his window life moves on, an ambulance blares through the traffic, friends are taking a cigarette break, dogs are being walked, a homeless woman is waiting outside a bagel store for change etc. All this, the city, goes up the avenue as far as the eye can see, and Osman is sedated, lost in his mind.

December 13

He hasn’t seen Sandy after... that incident. After missing a couple of appointments, but still sending her the bill, she has tried to communicate with him over email, giving names and numbers, but Osman didn’t want to start all over again. So she

gave up and mentioned this new psychiatric technology, an AI—not a bot, the manufacturers were stressing—into which Sandy has uploaded hours and hours of therapy sessions of Osman’s, and if he logs onto the website, he can resume his therapy through a virtual Sandy.

Osmanx: hi

Sandy8476: Hello, Osman.

Osmanx: hello

Sandy8476: Hello, Osman.

Osmanx: where do we start

Sandy8476: *Checking your past...* Wow! I am surprised you haven’t killed yourself.

Sandy8476: Osman?

Sandy8476: Osman, for our session to continue, I’d like some input.

Sandy8476: Osman, because of our protocol, I am going to call 911 if you do not reply in 10...

Sandy8476: 9...

Sandy8476: 8...

Sandy8476: 7...

Osmanx: im here

Sandy8476: Well, then, how is your family?

Osmanx: my dad is the same, my mother is happy, and im sad

Sandy8476: Why?

Osmanx: because i dont feel at home

Sandy8476: (silence) *Please say more about this situation.*

Osmanx: i dont know what to feel, how to feel, everything seems foreign

Sandy8476: Can it be because you are adopted?

Osmanx: no it used to be fine until now

Sandy8476: Can it be because you are adopted?

Osmanx: maybe it has something to do with my biological home, maybe thats missing. can it be because of not remembering istanbul, my birth

Sandy8476: *Looking up for travel deals to Istanbul.*

Osmanx: no no no

Sandy8476: *Found a deal that leaves next week. Direct flight. Passenger just cancelled.*

Osmanx: id prefer not to

Sandy8476: Nice reference. But what do you have to lose, Osman?

Sandy8476: Osman?

December 14

sanki tutunamayanların o ünlü yetmiş sayfalık bilinç akışı mektubu gibi osmanın istanbul macerası da onun etrafında dönen bir fırtına gibi geçiyor osman sadece havalimanını ve onu orada karşılayan ve tek görevi onu bir otele yerleştirmek olan bir üniversite görevlisini algılayabiliyor çünkü havalimanları her ülkede aynıdır gerisi yalan gerisi osmanın evine geri dönmesi ve asla orada olmayan bir başlangıcı araması türkçesi yok diye yanında sesli bir sözlükle dolaşıp aleti eline alan bakal çıraklarının alete am sik göt

yazıp pusi dik ve ess gibi isimleri aralarında anıra anıra gülerek söylemelerini izlerken kendi de gülmeye çalışıyor ama nafile ne yapması gerektiğini bilmiyor bu yüzden bari turist olarak başlasın belki ilerisi gelir ilk önce bir istanbul turuna katılıyor grup lideri osmanı türk zannedip kanka hesabına yanına destek olarak istiyor ama anlıyor ki farklı bir memleketten belki de alamancıdır diyor topkapı sultanahmet turkish delight taksim square tunnel galata filan derken osman nerede olduğunu unutuyor google mapsten bakayım diyor ama new yorkun düzenli ve kolay ızgara planlı haritasına karşın istanbulun eciş bücüş neyin ne olduğu belli olmayan daracık sokaklardan bir şey çıkartamıyor adaşı olan imparatorluğunun son dönemlerinde aynen kendinden önceki tarihlerin memleketlerin kültürlerin etkisini kaldıramadığı gibi şimdi de içinde bulunmadığı bulunamayacağı asırları aşan tarihi kaldıramıyor amerikayı düşünüyor tarihsiz ama çeşit çeşit kültürler barındıran bir de buraya bakıyor çeşit yok artık ama tek kültürün bile kendi içindeki inanılmaz farklılığını bir türk kahvaltı sofrasında ya da ortaköyde türkçe bilmediği için kumpirin üstüne bütün malzemeleri doldurulan patatesi yemekte zorlanırken bakakaldığı asya kıtasının belirli etnik sosyoekonomik sebeplerden değil de sadece aralarında küçük bir boğaz olduğu için ne kadar da farklı olduklarını bilmiyor

kütük diyor oteldeki resepsiyon görevlisi ilkokul ingilizcesiyle du yu nov yor kütük nambır diyor osman vat iz det diyor resepsiyon görevlisi kütük no anlıyor bu sefer oohoooo diyor yanındaki iş arkadaşına ankaraya gitmeli bu ama nah gösterirler buna kütüğü bari karakola git diyor diğeri başka yolu yok onlar sana yolu gösterir aslında görevli de bilmiyor osmanın ne yapması gerektiğini ama laf işte ya bu zorlarsan bir yere

gider böylece osman internette linksiz bağısız sadece ingilizce bir sayfa olan istanbul yabancılar şube müdürlüğüne gidiyor derdini anlatması beş dakika beklemesi üç buçuk saat sürüyor sıra numarası 31 now serving 5 sırada konuşabilecek amerikan biri var robert kolejde öğretmenmiş ama öyle kolej değilmiş college dense de iyi bir özel lise olarak düşün diyor maaşı da çok iyi peki sen neden buradasın diyor osman çünkü diyor üç gece önce sokakta bir kavgaya girişmek zorunda kaldım ben geri çekildim ama adam bana bir türkçe şeyler diyor sonra benim dilime döndü ama olmuyor o da fak mak anlamadım yani neyse sonra polis ayırdı ama yine de burada tutanak vermem gerekiyor dikkat et diyor burada yabancıları sevmezler hiç sevmeyenler daha da az sevecekler gerçi sen biraz türke benziyorsun ne ilginç tam osman hikayesini anlatıp yardım isteyecekken kolejli öğretmenin sırası geliyor hadi bana eyvallah diyor osman ot sattıkları ama aslında kentsel dönüşüm ya da finansal ortaklıklar aracılığıyla mutenalaştırma için tarlabaşında yakalanan afrikalı göçmenler ile dilenmekten yorulmuş suriyeli mülteciler arasında kaybolup gidiyor

polis kafka okumamıştır herhalde diye düşünüyor osman peki neden bu kadar kafkaesk konuşuyor diye düşünüyor osman polis soruyor kimsin numara 31 nesin numara 31 nereden geldin numara 31 nereye gidiyorsun numara 31 emin misin sen sen olduğuna adın osman ha istanbul 34e yakın ama ismin sadece outzbire gidiyor lan valla ne garip ahmet gelsene lan gelirken de çay getir bak herife türkiye doğumlu amerikan ismi de osman herife bak eğlenmesi bittikten sonra osmana bir numara veriyor bu sefer osmanın numarası değil ama 6 nolu odaya git diyor orada evrak doldurtacaklar osman bir sürü kısmı boş bırakıyor keşke telefonla konuşmasına izin verseler keşke annesini arasa da

sorabilse ama annesine ben asıl annemi arıyorum diyerekten bunalıma da sokmak istemiyor evraklar doldurulunca 4 nolu odaya bırakılıyor sonra yine bekleme odası 6 nolu oda 62 nolu tavşan oda derken osman keşke rüşvet verebilmeyi düşünseymiş derken osman ilk geldiği odada buluyor kendini demek osman ha diyor aynı polis görevlisi bu sefer daha yavaş ve daha ciddi osman yok senin ismin burada annen baban yok kayıtlarda yok sen de yoksun bence cia fbi filan bu dış mihrak mısın lan devlet mi yolladı seni niye geldin bu ülkeye pensilvanyadandır bu siktir git lan buradan yeni temizledik burayı senin gibi bu ülkeyi işkillendirecek yabancı piçleri istemiyoruz anladın mı

osmanın bu konuşmadan tek işitebildiği laf si ay ey ve ef bi ay oluyor ama yine de anlıyor polisin ne demek istediğini tamam diyor birkaç günüm kaldı zaten biraz daha turist gibi gezerim dönerim fatihten taksim otobüsüne biniyor imçdeki kumaşçıları unkapanında herkes her şeyi internete videoyla yükleyebildikleri için kalmamış kasetçileri fatihin kadınlar pazarını ve aynı bir türk gibi kızıl kilisesini ve ortodoks okullarını kaçırıyor taksim en azından aşağıya doğru indiği için kendini boşluğa bırakıp yürümeye başlıyor bakalım nereye gidecek peşinden kar yağıyor adeta ama tipi değil istanbulun griliğini yumuşatacak gökyüzünü kapayacak büyük büyük parçalar galatasaray lisesinin orada artık sınırdan düşünecek başka bir şeyleri kalmamış bir anne güruhu cumartesi dışında artık hafta içleri de buluşan ama ismi hala aynı kalan cumartesi annelerini görüp neden orada olduklarını anlamıyor sloganlarından yorulmuş bir anne etrafa bakarken osmanı görüyor ve hipnotize olmuş gibi ona doğru yürümeye başlıyor oğlum diyor gözyaşları gelemiyor çünkü kendisi de inanmıyor karşısındakinin gerçek olduğuna oğlum seni nerelerde aradım bir bilsen osmanın yüzünü elleri arasına alıyor

soğuk ve kuru osman ilk önce geri kaçmak istiyor ama sonra kendini bırakıyor annenin ellerine bu sahneyi gören diğer anneler de sloganlarını bir bir bırakıyor ve osmana kitlenip adeta yürüyen ölümler gibi osmana doğru yaklaşıyorlar oğlum oğlum diyor her biri martta ağlarmış gibi ses çıkarıp aslında çiftleşen kedi feryatlarıyla osman kaçmak istiyor çünkü boğulacak ama hayatında ilk defa böyle bir hissi yaşıyor yaratılmış sevgi değil de akli dengesi yerinde olmayanların kendi içlerinden gelen sevginin içinde kaybolmak istiyor annelerin elleri suratına dokunuyor üzerine çullanıyor ve osman aslında nefessiz kaldığından ve boğuluyor olmasından dolayı olduğunu bilmiyor ama yavaş yavaş bir ısının arttığını bunun dışarıdan değil de kendi çekirdeğinden geldiğini hissediyor beyaz bir ışık kar anne aile döngü sonsuzluk

derken çat diye suratına bir su kırbağı yiyor cumartesi anneleri cumartesi buluşur diye hoparlörden gelen dalgaları bozulmuş ama polis olduğu her yanından anlaşılan bir ses etrafa kaçıyor herkes anne baba çocuk bekar yaşlı osman da kaçması gerektiğini hissediyor ve onu çağıran karanlık tünele giriyor sembolik olarak kendini karaköyde buluyor halici izliyor martıların geyik yapmasından oltaların ince keskin sesine kadar her şey gözyaşı getiriyor osmana üstü yeterince ıslak değilmiş gibi gün batarken vapurla evlerine dönen insanları soluk yüzleri ve basit hayatları görüyor bir çift köprüde balık ekme yerken amerikan dizileri tartışıyor dizilerin ingilizce isimlerini çat pat duyunca osman son birkaç ayda ilk defa gülümseyebiliyor ama acılı bir gülümseme bu içini yakan onu mutlu ederken de üzen çünkü osman bir turist olsa da burada sadece birkaç gün geçirse de turistlik günah olsa da bu insanların hayatlarını öğrenemesem de burada yaşayabilirdim diyor burada bir hayatım olabilirdi dili öğrenseydim kültürü bilseydim

osman burada geçen bir kitabın karakteri olabilirdi kendisi olabilirdi ama bilmiyor ki o turistliğe mahkum istanbulda yaşasaydı da turist olurdu new yorkta da turistlik belli bir ülkeye ait bir şey değildir turist kendisi gerçekten olamadan var olan tek gerçek dünya vatandaşıdır ama boş verelim şimdi böyle konuları çünkü haliçin üzerinden kıpkırmızı bir günbatımı yaklaşıyor bütün ülkeye kısa bir merhaba dedikten sonra geceyi getirmek için bari şimdi anı yaşayalım

December 20

The building's buzzer is filled with movers' cards and the tenants have been leaving them intact as an act of defiance. Osman is not so sure. There has been another fire nearby, he can smell it, fresh. Checking his mail for the first time in weeks, he finds a letter with his name written in cursive. It is coming from 7910 Cresecent Executive Drive, Charlotte, NC 28217, but with the ZIP code 55806, sealed with a Hallmark sticker. Funny, he doesn't know anyone from there, maybe Wilmington, but Charlotte seems too rural. Still, it is nice to be reminded during the holidays. For this special occasion, he uses a mail opener he thought he would never use again. The letter contains a card that writes 'Home Sweet Home' on it with the same font on the letter. Only after opening the card he realizes that it is from Time Warner Cable and they are offering him a deal on their TV services.

He can't sleep. At first he thinks it's because of jet lag, then the bridge and tunnel crowd that scream shitfaced on the street because their suburban houses are too big to handle a lowered pitch. It has been five days now and he can't sleep. He has never had

insomnia before. When he was young, once a year, usually in the summer, not because of the heat, he would have one night where he would tell himself that this is that night/day of the year where he won't be able to sleep all night so why not check out the curiosities of 5am television. He was only able to close his eyes with the lazy approach of the daybreak with dew.

He knows this is different because he doesn't enjoy the yearly visitor from the first night, when he didn't know that this would turn into a dark, personal hell. At first he masturbates, whenever he becomes available again, to tire himself out. His arm gets cramps because he strains harder to bring himself to come, thinking about past and present fantasies until his mind runs out of imagination and his penis runs out of semen.

He finally gives in to the puritan solution of closing his eyes and counting sheep. He inhales and exhales deeply to relax parts of his body one by one, starting from the toes and working up, but sometimes his body decides where to relax so he has to obey, it knows him better. He visualizes his corporal landscape in two different colors like in those twilight infomercials, blue for relaxed and red for tense, and with each new inhale he would feel the relaxed parts ebb back, tensing and turning red, until the exhale pushes the dividing line forward to where it belonged before and thankfully gaining some ground.

The realization that it is not his body but his mind preventing him any sleep comes after the second day when none of the above methods work and his workout routine he so wanted to count on falls apart after sleeping so little. He gets frantic; a regular sign of insomnia, but recognizing something doesn't ease the pain, so he does the

only thing he knows—research. Nevertheless, after countless hours on the Internet, he knows too much about the condition to tackle it with a lucky, foolhardy attempt.

Like a crossword giving him mixed signals, the neon sign of the steakhouse outside writes H O R S E HOUSE. Osman says “Stables!”

4am is when everything is at its quietest, but that only means any other noise, bug, dog, drunk, will take the stage, as loud and sharp as the rest. So he uses a sound program he has downloaded on his phone. He chooses ‘Water Flow’ because of his affinity for the Heraclitus’ quote that reeks of Buddhism, hoping the trickle will clear his mind off of thoughts and carry them out to the sea where they will merge with everything else. Everything else should make his own mind and his own problems look smaller. But the sound of dripping is inconsistent enough to make him chart the irregularities, one drip now and three drips after that one. He wonders how long the developers have recorded the sound and when will it loop again because he doesn’t have anything else to do and think about when he is trying not to think about anything.

So he finds a white noise machine, the best in the market, none of that water dripping, whale wailing, Yule log bullshit; it comes with ‘Twenty-Five Different Frequencies, Not Sounds™’, the package claims boldly. The tiny gadget is overwhelming, like a constant wave washing over him, competent at first but soon it becomes patronizing with its continuous sshhh, ordering him to shut up and sleep. He still keeps the machine on even though he thinks that it is useless because he can’t bear the responsibility of ruling out a possible solution with his own volition. At least when someone else asks “Have you tried a white noise machine, it cured my cousin’s apnea, he

sleeps like a baby,” Osman will say “Yes,” he will not say “Yes, but I turned it off after a while because it was too condescending.”

The sign says DRESS USE. Osman goes “Salad!”

He decides to try homeopathic cures from China, India, Taiwan, Bangladesh, wherever it might be imported from Middle East and Asia to his deli two blocks away, but he is going to order them all online of course because he is not going to go out in this state, but he loses his wallet and loses his shit as well. He searches his entire house, a measly one-bedroom, only to find toy guns from the office Christmas party, a toothbrush from the previous resident six years ago, his father’s photographs he still hasn’t printed, a broken umbrella, and cables, for what he doesn’t know, just the channels with the ability to connect everything but without anything to connect to. But no wallet, its absence makes him freak out and weakly head-butt a wooden door without any serious intention. He knows better than to harm his brain, the only thing he has left.

Some day, sometime before twilight, in the fringes of his last chance of the night to fall asleep, his delirious limbo is quaked with a tumble coming from the construction outside. Echoing aside, Osman also hears the periodic ignition crescendo of an electric saw, finding its groove on a higher frequency, only to be interrupted by repeated contact with something that can be perceived as metal, then turned off or left growling because it overheats quickly. In less than two minutes, the machine is ready to be used again, and Osman has no choice but to wait.

An hour passes, and like an abandoned boom box playing abrasive beats, or a crazy hobo who may or may not be belligerent, no resident has gone outside to stop this,

so Osman feels he has to play the role. Approaching with curiosity instead of hope might create a pleasant situation for all, so Osman leaves any determination behind, simply aiming to understand what's going on to ease his brain.

He goes out with the feigned intention of smoking a cigarette, not knowing that he was craving one. Above the dusty and stark light of the construction, now six floors up, residential lights are on inside thin narrow windows above the closed bar, all behind a white banner that writes 'Kafka Construction', 3830 28th St, Long Island City, 718-937-0020, black on white, Arial bold, minimalist design.

He approaches two workers outside of the site. He would have liked to say hello, but the electric saw is in use, so Osman can only offer a cigarette. One worker abstains; the other takes two for himself with half-assed gestures signifying that he is getting the non-smoker's share as well. Osman shows he is fine with it and gets thanked with a smile. If only anything bothersome could be solved with smoking a cigarette together.

Finally the saw dies down, waiting for its next target.

"Hello."

"Hi. Thanks for the cig."

"Sure. So..."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to'—"

"Ask about the construction? Why is it this late? What good is it that we are building without any light? Not to mention that we get tired more easily? Why has nobody come outside to stop us or called the police? Yes, sure, fire away."

The construction worker has asked all the questions Osman would have, so he remains silent, maybe a forward head twitch to call for the answers.

“Here’s the truth: I don’t know. We are freelance contractors so we just do what we are told and move on. I get sent to different jobs every day and never to the same building. It’s great to have a small part in every construction, but I can’t be thinking about why I’m here right now. They tell us to open a hole in the morning and close it at night and open it again the next day. Anything else, the meaningful reasons behind what, where, and when we are employed for, anything about this construction, especially for an overnight job, I wouldn’t know, so that’s the correct answer. They pay us, we work. You can call the company, not the owners of the plot but our employment agency, but I’m sure the database will be too crowded to make sense.”

“When are you guys—”

“Done? For the night? You hope. Again, I don’t know, they just tell us when we are. Any hour they don’t, I get 26.84 dollars more, so I can’t complain.”

Osman’s cigarette is over, so he is going back to his bed, but gives the construction worker another cigarette, so that he will maybe make a bit less noise if possible, because Osman’s a good guy, you know?

Like Al Pacino, or anyone who is new to Alaska in the summer, he covers his windows in blankets and plunges himself into an eternal darkness, unable anymore to trust the sounds and voices outside to tell whether it is day or night. Chitchat on the street about a movie. Children, Osman hears, after school, Osman thinks, in a group, screaming together in joy as they walk past the soup kitchen, rats, homeless people. Something on

the street sounds like a bag of glass is being dragged. Or someone is trying to blow into a broken saxophone. People are loud in the city at night because people are loud in the city at night. Inside, his radiator exhales heavily, then squeaks in rapid fire like a rat drowning in the pipes, vermin wailing like birds who have forgotten to migrate. Mice use his apartment's skeleton to travel on the coldest nights. He taps a soft spot on the drywall and they scratch back.

He tries to lie on his back, on his face, reverting to the opposite end of the bed and flipping the pillows for the fresh feeling. He usually sleeps on his side but when he does it now he can hear a thumping in his ear, scientifically explained as vibrations of his heartbeat, but these feel deeper, louder, as if the slouching beast has decided to pay him a visit on his way. Can this be 'what has happened in the past months', an external embodiment of Osman's internal fissuring, symbolized because consciousness cannot be explained through imaginary signs but through inner vibrations?

The life in his apartment has turned into a dream that he can control physically, but can never wake up from, which should make it a nightmare, come to think of it. He wants to hallucinate to at least see something different, where he doesn't have power over anything but can bask in the haze of mental residue. Forget REM, the best he can hope for is what overcomes him between stages 1 and 2 where he can feel his eyes closing and a concept can trickle through his neurons to fire a projection onto his mental screen, but he can only remember the sensation of thought after being jolted up by the people outside who are afraid of rats—more cunning than cityfolk and the traps the city had laid down for them—or would like to make a big deal of seeing one, brave men pointing them out to

their female companions so that they will scream and reveal their sad helpless state, the weak woman looking for comfort in the strong man who is fearless in the face of rodents.

His phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Osman? We have found your wallet.”

“Thank you.”

“A homeless man found it.”

“Gene?”

“No, not Gene. You can get your wallet from the soup kitchen.”

The line for the soup kitchen—a Christian mission devoted more to anti-Vietnam hippie saints than its namesake St. Joseph—has a diverse enough crowd that they get their own special nicknames from Osman as he watches them from his window. On the line, there is Bodybuilder Mike in a tank top, no chest hair just muscles. There is Dopey Dennis with one eye wandering off and the other fixated upon whatever video his smartphone is playing because a house is expensive but entertainment is cheap. There is Muslim Ali, the only one who doesn't shave. There is Highbrow Bob with a shirt too big failing to maintain his dignified, clean appearance; he doesn't talk, he just eats and wallows in an old issue of a literary magazine. There is Raquelle, the only woman. There is Felix who is an old-timer, coming here for twenty years and will come for twenty more until he dies. Finally, there are the volunteers, usually students trying to impress their girlfriends with their social conscience, and the administrators, Bud with his no-bullshit

attitude and his non-discriminatory heart, and Kent, who works at the Daily News but comes here every two days to absolve from his sins.

Inside the kitchen, all of them stop becoming a specific person and just join the cumulative clanking noises until Bud blasts Electric Dylan at noon to send everybody away until tomorrow. Osman eyes the literal and a metaphorical window to go inside for his wallet, but he hasn't looked in the mirror in ages. He probably looks worse than the crowd outside. They might still give him the wallet but mostly, he feels like he doesn't deserve it back.

The apartment's old buzzer... (not really buzzes, because it has this thick but high pitched undulation, but technically?) buzzes. He pays no attention, because who knows whom doing what at this hour? In the second ring he gets out of bed this time, because who knows? He presses 'Listen'. Apart from some unintelligible static, the visitor is pressing other buttons.

He takes his finger off and, for a second or two, he is frozen in a winter silence. He presses it again and there is only the sound of the machine. He wants to go back to bed. It takes less than two steps away for another ring. Going for 'Talk', he accidentally presses 'Listen'.

"Oh lord, please help me oh lord, someone!" Roorooroo. "Please can someone help me?" Roorooroo.

He finally presses 'Talk' this time.

"Hello? What's going on?"

"Hello? Can you come down and help me please?"

He listens.

“Help with what?”

“Oh god... I'm down at the stairs with my bags, can you please come down? And help me, I left my bags in there, please?”

“I don't know who you are.”

“I'm a woman, I work at the,” this part gets scrambled, “can you help me?” He listens, “Please? Please? My god, why can't just someone help me, please? Will you please just come down, so I can get my bags? Oh god in heaven please help me,” she is crying now, “please help me god.”

There is someone else outside.

“Do you live here?”

“Please I'm a woman can you help me?”

The guy downstairs opens the outer door with his key and lets her in. No need for a buzzer, she echoes through the hallways now.

“Oh Jesus thank you so much!”

“I don't wanna know, lady.”

She sounds less Christian than black, but mainly desperate.

“May the Lord bless you!”

“I don't wanna know.”

Only one person walks up the stairs. The light from the bedroom doesn't reach the doorsill to imply someone's presence. One person walks higher up. Nothing happens. He locks his door in three different ways.

Denudation occurs after countless uncountable days. Osman's sheer strength has been worn down through an assault of the senses, from whatever is coming from out there, from the paranoia within, and maybe through whatever just is.

His eyes, finally closed because he doesn't have the energy to keep them open anymore, burst open like a volcano, gushing blood and swallowing the eyeball inside the cavity, leaving a hollow caldera with andesite down below. His nostrils geyser out mucus, then blood that cover the entrance of the olfactory cave, then the cartilage implodes back into the skull. Out of his mouth oozes a mafic, thick liquid, drips down his chin and creeps onto his chest, though whatever can be called his chest is not there, its brittle limit is stretched beyond its possibilities, stomach bloated further than stretch marks can cover, the layer ripped, archipelagos of skin floating on metadermis, revealing deeper strata destined for the same fate. Like brittle palm trees on lonely islands that powerless against the tropical storms, his hairs pop out from their follicles and gently sway back down onto his body, blocking the arteries, creating deltas until they hit an alluvial fan. His penis is allowed one last flashy stream until it shrivels like a burst balloon, so do his testicles, until they are tiny but rock hard, pressurizing their core as if they are going to turn out a diamond. His toe and fingernails rupture and raise their tectonic plates to create inward fjords. Margins are drifting too far apart to control. His trachea is useless as his lungs are exposed through the rib breaking inwards, the alveoli, through chute cutoffs tearing the lungs, bring more than enough oxygen to a body that is still living superfluously, until the pressure outside of Osman is too high for the little pockets of air, so they pop wrapping paper, but all at once so that it ruins the fun. Also exposed to the air is his stomach, which it thinks it can churn. Pumping too much air and

His phone rings, defying a battery that should have been dead long ago. Osman takes his time, hoping that it will stop, but the caller is adamant. Slumping across the room, he touches it and vibrates with the phone like a tuning fork.

"Hello?"

"Osman?"

"I think so?"

"Osman this is Pascal."

"Wh-"

"Osman I can't tell you where I am, obviously, except in the Midwest, and they are tracking this call, obviously, but I just wanted to say thank you for what you have done."

"I didn't--"

"I'll never see you again, but it was nice being your colleague."

For some vicarious reason, be it Pascal's pulling a Shawshank or contact with electronics, Osman feels a jolt of life surging through him. He opens his curtains to find that it is night, the dead of night, and nobody is on the street except Gene, who should not be here now. There are no lights, but he has an open book, the cover torn, turning the pages, as if he is actually reading.

"Hey Gene."

"Hey man."

His pockmarked face is bloated enough to bump his eyes back into his skull.

"What," Osman refers to the book through a jelly of lethargy, "What's that?"

“You want it man, I'm just reading man, do you have a dollar, cuz I got a knee infection, those people at the shelter they don't allow me.”

“They don't allow you what?”

“They don't allow me man, listen man, you wanna see my knee man, I got an infection, gotta buy medicine, do you have a dollar or something?”

If this were another book, this sentence would start the hairpin turn that will change this story into a poignant and unconscious *Trading Places*, show how Osman and Gene are similar, reading and living through books, making faint connections daily to spend the time, two homeless people in a city for the homeless. Osman would give Gene his housekeys and the former, with his already groggy state, rheumy eyes, and shabby clothes, would start to live on the street, on the charity of random paperbacks, while Gene would take a shower for the first time in weeks, wear Osman's better shirts, and start sleeping well. The last scene would be Gene's taking of Osman's job and role as an academic because he has read so much by now, walking back home after a class to find Osman asking for a dollar because he has a knee infection, only to small talk before going back to his cozy and comfortable apartment, and you, the reader, would walk away with a lesson of sorts, sort of like *Despair*. Or *The Double*. Or *The Double*.

“Hey man got a dollar man? Man?”

There are no one else but them on the street at this hour, so who is Gene to adopt a holier-than-thou attitude when he doesn't even remember Osman's name, nor probably the book he is reading, just a bum, just a tramp who just exists, eyesore, just sits across the street, watching Osman through his window, paralyzing him, making him unable to jerk off without feeling sad about the social issues. Gene who gives nothing back to

society, fucking parasite, burden. Thoughts are materialized in Osman's head and they use his body as an apparatus to affect the physical world. As if reacting to his literary history, or unfortunately following through the discourse, or perhaps just letting out some anger issues on a defenseless dummy, Osman—from brain to body—delivers a swift kick into Gene's head, knocking him over. The rush of life comes to him when taking another away, and Osman stomps on Gene's head until his dry, flaky face is crushed into putty. A prolonged wheeze rises up from the deflated body to say “no more”, and Osman, slumping back onto his bed, sleeps for the first time in god knows how many days.

December 21

The sun trickles in the room through a peeled window corner and wakes Osman up. Still feeling awful from the insomnia episode, but at least not tired, he takes away the rest of what has been stacked up against the window. When sheets and towels ran out, Osman used his books to build a base, not enough to reach the middle, to his dismay. He seems to clog the top with whatever's left around the house, clothes, plates, appliances, and stuffed torn pillows in between spaces like forcing a cardboard puzzle to end on one's own terms.

He doesn't know how long he has slept for. While he is not totally rejuvenated, at least the bags under his eyelids that were feeling like anvils in cartoons are gone. At first happy, he makes faces at himself, until he realizes he only has a stubble. He is sure that days, even weeks have passed inside his apartment, but the mirror shows no evidence regarding this claim. He puts his hand on his cheek, slowly rubbing it in circles. It croaks like heavy felt. Now with more pressure, he feels that it is like a knot, hoping that more

massaging will help it. More and more of his cheek being shuffled around, he reaches a point where a sliver of skin stretches too far and gives off a faint tearing sound. Osman pulls his hand back immediately, but there is no sign of the cut in the shaving mirror. He decides it's best not to meddle with it too much.

Osman looks outside to see the city living as usual. It is lightly snowing. People walk over the space that Gene had had for himself. The dried red splatters on the pavement are absent. There are no dragging marks, no movement, but a clean scraping off the sidewalk. Is Gene alive? Can he get up and walk away as if nothing has happened? Has someone else disposed of the body? Osman doesn't remember flashing lights, and there are no suspicious cops around, but he still keeps an eye out on plainclothes. When he finally exits the building, the street is empty, waiting for him. The neon signs says THEY ARE AFTER YOU, but Osman, looking at another direction, doesn't notice.

It is the last day of the finals and Osman is required to be in class during the exam. Regretting his previous decision to make it in-class, he now wishes for having asked for papers. He could have pretended to read them over the break, and if an obstinate perfectionist would have liked to see his or her (but more often than not, 'her') paper with Osman's criticism, he would go over it again, mark it carefully for spelling and grammar, praise the idea but go heavy on the students' natural inability to close read and think critically, skills which are taught in undergraduate, if not then deferred to the master's degree, if not to doctorate, if not to post hoc, and then swiped aside with martial arts platitudes like "We're always students, we're always learning." until ten to twelve

years later one establishes his or her voice (mostly 'his', 'her' will usually have to go the rebellious way, disgusted with the establishment) within the institution. Their new authority will roar much louder than the text being analyzed while the job of critical thinking will be relegated to undergraduates, and the cycle will be completed once again.

He picks up the blue books and the exam prompt from his mailbox, hoping not to get seen by his colleagues until next semester, when the question of "Where have you been?" will pertain only to the winter break.

"Hey Osman," Zhang emerges like a stranger in the adjacent urinal, looking for his own mail.

"Hey."

"Osman, I would like to say goodbye. At least for a while."

So had Pascal. What's going on? Are rats leaving the sinking ship?

"Why? Where?"

"I'm going on a world tour to lecture," he says, turning his back to show fine print dates listed on the back of a t-shirt. "It was hard to fit them all in."

"Whatever." He wants to congratulate his friend but I won't allow him anything other than party phrases.

"Got a bus and everything. Going to write a book about it."

"Yeah."

"There will be a DVD."

"Yeah."

"I was thinking *Stop Making Sense*, showing the audience much later."

"Whatever."

“Yeah, you're right, shouldn't be overthinking that right now. Might as well collaborate with a director. They love that stuff.”

With the pretense of serious business that even the most amiable teacher puts on when the finals arrive, Osman briskly enters the room, sits down, gives the papers to a student to pass them around, and just says that they have an hour and a half. Looking around the room as if he were a high school teacher with an impeccable record of detecting cheaters (for a literature test?), he meets some glances back—meek contacts from students whose minds were content with fantasizing about the break. Averse to scaring the young minds with meeting their eyes, Osman finds a spot on the opposite wall to project his thoughts on without any interruptions.

He had woken up to a city vibrating with Christmas songs. Even Chinese restaurants, Azeri barbers, Jewish delis, store owners and cab drivers from every ethnicity were blasting the mainstream radio that had an botomless arsenal of joyful holiday music, but was only choosing to play a couple, mostly Sinatra. Snow, must be because of snow, Osman thought. It is what brings people together. It is white, it is pure, it covers all the dirt on the ground and opens up the sky when it's done falling.

On the street he had seen a child had asking her mother when she was going to take her to FAO Schwarz while a fat drunk man in a Santa costume was passing by, chanting “Ho ho ho. Merry Christmas!” in the most monotonous and ironic manner, yet people were still smiling at his a shit eating grin hidden behind the white beard. Even the school's neighborhood was more relaxed, with the students taking their time to stroll through the snow flurry. Pigeons checked out different vantage points of buildings. The

local bum was warming his ass on a grill as a WASP-y freshman sat down and talked to him for a while about poetry. It was the best season for a hot coffee or tea, or for a hot chocolate if this city were really European.

After an hour, students start to give their papers one by one. They squeeze in a small remark, like a muffled “Thank you.” or “Goodbye.”, to which Osman can only contort his face for an acceptable smile, giving the same reaction to all, which, in turn, is also okay with students who are too hasty to make eye contact, whose dreams of holiday are becoming a reality with every eager step out of the building. Even Gideon, who leaves somewhere around the 1:10 mark, says something along the lines of gratitude. Whether it is out of pity, remorse, or submitting oneself into the hands of the authority to be graded, Osman doesn’t know, but the winning the anticlimactic showdown doesn’t satisfy.

Meredith is the last one remaining, and she is struggling with something. Her face is twisted as if she is stuck on a complex math problem in an exam that requires very little technical logic. In the last five minutes, she looks up at Osman and down at her paper, her eyes with more tears in them with each raise.

“Meredith you have two minutes remaining.”

She emits a hushed wail, which could have been ignored if the room were full. Receiving no acknowledgement, she upgrades it to a deliberately audible cry.

“I can't do this anymore! I don't know what I'm writing. I'm sorry!”

“I'm sure it's alright, Meredith.”

“But I don't want it to be alright. I want it to be an A.”

“Meredith,” Osman is recycling lines out of the teacher’s handbook, “You are a very bright student. I’m sure you’ll do just fine. I think it’s time for you to give me the paper.”

But the only thing coming from her corner is furious scrawling. Osman bundles the papers and puts his coat on to give some urging signals. Finally, he walks up to Meredith, hand open for her exam.

“No,” she is muttering.

“Meredith,” Osman reaches for the paper, but there’s her elbow on it.

“No!”

“Meredith, I’m sure you’ll... receive... a... very high... grade...”

“No! It is not perfect.”

“Ok, Meredith, would you like to take it home?”

She looks at him as if this wasn’t an option before. It wasn’t.

“Really? I can send it to you in a week?”

“Sure.”

This is her pharmakon, Osman knows. Her poison and her cure. She gets stressed before, during, and after a paper, but also feels the most comfortable in the chaos. She will spend countless hours in front of her computer trying to polish this stupid essay, cry, ruin Christmas and New Year’s, cry some more until an impulsive decision that will be labeled reckless right after she will press the ‘Send’ button on her email. She will wait in what will seem like forever, checking her grades every day, and Osman will be sure to give her an ‘A’ immediately after he receives the paper.

Outside, he runs into the Chair.

“Osman! You had an exam today, right? How did it go?”

Osman says something about Meredith to keep the conversation distant from himself.

“Don't worry about it. I'm sure you did the right thing.”

“I don't know,” says Osman. “I don't know what's right anymore.”

“Are you still sour about Tom, Dick, and Mary?”

“No,” he stutters, “not ethics. That new tragedy, students, us, the department. I don't know.”

Finally he musters what he had wanted to say from the beginning.

“I don't want to leave the city.”

“Osman, you have to go. For the good.” She gets closer. “For your safety.”

“But I don't know anything!”

“Exactly.”

Osman doesn't compute.

“Oh Osman,” the Chair says, more maternal now that the term is over, “you are still getting paid. The system works. That's the important part. That's what's right. There's always a next semester, and all will be forgotten. It'll be nice, just like the old times. I promise.”

“Ok,” Osman was going to say before the Chair gets uncomfortably close to him.

“Don't worry about it,” she whispers in his ear. “All the new tragedy will bring is just more exposure for Comparative Literature. They can't bring us down. Not that easily.” When her face comes back to the frame she is smiling. And then she is off.

Osman is supposed to go back home and forget about the events, the incidents, the roller coaster he had been through, but like an untreated bullet wound, the lodged thought of leaving the city, his mother, his father, actualizes itself in his brain, overtaking the nerves one by one.

His mother hadn't called him for the approaching Christmas, which would have been for more traditional reasons than religious. His mother, according to his life's narrative, gathered from years of evidence, should have called him several days before the holidays. Had she forgotten? Was she ill? Dead? Or had her growing nonchalance for his father had spread to the family holidays as well?

Osman stands in the middle of the pavement as people flow by him. He feels incompetent, without a vision, unsure of what literal step he should take in which direction. He feels stagnant and paralyzed like his parents. However, an idea, conventional but unbidden, springs to mind after a logical procession that has emanated from the lack of. He follows it, determined, walking uptown, in fact should be rather going home, because that's what you do after the exams are over, but Osman seems to be wearing metaphorical blinkers as he sees the world around him becoming more unworldly with each step.

A river of cars are using the sidewalks because there is a union rally, thousands of people, all behind Osman, walking through him, like the climactic scene of *The Bachelor*, the movie, not the reality show, though a connection is apparent. The march consumes Osman, passing buildings that are being renovated from recent fires and that's the real reason why the sidewalks are closed, so the demonstration turns into a parade to celebrate

the repeal of the metropolitan's municipal authority on labeling what constitutes as pets, so people are riding hippos, donkeys, giraffes because it is easier to pick up one's friends from their apartments, foxes fighting foxes, dogs and cats locked in the apartments because this is the first time they are seeing other species, the ones set in front of Animal Planet in order to be quiet and occupied are having a reality crisis, a problem of universals from a much different perspective, parrots' colorful feathers blanket down on the crowd after being strafed by eagles, which in turn empower the wolves to do the same to humans, and then the departments join in to stop the violence, police, fire, paramedics, comparative literature.

Osman rides the procession until a subway station. Inside there is what looks like a busker playing "My Heart Will Go On" on a kazoo with the utmost solemnity to the rhythm of coins being thrown at him. Osman takes the first train. It doesn't matter where it is going. As long as Osman is in motion he can switch tracks and find his destination one way or another.

The train stops at the same time with another one—it's his transfer. A woman follows him out the door, and asks "Excuse me? Does this train go to Fulton Street?" Osman doesn't understand what train she is referring to, the one that he got off or the one across he will get in, but he goes back to the one he left to check the stops, and so does the woman. Getting out once again after seeing that no, it doesn't go to Fulton Street, Osman turns around to find the subway doors closing down on the woman. Her face—eyes wide, mouth down—looks so helpless, but she is already far away from Osman, on whom a set of doors is also closing.

After the transfer and in the new car, to his surprise, Osman is the only one in it. Him, and the reason why he is alone: a homeless man sleeping upright against a hard seat and in—what is hopefully though there are not many saving graces in this situation—his own shit. Before, Osman would have probably encountered this scene with a friend, a date, someone, anyone, and then they would have laughed together for partaking in the embarrassing situation for the bum, and for them as well, uncomfortable moments creating a moment to remember.

The train stops, and the doors take a second longer than the usual to open. Osman rushes out to the other car without warning the newcomers. He has lived through this episode, why should they come away unscathed from the homeless man, and without their own moment to remember, a souvenir for the nose, a quirk of the city?

From the opposite side a wheelchair rolls in, belonging to a veteran without legs.

“Ladies and gentlemen, happy holidays, my name is Mike, I'm a veteran, and if you can spare a dollar—“

The end door of the subway behind him opens and out comes a man carrying a makeshift carry-on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, happy holidays, my name is Victor, I got laid off work and I have a family to take care of, so any dolla—”

The wheelchair makes a cool 180.

“Hey,” the veteran is rolling towards Victor, “Hey, you aren't supposed to be here!”

“We all have to eat, man,” he says.

“They can't give us both money!” The veteran is a professional, he knows the subway lines, when they are packed, when they are generous. He has tried every tactic known to beggars, busking, two-person, three-person group, inside man in the audience, and now, after fifteen years of inching towards perfection in his profession, this fucking guy comes in to ruin it.

“Sorry man,” the other says, and walks past Mike to recite his speech again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, happy holidays, my name—thank you ma'am. My name is Victor—Ow!”\

Mike has popped a wheelie to hit Victor with the metal footrest.

“What the fuck, man?”

So Victor takes the wheelchair by the handles, throws it on the ground, and Mike spills on the floor along with his legs, not much to anyone's surprise. He gets up, the train stops, Mike charges at Victor, Osman gets out. Looking back, the doors close on Osman once again, but he can see that Mike “the handicapped one” is winning before the train is gone. Osman walks the platform to Penn Station, where there are even more weirdoes inside, from all over America, but at least they are keeping themselves to themselves.

It's rather quiet on the Wednesday afternoon Amtrak, give or take the train's lulling rumble and the occasional screech from the icing. The papers rustle but people are silent, as they should be, because most are taking advantage of the midday break and napping. The conductor is taking his time, leaving the sleepy alone, checking back on them when he is done with the car, and even helping out an old man alone by sliding a slip in front of his seat. Everybody, even the sleeping old man who is actually pretending

(he pretends because I know) have a very specific reason to reach their destinations. Although ending up in different destinations, planned or unplanned, the roads help one to contextualize themselves. If the city is the same, the town is different, if not, the family is, if not, they are unique in their prison within. The lanes, tracks, paths, even dead-ends are hundreds of branches that force you to imagine what it is like to be at the end of it, but you can't.

The train moves along a gray Hudson River coated with ice that doesn't reflect the white snow as much as it projects bleakness. The sun is gone behind what should be cirrus clouds, but they are so dense they cover the sky like an infinite, white sheet. The fluorescent lights invade, but Osman is sleeping. He seems to be sleeping at every given opportunity, at any chance when he isn't obligated to act.

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The yellow light from the hall is spread on the mat until the door closes to the outside and the room is painted in eerie blue. Osman is seeing his father for the first time in months, the man's heart connected to a monitor, finger to an oximeter, and nose to a tube that is to something behind the wall. Regardless of where he—or the tube—is getting oxygen from, his mouth is slack open on one side. Strangely no spit comes out, which might indicate paralysis. Inflating and deflating, and doing nothing else, Osman's father doesn't look like he was waiting for him.

Osman pulls a chair next to the bed and starts reading the newspaper aloud.

“So, the Giants couldn't make it to the playoffs this year,” he says, “but the Mets might win the World Series.”

A long gasp, a crack of the uvula, and sssssssssssssss.

“Terrible weather we're having," he says, "In the city it is okay, but anywhere above Westchester was terrible.”

Beep. Sssssssss.

He would have liked to tell a joke, statistically it is the most helpful for the comatose, but he doesn't remember any, nor doesn't want to search for one on his phone. His hands are wet from wiping away his tearing face, and it smudges the newspaper's ink.

“Dad please wake up.”

Ssss-. Sssssssss.

Osman's agitated respiration syncs up with his father's. It cuts him off, interrupts his train of thought, and is not helping anyone in this situation. But the breath is something to attach oneself to, like yoga, doing it correctly, not paying attention to anything else, a way to spend the time until you give your last one.

“Dad... please wake up or-”

Beep. Beep. Sssssssss.

He slides his father's finger out of the oximeter as he swiftly puts his in without a spike in the monitor. He takes the tube out afterwards, and strangely nothing changes. He opens his father's chest, shaved for the straps but some fledgling hairs are making the final push to see sunlight before the eternal darkness and damp air in the coffin, not to mention the dress shirt. He takes the straps and attaches them onto his own scrawny chest. Osman thinks *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but he is actually borrowing this bit from *Bringing Out the Dead*, which he had watched a couple of years ago at Nicolas Cage symposium, organized by none other than Giorgio Mondo.

Now he is sobbing into the same pillow that he is pushing onto his father's face. The tears are there either to make his conscience have a more genuine, filial care and a twisted sense of piety, reacting to his own situation that had led up to this single independent act, even though countless books and theories have elaborated on patricide, but no writer nor theoretician had the guts, reason, and the madness to actually do it.

“Dad!” he is giving his entire body weight, “I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry Dad.”

Or maybe it is because his father is not reacting at all. He is already a dead presence, too weak to even fight back. Does he want to die, too? If he could speak, would he be grateful? Would he question's Osman's decision, open up an objective discussion, and even help Osman in finding out what emotions he is channeling through? Is it the murderous greed that comes after killing Gene? The lack of response to it? Is Osman looking for attention, for someone who has heard of the sad news, rushing for comfort to Osman when he also finally feels disconsolate, on the same frequency to receive an embrace from a friend, a colleague, or a stranger. If his father dies maybe he can take a sabbatical and remain in the city. The deeper he can push, the happier he gets, like he has found a way out of his troubles, turning back into what he was four months ago. His father, not anymore, but if he ever were to wake up, would be in vegetative state and a burden to anyone. Osman needs to move on and become a productive member of the society once again. He needs to reorient himself after his father is gone, his approaching old age, his mother's newfound vivacity, maybe considering a family, but nothing can happen until this deed is done.

He thinks it is done. Slumping back on a chair, he sheds some more tears, but not too much to alert the heart monitor. He brings the tube back in, slides the oximeter back

to where it belonged, and, finally, after a couple of deep breaths, ready for the rush of nurses in a second to see his helpless, surprised, crying face next to his father's corpse, he puts the straps back on.

Beep. Beep. A long gasp, sssssssssssssss.

No alarms, no nothing. His father continues to inflate and deflate like a sturdy balloon that stands the test of many birthday parties. Osman feels dejected, gamed, mocked, made fun of in front of everyone because this is a scar he will carry within and involuntarily project outside all his life now, and for once, for once, he thinks, as an individual acting out an individual thought, let me have this. Is this because he is not my real father, is that why this plot doesn't work the way it is supposed to, he is saying inside, because he knows whether he screams outside, into the universe, or just let the thought reverberate in his mind, the person who hears it the loudest and the clearest will always be him.

He hits his father, punching his face, just like with Gene, but the face is a slab of insensitive skin, too rubbery to tear apart and show blood. The heart monitor beep is the only thing that remains constant after Osman gives up.

"I'm sorry," he says to the receptionist in the lobby, "Where is the operating room?"

"I'm sorry," she says back at him, "No visitors allowed."

Wish-fulfilling, a tray full of what Osman has requested is being pushed away. Osman says thank you to the receptionist, but she realizes something is wrong. Acting before her, he throws himself on the sensitized cart, rolls over to grab two scalpels, and runs.

“Sir! Shit.”

Osman reaches his father's room again with hesitant doctors and security behind him, only to find the door has been locked electronically. He jams one of the scalpels in the hinges, but this is not the 1950s, nor a movie, so he ends up breaking the tool instead.

“You can't do that, sir.” A doctor, tired, more Mark Greene than Luka Kovač, “You can't also kill someone with a scalpel, if that's what you are trying to do. Maybe the neck,” he starts before being elbowed by a colleague, “but this is not a knife, sir.”

Yet they still shirk back when Osman swings the scalpel.

“Open the door,” he says.

“Sir, you know we're not going to do that.”

The tip accidentally touches his other palm and a drop of blood buds out. It stings, but that's about it. Lunging at the crowd to run away doesn't seem to be the option, they will know who he is. Yet does he know who he is? Looking at where he is and what he is doing, he wouldn't know. Maybe he is responsible for all his trouble. Maybe it really is just the projections of the mind. The projections of the trouble within, in the brain, to the exterior.

With the sloppy epiphany, Osman suddenly fills with love to everybody around him. If he would surrender now, even though he would get arrested, they, these doctors he is threatening would probably help him, give him medicine until he is fit for the rest of the world again. The system will take care of him. Same with his friends, his lovers, his parents, Gene, none of this, this situation with the scalpel, is their fault. If Osman can solve it in his head, he will not find himself in these circumstances ever again. So why bother them, he thinks, as he plunges the scalpel into his skull, pushing it further, creating

a crown of blood after sliding it left and right like a botched seppuku. It's just a brain, he thinks, it works like a machine, it has its own discourse, it can be changed for the better. Like an academic paper, I just need to cut the fat and dispose of the dated parts. If all this is because of my brain, he is thinking, and my brain is myself, then I think I have my solution: It's just a brain, he drops the scalpel, it's just a brain, he falls on the ground, it's just a brain, there are people above him, it's just a brain.

December 21

Osman doesn't have a single phone call to make. He doesn't want anyone to know. The judge, tired from all the lunatics that ruin this beautiful city—"Why can't they all just go to Poughkeepsie?"—, is at least content with Osman's only plea for a court appointed defense lawyer. The best criminal is a quiet criminal.

"Arraignment it is," the gavel comes down instead of a period.

Osman waits in a cell that night. He wants to tell his story to the officers, why he has attempted such a heinous crime, what has passed in the last four months that have lead up to him telling them about the crime, but the officers don't care in the midst of methheads from Vermont and joyriders who aren't sixteen yet. They have seen this before. They are either 'insane' or 'innocent'.

The defense lawyer comes into the room and sits down with his coat on.

"Hello, Osman? Hello, I'm Robert. Don't say anything, they got listening devices that can incriminate you here. You never know. Most of my clients couldn't keep their mouths shut so they lost their cases. But I can talk and they can't charge me on anything

because I'm not being indicted. I can literally say anything. Niggerfaggot. Fuckbag. Cunt puss. I'm a Nazi. Child molesters should be set free. See?

“But I think we have a solid case here, Osman. You're insane, right? Nod your head, ok good, because that's the angle we will be pushing. I have to tell you, I'm very impressed with how you handled it. No direct attack on anyone, they don't know what you were doing with your father in the room before you came out, and trying to lobotomize yourself, brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I wish all my clients were like you.”

Due to the low level of crime rates in winter and the swiftness of the local trials where the culprit is known around the town usually as “I never liked the airs of him/her.”, Osman's court date arrives on the next day.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the honorable Judge, my client is wearing a suit from Brooks Brothers today underneath the straitjacket violently imposed upon him. But don't let the Brooks Brothers, now having a winter sale on coats, there is a store five blocks away and an outlet farther out, fool you: Osman X. Johnson is definitely, clinically insane.

“The prosecutor will ask for certification of his insanity, will try to convince you that it was premeditated, that Osman X. Johnson, under the Brooks Brothers suit, which looks really good on him, perfect fit, too bad you can't see it, is a respectable individual in ‘one of the most prestigious’ universities in the state, if not the country. That he makes a decent salary, enough to wear this suit today, that he has had a stable life, happy childhood, healthy relationships, but, in fact, ladies and gentlemen of the jury please don't fall asleep, Osman X. Johnson has been insane right from the start.

“Adopted from a torn country, who knows what traumas were instilled in his mind before given the silly middle name of 'X'. No wonder both of his appellations were subjected to constant ridicule in school. Even though his exotic nature has helped him find grants and establish a reputable position in his university, this has only exacerbated, it means 'worsened', ladies and gentlemen, the rupture of his identity.

“My client has been under a lot of stress, as you can imagine, being an assistant professor on a tenure track, and the politics of academia is not worth the discussion here, but just imagine how you, in your own lives, have a problem with your bosses, colleagues, well, just add forty kids every semester on top of those. Kids, am I right? I'm glad you are laughing, but imagine Osman having to deal with so many of them, acting as a surrogate parent, when he hasn't had any parental vision in his life to begin with.

“So when he acts out against the system, not this country, ladies and gentlemen, not America, the beautiful, the free, but the microcosmic authoritarian powers that has governed him after ‘kidnapping’ him from his native country and forcing him to live a life that is not his own, it is not because there is a premeditation. Osman was battling against this all his life, yet he didn't know that it was in him, just like he didn't know that he would *act* this way in the hospital. He was just a Turkish-American, a Muslim-Christian, a barbarian-liberal man, and who can blame him, honestly, when he tries to cut his own brain out? In such a roundabout way, my client has confirmed that he knows the problem lies his brain, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the honorable Judge, who in their right minds wouldn't agree? Thank you.”

Keeping up with Robert's hotshot lawyer shtick, the jury, one by one, turn a slow clap into an avalanche that clamors throughout the room and culminates in a standing ovation.

“That went well,” Robert whispers in Osman's ear. “I'm glad I watched some *Boston Legal* last night.”

Robert's defense was impeccable. In fact, it was so effective that the jury, coming out of the room, rules Osman to be extremely dangerous and criminally insane, with the parents to blame.

Osman gets transported to a correctional facility called the Ravencroft Institute for the Criminally Insane, a facility that is advertised as ‘You can see Manhattan from your cell!’ in order to attract the existing, and hopefully more, demographic of dangerous people. He is in the waiting room with someone who shoves his pinky up his ear until blood comes out and says “Good, that's good.” Someone next to him gets shanked by a sharpened credit card, and Osman fails to see the symbolism.

His room, a 6x5 (to save room for one more cell that is very long but very thin), with a bathroom and bedroom in one, is much like a cheap studio in Chinatown. There is a lightweight desk that looks like metal but is actually just plastic covered in chrome, so frail it vibrates with whatever noise. He can hear all pitches of screams of the inmates and their scrapings on the brick wall with a disposable spoon saved from the previous lunch, the afternoon “Get me out!”s when the guards do their rounds, the constant back and forth, the aleatory and meaningless camaraderie between the inmates.

“Hey, hey Pete!”

“What, Ethan?”

“I’ll give you seven,”

“Uh-huh.”

“If you give me back two.”

“Three.”

“Take the one and put it next to the three.”

“No no, give me one and take five.”

Dylan in the next cell starts to bum-bum ba-bum-bum-ba-bum-bum the tune.

“Give me two, and you got yourself a deal.”

“Alright.”

“Alright, good. Good.”

“Good.”

“Good!”

“GOOD!”

The next day, when they are allowed their fifteen-minute walk in the quad, Osman realizes that the voices are all the same people. He goes up to the guard, who holds him at a baton's length.

"Sir," he says the word meekly for the first time in decades, "If you don't mind, is it possible to have books in my cell?"

"You are allowed a bible and a book," he says mechanically, "Have a friend or family bring it to you next time."

Osman is not going to communicate with anyone outside, nor even ask a stranger for help. If he ever got out, though unlikely, and people knew, his social standing would

be in ruins. He can only hope that the hospital crew didn't inform his mother, who might come here to visit Osman, only to be rejected because of shame, or she already collapsed and died when she got the news. Either way, it is better for her to live her own life from now on than to worry about others'. For the rest, his friends, colleagues, students, acquaintances, one-night-stands, and strangers, he thinks he can wing it with his tales from study abroad, pick a city and just say how different the culture over there was than ours. He has listened to enough party conversations about foreign countries to create his own story.

He acquires a Bible and an airplane novel from a sympathetic nurse, and reads one word from each book, one for education, one for pleasure, to make it last. When he comes out he can join the Religion department, he jokes to himself before breaking down and drowning his pillow with hopeless tears.

The only other thing Osman is allowed to have is a set of some papers and a blunt pencil. Writing is not only encouraged in the institution, it is probably the only thing to do except bodily functions. Osman leaves it alone for the first weeks, hanging onto life via masturbation, the only pleasurable thing in his life, but finds with each time the images, the context, the sexual tension, the feeling, and the sensation fade away.

So he moves onto another form of autoeroticism, this time more permanent and less instinctual, with the paper and the pencil. He writes about what is around him, examining the room, brick by brick like Robert Pirsig, but finds out that one *does* have finite things to say about something so small. What is hard and endless to write about is not the description of an object, but the associations it comes with to explain what it is and what it is not.

People, he thinks, you can write about people endlessly, because objects can be defined as synchronic, but people are not only always diachronic, but interpretable within the present, affected from the past and the future, carrying multiple contradictions within themselves in a single moment. Everything exists inside a human brain. Everything exists. Consciousness cannot be a slave to words, but they are all Osman has got.

Osman goes through his friends, his different identities evoked within them and vice versa, unique relationships between common people. Whatever he writes, clothing choices, accents, words, body language, emotions, reactions, always end up turning the gun back on him and reveal something about Osman. How they see him, how he sees them, them as all the possibilities Osman could have been, different nationalities, different reputations, fame, fate, all ending up in the same city, in the same brain. Stealing their lives, Osman creates a new one for himself, becoming a micro Cosmic Man, a transplanted Ymir, a local Adam, Osman, amongst them, dispersing from and at each other to create the universe in a prison cell.

He writes a woman to this new man, at first as company, to kiss, caress, cuddle, and snuggle, but he is not satisfied. In vain, he wants to create a different woman that he hasn't known nor will never know, free from the chains of patriarchy, unassociated, even from Irigaray. She just *is*. A mother comes to mind, but even she is defined through another person, usually her husband or her children, and becomes an imaginary symbol. But what about Osman's mother, not his real one, but his biological mother, who can't even be called a mother because she has never lived as one after giving birth, and the physical pains were just her obligation. Can she remain free? Can she be the one that we are all looking for, not just specifically, but universally?

He would like to write and erase and edit the woman just like he is doing with others, but he cannot bring himself to stain it beyond the ineffable. He wants something true. Not perfect, not pure, not even true, but the words cannot describe what Osman wants to label as 'real'. Instead the image only comes to him in his dreams, not in any shape or size, but as a light warming but blinding at the same time. Thus, this page, titled 'Woman', remains white forever, unblemished, pure, wrong, futile.

Osman realizes that in the end he has to write about himself, about what has happened to him. His stockpile of settings, characters, and events are ready, and all that is needed is a narrative, a plot, to tie them up together. He does it to detail his history, to reenact the story, to create himself through writing. He decides that it is best to write about the beginning of the academic year, as an individual and autonomous timeframe that has changed Osman's life in four months, one semester. For his first sentence, he borrows a blurb memorized from the department's website: 'Urban Romanticism' (COLIT-124) is offered every year as the introduction seminar to prospective Comparative Literature majors..."

He lives through the events again and again, like a movie reel decaying on repeat, a pentimento wearing off to reveal more, infusing himself into the characters and vice versa, writing about things he hadn't known before, unaware whether he is embellishing a story or just telling a lie, and after the first draft, which ends with him in a prison writing about his recent past, he goes through the manuscript once again, with more delirium, conflating time and places, separating signifiers from signifieds, reacting to everything that has happened to him and doing everything he has done again and again and again and again and again until he can't tell if the chicken or the egg came out first, but through

all the turmoil, the pain, the flux of life and the hustle and the bustle of the city, one word remains to dome over all the chaos that is still going in full energy inside, whenever a page is opened, read, and rewritten: Osman.

In order to talk about what really happened to him, however, Osman, cannot write about himself as himself. The focalization is too specific, too personal, and not omniscient enough. He needs an astral projection, a god-like author-ity that is bigger than what he pretends to be in his work. To give the answers Osman doesn't know. To relegate the responsibility to an Other. So, at first, quite accurately, he thinks a writer. Not a sympathetic writer, not an anti-hero, but a writer creating for destruction, out of pure spite and malice, just to torture a person, anyone, a random fictional creation, for example an academic named Osman, until the protagonist has to commit an act of insanity to get out of this symbolic confinement in his story by writing/torturing a writer who writes/tortures an academic named Osman, who writes/tortures a writer who writes/tortures an academic named Osman, who writes/tortures a writer who writes/tortures an academic named Osman*

* Hello! I am the author of this novel, Derin Emre. I hope you have enjoyed[†]

† Hello! I am the author of this novel, Derin Emre.[‡]

‡ Hello! I am the author[§]

§ Hello! I am^{**}

** Hello^{††}

†† Hell^{‡‡}

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