The Weightless Machine

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THE WEIGHTLESS MACHINE

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THE WEIGHTLESS MACHINE

by

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THESIS

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Critical Preface

Central to the poetics behind my thesis novel *The Weightless Machine* is Orhan Pamuk’s suggestion that to write and read a literary novel means to “[look] at the world through the eyes, mind, and soul of the novel’s characters” (*The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* 60). Such a novel employs the narrative mode Gérard Genette calls *focalization* (189). To read or write a novel focalized through one or more of its characters, is, as Pamuk describes to “see the universe…through [that character’s] sensations and, when possible, through [her] words” (*NSN* 60). However, Pamuk cautions, this does not mean the primary subject of the literary novel is “the personality and morality” of the protagonist; rather, it is the “life of the protagonists, their place in the world, the way they feel, see, and engage with their world” (*NSN* 60). What this means in a practical sense is a novel wherein every carefully selected vivid detail and narrative technique—indeed every formal decision—is “composed to reflect the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of the figure within it” (*NSN* 11). To do so gets at what I have come to see as an essential concern of the literary novel: To explore and produce questions concerning what it means to be a particular human being in a particular time and place. Thus my novel *The Weightless Machine* makes use of what Genette calls a *fixed* focalization (189) at a very close distance (162); everything passes through 22-year old Crystal Smith. The goal is a narrative universe both experienced and rendered—*being* via the deeply interconnected mind and body—by Crystal.

I write with a joy for formal play and discovery, a conscious awareness of discourses and framing—what Pamuk calls a *sentimental-reflective* novelist. At the same time I write to create a world that effectively *persuades* the reader as Vargas Llosa describes (25), a self-consistent,
compelling, detail-driven fictional dream per Gardner (The Art of Fiction 26)—what Pamuk calls
the naïve novelist. I aspire to, as Pamuk describes, a synthesis of these approaches—“being both
naïve and reflective at the same time” (NSN 12)—conscious of both form and technique, both
structure and meaning. In my first semester at UTEP Dr. José De Piérola, whose influence runs
throughout this poetics, said something I have kept in mind ever since: When we write we are
either challenging or reinforcing a discourse; the need, then, is to become more aware of the
discourse. I have tried to create a novel that is in dialog with aspects of the historical form as
well one that explores and questions some of the sociocultural discourses of my time. In this
critical preface I will identify the central narrative techniques of my novel as well as their
intentions. One of the most important things I have learned is the necessity of a conscious,
deliberate, deeply considered poetics. Thus the goal of this critical preface is to frame my present
poetics as a developing novelist as well as the poetics of a particular, developing novel.

A central concern of my poetics in The Weightless Machine is that the reader experiences
the real-time experiences—the being—of Crystal Smith. Thus I wish to achieve an intimacy
between reader and Crystal, which begins with an intimacy between the third-person narrator and
Crystal. I agree with Mario Vargas Llosa the narrator is “the most important character in any
novel” (42), and have thus spent much time developing the novel’s narrator/Crystal intimacy. A
central question of the modern novel is how to best render the inner life of character. The
primary technique I use to elicit Crystal’s inner life is the free indirect style. As has been well
documented, the free indirect style first notably appears in nineteenth-century fiction, initiated by
Jane Austen and developed by Gustave Flaubert. In the early twentieth-century Modernists such
as Virginia Woolf employed the free indirect style to create formally daring, figural-based
novels. Today writers such as Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, Francine Prose, and Ian McEwan
continue to find formally and thematically innovative uses of the free indirect style, pushing the boundaries of fiction. Dorrit Cohn uses the term “narrated monologue” but calls this technique “a transformation of figural thought-language into the narrative language of third-person fiction,” a first-person directness with the added advantage of the third person removal to render both conscious and unconscious processes (100). Such is a central concern of The Weightless Machine—I wish to render Crystal Smith’s process of being, a human mind/body in a particular place and time. I am trying to create a narrator-focalizer so closely focalized on Crystal as to achieve between them a perfect bond. Everything in The Weightless Machine is free indirect style with carefully regulated degrees of intimacy. I have tried to carefully control what Gardner calls “shifts in psychic distance” (AF 112). I am conscious of the risks of this operation such as, for example, a reader’s oversaturation of Crystal, “an overheated effect that only great skill can keep from mush or sentimentality” (AF 112). For me, for this novel now, the potential reward—the reader’s experience of Crystal’s experience—is worth the risk.

The opening of a piece of fiction, especially the first paragraph, should teach the reader how to read the coming text. The opening paragraph of Alice Munro’s story “Free Radicals” introduces the perfect bond I describe. Munro establishes a closely focalized intimacy with protagonist Nita:

At first people were phoning to make sure Nita was not too depressed, not too lonely, not eating too little or drinking too much. (She had been such a diligent wine drinker that many forgot she was now forbidden to drink at all.) She held them off, without sounding nobly grief stricken or unnaturally cheerful or absentminded or confused…
The language is not only that of an omniscient third-person narrator; it is Nita’s language, Nita’s mind. In Munro’s novelistic prose we see layers of a mind at work creating what Antonio Damasio calls the *autobiographical self*—a process of the mind that presides over personhood and identity, when “both the lived past and the anticipated future dominate the proceedings” (179). Within Nita’s autobiographical self process we see discrepancies between 1) projected self; 2) the notion of Nita’s self abstracted by others; 3) others focalized by Nita, and, 4) who Nita actually is, if she can be called a concrete thing. After the first sentence of the story, the pronouns “she” or “her” open six sentences in a row, further signifying the close focalization on Nita. In the second paragraph we learn Nita has not written to anyone about the still unnamed recent event,

Not even to Rich’s former wife in Arizona or his semi-estranged brother in Nova Scotia, though they might understand, perhaps better than the people at hand, why she had proceeded with the non-funeral as she had done.

The fragmented sentence suggests what Daniel Dennett calls the discriminated, selective content of Nita’s present mind, “drafts” available for access, concerning: 1) Rich’s former wife; 2) estrangement/distance between self and others; and 3) a concern for the misunderstanding by others of one’s constructed self and motivation. The fragmented sentences, a key related narrative technique, are a recurring aspect of the free indirect style that represents Nita’s mind. The conversational style of the fragmentation suggests that these thoughts are the result of an in-process, what we might call conversation occurring in Nita’s mind—a self seeking self, perhaps the absence of self—both drafting from and guiding perpetually changing perceptions, feelings, and discriminations. We see all of these mental resonances (Rich, Nita, Bett, competing versions
of the past and present) return throughout the story, assuming different forms and functions for protagonist Nita.

The mind processes of drafting and discrimination—numerous potential drafts feeding numerous potential narratives, always in process—I have borrowed from Dennett’s theory of consciousness. He and Antonio Damasio inform much of my current thinking about the human mind, of which verbalization is only one aspect. Mind, in Damasio’s definition, is all the processes going brain. Consciousness, which some organisms besides humans also have, he calls “a state of mind in which there is knowledge of one’s own existence and the existence of surroundings” (167). Self is one of mind’s processes, a function of the mind—one’s sense of being continuous in time. Damasio and Dennett both assert in different ways that the self is an always-changing phenomenon. The self is, in a sense, an illusion, a non-concrete, non-permanent thing. And yet, as Damasio describes, that autobiographical self process is necessary for survival, homeostasis within individual well-being as well as socio-culturally, within the shared world human beings (310). One of Crystal’s central yearnings is something like homeostasis, not just a physical health and wellbeing that she lacks, but also a socio-cultural well being. Her quest for homeostasis represents I think an unconscious cultural desire for homeostasis.

Munro is one of those authors whose seemingly transparent free indirect style points to mind processes at work, particularly that of the autobiographical self, always transitory, temporal. While my novel is not exactly in the Munro style, I have tried to keep her work in mind as a benchmark of modern innovation in novelistic prose. In “Free Radicals” the free indirect style and mind become one with story structure. For example, late in the narrative, following harrowing experiences with a home invader and further creations of self narrative, we read the following standalone line: “She was so shaken, so deeply tired, she could hardly stir a
foot. She had first of all to rest.” This line is immediately followed by a section break. The free indirect style becomes form. I have tried to incorporate similar elements throughout *The Weightless Machine*. For example, the chapters are formed and broken in very specific ways, reflective and representative of periods of Crystal’s being in time, her composing of an autobiographical, narrative self. Of course, such chapter breaks and shifts also serve a valuable dramatic function, enhancing what Gardner calls the novel’s *profluence* (*AF* 48), that I will discuss below.

“Free Radicals” is like much of Munro’s work: Rather than a focus on a series of events, plot, the story’s primary reason for existence is to render Nita being in time, experiencing life. To return to Pamuk, the story shows the world from the character’s point of view rather than the reader’s. The closeness of the third-person focalization—the free indirect style—allows this rendering. We see Nita act (or not) and react (or not). At one moment she, in her mind, tries to remember the term “free radical” but cannot (132). A page later, in the middle of conversation with the story’s home invader, and otherwise unsummarized via description, Nita simply says out loud, unprompted, “Free Radicals” (133). While we read the words, the sentences, the paragraphs—the story—Nita’s consciousness is existing, working, in-process. Thus the story achieves something like the novel of existing Maurice Merleau-Ponty theorizes. Such a work of fiction is not first a succession of ideas or theses, but would have the same kind of existence as an object of the senses or a thing in motion, which must be perceived in its temporal progression by embracing its particular rhythm and which leaves in the memory not a set of ideas but rather the emblem and monogram of those ideas (101).
I believe Munro achieves the rendering of a particular mind “in motion.” Little is summed or explained in capsulated idea or thesis. Rather, the reader is allowed to experience certain processes and results of the experience of Nita’s consciousness. From this mind’s recurring motifs, discriminations, responses, self-creations, and, most importantly, non-verbalized conditions, the reader can draw some ideas, but those ideas are only the reader’s, who likewise is the ongoing product of a consciousness in process. I have tried to employ similar techniques for similar effect in *The Weightless Machine*—the words that appear on the page are the conscious and unconscious manifestations of Crystal’s mind.

The goal of the above techniques is to induce in the reader a dream-like feeling that she is with Crystal in real time. She experiences the narrative universe as experienced by Crystal. The shared experience and learning of information also enhances the story’s dramatic power. For example, there are numerous sections where Crystal assumes certain, paranoid framings of reality (as when she finds Ed’s garden/bomb equipment in the hot tub; when she sits with Gil in *The Horn*, assuaged by his cunning; on the phone with beach-bound Benjie; in Stacey’s penthouse on the phone with Gil). My hope is that the reader experiences these subjective realities just as Crystal does, and when later events question the framing we experience a dramatic increase of narrative knowledge. Such moments point to the unreliability of Crystal’s perception and certainties, which speaks to the unreliability of the human mind. Rendering the experience of subjectivity—subjective experience—is a hallmark of modern fiction, and central to my own poetics. The techniques of bringing the reader to an intimacy with Crystal serve the purpose of not only experiencing another’s specific subjectivity, but to then self-reflexively consider every human being’s subjective experience. In this regard Francine Prose’s novel *Blue Angel* is novel with which I see *The Weightless Machine* in conversation.
The entirety of *Blue Angel* employs third-person close focalization on central protagonist Swenson. More, the novel is in the present tense, which is an important technique of *The Weightless Machine*, directly related to the goals of intimacy and being-in-the-moment-ness. When reading *Blue Angel* one feels she is experiencing Swenson’s being in real time. Ultimately, a major center of that novel is the always-discrepancy between one’s subjective understanding of reality and the way others might perceive the same situations. Swenson, like Nita in “Free Radicals,” has an unreliable perception of the world, and yet is constantly constructing a self-centered autobiographical narrative based wholly around his unreliable perceptions. The gulf between his take on events and the reader’s is, to me, one of the great joys of this novel, and one I have tried to make central to *The Weightless Machine*.

One of the countless moments in *Blue Angel* where we see its center and form come together is a road trip Swenson takes with his estranged daughter Ruby. Their dialogue about a sexual assault on her campus becomes an occasion for Swenson’s mind to worry his own crisis, part of his increasingly frantic self-conscious attempts at self-justification and rationalization, which unconsciously surfaces. Ruby’s dialogue reveals us Swenson seen from the outside. The line, “‘I’m sure they’re right,’ mumbles Swenson” (230), is followed by two paragraphs of interior questions and digression, before a third paragraph wherein physical reality intrudes alarmingly: something streaks across the road, Swenson comes to, and swerves. This brief interlude is followed by more interior digression, before Ruby’s dialogue orients us to Swenson: “Dad? Are you sure you’re all right? Would you like me to drive or something” (230). While Swenson’s mind processes continue, we see his mental breakdown via those nearest him. Several lines of evasive dialogue and three paragraphs of Swenson’s mind activity later, we arrive at a section break wherein Ruby reveals Swenson: lost in his mind while driving dangerously in a car.
with his estranged daughter in real time: “‘Dad,’ says Ruby, tremulously. ‘Don’t you think you should open your eyes?’” (231). With Munro, Pamuk, Prose, and others in mind, I hope the narrative universe—it’s landscape, objects, events, form—shows Crystal’s mind in process. A central goal of *The Weightless Machine* is to represent some of the conscious and unconscious processes in her mind. For example, a recurring motif is the novel’s numerous transitions between waking and sleeping, liminal periods wherein we see Crystal coming to without the autobiographical self process firmly in place.

I have tried to fill *The Weightless Machine* with such moments, juxtaposing Crystal’s inner life with the voiced and described perceptions of others. We see Crystal not only through her experience of the narrative universe—her feelings, perceptions, verbalizations—but also as other characters see her. More, we see and learn of the novel’s other characters via Crystal’s often harsh judgments and framing. Thus, when she’s surprised to learn the complexities of her Mom or Uncles Ed and Benjie, the reader is also surprised. Crystal is maturing over the course of this novel, developing a more complex understanding of the world and people around her. The effects are, I hope, dramatic, moving, revelatory, and funny, in varying degrees or all at once. In this way, very much to my personal tastes as a reader, I find *Blue Angel* deeply funny. The language and worldview of Swenson is highly stylized and self-consistent. I realize the language of my novel, the language of Crystal—her language and diction, her titles, her descriptions, her judgments, her perception of self and other—is highly stylized, and likely not to every reader’s taste, but I have tried to make it self-consistent, singular, funny, and moving in both the intellectual and emotional senses. Crystal yearns to be funny. She sees the world in its ambiguities and absurdities with a comic eye. And yet her experience of the world is grounded in mortality, fear of death and the unknown, frustration and dissatisfaction with self and other. One
of the recurring emotional peaks for Crystal is making another person, especially Stacey. Such reflects a personal poetics too—comedy, when it is intelligent and spiritual in intention rather than debased, is one of the most important human survival mechanisms. One of Crystal’s great misunderstandings of Uncle Ed is that he is also trying to make her laugh. He too is pained, and his attempt to lighten his heaviness with laughter is one of his few healthy proclivities. Crystal has always misunderstood this, and over the course of the novel this is something she comes to see in both Ed and Benjie, as well as with Fret. *The Weightless Machine*, after all, was a long-running joke between Ed and Fret.

The question of identity, connected to ideas of the self, is important to Crystal, as well as to the novel *The Weightless Machine*. Humans have long trafficked in the objectification of self and other, constructing strict definitions of identity in the form of stereotypes and labels. I believe today’s hyper-mediated world exaggerates these learned, received tendencies in a way that can be maddening, especially to those in various states of liminal-ness, as with Crystal. Her entire life, by different people in different ways, Crystal has been objectified, and today she is self-conscious to the point of extreme anxiety and hypertension, mental illness borne heavily in her mind and body. For example, at a young, formative age Steph McDaniels named Crystal “The Big Dang,” a name readily adopted by her peers. Today Crystal uses it as both a point of ironic pride and shame. Indeed, *The Big Dang* is the very title of her lifelong, form-shifting autobiographical creative endeavor. Crystal feels a near-constant shame connected to many issues, notably her body, her weight, her gender and sexuality, her lower class upbringing in an isolated Midwestern town, a familial and environmental history of depression, addiction, and suicide. The novel is an exploration of her depression, her yearning for homeostasis. We see this markedly in the legacy of her father’s suicide, and in her suicide attempt mid-novel, which I have
tried to frame as a culmination of all that came before in the narrative, again, without being explicit and overstating. On one hand Crystal wishes to shed an objectified identity. On the other hand, she wishes to compose an identity that counters the objectification. It’s a profound dilemma I think many face today, particularly young women, wherein obsession with image and surface corrupts inner being. They way we are seen and the way we see others. This same idea informs Crystal’s obsession with social justice—her speaking to racial inequality, which often takes the form of preaching. Similarly we see her obsession with Silas’s derogatory “Indian” mascot, a recurring motif and plot device. She means well but the results are often strident. However, at least she is trying to confront these realities. She yearns to communicate about unspoken realities, as well as to facilitate communication between groups who have been constructed to misunderstand one another. The novel’s recurring theme of online/social media shaming also speaks to a debasement in contemporary discourse, an inability to have genuine conversations.

The question for Crystal, as it is for every one of us, is *Who am I?* Who is this Crystal? The novel is the finest form for such exploration. We see such explorations, for example, in the work of Crystal’s favorite writer Virginia Woolf. In what I might call a spiritual sense, the oeuvre of Woolf is another of those speaking to Crystal, and speaking to *The Weightless Machine*, which as I’ve said is Crystal. I might say Crystal’s (and the novel’s) work exists somewhere between the inner explorations of Woolf and today’s rampant pop culture genre codification, which we see Crystal exploiting and playing with. She loves to read, and her language in the novel speaks to a relatively wide reading. Prior to the suicide attempt we see some of her books, which includes not only Woolf, but also David Foster Wallace, whose writing and suicide are also both inspirations on my novel. Crystal has gone to film school, and
like many of her generation grew up with television, but her inclination is toward literariness and literature, so she finds herself writing hybrid texts, which she thinks both funny and meaningfully serious, in the way of a talented, ambitious, but still adolescent writer. I will return later to *The Weightless Machine*’s play with genre, which is connected to its play with self and identity—rich and profound traditions in the novel.

I realize the creation of what John Gardner calls “interest” (*AF* 39) in a narrative requires more than just a closely focalized character in action, a character being. As such I am also committed to my novel’s need to create what Gardner calls “profluence” (*AF* 53, 165). Gardner describes an effectively profluent plot as one with “forward-movingness”. The many details, events, and characters of a novel, if its plotting is profluent, will evoke from within the novel a sense of meaning, cohesiveness, verisimilitude, and, very importantly, what we might call payoff or development. From the novel’s outset—Crystal Smith cramped in a limousine at the base of Stacey Wilde’s condominium high-rise, unable physically and mentally to reach Stacey, unable to effectively communicate with anyone—I have tried to set a plot in motion, and while related subplots also develop across the novel, I have tried to continually return to the central plot into which all weaves—Crystal yearning to be with Stacey. Gardner invokes Aristotle’s concept of “energia”—if the novel’s many details, characters, and events have a potential energy in them, a profluent plot will feature the actualization of that potential, which will simultaneously feel both inevitable and unexpected (*AF* 185). The actualization of all this energy in the “resonant close” of the novel, is “the basis of the novel’s chief glory” (*AF* 192)—a description that artfully evokes my own experience of literary novels. Nothing in the world makes me feel as moved or changed or illuminated as the resonant close of an effective novel. It is a primary reason I move hungrily from novel to novel—a search for that deep and aching resonance. Narratologist N.J. Lowe’s
concept of the classical plot’s “endgame” evokes a very similar idea: “the final discharge, among main viewpoint characters, of emotional potential that has been built up by the resolution postponed...some kind of emotional buzz” (60). In accordance with Gardner and Lowe’s ideas, *The Weightless Machine*’s final sequence—Crystal’s return and ascent to Stacey; Crystal’s experiences in the penthouse invoking all the novel’s characters and events—seeks to fulfill the novel’s potential energy, bringing together its characters, its many elements and resonances. However, as this the novel ends at what I now see as Book One, I produce new potentials of energy just as others are rewardingly actualized.

But again and importantly I hope this novel transcends its spider-webbed causal events to evoke and explore Crystal Smith’s being in time, a human mind/body in the world—a particular mind being in a particular time and place under a particular set of conditions. I believe no art form is more capable of such exploration than the novel. Thus, undergirding the above-mentioned profluence is Crystal’s “yearning,” a vital concept described by Robert Olen Butler. Yearning, Butler insists, must “always be a part of a fictional character...the dynamics of desire that is at the heart of narrative and plot” (40). Crystal’s yearning, which, like the novel’s center, I have tried to make both indelible and mysterious for the reader, drives her many choices and actions. Indeed, even the formal devices like the perfectly bonded free indirect style and present tense speak to another aspect of Crystal’s yearning: *to compose*, as in a narrative and autobiographical self, in order to be a being part of the world as she perceives it, a fruition of agency. Crystal composes the very novel narrative we are reading, as well as the reverberating “Chinese Box” narratives within the larger narrative. She does so in an attempt to appease a deep dissatisfaction with her perceived state, her lack of agency. She at once perpetuates her isolation (from family, co-workers, peers) while experiencing a deep dissatisfaction with isolation’s
loneliness. She is hyperconscious of the breaches between one person’s mind and another, what William James called “the most absolute breaches in nature” (226). She composes in order to create her self, to explain her self to others, and to explain the world to her self and others. She composes to make connection in what she sees as a disconnected personal and public experience of the world. Such is directly related to her yearning for personal and social homeostasis. Finally, she composes, literally, to bring a version of her self to Stacey, and Stacey to her. The “pitch” Crystal composes over the course of the novel is what produces Stacey’s longed-for call to her. Form reflects content: this novel itself is an exercise in crossing the most absolute breaches, an exercise in what it might feel like to inhabit the mind and being of another: Crystal Smith.

Mario Vargas Llosa’s descriptions of the “Chinese box” deepen my technique of formal play that employs multiple instances of narrativity and textuality. Such a story, he says, is “constructed like those traditional puzzles with successively smaller and smaller identical parts nestled inside each other, sometimes dwindling to the infinitesimal.” However, it is very difficult to do this effectively because “when a central story begets one or more subsidiary stories, the procedure can’t be mechanical (although often is).” *Persuasion* requires the construction “contributes something to the tale—mystery, ambiguity, complexity—that makes it seem necessary, not merely a juxtaposition but a symbiosis or association of elements with a mutually unsettling effect on each other” (101). Effective, persuasive Chinese boxes “trigger significant reverberations within the mother stories” (103). Vargas Llosa’s novel *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* features reverberate Chinese boxes. Chapters in the so-called mother narrative alternate with other narratives, which turn out to be popular pulp radio plays. The convention doesn’t become obvious until later in the novel, which greatly enhances the novel’s interest, its mystery. More, the radio narratives and mother narrative become artfully confused. They merge
rewardingly late in the novel. Similarly, I’ve constructed the many narratives of Crystal and the many narratives of the novel to coalesce in Crystal’s being and in the novel’s form late in *The Weightless Machine*.

From the novel’s outset I establish Crystal as an aspiring writer. She references her ongoing, monomaniacal, post-adolescent personal narrative *The Big Dang* (again, inspired by Steph McDaniel’s naming of Crystal), which has taken different forms at different times in her creative, self-absorbed life (e.g. diary, stand-up comedy performance, screenplay, novelistic prose). Crystal’s conversations with her selves—her inner compositions—become the form of the novel. Additionally, there are ekphrastic references to Crystal’s “unsuccessful” student writing, which we can consider part of her amorphous monomaniacal text. She explicitly references *The Last Christmas*, a chapter/segment/episode of *The Big Dang*, inspired by her last trip home to Silas, Missouri, indicative of the aforementioned personal style of dark-comic social parody in that it satirizes the Bruce Willis persona-driven, nationalistic, terrorist fantasy *Die Hard* films while speaking to Crystal’s shame and frustration with the perceived oppression of socially conservative Silas. *The Last Christmas* then reverberates when Crystal sits to watch the first episode of *Fit To Pitch* and sees that contestant Bill Gulliver’s pitch has the same title but effectively flips the “terrorist” scenario by making a group of Islamic extremists the antagonists rather than Crystal’s Southern Baptist extremists (this too is one of many instances of doubling in the novel). While these are instances of narratives within the mother narrative—Crystal’s compositions—we do not read Crystal’s work itself until the chapter “*HTBM: Piss Ship,*” which picks up from Ed and Benjie’s *Hot Tub Baby Machine* pitch as well as the mysterious property *The Weightless Machine*, which appears to be a subversion of ideas of composed by Ed, her father Fret, and Ramses Michael Patrick on *Fit To Pitch*. Over the course of the novel these
Chinese boxes converge and become one with the master narrative. *The Last Christmas*, the multiple versions of *The Weightless Machine*, *Hot Tub Baby Machine* and the *HTBM* franchise ideas, and the pitches and players from *Fit To Pitch* converge within Crystal’s reality inside the penthouse of Atlantis W. Hollywood.

I do not at first explicitly tell the reader that *HTBM: Piss Ship* is Crystal’s composition. However, I consider it part of the novel’s interest and profluence in that it picks up on the novel’s system of resonances and references. More, Crystal’s text continues to develop in the novel, becoming the pitch which she gives to *FTP* producer Gil Tannen-Sterling. One of the understated aspects to this authoring is that Crystal’s composition, unlike her previous compositions, here gathers interest and traction because it is authored and mouth-pieced through men (Uncles Ed and Benjie). Crystal’s *HTBM: Piss Ship*, and it’s sequel *HTBM: The Five*, continue in the vein of her dark-comic genre parody with a social intent, both in in terms of dystopic content as well as parodying the tent-pole, franchise mentality filmmaking consuming popular cinema. Crystal intends these texts to be comic, even absurd, while at the same time trying to make them genuinely viable as properties via their recognizable elements and interest in what she considers a corrupt and ridiculous commercial industry. This too, as it turns out, was Ed’s original goal with *Hot Tub Baby Machine*. However, these ideas are misperceived and misconstrued by the minds they pass through, Benjie at first, and then producer Gil Tannen-Sterling. But as Chinese boxes within the novel, these texts have deeper meaning for Crystal, filled as they are with references to her life, her father, and particularly Stacey Wilde. In one sense Crystal is writing the pitches to attract Stacey’s attention, to bring Stacey into her life, which then happens in the chapter “Yes” when Stacey calls, asking Crystal to help realize the film, unaware it is already Crystal’s creation. Also central to the confluence of stories, we see
“The Grand Armada” develop from an unconscious dream state—a draft, so to speak—into a significant thread in the Chinese boxes.

“The Grand Armada” is one of the novel’s central thematic concepts, as well as what Gardner calls a *controlling metaphor* (“General Plan for the Sunlight Dialogues” 259)—an exploiter/exploitee power relation disrupts a homeostatic state, or homeostatic potential. “The Grand Armada” is, on one hand, a textual reference to *Moby-Dick*’s well-known Chapter 87 of the same title, which features the Pequod’s whale boats’ journey into a great pod of sperm whales and culminates in an intensely lyrical, dramatic, and ultimately violent encounter with a group of Sperm whale calves and mothers in the calm eye of a titanic, circling pod of Sperm whales. This scene informs many of Crystal’s half-conscious dream-states in the novel, reverberating too with Stacey’s Wilde’s childhood whale-like, wordless songs/soundings on *Show It To Them!* which so transfixed Crystal. “The Grand Armada” is then drafted into Crystal’s expanding *HTBM* franchise universe as apocalyptic finale to Episode Two, *HTBM: Piss Ship, The Weightless Machine*’s final chapter, “Dawn Saboteur,” features for the first time Crystal’s self within her *HTBM* narrative; she dreams from the penthouse deck of the circling space station and Earth’s extinct human population in their Weightless Machines. Looking up at the sky Crystal imagines the mothers of the Drummond children—“The Five”—boarding the space station too late. Thus, in its final chapter, the novel’s Chinese box narratives and Crystal’s real-time autobiographical self narrative become one and the same.

The simultaneous exploitation and marginalization of women and children in society and popular culture is a concern of Crystal’s, as well as the novel itself. The mothers and calves of “The Grand Armada” speak to the objectification and exploitation of women and children that is fundamental to the construction of patriarchal society. Thus I see many of the novel’s threads
culminating in the apocalyptic “Grand Armada” sequence. The textual referencing of Moby-Dick’s chapter 87 speaks also to this meaning. To Crystal’s thinking Melville’s (one of the writers in her box of books) “Great American Novel” is a truly effective, complex, influential novel which is part of the form’s parodic, metafictional legacy so valued by Crystal, and with which I intend The Weightless Machine to be in conversation. But also, for Crystal, “The Grand Armada” speaks to patriarchal, supremacist, and capitalist powers that exploit and exterminate Earth’s sentient beings and resources as part of its self-obsessed, monomaniacal narrative. Consumer capitalism, poverty, the creation of divided underclasses, nationalism, the entertainment industry, the pharmaceutical industry, advertising, social media, data mining—I realized late in the writing of this novel that time and again in the narrative we see an exploiter/exploitee power relation disrupt a homeostatic state, or homeostatic potential.

*Hot Tub Baby Machine* is another central story-within-the-story. For Crystal the movie is a parody of the American teen and romantic comedy genre that speaks to the historic objectification, exploitation, and abuse of women and children. The different ways by which Gil and others misconstrue, misconceive, or frame “the pitch” speak to this exploitation’s continued ubiquity in modern popular culture. Crystal takes the darkly comic parody to greater and greater extremes as the sequel *HTBM: Piss Ship* features a group of naked children—The Drummonds—whose voyeuristic, incestuous 18-year maturation aboard a space station becomes Earth’s top viewing entertainment. The novel’s close points to the third installment of the Crystal’s so-called franchise—*HTBM: The Five*—which will feature the marginalized women of Hot Tub Baby Machine and *HTBM: The Ship* as aged mothers who seek to alter the narrative. Formally my novel ends on this note, which is also parody of serial storytelling and franchising. Many narrative resonances, I hope, come to confluence. More, a significant dramatic event occurs
when Gil once again takes ownership of Crystal and Stacey’s narrative, prompting Crystal’s grip on reality to again weaken. She tells Stacey her paranoid version of what is happening, and the reader is left to wonder where our complex, subjective narrative might go next. I plan another novel to follow this one, or perhaps this is the first half of a longer novel. The continuation of the narrative will feature Crystal’s ongoing autobiographical self narrative as well as multiple real-life film productions, the actualization of some of our novel’s Chinese boxes. Ramses and Gil’s production of *The Weightless Machine* will compete with that of Crystal and Stacey’s, who team up with oft-referenced writer/filmmaker Dorene Smith.

The continuation of this narrative will also deepen the possibility of Gil Tannen-Sterling’s surveillance and intelligence operations regarding Crystal and her family. A recurring idea in the novel is the disappearing boundary between public and private. The rise of social media has produced a situation in which all of our hopes and dreams are available as data to be mined by corporations, intelligence agencies, and any number of independent operators. Ed’s paranoid rants about saboteurs, the covert murders of social and cultural figures, and the operations of various intelligence agencies to control our beliefs and worldviews is of course all-too-real, and the events of this narrative make Crystal (and thus us) wonder whether something similar isn’t happening around her via Gil Tannen-Sterling and whatever forces of power he might represent. Throughout the novel, the language and products of popular culture are seen to shape the reality of citizens. The dystopian reality of Crystal’s *HTBM* franchise envisions a future of global citizens who disappear inside entertainment devices called Weightless Machines. On one hand, this is meant to be a play on recurring genre tropes, but also, it’s not unlike the de facto social control of social media and other ubiquitous entertainments already existing today. Crystal, like Ed, suffers paranoid delusions, but might there be actual things to be paranoid
about? *The Weightless Machine* says yes, and I look forward to developing this line of thought in the next installment of this narrative.

I consider *The Weightless Machine* a work of metafiction. My sense of what this means is influenced by Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980). Hutcheon makes clear that origins of the techniques often heralded as new, even destructive, under the umbrella of “postmodernist” fiction have long roots in the tradition of the world novel. To those who would define postmodern as calling into question “claims of literature and art to truth and human value” (Graff, qtd in NN), Hutcheon rightfully points to the long novelistic tradition begun with *Don Quijote*. She uses the term metafiction to describe the many forms that novelistic self-consciousness can take, a tradition she traces to roots in the Romantic, modernist, and Spanish baroque periods. She focuses on the roles of text and reader, arguing that metafiction—contrary to what its opponents insist—enhances the life-art connection via a focus on the mimesis of storytelling’s imaginative process rather than product (the story told). Thus, the process of reading and composition equates to the process of being. These traditions, as Hutcheon makes clear, are central to the novel’s origins. I hope that *The Weightless Machine* is in conversation with this important legacy. The novel employs mimesis of storytelling’s imaginative process as both theme and content. It is thus a testament to being—being as process, not product. I have mentioned Moby-Dick; I think one center of Melville’s great novel is something like this same notion. In the chapter “I Was Just Joking” we see Crystal, having decided to stay in Silas, move into Ed’s trailer and, while taking care of her comatose uncle, she literally composes. We see Crystal sitting at her desk in the act of composition—the result of which is not only the Chinese box narratives I have mentioned but the novel itself. In the chapter’s culminating moment, self-referencing, playful Crystal, seated at the desk, both creator
and character in her autobiographical self process, writes: “And if you look closely you might see a fine mist above her.” This moment of course is another *Moby-Dick* reference, not only to of the whale’s oft-referenced “mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor” (293), but also Chapter 85, “The Fountain,” in which Melville inserts the composing narrator (easily seen as himself) into the narrative:

> “While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long song reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon” (158).

Such is, remarkably, the very image of Melville at work on his novel. More, such is the novel.

In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera contends that the novel serves as “image and model” of the modern world, a world in which, on one hand, advances in science, philosophy, and other disciplines call into permanent question notions of any kind of “single divine Truth,” but on another hand, an overemphasis on materialism leads to what Heidegger calls “the forgetting of being.” The novel’s wisdom is “the wisdom of uncertainty”—it simultaneously “scrutinize[s] man’s concrete life and protect[s] it against ‘the forgetting of being.’” Kundera asks whether the novel, as a medium, has “already mined all its possibilities, all its knowledge, and all its forms?” (15) In answer, he describes the history of the novel to present as one of “missed opportunities” rather than an exhausted seam, and describes four essential appeals—to play, dream, thought, and time—that the novel may yet richly explore. The first of these is the appeal of play. He says that Stern, in *Tristram Shandy*, and Diderot, in *Jacques le Fataliste* conceived their novels as “grand games” that “reach heights of playfulfulness, of lightness, never
scaled before or since.” I have tried to apply these appeals, especially that of play and dream, to *The Weightless Machine*. Additionally, Italo Calvino’s essay “Lightness” (1988) contributes thematically to my sense of these appeals. Calvino explores *Lightness* as both physical and metaphysical quality, presenting an image of “the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness” (12). This striking image can be applied to the yearning of Crystal Smith, as well as many specific narrative instances of *The Weightless Machine*, and, finally, as part of poetics of the entire novel. Lightness and weightless gravity—the meeting place of melancholy and humor—are qualities essential to being in *The Weightless Machine*. I connect the appeals of Kundera and Calvino to processes of self-awareness and self-reflexivity, to the remembering of being. *The Weightless Machine* not only thematically explores such processes; it is itself, for me personally as well as Crystal, a novelistic process of self-awareness and self-reflexivity. Engaging in the writing of this novel has been the most rewarding creative process of my life, and, I hope, the model and beginning of more novels to come.

To characterize *The Weightless Machine* a kind of grand and playful game is not to call its endeavor trivial or non-serious. Indeed, as I’ve described, the novel deals with a great many very serious subjects, and builds, I hope, to a moving, emotional endgame. While writing with a joy for formal play and discovery, an awareness of discourses and framing—a *sentimental-reflective* author in the Pamuk sense—I also wish to create a world that effectively persuades the reader as Vargas Llosa describes, a self-consistent, compelling, detail-driven fictional dream per Gardner; what Pamuk calls the *naïve* novelist. I am inspired by and, aspire to, Pamuk’s earned synthesis of these ideas. I understand a novel the length of *The Weightless Machine* cannot create interest as closely focalized interior explorations alone. Thus I seek a self-consistent system of
resonances, vivid details, and formal techniques across a dynamic, subjective narrative universe. I wish Crystal and the other human beings in my novel to feel like human beings: Complex, human minds not as products (objects) but processes. “In spite of what we know about fiction,” Pamuk says, “we are annoyed and bothered if a novel fails to sustain the illusion that it is actually real life” (NSN 3). I strive for what James Woods calls “lifeness: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry” (247). In defending “realism of this kind,” Woods says, “almost all the great twentieth century realist novels also reflect on their own making, and are full of artifice. All the great realists, from Austen to Alice Munro, are at the same time great formalists” (247). The question becomes how does one practically do this on the novel page?

Today neuroscientists and other thinkers understand there is no divide between body and mind. Rather, as both Damasio and Merleau-Ponty describe, body and mind are deeply integrated. We experience the world through our bodies. One’s sense of self extends to the body, and extends to how one sees and is seen by others. Crystal’s weight, gender, and other physical characteristics such as her crooked teeth, affect how others see her, and consequently how she sees her self. She is obsessed with her physical similarities to her uncles, and her disgust with them points to her self-disgust. Crystal has been body shamed throughout her life, and her tendency toward self-shaming and self-denigration developed as defensive reactions to the social world. Contributing to the novel’s lifeness I have tried to physically inhabit Crystal’s body throughout the body. For example, one recurring resonances is her tendency to “blow air out her nose”—a physical manifestation of her exasperation with people and things. I describe this action with slightly different language throughout the novel—e.g. “shoot air,” “push air”—depending on the level of her discomfort. Too, in several places we see her mother perform a
similar unconscious action, which points to Crystal having unconsciously received the trait. Another recurring resonance is Crystal’s smelling of her body. She’s obsessed with the way she and others smell. This was one of many things I tried to make more clear and precise in revisions to the novel. She believes her smell to be that of a “turned fruit”—sour but still sickly sweet. She literally folds into her self—sleeping on the couch for example—and revels in her scent. A recurring fantasy is finding another who smells like her, and who will like her smell. She is obsessed with Stacey’s smell, described variously as a wet soil, river earth. In the novel’s climax wherein she and Stacey come together, Stacey tells her that she too has been obsessed with Crystal’s smell. When Crystal asks her what she smells like, Stacey replies, “Like a river, C. Rich, wet river and earth.” This is one of my favorite moments in the novel, an example of both narrative payoff and lifeness. Similarly, Crystal is seen throughout the novel “holding in” her stomach, clenching in the company of others, ashamed of her weight. Late in the novel Stacey tells her to unclench, to quit holding it in.

Creating lifeness is also to place Crystal within events, to see her react, act, and change—a proactive agent in a world of its own consistent reality. As such I open the novel in movement, en media res—Crystal in the limousine before Atlantis W. Hollywood—and then follow her through events. I subscribe to the idea that the human mind, and its important autobiographical self process, is constantly changing, always new, a product of its bodily, social, spatial, and temporal contexts (numerous thinkers in disciplines from neuroscience to psychology and philosophy describe this concept, but I am particularly influenced by Damasio’s Self Comes To Mind). I want to see and experience Crystal as she sees and experiences her universe, her self constantly changing. As Pamuk describes, we learn about this character via her reactions to and attitudes toward the events and places she is within. Central to Crystal is a deep depression, the
causes which include the fear, anxiety, shame described earlier—a constellation of problems concerning trying to be something. I try to get at these realities subtly, and a central technique here is the employment of what Gardner calls vivid detail—a world experienced, as Pamuk describes, from our hero. Central among the novel’s landscapes is that of Silas, Missouri, a particular time and place I wish to render as one of limited opportunity. And because we experience Silas, as everything else, via Crystal, the narrative itself frames and focalizes Silas not unlike the framing and focalization Gil applies the town in his manipulative reality-TV production. I hope the reader comes slowly, dramatically to see Silas in other ways, as we learn more about Crystal, seeing her in this world in a way she cannot herself see. Uncles Ed and Benjie, Mom, and deceased father Fret are lifelong Silas residents. The limited opportunity of Silas, coupled as it is with a limited learning and worldview, produces in its residents a frustration, anger, and confusion. This situation of economic, spiritual, and intellectual poverty leads to rampant drug and alcohol addictions, which both cause and exacerbate pre-existing mental illnesses. Crystal’s yearning for “sociocultural homeostasis” (Damasio 310) speaks to a the collective, unspoken yearning of a town like Silas, Missouri, ravaged by an economic system and political reality that does not serve the interests of the poor and disadvantaged. Crystal’s yearning to communicate—to articulate words that make meaning for her self and others, words that help others see themselves and one another more clearly—speaks to this same idea.

A central text in my bibliography is Andrew Soloman’s The Noonday Demon (2002). The book’s subtitle reads “An Atlas of Depression.” Soloman’s careful, spherical study, resonant with his own heavy history of suicidal depression, contributed significantly to my own thoughts regarding an entire milieu that suffers in a hotspot of this kind of being. Poverty greatly exacerbates depression, and Soloman makes particular note that women—a disadvantaged class
within a disadvantaged class—bear a great brunt of the illness, women of color even more. So much of Western literature is about the male experience of suffering and living, and yet, as Solomon points out, “about twice as many women as men seem to suffer depression” (173). “Across cultures,” he continues, “women have higher rates of not only depression but also panic disorders and eating disorders” (175). Author Naomi Wolf remarks in *The Noonday Demon’s* “praise” section that women’s lasting depression and grief “is so often trivialized.” Thus we see both Crystal and her mother Claire. But men too feel a burden of poverty, a heavy sense of limitation. All are prone to seek unhealthy avenues to feel better, to seemingly step outside of their time and situation. One result: The poverty class in small rural communities like those of southern Missouri feature alarming incidents of addiction to drugs such as alcohol, methamphetamines, and, particularly significant for Crystal’s uncle Ed and father Fret, opioids. Disturbingly, these opioids are now readily made available to folks via the pharmaceutical drug industry, so called “painkillers” and “pain medication.” One of the novel’s centers, I think, asks what is this pain that needs to be *medicated* and *killed*? There is a heaviness in poverty, a fear of too-close mortality, a shame; there is a heaviness in being a woman, a fear of too-close mortality, a shame; Crystal’s experience, even far away from Silas, is deeply drenched in this heaviness. “Depression,” Solomon points out, “takes up bodily occupancy” (15).

For Crystal, Silas, Fret, Ed, everyone, there is a deep yearning for some kind of lightening, and lightness. A yearning for moments of unfettered being and self-awareness, a place from which to consider the present, past, and future with a sense of wonder and joy. A yearning for homeostasis. Of course, Crystal, like many in the novel, needs to be healthier in both mind and body. As the novel shows numerous times, she has poor eating habits. Habitual depression leads to such habitual, poor choices. The cost of the weight is immense. Suicide is a
central component of these milieus, and thus a central component of the novel’s narrative. Suicide has hung over Crystal her entire life because of Fret’s suicide, Lyle’s, and others in Silas. In the narrative her mind returns repeatedly to the image of the spinning fan, the living room within which Fret died, and to which she will indeed return. Throughout the novel her own suicide is an indirectly-alluded-to option in the back of her mind—a draft of a potential conscious state. I have tried in the matter of Crystal’s suicide attempt not to exploit or sentimentalize, tendencies that Gardner rightfully points out can weaken a novel’s effectiveness. I think it a great miracle Crystal lives in this novel, that she is alive. I have come slowly to understand that one of my great hopes with this book is to help others, particularly younger novel readers, not suicide. I hope this book—as an experience, a yearning, a dream, a sense of puzzle and center—is a being in a world, a weightless machine accessible to others for reflection and renewed living.

Central to my experience writing *The Weightless Machine* is the importance of craft, the necessity of a committed, dedicated, resonate practice. I have long thought myself a writer but only now am I coming to see what a mature practice means, practically and spiritually, for my body and my mind. To write every day within a wide open narrative universe—a puzzle of a great many pieces, pieces new all the time, pieces placed always in new places, moving and changing—is of great benefit to my health, to my outlook on and experience of the world. Employing Robert Olin Butler’s *dreamstorming* practice was particularly valuable in several stages of *The Weightless Machine*’s development. I first began to dream the novel’s worlds and characters, and most importantly Crystal, during one stretch of effective dreamstorming several semesters ago. Then again another concentrated use of the practice during a later draft of the novel greatly enriched the complexity and human feeling of my novel. Via this practice I have
tried to reach The Weightless Machine from my unconscious, as a body of sensations and feelings in a physical world rather than through a superficial, idea-driven intellectual construction.

I know I must work hard to continue these practices; not only do they make the work possible, the work makes my life better. I appreciate and have incorporated a number of writer’s poetics, but in this matter of life practice, life process, Joyce Carol Oates’s “Faith of a Writer” is particularly resonant. The work becomes its own reward, a process and practice by which to fulfill life when other pursuits such as religion or materialism cannot. In fact, as with Crystal’s yearning to compose, the process produces homeostasis. The process gives life meaning. Vargas Llosa agrees, “The defining characteristic of the literary vocation may be that those who possess it experience the exercise of their craft as its own best reward” (4). Pamuk, whose poetics been so influential to my poetics, articulates these ideas beautifully: “Both in writing and painting the supreme goal must be to attain such happiness” (NSN 118). The importance of sitting to dream, to write, is not first about stacking pages, or completing a product, or competing with other writers, but rather about ways of seeing the world anew. Among them: “to forget the world in the way a child does, to be irresponsible and delight in it, to play around with the rules of the known world—but at the same time to see past [her] freewheeling flights of fancy to the deep responsibility of later allowing readers to lose themselves in the story” (Other Colors 8). To be honest, I’m not sure The Weightless Machine is successful or effective in any of the ways I’ve described above. I hope it is, but I’m not yet sure. Most importantly, the work has altered my experience of the world. Just as it has been about Crystal’s being in time, writing The Weightless Machine has been about my being in time. It makes me smile and it gives me hope.
“In fact, the artist’s designed seemed this: a final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject. The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads.”

—*Moby-Dick*

"Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,
Flapping from out their Condor wings,
Invisible Wo!"

—*The Conqueror Worm*
1. Christmas Familyless

As the limousine lurches from Sunset Boulevard’s traffic into a line of identical limos sloped before the condominium high-rise Atlantis W. Hollywood, Crystal Smith, over-crammed in the window seat and a tuxedo suddenly two sizes too small, sucks in her belly and wishes to disappear. Her co-workers—each dressed in varying degrees of good taste and reason for Stacey’s party, and not one of whom has mentioned Crystal’s unfortunate new look—crowd her window as if she weren’t here. Towering Atlantis is a long gold leg and Celebrity Teenager’s below-the-line crew ogle its bright penthouse. Crystal tries to act disinterested, but Stacey Wilde is up there. Stacey loose and limber, probably laughing right now, shaking her head at something, dark red hair floating weightless around her, while Crystal down here sweating and bulging in a man’s suit with her newly shorn hair greased back feels and looks like a giant frog.

She could shove the limo’s door open and try to climb out, but then she’d have to taxi back to the valley, and today she spent the last of her money on this stupid frigging rental tux and haircut. She smells her body excreting stink and fear, and she smells longhaired Digital Imaging Tech Stewart leaning over her. His sour pungency of weed, cigarettes, and whisky reminds her of the Fret dream, come again today at dawn.

“Ya’ll ready for this?” Stewart grins shaggily at the party crew. It’s a joke, a line from a song, but to answer the question: no.

“I heard Stacey’s got the whole top floor,” says Make-Up Assistant Keeley, looking pretty cute but desperate in a low-cut dress. Keeley takes a wincing swig from the silver flask Crystal wants none of and passes it to Script Supervisor Shannon, dressed in a bosomy but tasteful blouse and long skirt.

“Have you guys been here before?” Shannon says.
“I’ve been to the downstairs bar,” says First Assistant Camera Oral Robinson in his no-bullshit slacks and button-down. “The pricks wanted twenty-five bucks for a beer.”


The line of limousines doesn’t frigging move. Overhead the Atlantis penthouse, Stacey hidden somewhere inside, shoots beams of light across a starless sky. Crystal closes her heavy eyes and feels half in the Fret dream, like floating in water:

She rides off Fret’s chest. It is her first memory. The only she has of her dad. She is two-months-old. A blur. The tiniest text on water. They’re in the trailer’s narrow living room. Overhead the ceiling fan spins, its pull-cord clicking the metal base, its long blades shadows flickering the dirty vanilla ceiling and walls, flickering Crystal and Fret who also circle the room. He carries her clutched to his paint-splattered t-shirt and barrel chest, his smell close, familiar: the body being, turning, a fruit past ripe but sharply sweet. He is agitated. She is weightless, the beginning of weight. His dark red beard scratches her cheek, and he is crying. His wet eyes reflect blurry Crystal, and his wet mouth moves, he talks, talking, he is saying things, seemingly many things, but she cannot hear them. She senses tantalizing forms to his words, and yearns to fill them, but Fret and she begin rising toward the fan’s fast, flickering blades. Fear paralyzes her as the blades near. Here the dream always ends.

“You okay, Smith?” She opens her eyes. Stewart, so close she can see the cavernous blackheads of his red nose.

“What do you mean?” Crystal shifts her shoulders and shoots air out her nose. Stewart gets the hint and squeezes himself away, giving her the only couple of inches he can.
“You seem a little pale. Skittish.”

Like a colt apparently. A megafauna colt. “No, thanks, I’m good,” she says. “I wonder why these cars aren’t moving.”

Atop the hill, past the idling limousines, the Atlantis front lobby is bright with glass and precious metals. Hollywood hipsters in denim, leather, and plastic flit past a line of serious doormen into the high-rise. One dark-suited doorman, a clipboard of papers in hand, troops slowly down the line of limousines, stopping to inspect the occupants of each.

“Can’t you call someone, Smith?” First A.C. Oral Robinson says to her. Everyone laughs.

Crystal squeezes a smile. LOL. It’s a joke because, like, the Second Second Assistant Director is supposed to do everything like that all the time. A recent film school graduate with a mountain of debt and no network or job prospects, she answered a vague Craigsboard ad several months ago and came on the new reality-TV show as a minimum-wage Production Assistant. When she discovered it was Stacey’s show she believed her position providence. Within weeks, under the mentorship of Second A.D. Tanya, she rose to Second Second A.D. This was only partly because she easily figured out how to do everything; mostly it was because she showed up everyday for little pay and worked insane hours that would have been illegal under old union rules. When Tanya had enough and quit not only the show but, like many are doing, the whole business, Crystal assumed those responsibilities too. Now she manages all production on *Celebrity Teenager* but remains, by both title and pay, Second Second A.D.

She suspects she will be put to work any time now. If First Assistant Director Amy, aka The First, aka The Worst, was in this car Crystal would definitely be tasked with something ridiculous. “Smithy, will you call the National Weather Service and get us a Thunderstorm for this shot? Thanks.” Later: “Smithy, can you and the P.A.s get rid of all this fucking water before
we break from Lunch? Thanks.” Make-Up Assistant Keeley told Crystal that Amy calls her “Fat Kermit” and has a thin-lipped, eye-rolling, shoulder-shrugging routine that accompanies the slur. Keeley almost laughed when confiding this to her.

Her body bulges the tux, her eyes swell and roll. You can’t suck in “Fat Kermit” forever. If she survives tonight she’ll add this chapter to The Big Dang, her life’s work, itself a name given her in fourth grade science by the keen Steph McDaniels. What luck to have come of age with great poets.

Her phone vibrates, irretrievable in her pants pocket, buried between her thigh and Stewart’s. Piss ship. It must be Uncle Benjie again. Like a curse following her from Silas, Missouri, Benjie moved to L.A. several weeks ago, and she’s done everything she can to avoid him and the reality show in which he was cast.

“He’s not doing anything for Christmas,” Mom said yesterday on the phone from Silas. “You should call him back. You’re both in Los Angeles…”

“Mom, Venice Beach is like a whole other city from where I live. Besides, I have to work.”

“You might call your Uncle Ed too. He was asking about you. It seems like he’s been really down lately…”

God. Ed. Her entire life spent escaping this family. “Mom, I can’t right now. I’m working, like, seriously, a hundred hours a week on the show…”

“I don’t understand why you’re not coming home for Christmas…”

Mom, don’t you remember last year? The Last Christmas? Does anyone have a memory of events? “Mom, I told you, production’s in a big push right now and I can’t get away…”

“I don’t know who makes somebody work on Christmas…”
“Anyway, it’s all consumer capitalist scam preying on the most vulnerable. I frigging hate Christmas.”

“Crystal, please don’t say that.” She could see Mom’s eyes tear, her lips quiver.

The pocketed phone vibrates again and again. Stewart, sharing her thigh, smiles crookedly at her. “Looks like somebody’s blowing up.”

Yes indeed. Historical fact: Christmas never ended well. She should be in her apartment, one of the shadows, neither looking nor being looked at.

She wasn’t going to come tonight. But then this morning she read the new frigging Rolling Stone feature: “Who is this Stacey Wilde?” A huge coup for Stacey and her people, as well as Celebrity Teenager’s producers. “The broken teen pop persona once again transcendent, star of her own hit reality series.”

Everyone knows the improbable story of Stacey Wilde. Abandoned at birth by unknown parents and then kicked out of a series of foster homes—twelve in total across the Midwest and South—she was a nonspeaking child too wild for any guardian. At the age of eleven she escorted herself to auditions in Beaverton, Alabama’s Beaverton MegaMall for the television series Show It To Them!

She showed it to them. As SITT’s Executive Producer Lank L. Lankington describes, Stacey’s original, seemingly impromptu songs were ‘a wordless singing—a sounding really—wails and moans that echoed to the starry firmament and back.’ Stacey’s enigmatic songs arrested all who heard. The TV audience selected her winner that season, and elevated her to global stardom. Which is when the trouble began.

Young, emancipated Stacey learned the hard lessons of celebrity excess and the public gaze. More, she learned to speak, and the novelty of her suffered as new songs assumed familiar
pop formulas. Sure, songs like ‘Baby Dynamo’ and ‘Little Miss Dizzy’ weren’t bad for pop, but audiences had heard it before. Led by an unsparing media, the public’s infatuation turned into contempt.

‘By the time I was thirteen,’ Stacey says, ‘I was addicted to everything. I didn’t know who I was. People love you, then they hate you, then they’re always looking for you. Finally I decided to exploit my exploitation.’ At the old age of eighteen she’s been given new life by reality-TV series Celebrity Teenager, surprise hit this year for Michelson-Katz Productions and Bravura Channel.

While we talk, her gaze drifts from the penthouse deck of her Hollywood high-rise, across noisy Los Angeles and toward the sea, an expanse of countless shimmering crystals that blur at the far horizon.

‘Sometimes I wish I had never learned the language of people,’ Stacey says.

Yes. When Crystal was eleven, the same age as Stacey but stuck in another universe, she watched Show It To Them! every week. She sat crosslegged in the trailer living room before the crappy TV and revered Stacey—a tiny, speechless girl who could suddenly open her mouth and cry towering sounds, equal parts whale, wolf, bird, and beautiful tragedy.

“Why aren’t we moving?” Crystal complains to no one. Stifled in the stalled limousine, her co-workers grumble, mumble, and concur.

Since replacing Second A.D. Tonya last month, she’s had close contact with Stacey, the Celebrity Teenager who is in fact 22 years old like her. Along with fifty thousand other duties, she told Mom, she is on-set liaison between production and Stacy. Given Stacey’s general habits of unaccountability and obscurity, this position is fraught with headaches. But then last week in
Stacey’s private trailer The Event occurred. Stacey in a thin t-shirt and panties, on the very surface of her, unashamed, smoking a cigarette:

“C…”

She called Crystal C.

“…what are you doing for Christmas? Are you going home?”

Crystal hesitated. She needed Stacey to sign paperwork and then she needed to get that paperwork back to production ASAP and try to finish wrapping out. It was the middle of the night and she’d been working for sixteen hours, an average day on this gig. They were alone in Stacey’s trailer, which was weird because Stacey always had on-hand a coterie of friends, handlers, and criminals. Stacey was the most awake, the most fully alive human being on the planet. Her face a different constellation of dark red freckles each time Crystal looked at her.

“N…”

“Where is home for you?”

“Missouri. Mid-southern Missouri, actually. Kind of t…”

“And you’re going home for Christmas?”

“No. Never,“ she said. ”I mean, not this year at least. It’s kind of…”

Stacey nodded, her eyes wet tunnels into understanding. “Yes, I knew that about you.”

“…knew what?”

“Christmas, home, family, no one understands…the whole tragic dance…I mean, fuck that, right? My so-called families could always give a fuck, C, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Come to my place.” Stacey placed her hand on Crystal’s bare forearm. Each of her thin fingers dry, ticklish, and fervent on Crystal’s skin.
“What place?”

“I just got a penthouse. At the Atlantis. On Sunset. I want you to come. It’s a party I call *Christmas Familyless.*”

“Really?” The smell of Stacey is wet soil, is that correct? Something rich, pungent. What does she do to her body? Her hair? Crystal always feels like she hulks over Stacey, and she sucks in her belly.

“Absolutely, C,” Stacey said. “If anyone needs somewhere to go it’s those who can’t go home, am I right?”

Sometimes Crystal thinks Stacey’s much smarter than she plays on the show but other times it isn’t clear. But Crystal lives where Stacey’s hand holds her arm.

“That’s awesome.” Come closer.

“I wanted to invite all of the crew.”

“Oh?” Dang. ”I don’t…”

“Because nobody does that, you know what I mean? Nobody invites the fucking crew. And who among them has a place to go?”

Stacey removed her hand from Crystal. She turned to shake out her hair.

Stacey did invite the entire frigging crew, and tonight she sent an 8-passenger limo for sixteen of them. Like Crystal, these sweating, non-union, reality-TV day players can’t stand the gig’s endless hours and high-stakes disorganization, and yet they can’t turn down the only production work left in town. Nor can they turn down an invite to Stacey’s party.

Stewart knocks back a shot of stinky whisky and offers Crystal the flask. “No,” she says. “I’m good. Thanks.”
“I’ll hit that shit,” Keeley says. As she leans for the flask, Stewart and the other guys stare at the exposed tops of Keeley’s ripe, apple breasts. Crystal shoots air out her nose.

No one in the limo has said a word about her unfortunate ensemble but she knows what they’re thinking: Fat Kermit.

But it wasn’t always like this. She had woken this morning in her North Hollywood studio apartment with a rare sense of possibility. She read Stacey’s *Rolling Stone* interview, breaking her rule of never looking at glossy, fascist propaganda. She pictured herself in Stacey’s penthouse, on Stacey’s balcony, the dark sea distant, and Stacey coming behind her, placing a hand on her waiting arm. She drank too many cups of coffee, and, feeling great, floated down Magnolia Boulevard to Tony’s Barbershop.

“Leave a little on top, to slick back,” she said, “But otherwise cut it all off.” She’d wanted to do this a long time but had been afraid.

Tony shrugged. She sat in the swivel chair and watched her shoulder-length mop of limp Midwestern hair fall to the floor. Two thousand miles away in Missouri she heard Mom breaking into tears: “Crystal, why? You looked so pretty with your hair long.” As the old her fell away, her long-obscured, puffy face emerged, but it wasn’t so terrible; the cut lent her broad forehead nobility, and revealed her large, river-colored eyes.

After the barbershop she kept going: Unstoppable Crystal Kahn on the March, several blocks over to Gentleman’s Would, where the salesman seemed able to peer into her soul. She found the perfect tuxedo model, “The Poet Laureate,” yes, the salesman nodding, encouraged. Crystal in the shop mirror: a force. Not the shop’s most expensive tux, but next-month’s-rent expensive. But necessary. Because tonight was Stacey’s Christmas Party and Crystal wasn’t going home. She could feel Stacey’s hand and hear Stacey’s dusky voice.
Back at the apartment she kept looking in the mirror: look: look: Debonair Crystal Smith, the picture of class; Celebrated Writer Crystal Smith, the smooth blade who casually cuts the cruel world.

But then she realized a terrible thing—she looked like a cross between her dad Fret and Mom’s brothers Ed and Benjie. Fret’s huge forehead and big eyes, handsome on him—as many still say—but a look of shock on her, made worse by the upturned nose, weak chin, and hanging jowls of the Presser men. Tall and broad like dad—big-boned, they say of him—but slump-shouldered and round like Ed and Benjie. The worst of all worlds. Oh my god, no. Look again, one step back from the mirror. Her edges frogged out. The tux which fit so well at the shop could now barely hold her. She sucked her belly in. She tried to pull back her sloping shoulders and hang her paddle hands sideways. There. She could hold it in all night. Breathe half the time, or not at all.

But the fear kept growing while she ate a peanut butter sandwich and quickly drank two Diet Cokes. Uncle Benjie called her again but she didn’t answer. She gorged another stupid peanut butter sandwich. Toxicity and blood pressure mounted. She paced her tiny apartment, and kept going to the mirror, looking, where she saw too-big eyes in a gross bald head atop a blubbery, blockish body: A full-blown, terminal case of Fat Kermit.

She couldn’t go to Stacey’s party after all. She would call and cancel her scheduled pick-up.

But then through the window blinds she saw the black limousine pull to her curb. Her phone rang, its belling landline ringtone no longer nostalgic or kitschy but an ominous threat.

She sucked in her belly, buttoned the tight tux, and went outside to meet the car. She crossed to the door and started to open it before the driver, coming from the other side, called
out, “Whoah, whoah, big fella,” and opened the door for her. Crystal bent down to get in and came face to face with a group of co-workers she had never seen dressed up, or even off set. They blinked back at her. She was the last person picked up, and both seats were full. She could squeeze next to either DIT Stewart or Key Grip Matt Horst, who has pissed, more than once, right behind Crystal’s office in the production trailer.

Stewart shrugged. He scooched as far as he could, and Crystal wedged her body in the seat. She felt everybody squeezing, watching her aghast. The driver kept pushing the door from behind until it closed, locking her in.

Why aren’t these cars moving? She looks to the penthouse of Atlantis W. Hollywood. Stacey’s probably sucking on a cigarette. Laughing. Touching everyone. Who’s Stacey’s boyfriend tonight? Tricky Ricky hasn’t been on set for a few days but other suspicious men have come and gone.

“Jesus Christ already,” says Matt Horst, who must be thinking about pissing on something. “Seriously,” Scripty Shannon says. “Are we supposed to just sit here all night? I left my family at home for this.”

On the far side of busy Sunset Boulevard rises a giant billboard. She hasn’t noticed it before. Seven children sprawl on a wide, mussy bed, tangled up in sheets and one another, almost fully frigging naked. They stare at the camera, at her, their adolescent gazes all at once guilty and accusatory and bored. The billboard doesn’t even seem to advertise anything; it’s just a pornographic photo of children. An inexplicable thought occurs to her: this world is in its final days.

The doorman with clipboard reaches their limo and asks the driver, “What number are you?”
“47,” their driver says.

The doorman checks his papers, then leans near the driver. He says something she can’t discern. The driver nods as the doorman passes to the next car.

The driver pulls their limousine from the line and glides uphill toward Atlantis W. Hollywood. The crew’s breath catches as the car passes the gilded front lobby. Partygoers and doormen on the outside, Crystal and her crew on the inside; everybody stares at everybody else. Crystal tries to peer past the people and glass and mirrors into the very building itself. She sees a giant fountain, bright lights flashing, someone laughing, and then it is all gone. The limo takes a sharp right at the edge of the property, drives past a “Service Entrance” sign, and ferries Celebrity Teenager’s below-the-line crew to a set of poorly lit kitchen doors at the very back of the building.

Crystal and her crew watch silently as another guy in black suit pushes out the service doors. He too holds a clipboard. He squints at their car as he approaches. Bending low, he and their driver confer. The doorman gazes distastefully at his clipboard, then at the crew, at Crystal. She can’t hear his words but he shakes his head. The driver shakes his head too. A lot of head shaking tonight. Clipboard guy shrugs. Crystal, zooming in on his white lips, reads his last words:

“I don’t know. Take them back home or whatever.”
2. Hot Tub Baby Machine

Crystal sits statue still, sagging the bed’s corner in the dark gray of early dawn. Her feet and hands are still numb, distant from her body, hardly hers. Magnolia Boulevard’s commuter traffic already rumbles her narrow North Hollywood studio, headlights criss-crossing her closed blinds. “You live on Magnolia?” The Worst asked her once, well-trimmed eyebrow raised like a knife. “God, Smithy, seriously. Nobody lives on Magnolia.”

As far as Crystal can tell lots of people live on Magnolia.

Why’d she tell Uncle Benjie she’d meet him today? She got home from set only a couple hours ago, took several frantic phone calls from The Worst, revised tomorrow’s call sheets for the thousandth time, and then emailed the crew and cast. She checked Google-Alerts for Stacey, quickly ate a peanut butter banana sandwich, and then lay atop her bed. She had a fleeting, anxious dream. Not the Fret dream but she vaguely remembers a spinning fan, clicking, water, and panic. She came to consciousness suffused with dread, her body weighted with wet sand.

Behind her in the kitchen alcove the coffee pot gurgles and wheezes. If someone were to compose this image of her hulking in the half-dark, a shapeless blob stuck between actions in the baggy gray sweats she’d just as soon live in, they’d glimpse The Big Dang. But piss ship, nobody wants to see that.

She doesn’t.

She blasts a peanut butter fart into the bed and almost laughs. Uncle Ed used to call his beer and cigarette bazooka farts The Horn Section, all of which disgusted her. But when you’re grown and alone everybody’s a trombone soloist.
She stands and crosses stiffly to her desk. Her latest journal lays open. With puffy hand she picks up her blue pen and writes “Trombone Soloist?” Under that she writes “The Horn Section.” Under that, inspired, she writes “tickets still available.”

The smudgy manuscript of her senior project stares at her—The Last Christmas. Every few weeks she pulls it from the drawer with big ideas to revise, stares past it a few days, and then puts it back. A story for the screen, The Last Christmas features a young woman named Bruce Willis—a young woman playing Bruce Willis playing a young woman. On a Christmas trip home, struggling against her past and a heartless town, she stumbles into a plot by Southern Baptist terrorists to kick-start their hotly anticipated Apocalypse with a series of strategically placed home-front holiday bombs. In the final showdown Young She-Willis cracks a timely catchphrase: “Ho, ho, hopeless, Motherfuckers.”

During undergraduate workshop Ryan Frisbang, now writing the new X-Men, said, again, he needed “more story, more plot.” Mike Dillahunt, now writing and directing episodes of Two Baby Men, said, “It’s like it almost wants to be something, but it’s not.” They were both right.

She crams the manuscript in the desk drawer and there finds the dog-eared Rolling Stone. Stacey.

Again yesterday Stacey didn’t show up to Celebrity Teenager’s set. She’s been absent the week and half since Christmas. But with ratings rising and advertisers calling, Writer/Director Freddie Greenfield and the producers have kept shooting. They have a body double named Tiff Goldsworth who, if you squint your eyes and look at only from behind, mostly passes for Stacey. “She’s got a wooden face but a great ass,” she overheard Freddie, the boy-prick wonder, say to Executive Producer Arnie Michelson. “We just shoot everything from the ass.” Freddie’s the same age as Crystal but somehow on “the auteur track.” They’ve shot an entire episode of
coverage with Tiff, and plan to insert close-ups of Stacey when she comes back. “It doesn’t matter,” Freddie reassured Arnie, “We’ve got her name and the show’s a hit.” But everybody’s pissed at Stacey, especially the below-the-line crew about the Christmas debacle.

Unlike Stacey, Tiff Goldsworth doesn’t smell like moist soil. She wears an eye-watering perfume Crystal calls Acrif Encounters. Whereas Stacey loathes making Celebrity Teenager, Tiff loves the ridiculous episode now in production—“Zen Center Re-Treat,” wherein our Celebrity Teenager tries to find her self but ends up teaching the Buddhist Monks a thing or two about living.

Tiff hasn’t laughed at the hesitant cracks Second Second A.D. Crystal has made. A few times Crystal made Stacey loudly, and she remembers each joke that worked. Her favorite thing is to make someone laugh, especially Stacey’s ringing body laugh.

“Who is this Stacey Wilde?” asks Rolling Stone. On the cover, Stacey stands in a hall of mirrors, each mirror an image of her at different ages: little Stacey singing on Show It To Them!; young, clubbing Stacey arched on the lap of an old, gross, and very pleased Jimmy Paige; Stacey with shaved head and narcotic eyes threatening the photographer; Stacey’s first disheveled mugshot; Stacey’s second disheveled mugshot. In the center modern Stacey, tailored in a handsome tux, looks over her shoulder at the viewer, her mouth an O-shape, her expression both invitation and threat.

Crystal turns the magazine facedown, but the back cover features an advertisement for American Apparent’s new line of “Invisible Lingerie.” She can’t frigging believe it. The model—soaking wet on the floor of a closet?—is Tiff Goldsworth. Her face, yes, kind of wooden. Crystal blows air out her nose and hides the foul glossy in the desk drawer.

Somebody punch me; see if I’m dreaming.
What is Stacey doing this morning? With whom? Has she washed up in a gutter? What’s happening in that penthouse?

She reaches for her cellphone, always a moment of dread.

Piss ship. Since last night (this morning?) she’s gotten twenty-seven show emails, ten from The Worst, the succubus who never sleeps. She’ll have to answer them before she drives to Benjie. She checks Google-Alerts for Stacey—no breaking news. Good.

She puts her nose to her sweatshirt’s wet armpit and inhales deeply. What does she smell like? She can’t give it a name or proper description. Just a gross, turned fruit. Yet it’s comforting. Her.

She promised her self she would finally write this morning, but she can’t focus. Besides, write what? *The Big Dang* never happens. Never happened. Steph McDaniels would have a theory about that. “So, it’s just, like, a big blob in space or whatever?” said prescient Steph in Coach Cotterback’s fourth-grade science class. Steph, perfect teeth and breasts on the way, turned in her seat and looked at Crystal. “I’ve got a theory. Crystal’s the Big Dang.” Everyone laughed, including Cotterback. Crystal wilted in the back row, but it was a pretty good call.

She shuffles to the kitchen and pours a cup of coffee. At the first black sip her blurry face sharpens, the puffy numbness in her hands and feet fades.

Dang. Daylight gathers in the window blinds. Traffic has reached full thrum. She braces her self for the drive to Venice Beach, for Uncle Benjie and his reality television show.

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Mom had been the first to call Crystal with the news. “Benjie got picked to be on some TV show. He’s going to L.A.”
She’d been driving then too, on her way to set, and she almost swerved off the Hollywood Freeway. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Mom said. "He sent away for it by the internet or something.”

“Mom, that doesn’t make any sense.” The way Mom relayed information often annoyed her as much as the information itself. “He’s going to be on a TV show? What frigging for?”

“I don’t know, Crystal. Don’t raise your voice with me please. You know I don’t understand this kind of stuff. He’ll have to explain it to you. Maybe you could call him.”

The sense of something very bad about to happen bloomed in her. A familiar feeling, but this was an acute case. On set that day she tried to hide in the production trailer, hunched over her card table desk and a depressing stack of payroll paperwork. Benjie called and she answered on the first ring.

“You’re never going to believe it," her uncle said cheerfully. "I got picked to be on Fit The Pitch.”

“What’s Fit The Pitch?” she said.

“It’s one of those reality life things like your teenager show, except on this one people send in their ideas for movies they want to make. Four of us got picked to come out to Hollywood and ‘pitch’ our movies. ‘Pitch’ is what they call it when you…”

“I know what it means.”

"They’re bringing me to L.A. and everything. Maybe we can be California roomies like Three’s Company or whatever?”

No. Panic squeezed her throat. She got off the phone and googled the show, actually called Fit To Pitch and horribly real. “Another Tannen-Sterling Production brought to you by Gil Tannen-Sterling.” She found the show’s website, and watched the video trailer:
Gil Tannen-Sterling, an older gentleman with a deep-tanned, wrinkle-free face and a sweeping crown of dubious blonde hair, strides through an Old West studio back-lot in a purple business suit. He addresses the camera: “Movies. You’ve seen them all, right? Well, my friends, where’s yours? What’s your movie?” Around him Extras in gross Native American and Cowboy stereotype engage in stage combat with Nazis and Egyptian Pharaohs—a history-less, human-less grotesquerie. Smiling Gil sidesteps the carnage and keeps talking: "Welcome to Fit To Pitch, the show where Gil Tannen-Sterling brings four lucky contestants to Hollywood to pitch their dream movie. Your action-adventure, your romantic comedy, your superhero-tent-pole, your whatever-it-is—I’ll pick the pitches with the most potential and I’ll throw you in the lion’s den. You’ll meet studio execs, producers, agents, directors, marketing and advertising gurus. You’ll talk the talk and walk the walk. You’ll move and you’ll shake. I’ll do everything I can to make you Fit To Pitch. And in the end, baby, I’ll pick one of the movies and personally finance it. Sound good? Just use the video submission link and send me your audition pitch today.” Gil Tannen-Sterling points his long slender finger at you and winks: “Let’s make a movie.”

Crystal was dumbfounded. She couldn’t process how Benjie got involved in this terrible scheme. He had never even talked about movies or writing. Uncle Ed, his older brother, had alluded to writing stories, but that was drunk, rambling noise. What could Benjie be pitching?

With ratcheting anxiety she googled Gil Tannen-Sterling. He had never even made films. He executive produced numerous law enforcement and “true crime” shows, genres that helped kickstart reality-television: Cop Wars; Cop Wars: Extreme; Big Vigilante Small Town; Big Vigilante Big City; After Death Confessions. All shows in eternal syndication, Crystal knew them but had avoided watching.
Media fascist Gil Tannen-Sterling had made a fortune creating and exploiting the misfortune of others. And now Uncle Benjie Presser was in his fold.

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Crystal drives from the valley to Venice Beach, her hands pink and tight on the steering wheel, the tiny old Toyota a rattling death trap on the freeway. At the 101/405 exchange a Hummer blows by honking. At her? She grimaces at the gone driver, shrugging her shoulders and palms in mute question.

A Fat Kermit reaction.


She parks at the Venice Beach boardwalk, immediately uncomfortable in the crowd of bare-bodied locals and tourists. The sun glares at them all. She’s hot in her usual outfit—tan slacks, heavy boots, and collared button-down shirt/tent—but she’s covered. Hands in pockets and head down she finds Donkey Dogs, the boardwalk cafe that Benjie said was “the only place around here that makes normal stuff.”

Benjie waits on the franchise red and yellow outdoor patio. He’s bigger than last Christmas, round and bright in a tie-dyed dashiki, his bald head and face sunburnt red. He doesn’t see her at first.

She squeezes a smile. “Hi Benjie.”

“Crystal?” He blinks, taking in her short hair and her own weight gain. But then he smiles and hugs her tightly. “Dang, Crystalbear, I’m so glad to see you.”

She’s mortified; she looks like him. The upturned Presser nose, the weak chin and flabby jowls. She sucks in her belly. “I’m really glad to see you too.”

He stands back, his pudgy hands on her shoulders. “You cut your hair!”
“Yeah.”

“It looks good.”

“I got sick of taking care of it.”

Benjie rubs his bald head, peeling the red skin in flakes. “I hear that.”

“Wow, that’s a crazy shirt you’re wearing.”

“Right? Isn’t it cool?” Benjie models the factory dashiki with a Chubby Checker kind of twist. “Gil said he wanted me to be like the hippy in the group. Perfect, right?”

Benjie’s eyes do show the telltale red irritation of pot and alcohol. The rubbery smile and cheeks. It’s not even noon. She experiences unsettling deja vu. Benjie is Mom and Ed’s youngest brother. All three are pot-heads, an endless source of embarrassment and chagrin for Crystal growing up. Worse, Benjie and Ed had bad drinking habits. Mom worked hard and held down a job as an in-home caregiver, minimum wage though it be today, but Benjie was often unemployed. He painted houses with Ed when Ed had work and they were getting along, but he now lived in Mom’s trailer, in Crystal’s old room. This was fine with her because he was a friend to Mom and helped a little with bills. And she would never need that room again. But to see him here in Southern California, her refuge…

“You okay?”

She comes back, her vision telescoping on Benjie’s blurry concern.

“Yeah. Yeah. It’s just bright out here. I don’t do the beach much.”

“Here, sit down, I got us an umbrella table.”

They sit. Benjie’s already ordered three hot dogs, fries, and a beer.

“Dang, Crystalbear. You remind me so much of your dad. It’s really amazing.”

She never should have cut her hair.
“I still miss Fret so much,” Benjie says, staring at his food.

Like Benjie, Crystal orders the Double Donkey Meal with All The Fixins. She knows it’s terrible but as soon as she saw it she wanted it. The fixed hot dog dissolves in her mouth; instant pleasure reward. The Diet Coke—even better from the fountain—scrubs her palate with sharp, sweet tingles.

Benjie also chews. He keeps glancing at her, her hair.

Beachgoers crisscross the boardwalk: pale tourists in hesitant bunches; darker locals gliding on foot or skateboard; grimy runaway kids in backpacks trailing leashed dogs; the scantily clad, the tan, and the muscled with healthy sheen and flowing hair. Discomfort Beach. All the gazing, all the squinting, all the rubbery bodies on bold display.

“I love it out here,” Benjie says. “It’s like everybody’s doing good. Dang, did you know weed is legal out here?”

God. “Yes.”

“Can you imagine? And Ed doing all that time for it back in the day? It’s like civilized out here. Not like Missouri at all. You know they’re still busting people for that shit back home? And here doctors are just handing it out.” Benjie leans close. “In fact I got a little doob on me right now if you want to hit the beach after this.”

The very thought of the sweet-sour stench and clumsy-decision aftermath makes her nauseous. “No thanks, I’m good.”

“You always were, Crystalbear. I respect that.” Benjie finishes his beer and looks to the Donkey Dog counter like he wants another. Once they started drinking they always drank very quickly.

She pushes air loudly from her nose. “So, your show—it’s, like, filming now?”
Benjie grins. “We be filming, baby. Gil’s got us all in a big house just a few blocks from here and he’s filming everything.” Frig jesus. “We premiere in a couple weeks. You should come over there with me and you might get on TV too”

“No.”

“I told Gil about your show. He already knows all about it. He wondered if maybe we could get together sometime and do something with Stacey.”

“No.” A spark of anger in her voice. Benjie looks worried and she softens her tone. "I mean, I’m just, like, a stupid assistant on the show. Besides, Stacey would never something like that.”

Benjie shrugs. “Gil’s pretty persuasive.”

“Please don’t ever talk to him about me and the show.”

“Okay. Sure. Whatever.” Benjie tries to drink from his empty beer, then sets it back down.

“I mean, we’re all signed to confidentiality agreements and stuff like that,” Crystal says.

“Us too. Isn’t it funny how we’re both in Hollywood making movies?”

“We’re not making movies.”

“You know what I mean. TV stuff. Hollywood stuff.” Benjie smiles. “We’re a couple hillbillies come a long way from the Ozarks.”

_Oil that is, black gold, Texas tea._ Crystal sips forlornly the bottom of her soda. She always finishes before the food. She looks to the counter.

“To tell you the truth,” he says, “I can’t really believe this is happening. I feel like I’m floating around in some dream.”

Tell me about it.
Crystal clears her tight throat. “I never even knew you had any interest in movies or writing or anything like that.”

Benjie nods. “Well, yeah, you know, it’s weird. It just kind of happened. Ed saw the ad for the show on the internet and he talked me into it.”

Ed. Of course he would be the provocateur. She recalls the insane rant he delivered _The Last Christmas_ and shudders.

She doesn’t want to but she has to ask: “So what’s the, uh, movie you’re pitching?”

Benjie sucks in a big breath of air. “Well, it’s kind of hard to explain actually…”

Oh god.

“…and actually I wanted to get your help on it, cause you’re the real writer of course…”

Oh god…

“No, no, no…

“…I’m still working it all out but it’s about this high school guy named Jim Drummond who’s like a major dork nobody likes. Everybody hates him actually, but he’s actually a really sweet guy who just wants to be loved…”

The best thing that could happen right now is for the dirty sea to rise and take us all…

“…one fateless night Jim sneaks into the biggest party of senior year…Well, somehow, and I’m not sure how yet—it’s one of the things I was hoping to get your help on—he ends up in the back yard in a big hot tub with the five girls he loves most in the whole world…But the jets and everything are so strong, so intense, and Jim…does something…a power rushes out of him and he can’t stop it, it fills the hot tub…”

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The fragile shelf of land on which they sit and talk will crumble into the watery waste. It’s not a matter of if but when…

“…then months later, back in school, Jim is still a huge dork, but one by one the five girls realize they’re pregnant…”

She could actually get up from this table, cross the boardwalk and beach, and walk into the sea. She’s big enough she’d sink easy, she wouldn’t even need rocks in her pockets. She could close her eyes. Feel the water and she become one…

"The girls get together and connect it all back to Jim, that night in the hot tub…He impregnated all of them, all at once—*Hot Tub Baby Machine*, get it? What follows is an awkward courtship…Jim truly loves each of them and they come to love him too…The town is really pissed at first, but then they see something special has happened…Jim and the girls move into a big house the town helps build…Word of the miracle gets out and Jim and the girls and the town get famous…Then, something else happens, but I’m not sure exactly what…A big final battle or something…Everybody has to work together to beat an enemy…But in the end everything works out…Seven babies are born, because two of the girls have twins, and each baby, it turns out, has super-hero powers…Cool, right?…They become a team of superheroes, led by Jim and the moms…They set out to fix all the bad stuff in the world, beat the bad guys and stuff…But all of that will be in the sequels…Gil’s big about *franchises* or whatever…This thing could go on forever if you think about, one *Hot Tub Baby Machine* after another, boom, boom, boom, boom. What do you think?"

Oh god. Oh frig jesus. Crystal stares just over her uncle’s shoulder. She can’t fix on his face or anything else. In a world of terrible contenders, the tiny cauldron of Benjie’s brain has fired the worst movie ever made.
And he and it will be on television soon, sucking her and everything else into its spinning apocalypse.
3. There’s been an accident

In the dark, woody hills of Malibu canyon, their thirteenth hour on set, Crystal trudges the steep path from production to Stacey’s trailer. Her radio headset squawks and she cringes.

“Amy for Smithy.”

She blows air out her nose. She was just with The Worst like five seconds ago. She depresses the call button. “Go for Smithy.”

“Uh, listen,” The Worst starts, and then stops. She talks to somebody off radio, surely Writer/Director Freddie, “Right, right, right. I know, I know. The usual fucking cluster-fuck.” She comes back even louder: “Amy for Smithy.”

“Go for Smithy,” Crystal repeats.

“What’s your 20?”

The headset’s tight in her ear. “I’m going to get Stacey?” Her voice sounds tinny and weak even to her self, and seems always to annoy The Worst.

“Have you seen the P.A.s?”

Crystal knows the P.A.s are on this very channel listening. New this week, Josh and Henry, twenty years old and freshly graduated from, respectively, The Hollywood Movie Institution Academy and Big Mac Steve McKenzie’s Hollywood Boot Camp, had been sent only minutes ago into the woods by The Worst and Freddy.

“They’re looking for the, um, animal?” Crystal says.

“Well, did they find anything yet?”

She stops. On the trail above her Stacey’s trailer—situated far from set as Stacey’s contract stipulates—is brightly lit inside, throbbing repetitive techno music. It’s three in the
morning and Crystal feels the cooling Malibu night tighten around her neck. “Crystal for Josh?” she says into the radio.

A pause and then Josh’s quivering voice: “Go for Josh.”

“How’s it going out there?” Crystal says. “You guys having any luck?”

“Um, I don’t know,” he says. “It’s just…” He trails off. Right, Crystal thinks, it’s just the impossible edge of the world’s end. He comes back: “Henry thought he saw a shadow of something but it was pretty small and we couldn’t catch it? But we’re still looking…”

Thirty minutes ago, when they should have been wrapping the day at twelve hours and letting everyone go home, Freddie had started talking about “the next set-up,” which, as far as Crystal could tell, came out of nowhere. A whole new set-up on Celebrity Teenager was a guaranteed two or three hours.

“The Campfire Scene,” Freddie had said, conferring with the producers and The Worst. “We don’t have an episode without it.” Arnie Michelson, the only producer of the three with a lick of practical sense—his partners Greg and Garamond Katz having only recently taken a family fortune built on the import of designer handbags and become reality TV producers—Arnie said, “You sure? I think we got it?”

Yes, yes, frig jesus, we got it, let’s go home, Crystal silently begged. But Freddie dug in. He had one of his trademark “Movie Magic” inspirations. The Farmers would teach Stacey how to build a Campfire, he said. But just when Stacey is about to pour kerosene on the logs a Bear appears from the woods and Stacey, because of A Childhood Fear of Bears, gets super scared and accidentally pours the kerosene on the Farmers’ feet. Then she lights a match to scare The Bear away but instead drops the match and lights the Farmers’s feet on fire. Then she has to confront Her Childhood Fear and run past The Bear to get to a Bucket of Water that she uses to
save the Farmers, whereby Stacey teaches them a thing or two about Bravery and Survival. Then she teaches them “Baby Dynamo” and the episode ends with Stacey and the Farmers sitting around the Campfire singing her marginal hit a cappella.

Greg and Garamond, both cocaine-eyed, loved it. Michelson was sold. The Worst agreed. “We’re here, let’s get it,” she said. Then she turned to Crystal and asked where The Bear and Bear Wrangler was.

Crystal, her voice breaking, said, “I don’t think there’s a Bear on the schedule?”

Freddie groaned, gripping his genius temples. “Goddamn it,” The Worst screamed in front of the whole crew. “We talked about this yesterday!”

Did they?

“I need a fucking production team,” The Worst said to everybody. “Never mind,” she said to Crystal, “Just go let hair and make-up and wardrobe know and then tell Stacey to get ready.”

The Worst told Josh and Henry to “go into the woods and find an animal.” Josh went mute and Henry asked quietly, “What kind of animal?”

“Any fucking animal you can find,” The Worst said.

“Something big,” Freddie said.

Now, below Stacey’s trailer, the night and woods pressing in on her, Crystal grips her radio. “Just keep looking,” she assures Josh and Henry.

“No, scratch that,” The Worst cuts in with a burst of static. “Freddie’s got another idea instead.” Oh god. “We need you guys to find Firewood. Fucking Props doesn’t have any.” Props, of course, is also listening to this same channel.

“Firewood?” Josh says.
“Firewood,” The Worst squawks. “It’s pieces of wood that you put on a fire.”

“Copy that,” Josh says. “There’s a bunch of sticks around here.”

“Great. See if you can catch those,” The Worst says.

Then the radio falls silent. Insects saw in the dark trees. Being in the woods reminds Crystal of Missouri. They lived far from town, which was good, but young Crystal, often home alone while Mom worked or went out, used to get scared by the thought of every unseen threat creeping in the close woods at night.

One song ends in Stacey’s trailer and Crystal hears a crowded burst of manic laughter. Of course. Stacey’s got company. Another song starts, pretty much the same song that just ended.

“Should I still get Stacey?” Crystal says into the radio.

The Worst comes back, “You didn’t get her?”

“No, I mean, I’m just, I was right here…”

“Yes, Smithy, yes. Get her down to Hair and Make-Up right now. They’re waiting.”

“Copy that.”

Crystal slumps toward Stacey’s trailer. Stacey returned to set this week and Tiff Goldsworth was dispatched back to the closet. But Stacey has barely said a word or even looked at Crystal. She’s smelled flu-y and phlegmy. Her face and body seems bonier, her freckles caved in shadows. Crystal hasn’t even tried a joke.

Crystal doesn’t climb the two tiny steps. She reaches up and knocks on Stacey’s door.

Voices inside, laughter. But nobody answers.

Crystal knocks again, louder.
The door jerks open, a metal on metal screech. Tricky Ricky sticks his head out. “Tony Tone!” he says. The nasty smoke of cigarettes and pot billows from behind him. The music is insistent and pitch-y.

Crystal shakes her head. “I was looking for Stacey?”

“You’re not Tony Tone,” TR says. Stacey calls him TR, and some websites call him her boyfriend. Right now he’s soaking wet for some reason. Weighs maybe eighty pounds tops, counting his gold chains. Crystal could pick him up and throw him a great distance.

“Is Stacey here?” Crystal says. “We’re ready for her on set?”

Stacey’s big red head, wet and slicked back like a seal, appears in the smoke over TR’s shoulder. “Tony?”

Dizzy and nauseas, Crystal shakes her head. She waves her hand to clear the smoke.

“Oh, Crystal, hey,” Stacey says. TR disappears inside and Stacey moves into the doorway. She’s dripping wet. Has a tiny towel wrapped around her. Her large eyes are blurry and red. “Hey, hold on real quick.” She lights a cigarette and exhales a great cloud of it. Her eyes, slightly more resolute, return to Crystal. “What’s up?”

“Um, we’re ready for you on set?” Crystal squeezes a smile meant for encouragement. “Last set-up of the day?”

“Can ya’ll give me a little bit?” Sometimes Stacey still sounds Southern, the orphan of Beaverton. “We just finished taking a bath in here.”

Crystal peers around Stacey. The trailer’s not just full of smoke but a hot, balmy steam. The whole sick crew lounges, each wet and naked: Sometime BFFs Willow, Plexus, and Stevie-Bear suck on cigarettes; TR tries to roll a joint at the table, the rolling papers wet and coming apart; Manager Chad sleeps on the couch with a long-ashed cigarette burning in his limp fingers.
Crystal didn’t know there was a bathtub in Stacey’s trailer, especially one that could fit this many people. She smells condensation and moist, warm skin. Atlantis Bathhouse.


“Well, to be honest, we’re on a real push?” she says. She knows the time but looks at her watch. “We were already over twelve hours but then Freddie added this scene?”

“Oh god.” Stacey’s thick lip curls. "What is it?"

“Well…” Crystal says. Where to frigging start? “You and the Farmers are going to build a Campfire but one of the Farmers accidentally sets himself on fire and then you’ll, like, put him out? And then, like, you’ll lead a campfire sing-along of ‘Baby Dynamo’?”

Annoyance masses the freckles of Stacey’s face. “Fucking nightmare,” she says. “I fucking hate that song.”

“Right,” Crystal smiles with closed lips to hide her crooked teeth. “But apparently it’s real big among the American farming and campfire-making community?”

Stacey doesn’t laugh.

Crystal adds, “Freddie says it makes the whole episode?”

“Oh, whatever. Just give me a little bit.” Stacey slams shut the door and says something to her wet friends, eliciting uproarious laughter. Crystal backs away from the trailer. She could stand there and wait God-knows-how-long, which will enrage The Worst, or she could trudge back to set and say that Stacey was still getting ready, which will also enrage The Worst.

Lo and behold, Crystal’s radio crackles and The Worst fills her headset: “Amy for Smithy.”
Crew always sound put-out on the radio but nobody has ever been as put-out as The Worst. “Go for Smithy?”

“What’s the 20 on Stacey?”

***

Crystal hides in Digital Capture to watch the final scene play out on Stewart’s monitors. This trailer reeks of weed and unwashed Stewart but it is the calmest place on set. Stewart brews his own high-octane coffee and is always glad to share. Crystal perks up on her first hot sip.

Amazingly, Freddie’s whole frigging set-up works. He saved the day by talking the property owners into using one of their dogs for the scene, a negotiation that Stewart said involved many $100 bills. The dog was an ancient Irish wolfhound that could barely move, "but at least its fucking huge," Freddie smiled. The Farmers, three depressed extras hired at $50 day-rates from Associated Casting—everyone calls it Ass-Casting—weren’t too eager to be set on fire but Freddie assured them he would only just light their shoes on fire for a few seconds and get his shot. Plus they would get to see Stacey one more time.

And Stacey. What a confusing enigma. Just when the Celebrity Teenager set is about to fall apart, the crew mutinous and mean in their fifteenth hour of work, Stacey, for the first time all day, is on top of her game. She strides onto set with some kind of pharmaceutical super power, her eyes wide and bright, her thick red hair floating weightless around her. She hits every mark, improvises charmingly with the stiff extras, overcomes her Childhood Fear of Irish Wolfhounds, saves the burning Farmers, teaches them a thing or two about Bravery and Survival, and finally she sings “Baby Dynamo” into the starless night:

I ain’t got much, baby

But I got to go
Don’t call me baby, baby

I’m the Baby Dynamo

The song makes less sense every time Crystal hears it, but tonight Stacey delivers a deeply weird, downbeat version. Her voice, while not the epiphanic phenomenon of Show It To Them!, still aches with pain and grain. The camera zooms into flickering, firelight close-up: Stacey, her freckles dense and dark with exhaustion, cries while she sings: I’m the baby / I’m the I-don’t-know. Watching on the monitor Crystal also cries.

“Cut,” Freddie says. “Fucking beautiful.” To the crew he announces, “Ladies and Gentleman, that’s a wrap on Celebrity Teenager, Episode Number Ten, ‘The Simple Life.’ I can’t thank you enough. We did this together. We made Movie Magic.”

Key Grip Matt Horst and his pinch-faced Grips piss the Campfire out and begin tearing down the lights.

***

Crystal returns to set to escort Stacey to her trailer, but doesn’t see her anywhere. The damp embers smolder. Electric Tony Biggs passes by angrily winding cable, “Smithy, we got a call-time for tomorrow?”

“Um, no, not quite. I’m sorry. I still needed to get with Amy and Freddie and…”

“Well, to be honest you’ll be lucky if you have a crew there,” Tony says. “I’m just telling you.”

You’ll be lucky. She is both lowly functionary—a glorified P.A. really—and, to the crew, the scheduling and payroll face of the operation. She nods at Tony, her lips tight. She understands. But also, this is what they say every frigging night.

“Crystal?”
She turns. Josh and Henry stumble up the path with heavy black trash bags in each hand. Their clothes are rumpled and filthy but their faces bear the rigid smiles of sweet, hopeless Production Assistants.

She realizes she too has sweated through her slacks and button-down shirt. A sour fruit, warm in the cooling night. Is she steaming?

“We got all the trash collected,” Josh says. His baby goatee a dark stain on his chin.

She hopes they can’t smell her. “Great, great. Thank you,” she says. “Yeah, just throw them on the flatbed. We have to haul everything out of here tonight.”

Henry clears his throat. “Um, about the trucks…”

She knows what’s coming. Three days ago Drivers Don Trumbell and Dirty Frank did quit the show. Instead of hiring new Drivers, The Worst thought, why not just have the new P.A.s drive the two-ton grip-truck and heavy flatbed between the Michelson-Katz Production offices in Santa Monica and the steep ravine Malibu location. Neither Josh nor Henry had ever even driven a large pick-up truck.

They’ve worked the same sleepless hours as Crystal this week and she’s worried every day that they safely complete the drive along these perilous ravine roads.

Earlier today she’d told them she would try to find somebody else to drive the trucks tonight. Why she said that she has no idea. Of course there is no one else to drive.

She squeezes a smile. “Yeah, god, guys, I’m so sorry, but you do have to drive the trucks tonight.”

Their eyes fall but they nod and smile. They’re learning quickly.

Josh hesitates. Both still hold the dripping, heavy trash bags. “How are we doing?”

“Excuse me?”
Josh says quietly, “Me and Henry wondered if we were doing good? If people liked us or not?” Henry nods.

A sharp pang in Crystal. She can’t lose these guys. Not only does she kind of like them but they’re the only decent help she’s found. “Oh, god, yes. You guys…you’re total lifesavers. You’re terrific. We couldn’t do this without you.”

“Really?” Josh grimaces. “It’s all…a little rough. We feel like we have no idea what we’re supposed to do.”

It will be impossible to get new P.A.s all over again. “No, no, no, listen—you’re awesome. Everybody loves you.” Then: “You know, I was a P.A. only six months ago.”

“Really?”

She feels a wave of exhaustion. Wet sand settles in the bottom of her. Her hands and feet numb. It’s 1:00 AM. She’s got at least an hour left until she can wrap. Probably two. The drive from here to North Hollywood will be an hour and a half. Home by 4:00 AM? And best case scenario: crew call tomorrow will be 10 A.M. in godforsaken La Cañada-Flintridge; she’ll have to wake up, at the latest, by 6:00 AM. And Josh and Henry will have to return to the Santa Monica office by 7:00 AM to get the trucks out to…

“Only six months ago?” Henry says, the wisps of his sideburns quivering.

She feels swollen. Froggish. She sucks her stomach in. Hears her self say, “Yep. If you just keep doing good work and being a cool person people always ask you back. You’ll climb the ranks in no time, I promise.” Celebrity Teenager’s Second Second Assistant Director feels a black, red-flecked coffee vomit swell her throat. She squeezes it back down.

“That’s cool,” she hears Josh say.

The sharp squawk in her headset. “Amy for Smithy.”
“Go for Smithy.”

“What’s your 20?”

“Um, I’m here by the campfire?”

“Have you seen the P.A.s?”

Josh and Henry, both listening to the same channel on their headsets, clench.

“Yes,” she says.

“What will you tell them to get over here and get The Outhouses loaded on the Flatbed?”

Josh and Henry pale. The Prop Outhouses were one of Freddie’s ideas for the episode supposedly set in American farm country. All week the crew has used them as Very Real Outhouses.

She didn’t hear them until right now but the forest insects are screeching.

***

Her phone tolls in the pre-dawn and all the dread in the known universe buries her in her bed in the narrow dark box of her apartment. She know the ring; The Worst calls again. Like a worm in her heart. Why is The Worst even awake right now? Home an hour ago, Crystal revised the now final-final-final call-sheet (Craft Services Frank of Great-Meals-On-The-Go went, walking in angry tirade about The Worst’s angry tirade over a vegan meal; new Craft Services—somebody called Chef Ace, which sounds disgusting when you say it—had only just confirmed his availability) and emailed The Worst for approval (“its fine thanks,” Amy wrote without time to read the thing), then she emailed the rest of the crew (each she could hear cast a dark curse on Fat Kermit), emailed Stacey’s people (Stacey literally disappeared from set), and she finally wrapped the day (SHE WRAPPED ANOTHER FRIGGING DAY OF A HIT SHOW). She ate two quick peanut butter sandwiches and collapsed on the bed.
The phone tolls. Why doesn’t it go to voice-mail?

The ceiling is a dark gap. Hot. She needs a fan in here.

The Worst is calling about call-time. The Worst figured out that Crystal made an executive decision to push Crew Call an hour, to 9:30 am, the tiniest mercy she had available. But of course she and Josh and Henry still have to be there an hour before; nothing she can do about that.

When she got home in the still-black morning the first thing she did was call her Production Assistants.

“Yeah, we just dropped the trucks off and now we’re driving home,” Josh said. His voice distant. “Did we forget something?”

“No, no, you’re good, you’re fine—I was just calling to check in. Thank you for everything. Get some rest. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” What she meant was that she would see them again in several hours, out in La Cañada Flintridge, at least an hour northeast of Los Angeles with traffic, when they arrived with the two-ton truck and flatbed.

Now she is sand weighted to the bed. The phone rings and stops. She should check the calls. She’s not sure she’s breathing. Beyond the blinds traffic shivers back and forth. When she moved in the landlord (he’d said he was a screenwriter too, and he smelled like beer in the late morning) said, “You get used to it. It’s like the ocean.”

Headlights flicker the blinds. Old TVs, half shadows. The ceiling fan long shadows flickering the tiny trailer living room where she watched Stacey in Show It To Them!.

What was it sweating Fret said?

The phone again rings. Goddangit. The rings blend into a single keening. Leaden circles dissolve in the air. She curls. Presses her face to the pillow. Who is this Ms. Smith? Curls to her
armpit, smells her self: past ripe, the body turning. *Los Angeles has swallowed many a young woman called Smith.* Funny or not funny? When she gets to it, there is a newish chapter of *The Big Dang* called “Rope Swing.” Funny or not funny?

The phone stops. The dark apartment tightens. The Worst will listen to Fat Kermit’s infuriating message and then launch into reprimands and byzantine adjustments to today’s schedule.

_Goddangitgoddangitgoddangit_ she cannot not look:

She kicks off the damp bed sheet and leans for the nightstand, her phone:

the screen blinding in the dark:

*Three Missed Calls*

*Mom*

***

She stands near the flickering blinds, her phone pressed to ear. In Missouri the phone rings unanswered. This isn’t good. 4:14 am here means 6:14 there. She sees Mom’s secluded trailer, the phone tolling, and Mom incapacitated on the living room floor.

On the bed the blobbish impression where she’d lay.

Goddangit Mom, just frigging answer.

She parts the blinds and peeks out. Past the useless two-foot stucco balcony and security fence is pre-dawn Magnolia Boulevard. Nervous, aggregating traffic; palm fronds piled on the sidewalk; pinkish-grey everything, damp and soiled. A dim world under a layer of warm, lapping water. The dude with the dreadlocked mushroom head digs in a curbside trashcan. The Postman in His Thousand-Pocketed Bag Jacket. Nobody works harder than he does, even soaking wet. His shopping cart brims with bottles, cans, and a molding, stuffed brontosaurus.
When all else are gone, he’ll be the last one here.

Why isn’t voicemail picking up? Missouri phones have voicemail don’t they? Nothing back there works right.

She blows air out her nose and hangs up. She trudges to the kitchen alcove. She readies coffee. Watches it brew.

The phone rings. *Stupid.* Mom never picks up the first time. She waits until Crystal is doing something else.

“Hello?” The first thing she hears is the sucking hiccup of Mom’s crying. Very familiar. But the grief is particularly urgent, forlorn.

“Crystal, there’s been an accident,” Mom says.

*Accident.* She’s housed in a very tiny place in her throat. “…what?”

Her daughter close, Mom comes undone in rushing words: “Ed died and he’s in a vegetable and a coma…”

Crystal hollows.

“When I found him he wouldn’t wake up or nothing, I kept doing CPR and everything, Crystal, and he wouldn’t wake up…”

Uncle Ed. “Wait, he’s dead or he’s in a coma?”

“I don’t know, Crystal, nobody will tell me anything, I’m in the hospital…”

“Mom…”

“…and it’s like a real-life nightmare.”

“Is he going to be all right?”

“No, the guy said he’s in a total vegetable and life support.”
Crystal sits at her dim desk. The kitchen light behind her, the blinds flickering before her, she’s grainy grey.

“The doctor said that?”

“The ambulance.”

“Where are you now?”

“They brung him to the hospital in Jeff. It’s like a maddening house in here.”

Still Hospital in the state capital Jefferson City. A forty minute drive from rural Silas. Crystal has dreadful memories of Still, other family accidents. “You drove up there?”

“Yes, and Crystal, I lost my dang keys…” Another surge of grief, Mom’s words drowning.

“You lost your keys at the hospital?”

“Yes…”

“Well, where’d you put them?”

“I don’t know, Crystal, don’t be mean to me now please…”

Crystal closes her eyes. “Mom, I’m not being mean, I’m just trying to help you…”

“I need someone to help me find my keys, Crystal, I can’t get out of here and nobody will help me…”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes, there’s nobody here anymore…”

There’s nobody here anymore.

What did Ed do to himself? He did something to himself, she knows it.
She sees giant Ed entering the sun-blasted front doors of Silas Middle School right when the whole seventh grade was having lunch. He was wild-eyed, covered in dripping blue paint, yelling “Crystal” across the room. He’d thought he was supposed to pick her up.

When her classmates saw him they started howling. Steph McDaniels stood from the popular table and led the room in a terrible singalong of incorrect whale sounds—*Sham-Mooooo, Sham-Moooooo*. Like frigging cows.

Ed, stoned out of his gourd, thought it hilarious, and he let out laughing, which only made everything worse. Crystal, hunched alone at the back table with the Frederick Twins and Limp Gus, wished desperately to disappear.

“Mom, just slow down and look carefully. The keys have to be right there.”

“I did.”

“Did you look in your purse?”

“Yes, they’re not anywhere.”

“Did you go back out to the car and look?”

“Yes.”

“They weren’t in the car?”

Crystal hears commotion on the line, somebody says something to her mom. “Excuse me?” Mom says, still holding the phone to her ear and mouth. “No,” she says quickly, “somebody’s sitting here already, I’m sorry.” Claire Presser, not good with crowds in the best of situations, clinches in the emergency room waiting area of Jefferson City’s Still Hospital.

“I just had a feeling about him,” Mom says. “It’s the craziest thing, Crystal. I kept calling him and he wouldn’t answer so I drove to his trailer and found him laying on the floor just completely purple. I called 911 and started CPR but he wouldn’t come back, Crystal. When the
ambulance came one of the guys said he was like a blimp—like I wasn’t even there.” Mom cries.

“They asked me if he had a living will, Crystal…”

Her small hand on the desk a puffy paw. Her chewed fingernails smooshed down and gross.

Mom breaks up in wet words, “…and I said, no, he doesn’t have nothing. He don’t even have insurance, Crystal…”

Ed Presser, Mom’s big brother, had been her dad Fret’s best friend. They had a dumb rock band together called The Traveling Hippos. They started a painting business called Precision Painting that Ed kept going after Fret’s death. Her entire family mortified her but Ed the most. During her freshman year of high school the frigging DEA busted him for growing and selling pot—scandal of scandals in Silas—and he spent several years in prison.

Last Christmas, at the end of his craziest rant yet, he called her the worst thing in the world, and she has not spoken to him since.

But Ed had been the only one who supported her going to film school in California. “Your dad would have wanted this,” he said. “You need to get the fuck out of Silas.” Nobody had any money, and even with her desperately-earned scholarships she’d had to take out massive loans, but several times Ed sent her a couple hundred dollars in cash. God knows where he got it, but still, it helped.

“Well, dang, there’s my stupid keys,” Mom snorts. “They were right there in my dang shirt pocket. I tell you, Crystal, sometimes I don’t know what’s going on in my mind. I’m afraid I’m getting Alls-timers or something.”

Crystal pushes air out her nose. “You just need to relax and hold it together."
It’s 4:30 am. She has to be on set in four hours, meaning with traffic to La Cañada-Flintridge on a weekday morning she should leave in two hours tops, because she also has to stop and get coffee, breakfast burritos, and craft services. Last night in Malibu they ran out of everything except apples, which nobody touches. P.A.s should get that stuff but she can’t give Josh and Henry anything else to do.

“The worst thing is nobody ever tells you nothing,” Mom continues. “I told the nurse at the desk that I’m a Certified Caregiver and she still said, ‘Ma’m, the doctor will let you know about your husband as soon as he can, please have a seat.’”

Crystal opens her laptop and finds the cheap airline ticket website. She clicks on a departure date of tomorrow but then changes it to today. “I said, ‘He’s not even my husband. My husband died a long time ago, thank you very much.’” Mom’s indignant tears. ”He’s my big brother and his name is Ed Presser.”

“I’m flying into Kansas City today,” Crystal says. The flight leaves in two hours. The drive to LAX is at least an hour. And checking into LAX, getting through security…well, she can’t think about it, she has to just go.

“Oh, Crystal, no, you don’t have to do that,” Mom says. “You should stay there and do your work. Nobody here even knows what’s happening yet and there’s nothing nobody can do. I’ll be fine, don’t worry about me…”

“I already bought the ticket. But I need to leave right now to make the flight.”

Mom hesitates. “Can you get a ticket for Benjie?”

Frig jesus—Benjie. She forgot about him. She dizzies. This can’t be done. Nothing can be done. How is she going to?

“He can’t get his own ticket?” She knows he can’t.
“He says he doesn’t have any money right now.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll pay you back when you get here,” mom says softly.

“No.” Crystal buys the ticket. “What’s his middle name again?”

“Lyle.”

Right. Frigging Lyle Presser, their dad.

“What about his stupid show?”

“I don’t know anything about it. It already started but he said he’s not doing anything right now.”

*Fit To Pitch* started already?

“Should I call Benjie and tell him you’ll pick him up?” Mom says.

Crystal groans as she stands from her desk. “Where he’s living is like right next to the airport. Can you tell him to just meet me there? Tell him it’s where all the planes are landing and taking off.”

***

At the Corolla’s trembling wheel, Crystal strains to pick up speed and enter the busy Hollywood Freeway when again her phone rings. A tractor-trailer careens by, then another, and she punches into the left lane. The ringing tolls. She really needs to change that frigging ringtone. Her hand flaps in the console, and she finds the phone and Fang. *Amy*. Her throat clinches.

But she has to do this. She slips the Fang in her ear while craning to change lanes.

“Hello?”

“Smithy, great, I’m glad you’re up. It’s Amy.”
“Oh hey, what’s up?”

“Listen I was just talking to Freddie,” (at 5:30 in the morning?), “about a few things and so…you got pen and paper handy?”

No. “Sure.”

“Okay listen, first, he’s afraid the Park today isn’t going to be ‘green’ enough. We want like a real American Midwest leafy feel when Stacey meets the Veterans Coming Home From War. So call the P.A.s and tell them to stop at House Depot with the flatbed and pick up a bunch of those big potted plants, the ones like trees. Make sure they keep the receipts so they can return everything.”

“Okay, um…”

“Also, about the Veterans—these extras aren’t going to be a bunch of fucking freaks this time, right?”

The show pays no money for real talent and so Crystal has to use Ass Casting’s non-union extras, usually depressing, broke-Hollywood folks. Yesterday on-set another huge thing was that one of the guys sent to play a Farmer was black. A confounding discussion ensued between Freddie, the producers, and The Worst whether Farmers could be black, the stupidity of which enraged Crystal. But she didn’t speak up. And she realized that after Second A.D. Tonya quit there wasn’t a single person of color on the crew. The whitewashing of everything was a big reason she left the Midwest, but it’s the same everywhere.

“Well,” Crystal says, “They’re five adult males?”

“Jesus Christ. Okay, fine. Also, listen, Freddie wants to have some Old Grandparents and Little Kids hanging around with Stacey and the Vets. American types. Can you get us those?”

“Okay…”
“And listen, Freddie and I think we could push call an hour today, and give everybody a little break because we’re going to go late tonight. After the Vets and Stacey build the Tree House, Freddie wants to get The Moon coming up. It’s going to be full tonight and Freddie wants a whole kind of magic fairy tale feeling.”

_Push call?_ Is she dreaming? “That sounds awesome.”

“Yeah, right?”

“Ok, so, push call to 10:30?”

“No, no. 9:30.” Which is what Crystal already did. Now and then the tiny miracle doth bloom.

“Got it. Done. Great idea. Consider the Call Sheets sent.”

“Of course we still need you and the other P.A.s there by 8:30 to set up.” The other P.A.s? “We’re going to have to hit the ground running today.”

“Um, Amy, actually, that’s the thing…”

“What?”

Crystal merges with the 405 freeway. Pastel pink and blue light smears the horizon. If she could lay down and sleep she might never awake. “There’s been a really bad accident…?”

“Huh?”

“My mom had a stroke and had to be rushed to the hospital. She’s on life support and they don’t know if she’s going to make it?”

The Worst doesn’t respond. Crystal tries not to picture her pretty, knife-shaped face. “I have to go be with her right now?”

“When?”

“Well, like, right now? I’m on my way to the airport?”
“The airport?”

“Yeah, I mean, my mom lives in Missouri? There’s, like, nobody else there?”

Crystal’s steering wheel hands feel numb, puffy, far away. Somebody else is driving. “I mean everything’s set up and ready to go today,” she continues. ”Josh and Henry are good. I’ll keep in contact all day and take care of whatever comes up. And then we break for three days? I’ll be back in plenty of time to start up next week?”


Wait, what? “Josh and Henry?”

“Right. Well, cool, listen. Have a great trip. I better jet over here. We have a lot to do today.”

“I’ll keep in touch. I’ll have my phone on me all day…”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll be fine. I’ve been in this business a long time, Kermit.”

***

Carry-on bag slung over shoulder, Crystal humps breathlessly from the LAX parking garage to the Midwest Blue terminal.

“Crystal!”

Benjie steps from the curbside crowd. He still wears the trademark dashiki but it’s now stained with sweat and grime. His arms reach for her and so Crystal hugs him. He holds her and starts to cry but she pulls back. His eyes are red with tears or intoxication or both.

“I can’t believe it,” he says. “Sonny.” Benjie is the baby brother to Mom and Ed. Ozark siblings of their generation refer to one another as Sonny and Sissy.
“I know,” she says, already moving to the glass doors. “Listen, we have to get to the gate really fast.”

“Well…I need to check my bag?”

She freezes. He points to a coffin-sized suitcase.

She blasts air out her nose. “You’re always supposed to do carry-on.”

Benjie chews his lip.

“Over here,” she says. She grabs his bag and drags it into the line at curbside baggage check.

***

Another line of flustered travelers waits at security. She scans anxiously down-terminal to the departure gates and checks their tickets again.

She dreads the body-scan machine—are they getting smaller? Will she even fit? And then she has to bend over and get her shoes back on in public. Goddangit.

She’s wet with sweat. She has to lose this weight.

Benjie breathes heavily. Like many in line he hunches over his cellphone. He touches, taps, and smears the screen. “Did you watch the premiere last night?” he asks.

“The what?”

“Fit To Pitch,” he smiles. “My show. We had our premiere last night.”

Frig jesus. “Wow, no, I’ve been super slammed at work.”

“Oh, dang,” Benjie says. “Well, I think it went pretty good. It’s hard to tell.” He nods at his phone. “I’m waiting to see what everyone says.”

Crystal pulls out her phone. No calls. What did The Worst mean about making Josh and Henry the Seconds? She meant just for today, right?
Everyone in LAX looks like a paparazzi photo of civilian celebrities: designer baseball
caps crammed low, outsized sunglasses, self-conscious projection—the very opposite of not
wanting to be noticed. Benjie stares at the crowd. Crystal can tell he too wonders if anyone
recognizes him. They do not.

What is Stacey doing this morning? Are they taking another bath?

“Oh hey, check it out, Crystalbear.” Benjie pulls a stack of business cards from his
pocket. “I got these made.”

She takes one. It reads “Benjie Lyle Presser” and a little clip-art spotlight points away
from the name. Below, smaller, it reads “Actor, Writer, Director, Producer”—each a very
specific position Benjie has not attained. Then: “Hollywood, California, USA.”

“I still have to get a local phone,” he says. “So it doesn’t have a phone number yet. But
it’s pretty cool, right?”

“Totally cool.”

“Yeah! They’re easy. There’s a machine right in the Getco around the corner from our
house. We’ll have to hook you up with some.”

Crystal hands the card back to Benjie. Considering it, his eyes tear. His lip quivers. “I
couldn’t wait to show these to Ed.”

Crystal’s next in line for security. The agent waves her forward. Oh god. She sucks in her
stomach and squeezes into the body-scan machine. “Raise your arms like the diagram please.”
Her throat tightens. She senses the TSA agents and everyone else gazing at her every gross,
blobby part. What’s taking so long? “Turn around please.” The machine trembles under her.
“Move on through, sir.” She stumbles for where nobody can see her.

***
Passengers have already lined up at the boarding gate. Midwest Blue is first-come, first-served for seats, and Crystal and Benjie are the very last in line. Please, please, let there be seats, and please let them not be side-by-side.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to get seats by each other,” she says.

“Really? Dang,” Benjie says. “Hey, is that Allen Thicke over there?”

“Who?”

“Allen Thicke! From *Full House!* The one with the two hot what’s-their-name twins.”

“The little kids?”

“Yeah, no, I mean they’re hot now, but on the show they’re little kids.”

“I never watched that one.”

“But you know it, right?”

“Sure.”

“Dang. Ed and I used to watch that show all the time.”

Gross.

“I’ve got to say something to him,” Benjie says. “I’ll get his autograph for Sonny. Will you hold my place in line a second?”

She pushes air out her nose. “We’re not supposed to hold places…”

“Just for a quick second,” and already Benjie waddles across the crowded concourse. He approaches and says something to startled Alan Thicke, who reluctantly shakes hands. Allen Thicke was the dad on *Growing Pains*, not *Full House*, but she wishes she didn’t know that. Benjie pulls the business cards from his pocket but the stack of them fall to the ground. He bends for the cards with no small effort and falls butt-first to the ground. He labors to his knees and
tries to gather the scattered cards. Allen Thicke retreats quickly into the crowd. Benjie looks up, mouth open as if to say something, and watches him go.

***

On the plane all the seats are taken but two. Benjie, ahead of Crystal, takes a spacious center seat between two skinny women in ballcaps and shades. The last seat is between a middle-aged, Midwestern couple, both huge, dressed in souvenir Hollywood t-shirts. The woman in the window seat double-checks the contents of her large purse. The man slumps in the aisle seat, head cocked in neck pillow, already asleep. No reason they should sit next to each other.

“Excuse me,” Crystal says politely, and the woman hits her husband to wake him. He startles, a choking sound in his throat. His confused eyes light on Crystal, then roll in exasperation. He says nothing as he shifts his legs barely to the side. Crystal squeezes past him, over him, and wedges herself into the middle seat. There isn’t enough room. All three of them sigh loudly.

“You going to Kansas City?” the woman asks. Crystal nods. She has nowhere to put her arms so she crosses them on her stomach’s swell. “It’s going to be very cold there,” the woman says, eyes widening with the report.

Dangit. That’s right. It’s frigging winter in Missouri. She never even thought about it. She packed nothing for the cold.

Her last act is a grim smile. Head against the seat, eyes finally closed, she begins to disappear. The fan’s flickering shadows. Will Josh go inside Stacey’s trailer? Will he smell her wet soil? She feels like she’s falling, anxious for a brief, terrible second but then dissolving to sleep, Ed did this to himself just like Fret didn’t he, distant Benjie tells someone, “Yeah, yeah, it’s on right now, it’s like America’s Best Show It To Them or whatever…”
4. The Last Christmas

She dreams of her last trip home. She sits across from chain-smoking Ed at the card table cramped between the living and kitchen areas of his trailer’s front room. The place is a disaster: smoke- and water-stained walls, grimy carpet, hectic piles of dirty clothes, unopened mail, newspapers, books, fast food wrappers, empty beer and soda cans. Cigarette smoke stings her eyes. Under the bare overhead lightbulb Ed drinks beer while he talks.

“Well, look, Crystalbear, I mean, you need to remember what kind of place Silas is. For that matter, what kind of country this is. These rustic cowboy fuckers hope we destroy each other. It’s the last chapter of their book. I thought your letter was some real great shit.”

Her stupid letter to the editor. Despair that she has to do all this again weights her mind. She wants to stop events, or step out of them, but they propel her. Can she change them?

The Silas Indians were in the 2-A State Football Playoffs, and when she got home she saw signs all over town—“Go Indians,” “Indian Pride,” “We are the Indians.” She read an article in The Silas Advertiser, and its photograph caught her eye: Injun Joe, the Silas High School mascot—a large-nosed, toothily-grinning Native American caricature—lead a stadium of war-painted white students in the raised-arm tomahawk chop. Worse, Silas was playing local rivals Buckeye, whose mascot was also the Indians. Homemade signs on both sides said ”Beat the Indians,” ”Scalp the Indians.” How had she not registered this awfulness before? She had been a Silas Indian—not a jingoistic booster by any means, but never a conscientious objector to the terrible slur. Suddenly she was obsessed and righteous. She had to say something. Rigid on coffee her second morning in town she emailed a letter to the The Silas Advertiser.
Ed finishes a beer and sets it on the table among the other cans. He looks to the fridge, already thinking about the next. He’s gained so much weight. His chin has disappeared into his neck and his neck into his chest.

She feels her chin eroding too. Feels the trailer floor bow under them.

Ed stands from the wobbly table. He crosses heavily past Crystal to the kitchen. Even though it’s freezing outside his stressed 5-XL t-shirt and sweatpants are sweat-soaked. She sweats too. This is a wet t-shirt contest nobody wants to see.

Ed grabs a beer from the fridge and pops it open. She cringes as he takes a long drink.

“Crystalbear, you want one?” he says.

“No I’m good.” Each time he’s gone to the fridge he’s asked her the same question.

Ed digs among the mess on his kitchen counter. “Ah, here we go.” He finds a greased copy of the *The Silas Advertiser* folded to her letter.

“*Indians Vs. Indians*” he reads, his big phlegmy voice rattling the trailer. “Great title…”

Crystal pushes air out her nose. “Ed, no, please, don’t…”

“No, this is on point, Crystalbear.” He keeps reading as she slumps in her seat. “When we cheer our Indians against the Buckeye Indians—waving signs that say "Scalp the Indians“ and "Kill the Indians“—we make hateful kitsch of a country-founding genocide. Listen to ourselves: the war-drum dirges, the tomahawk chants, the swollen "Indian Pride." Can we not see this a lurid nightmare for any decent human, let alone Native Americans?”

Beyond the old recliner and soiled couch the TV plays soundlessly. A cop reality show. A grinning officer addresses the camera, pointing at a group of neighborhood kids staring grimly from a run-down porch. The officer and his partner then approach the kids, hands on guns. Why is Ed watching this crap?
Ed keeps reading, his voice grating, “*Indians. Braves. Redskins.* It’s time to Change The Hateful Mascots. More, while we cheer ‘our Indians’ who among us raises a voice about the woeful conditions faced by actual Native American communities today: systemic poverty, underfunded schools, the pervasive lack of opportunity and access.” At the end of the letter she really seared, ”Each twenty dollar bill we shed on this ‘entertainment’—embossed with the smug face of our grandest, good-ole-boy architect of genocide—would be better served making good on broken promises: reparations for Native American communities."

Ed lets loose a guttural cry and she cringes. “Bravo,” he says. He puts the paper down in front of Crystal. “Terrific work. But I think you could do something even more effective. Why don’t you make them real people in a real story? I made some notes for you here.”

Notes? Frig jesus. She sees his chicken scrawl in the newspaper margins but can’t bear to read. She needs a drink of water but can’t move from the too-small folding chair.

Ed fishes a burned-down marijuana cigarette from a brimming ashtray. They call them *roach*es. The word and smell combo makes Crystal nauseaus. He sits opposite her and lights the roach. His eyes shrink and his face puckers as he inhales. She has to look away. The cops escort several of the now-handcuffed kids from the porch.

Ed, his eyes muddy red, leans elbows-first on the card table but it starts to buckle and has to sit back up. “You’re the best writer I know, Crystal.”

She shakes her head. She cut her trip short and is flying back to Los Angeles tomorrow. She wants to go to Mom’s and go to bed. But Ed had been begging her to stop by and see him before she left. “Stupid,” she says. “I don’t know when to shut up.”

“No,” Ed thunders. “Never shut up. Never stop writing, Crystalbear.” God, she hates when he gets loud and worked up.
Her letter’s rhetorical flourishes had not found a welcome audience. The text not only generated a cascade of comments at The Silas Advertiser’s website, but it also traveled the dingy Silas corner of social media, as reported by Uncle Benjie who actually looks at that crap. “It’s all over FaceTorque,” Benjie had shook his head. “Getting ripped a new one.” (One of the grossest phrases in contemporary English. Again, nobody examines the weight of words.) Benjie added, “And anyways, Crystal, I don’t get the big deal. We’ve always used that name. It’s just football or whatever. It’s fun.”

Online anonymous Silas agreed. Because she couldn’t look away, her anxiety ratcheted with each new comment to The Silas Advertiser’s website:

- *this what happen when we dont teach USA PROUD*
- *race bater commie scum*
- *Im part Choctaw on my great-great-great-grandma side and I love are INDIANS*
- *Everybodys offended EVERYTHNG. I’m sick of this WA-WA-WA-WA CRYING LIB BULLSHIT*
- *LOL YOU LOST DIRTY INDIAN GET OVER IT*

Where do you start? What do you say? How do you make words, sentences, conversation?

Far worse, a number of pointedly personal comments stabbed:

- *Crystal Smith is a self rigtus bitch*
- *Did fatty baby not eat today???*
- *Seaworld is in California, Shamoo—Go home and eat.*
- *The sound of The Big Dang is a sucking sound.*
The articulate, specific nature of these comments left little doubt the author is Steph McDaniels, perfect teeth and breasts, The Poet of Names.

Ed is trying to figure out which of the table’s many cans has beer in it. He finds the can and tips it back. Empty, he looks again to the fridge.

In much of the *The Big Dang* she calls Ed Uncle Ahab.

She has to get out of this trailer and out of this town.

“Crystal, listen, most of those online comments aren’t real persons,” Ed says under the bare overhead bulb. “It’s the work of saboteurs. They’re everywhere, reducing and obscuring everything. It’s so easy today. The saboteur resides in internet message-boards and comment threads; graduate classrooms; university boards; think tanks; corporations. He fills TV talk show panels. He writes scripts and articles and books. He promotes distraction—misleading, superficial crap everywhere. His goal is to corrupt ideas. Flatten conversation. Protect the mechanism.”

Ed takes a long hit off his roach. His red eyes narrow and stare unsettlingly at her. He looks around the trailer and then leans toward her, speaking quietly: "And when necessary, please believe me, Crystal, the saboteur moves quickly and silently to eliminate the bugs who scratch at the mechanism’s base.”

Her limbs numb. She can’t breathe. On the TV a police car pins a cowering perp against a brick wall. Cops rush from the car with raised guns. The title flashes: *Cop Wars: Extreme.*

“Right,” Ed says at the TV. “This kind of shit is exactly what I’m talking about. I’m keeping a close eye on things these days, Crystal.”

*A Tannen-Sterling Production* flashes on the screen. She senses a chasm opening inside her, like she’s falling from her body.
“You know,” Ed says, his voice lightening, “It’s funny. Me and your dad had a Traveling Hippos song about Andrew Jackson.”

With numb hand she scratches slowly her head. It feels far away, like somebody else’s scalp. “Really?”

After Fret’s death Ed never played guitar again. Traveling Hippos never recorded, so Crystal’s never heard them. Which is fine with her. The name alone is embarrassing.

Ed laughs, his body jiggling. “God, your dad was the best, Crystalbear. The funniest motherfucker. He called that song “Old Hickory.” It went,

_Cleanest land you ever seen_

_Room for the friends and family_

_To sit and watch history convene_

She wishes he would stop but he keeps singing.

_When the horse shits in the White House, baby_

_History really convenes_

_Old Hickory sticks his dick_

_In history’s first light socket_

_And he cries, paint the fucking portrait_

Ed laughs with his full body. Tears in his eyes. He gets up and goes back to the fridge, the trailer trembling beneath him. “Because of his picture on the twenty dollar bill?” Crystal doesn’t get it. He pops a beer and keeps singing,

_Let’s Make Deal, he cries_

_We’ll live and you’ll die_

_We’ll name it The Good Genocide_
When the horse shits in the White House, baby

History really convenes

Ed laughs loudly, holding his belly. “Let me tell you, that one really pissed off some local yokels, boy.”

She considers her hands: puffy and pink. Her fingernails damaged little shells. She raises a raw nail and chews it.

“If Hell existed, your dad said, Old Indian Killer would top the list of those burning,” Ed says, squeezing past Crystal. He drops his weight onto the suffering wood chair, which she can’t watch.

A tormented look clouds Ed’s face. He shifts forward, as if to speak, but then stops. He finishes his beer in a single drink.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” he says.

Crystal braces. The confiding tone is always a warning sign. “What?” she whispers.

“Somebody killed your dad.”

Everything in the world disappears but this trailer tilting in an terrifying abyss.

“He hung himself,” she says quietly.

Ed shakes his agitated head. He lights another cigarette.

“That’s just the way it looks.”

Ed’s insane. His words make no sense. But she’s rigid with fear. “Who?”

Ed looks around the trailer. “I can’t say for sure who but it was definitely one of our own Intelligence Agencies.”

Her voice emits on its own: “Why?”
In the floating trailer with a single dim overhead light at two in the morning every thing has a shadow directly under it. “I know it sounds crazy,” Ed says. “But they kill all kinds of people. They always have.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know exactly. I think it has something to do with how smart Fret was. How weird and funny. Those people always top the hit list.”

His words keep coming, an avalanche: “You know they killed John Kennedy Toole? I read a biography in prison and figured this whole thing out, Crystal. I read a bunch of stuff. I put everything together. I’m writing a book about it right now.”

Fear in Crystal’s throat, chest, eyes. She savages the fingernail in her mouth. “Toole committed suicide too,” she whispers.

“No, see, that’s the thing. That’s how they get away with it. Because shit just happens, right? ‘People die, it sucks.’ But get this: if people knew how easy it was to kill someone, and just how many had been killed, they’d lose their shit. The floor of everything would disappear.”

“It’s the easiest thing in the world to make someone kill the self. A saboteur can get up in the mind any number of ways. Plant an idea, stage a misfortune, a series of misfortunes, needle fears. Fear is a tremendous weapon. Killing our self is part of their plan. They’ve been doing it for centuries and today it’s easier than ever. They can give a person a stroke, a tumor, cancer—there’s a bunch of ways to do it. That’s how they got Bill Hicks.”

Toole, Hicks—these are writers Crystal admires. “Hicks chain-smoked cigarettes,” she says. “Practically narrated his death in public.”

“Ah, well, again. We’re programmed to expect it. ‘He was a manic depressive; he lived an unhealthy lifestyle; he was a drug addict; he was crazy.’ But here’s the thing: when that
person is gone they have completely disappeared. No agency, no voice, no coming back. And somebody somewhere sits back very relieved, a secret locked away silent and forever, buried deep in the mechanism. They got all the great ones. Martin Luther King, Jr…”

“Well, yeah, everybody knows that,” she says.

“But do they? Do they really? Don’t you think it’s weird how nobody ever talks about it? Get this: we know our own Intelligence Agencies—after actively trying to make King kill his self and not succeeding—our own Intelligence Agencies straight up murdered the most important American of the twentieth century, if not our entire history, but nobody ever talks about it. It just seems to have been sucked out of discourse. Voided. A great deal of work went into that and continues to go into it.”

“Right,” she nods. “Of course. But them other guys…who really cares about them?”

Ed fishes among the table’s many beer cans, but they’re all empty. On the TV two cops have a guy up against a car and he is trying desperately to say something to them but nothing comes out of his mouth.

“Crystal, you don’t know yet,” Ed says. "Power isn’t afraid of the people we think: demagogues, kooks, terrorists. These constructions mean little; they even strengthen the status quo. Power fears the subversives, the mentally agile, the effective communicators, mediators, facilitators; people who connect ideas to make new ideas; people who pull back curtains. The Comic is at the very top of this list, as is the Novelist. And if you’re both, you’re a remarkable threat.

Crystal feels a chunk of fingernail come loose in her teeth. She chews and swallows it, and switches fingers.
“I don’t mean today’s definitions of comedy—the cozy and enabling sitcom, the Hollywood broad comedy, all the pop shit designed to reinforce market realities and the status quo. Like everything else, pop texts have been flattened and rendered harmless. Shit, they don’t even want people to know how to read today. I mean really read, which is the ability to intuit, make leaps and connections, think critically. The modern fascism doesn’t need to ban books because they’ve made it so nobody reads. Nobody knows the questions to ask. Ironically, this dumbing down will in the end bite us all in the ass, but The Mechanism of Now doesn’t give a shit. The Mechanism seeks only to keep the Mechanism running.”

Mosquitoes buzz in the trailer. Isn’t it winter? Crystal hears one keening just behind her left ear. There, then not there. She waves her hand at it. There, then not there. One lands on Ed’s arm and he looks at it. He waves at it softly, and it flies away. “Try not to kill any of them,” he says.

“Okay.” She needs to piss but cannot move.

Ed keeps going, “Saboteurs, Crystal. They’re everywhere, all the time. They killed Kafka. And before that they drove him crazy—the recurring pattern. Made him destroy great work, and then they destroyed much of the rest. One of the great crimes of the 20th century and nobody knows it. Work that would have changed the world. They didn’t kill Sam Clemens but they didn’t have to. They killed those dearest him to darken his mind and shift his concerns from the social to the existential, which they know nobody gives a shit about. Shakespeare? Definitely killed. And now what gets the attention? The dumb mystery about who he was; planted, stupid, distracting biographical crap, like tabloids. The fundamental point is these voices disappeared, replaced by silence. You wouldn’t believe what the saboteurs keep an eye out for; the traits, tendencies, and abilities they most ardently monitor. They track writers, thinkers, weirdos. They
kill a person not even for what she or he has already done, but for future potential. Because she or he represents an unexpected set of possibilities.”

The walls of the trailer are so thin, so shabby. Her and her uncle’s weight strains the structure. Get up, Crystal. Get up and get out of here.

“They kill all kinds of weirdos all the time. A huge one? Hendrix. They killed the fuck out of Hendrix. Your dad used to say this all the time, Crystal. And he was right. Hendrix was a game-changer, fire, funny, a spherical thinker in direct connection with people. And of course, even worse, he was black. His blackness and brains and Star Spangled Banner did him the fuck in. He was sounding and the saboteurs moved swiftly to kill him. 28 years old. A world with Hendrix today would be a different world.”

Well, yes, Hendrix. That makes sense. A world with him would be a different world. Beneath the trailer darkness beckons.

Ed sucks a labored breath. He’s exhausted. Deep creases line his face and drop shadows.

“I’ve been needing to tell you,” he says, tears welling in his eyes, “This is what happened to Fret.”

“Why?” She’s barely a voice. Barely anything.

“You can’t imagine how but they marked him very early. He was a weirdo. Just like I’m a weirdo and just like you’re a weirdo.”

Enough. She sits upright. “He was a drunk and drug addict and he hung himself from a stupid frigging ceiling fan.”

Ed’s face squeezes terribly. “A drunk and drug addict? That’s not true. Where did you get that, Crystal?”
The room tightens, squeezing Crystal. She stands from the table, weaving. Her vision blurs, blackening at the edges. “I got to go, Ed.”

She will never come back.

“Crystalbear, wait, please, there’s something else I need to talk to you about.”

She freezes halfway to the door. “What?”

Ed’s face reddens. Frig jesus. She dreads the thing that actually gives him shame. “Well, listen,” he stammers, Crystal unable to breathe, be, “Listen, Bear, I know you’re a dyke, and I…”

Crystal turns, lunging, and shoves through the trailer door. Its metal on metal screech is the sound of rending as the cold air and black night sucks her up into the fan’s spinning blades and she grasps below for the body that held her, she tries to sound…

Crystal?
“Crystal?”

She awakens without identity, terrified, looking: objects above her, looming like to fall: people: she’s surrounded by people looking down at her. People in an airplane. The airplane. The first sense of her is estrangement.

Then embodiment.

Then terrible embarrassment.

“Crystal?”

Two rows ahead, Benjie leans over his seat. He and the women on either side look with concern. Others stand above her, some looking, some pulling suitcases from the overhead compartments. Her hand comes to her face. A giant drool has gathered on her lips and chin. She wipes, but sees drool pooled on her chest. She wipes that too. Gooey residue all over her hand. She wipes that on her pants. She is a sticky mess.

She hopes she didn’t pee her pants. She feels wet but she doesn’t think it pee. The large man standing next to her looks at this phone and pushes buttons. The concerned woman on her window-side offers an airline napkin. “Thanks,” she hears her self say. She wipes with the napkin, which is too small and immediately soaked, coming apart.

“Crystal? You okay?”

Goddangit stop saying frigging Crystal. She scowls and waves Benjie off. What was the dream? It was so close. She tries to find it, but with her thinking it’s gone. Out the window she sees the flat tarmac bounded by a flat Midwestern field bounded at its far edge by naked trees, the whole world covered in a thin layer of bright snow and bounded by a low blue sky.
Coming off the plane, Crystal sees Mom in the waiting area, short and pear-shaped, hands knitted at her chest, head craning to scan the arrivals. Mom’s green nursing scrubs are wrinkled, several days worn. Her permed hair is messy, and much grayer than last year. At first Mom’s moist eyes miss Crystal, but then they find her, focusing with alarm on her missing hair. But Mom quickly recovers a grateful smile. She starts crying and rushes to clutch her daughter. Crystal hugs back, enveloping sobbing Mom. Then Benjie folds his heavy arms around both of them, he too shaking and sobbing. Crystal closes her eyes.

The sound of *The Big Dang* is a sucking sound.

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Exiting the airport, Crystal clenches in the winter cold. She hunches her shoulders and humps tippy-toed across the parking lot. Behind her Mom and Benjie do the same.


“Well, I told you you’d need a coat, Crystal,” Mom says. And she had. Inside at baggage check, several times. She even offered Crystal her own old coat, which would never fit. “I’ll be fine,” Crystal sighed loudly. But she’s freezing.

The day is bright and wide. The blue sky holds wisps of white cloud and the sun is high, but such is deception. The air is not only cold but humid; the wet chill crawls inside you. Crystal shudders. Red goose-bumps web her exposed arms.

“We’re over here,” Mom says, moving between the parking lot’s dirty cars.

“Why’d you park a mile away?” Crystal says.

“Well, Crystal, there weren’t no other spots,” Mom says. Crystal blows a cloud of condensed air out her nose.

“They say we got a big storm coming,” Mom says. “Snow and ice.”
“Shoot,” Benjie says, “I was laid out on the dang beach just yesterday.” Crystal tries to shake the image.

Finally they reach Mom’s rusted little Saturn. Clumps of frozen mud fan its tires and lower half. They pile inside the car. Benjie takes the front seat because he gets carsick, but the back seat makes Crystal nauseas too. She listens to the engine wheeze and churn, trying to start. Mom pumps the gas until the car finally fires. “I have to get this thing looked at pretty soon,” Mom says. She revs the car several times as they wait for the engine to warm.

“I figured we could go through Silas and drop our stuff off at the house,” Mom says. “Then we can head up to Jeff to see Ed.”

Benjie’s eyes pinch. “Has there been any change in his condition?”

Mom shakes her head. “No. They got him on life support and are just waiting to see.”

“I just don’t get it,” Benjie says morosely. “He was just fine.”

Tears well in Mom’s puffed eyes. “I know it. I keep thinking he’s just going to open his eyes and say, ‘Sissy, get me out of this fucking hospital right fucking now.’” Her imitation is perfect; Ed gruff and distrustful. Benjie laughs, also tearing up. Crystal sees them: Ed’s forever little siblings. Even old they are young and abandoned.

A cloud of grey exhaust has gathered around the them.

She has to ask. “Did he commit suicide?”

Mom and Benjie ruffle—at the same time she says, “No,” and he, “Of course not.”

“I hate to say it,” Mom says, “But Sonny was in terrible shape. I kept telling him all that weight’s hard on the heart. I told him he needed to quit smoking them cigarettes get some exercise, but lately he wouldn’t even hardly leave his trailer.”
Benjie wipes tears from his eyes. “I just know he’s going to wake up pretty soon. He’s going to open his eyes and ask for a J and a cold one and then we can all start over, better than ever.” Benjie faces Mom and her. “I got this TV show for all of us. *Fit The Pitch* is our golden goose ticket. It’s what we’ve all been waiting for.”

Crystal’s never heard a more depressing soliloquy.

Mom puts the car in drive and lurches across the parking lot.

Benjie pulls out his cellphone. “I can’t believe you guys didn’t watch the first episode. We can all watch later on Ed’s TV.” Benjie jabs at the screen. He holds it close to his face and squints. He puts it next to the window, shakes it, and brings it back to his face. “If I could just get stupid reception out here we could see what everyone’s saying about it.”

Mom looks sidewise at the phone. “I don’t trust them things.”

Piss ship. Crystal forgot about her job. She reaches compulsively for her phone but then freezes. She doesn’t want to look. What’s happening right now at La Cañada-Flintridge’s Douglas Wiley Memorial Park? Stacey in her trailer doing what? With whom? The Worst feasting on Josh and Henry’s entrails in the production trailer. Grip and Electric skulking, slamming things against other things. Stewart in Digital rolling another joint. Freddie with Camera planning set-ups and Movie Magic. For decades, La Cañada-Flintridge has been one of the TV industry’s exterior and B-roll stand-ins for The Rest of America, aka Small Town America. America, conversely, has come to mirror Southern California’s franchised, suburban sprawl.

The car right now motors by a cold pile of strip malls and cloned housing developments on the outskirts of Kansas City.
She should at least call Josh and Henry, make sure they’re surviving. But god, really, two non-blobby young white dudes in Hollywood? By this morning they’re probably Studio Execs, if not Studio Heads.

Does Stacey realize Crystal isn’t there?

As they drive, Kansas City gives way to rural country, low, snowy fields bordered by bare trees. Mid-Southern Missouri. Out here the flat lands meet the hills. Out here sits Silas.

Mom keeps studying her in the rearview mirror. The chopped hair, Crystal knows, but also the new weight, the no-make-up. Wary of redress or chastisement, Mom has learned to be careful with her words around Crystal, but she lacks the guile to hide questions and concerns in her eyes. Seeing Crystal seeing, Mom smiles, her wet eyes trembling but twinkling.

“Just you guys being here makes everything better,” Mom says. Her face is small. Delicate and weathered. Seemingly overnight her long black hair has become a seashell gray perm, today in need of combing. In her aged face Crystal recognizes Mom’s Mom, and Mom’s Mom’s Mom—faces confined now to fading memory and family photographs. And where else?

“You know what else would make everything better?” Benjie grins sheepishly at Mom. Crystal knows before he says. “You ain’t got a little J by any chance do you?”

Mom purses her lips and nods. “In the glove box.”

Benjie opens the glove box and extracts an old rolled sock. Unrolling, a pill bottle is revealed, it’s label long worn. He opens the bottle and extracts a marijuana joint. “You got a lighter?”

Crystal pushes air out her nose. This is the way it goes every frigging time they do anything.

Mom finds a green plastic lighter in the console.
Benjie lights the joint and sucks. His cheeks rise, his eyes go small, his forehead wrinkles. He exhales, then hits it again. “Don’t mind if I do.” The ropey-warble voice, the putty face, the rubbery grin.

He offers the joint to Claire, who hesitates briefly but then says, “Well, I’ll just have a couple little tokes. Might make me feel better”

Smoke fills the cab. Crystal rolls her window down. The brisk vacuum sucks the smoke from the car. She leans nearer the open window. Feels the welcome draft in her thin hair, pulling and pushing her face.

Claire rolls her window down a couple inches too. The cross-flow causes the smoke to break and zig-zag. A little runner on the joint’s tip burns unevenly, wants to travel, so Mom licks her finger, and daubs the paper lightly to make a damp buffer. She takes another hit, holds the smoke, and exhales. She puts the joint near the window and its tiny ash gets sucked free. She passes to waiting Benjie. “Better already,” he says.

“That’s about all the weed I have left,” Claire says. “You can’t hardly get it around here no more. They done busted everybody.”

“That’s bullshit,” Benjie says, taking a hit. “Busting folks for trivial shit.”

“Try growing up black in an inner city,” Crystal says, but no one hears.

“Meanwhile everybody’s on meth or them pills,” Claire says. “At the middle school a few weeks ago they busted a group of kids selling each other that oxy-calling crap.”

“Oxycompton,” Benjie winks. “Did you get any?”

“Oxycontin,” says Crystal.

“Huh?” says Benjie. He turns in his seat, smiling, and offers the joint to Crystal.

She blows air out her nose. “No thanks. I’m good.”
Claire and Benjie pass the joint between them and the car falls into silence.

The nauseas sweet smell and smoking activity reminds Crystal of childhood, thousands of car rides with Mom into town and back, the countryside just like this: rolling fields dotted with trees, houses, hay bales. Beyond the fields, streams and creeks network. Silas was a social nightmare but Crystal could always look across one of these spaces and feel something like calm. In a recurring fantasy she parks on the side of one of these rural highways and walks into the field, way back near the trees, and lays down on the hard yellow grass, close to the dense earth, way down in a pocket of her, not moving, and she disappears in the light of day.

Mom heaves a sigh. “I sure wish Sonny was here right now.”

“Me too,” Benjie agrees sadly.

Getting stoned always means a brief ephemeralness followed by a long heavy leadenness.

“You know the thing I keep thinking about?” Mom says. “You always wish you could have told someone all the nice things about them while they was here.”

Crystal reaches for her phone and freezes. Reaches for her phone and freezes.

***

Two hours later, Mom’s car bumps over the creosote railroad bridge. Crystal knows the weathered billboard well: “Welcome to Silas!” And below, the baffling motto: “Missouri’s Secret!” She never did figure out the secret, and she likes to think she tried. A newer sign has been tacked to the billboard: “Home of the Silas Indians, Missouri 2-A High School Football Champions, 2009.” Injun Joe runs, smiling toothily, football tucked, tiny dust cloud at his heels.

Atrocity kitsch. God. What can she write with that?

Wait a second. Injun Joe, the grotesque plastic mascot—what if he were a real character in a real story? What if he were in The Last Christmas? Played straight? What if he partnered
with Bruce Willis when the Baptist bombs explode at an Indians Vs. Indians high school football championship? Frig jesus. That could be insane.

“Say what?” Mom says from the front seat.

“Huh?”

“I heard you say something?”

“No.”

Slumped in the passenger seat, phone slack in his twitching paw, Benjie snores as he has for two hours.

"Mom, can we stop by Ed’s?"

“You don’t want to go out to the house?”

“No. I’d like to go see Ed’s.”

Mom’s eyes and nose scrunch—her familiar that’s-not-normal face. “Well. Okay.”

They motor past Quik Stoppe, which used to be Runyon’s Bait and Gas, where mom always got gas and young Crystal gazed on disorganized schools of minnows in the bubbling water of big aluminum tubs.

When Obama ran for president Quik Stoppe’s storefront window bloomed a Confederate battle flag and a “NO-Bama” sign. She wrote the store into The Last Christmas. Now the same flag and sign still hang, but are faded almost blank by the sun.

They travel central Versailles Street. Growing up she hadn’t realized the local pronunciation “Ver-Sales” was incorrect. Pick-up trucks and used cars motor by, trailing grey exhaust. Dirty, slushy snow lays roadside in plowed furrows.
Video Hut has a “For Sale or Lease” sign in window. Dang. She liked that place. At one point she had wanted to watch every video on every shelf. Video Shack, on the other side of Silas, also closed. What happened to the videos?

Indian Burger is open and doing brisk business. Customers at the outdoor ordering window blow into their cold fists. She sinks in her seat and scans the faces in the crowd. No bogeys on her tail.

Mom smiles in the rearview at her. “Ain’t much changed around here.”

Tony’s Tool Emporium and Bosco Paint, where Ed ran a maxed-out business account, have both closed down, but across the street Walmart is open, its parking lot crowded with cars and customers in caps and coats.

Then the utilitarian, red-brick structure of Silas High School sits in its dirt patch, fronted by the oxidized bronze tomahawk statue and an encased letter-sign that says, “Indians, don’t forget to register for your SATs!”

She swallows anxiety. She will have to avoid people while she’s in Silas. A detailed To-Avoid List aggregates in her mind.

Turning left at two sallow dogs and a discarded tricycle, Mom guides the car down the bumpy dirt lane of Crest View Trailer Park. They pass corrugated metal trailer-homes in diagonal rows spaced by old satellite dishes, staring dogs, and sunken vehicles.

Benjie wakes with a start, sputtering and gasping as if fighting from water. “What are we going here for?” he says.

“Crystal wanted to stop by Ed’s,” Mom says.

Benjie used to live with Ed at Crest View but theirs was a volatile rooming situation—Blob Vs. Blob. After Crystal moved to California Benjie moved in with Claire, taking Crystal’s
old room. Which was fine with her. He helps Mom with bills, and she’ll never need the room again.

Half awake, Benjie looks anxiously for his phone. It’s in his lap.

How weird nobody from set has tried to call her? But she doesn’t want to look at her phone.

At the very back of Crest View, set against bare trees and a thin dry creek, is Ed’s rusted trailer. He’d hated moving here. For years he lived on the spacious rural property outside town left by their dad Lyle Presser, but when Ed got busted the DEA confiscated the entire place overrun with pot plants. This event loomed largest on a long list of grievances he held against authority, government, and the whole world. When he got out of prison he moved into Crest View and never tired of bellowing, “No crest, no view, fuck me, fuck you.” But now and then he would also laugh that this rear spot by the trees and creek was “the best of the worst.”

Mom parks beside Ed’s battered Toyota pick-up. Crystal climbs out, her body stove-up and clenching. She stretches but blood rushes dizzyingly to her head. Piss ship. She leans against the car, her vision blurring.

“You okay?” Mom and Benjie say at the same time.

“Yeah. “ Ed’s sagging trailer seems to tilt and flicker. ”Just…my body fell asleep.”

The land is muddy and slushy in every direction, but above mid-Missouri’s winter daylight springs surprisingly bright, the sky a clear vast blue. The cold air braces Crystal, tightens her cheeks. Her breath comes back. She might have missed seasons.

In the bed of Ed’s truck sits a frost-blanketed pile of paint cans, plastic sheets, brush poles, and used brushes. On the door, the top of the “Precision Painting” magnet decal hangs
folded over. The business motto was “Two Guys and One Helluva Job!” Benjie looks in the cab.

“Sonny been getting any work?”

“Not that I know of,” Mom says.

They climb the rickety wood steps of Ed’s trailer. Mom unlocks the door but it sticks and she has to shove it open, a metal on metal shriek. Crystal follows her inside.

The mildew smell still permeates, but the trailer has been tidied and arranged. Piles of junk have been removed. Corners and surfaces scrubbed.

“Dang. I never it seen it so clean in here,” Benjie says.

“I did that,” Mom says, hurrying to the bathroom, “I didn’t want nobody to see it how it was.”

Crystal studies the card table where she and Ed sat. The two chairs still oppose one another. The folding chair’s cushion bears a rip. Ed’s wooden chair leans, its slats duct-taped. How did that thing even hold him? A pile of stuff has been stacked on the table: mail, magazines, loose papers, and several manila folders. Crystal sits in Ed’s seat, flips through the material.

What the heck? He has Stacey’s Rolling Stone?

One of his folders is labeled Hot Tub Baby Machine? She opens it. Empty.

Benjie stands before the sleeping TV and cable box. When he powers them the air crackles and the thin hairs of Crystal’s arms and neck rise. The DVR menu gathers brightly on the screen: Fit To Pitch, Episode One, Fandango Channel, 548. Below that: “Replay” or “Search for new program.”

“He was watching the show,” Benjie says thickly. He chews his lip as he processes the information. He looks to Crystal with worried question in his eyes, and she has to look away.
From the back of the trailer the toilet flushes. Water runs in a sink, stops. Mom shuffles back into the front room. “Whew. I really had to go,” she smiles, wiping hands on her scrubs. She freezes. “What’s wrong with everybody?”

“Where was Ed when you found him?” Benjie asks.

“Well, he was laying face down on the floor here, like he just got up from his recliner and fell forwards.”

“Watching TV,” Benjie says.

“Huh?”

“Was the TV on?”

“I don’t remember, Benjie. Everything happened so fast. It’s the weirdest thing: I was sitting at home reading a book and all of a sudden I had a feeling about him. I called and he didn’t answer so I rushed over here and that’s when I found him. He was purple and swollen. I called 911 and kept doing CPR on him but he wouldn’t wake up.”

“But before that, did he say anything about my show? Was he going to watch it? I figured you guys would all get together to see it.”

“Well, I did ask him, because I wanted to watch, but he told me wasn’t going to watch it.”

Crystal grips the Hot Tub Baby Machine folder. It’s well worn, like it once carried papers.

Benjie gestures at the TV screen. “Well, it looks like it was the last dang thing he watched.”
The screen glows and throbs. Benjie stares into it like the little kid in *Poltergeist*. Crystal can hear the distant sound of something like static sea and garbled voices. They will never find a tiny exorcist in Silas. She holds her breath lest the trailer collapse.

“You found him Thursday night?” Benjie says. “What time?”

“It was late, ten or eleven.”

Benjie drops onto the couch and dust billows from its cushions. “He watched my show and then he died.”

Mom’s voice rises, “He’s not dead, Benjie. Please don’t say that.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. I mean he watched my show and then had his dang stroke or whatever.” Benjie grips his face. “Oh my god.”

Crystal lifts the folder. “Did Ed write *Hot Tub Baby Machine*?”

Benjie’s cheeks redden as he kneads them. “Well, I mean…we both kind of came up with it. Well, I mean, yeah, it was pretty much his idea but then we developed it together. It was a whole a big plan. He was the one who told me to try out for the show. He made the audition video with his phone and submitted it. Afterwards we got in a big fight about the movie because I didn’t want to do it the way he wanted to do it. He had all these weird ideas that wouldn’t work in a normal movie. I kept trying to tell him but he wouldn’t listen. I thought everything would be fine after I went to California and did the show. We was always going to split the profits or whatever.”

She remembers Ed’s crazy eyes. The way he leaned over this table and tried to confide to her. “What do you mean he had weird ideas about it?”

“Well, I don’t know. It was real dark. He said he wanted to mess with people. He thought it was funny.”
“He thought the script would be funny?”

“Yeah, but in a real disturbing way. I told him it needed to be fun. A movie about a guy who gets the girl.”

“The girls.”

“Right. The only reason Gil picked it for the show is because it’s supposed to be fun. I call it ‘A Super Hero Love Story.’ Gil loves that.”

“And what did Ed call it?”

Benjie’s face scrunches. “Well, he said something like it was an assault on movies. On TV and stuff. Which doesn’t make any sense because all that stuff’s just fun or whatever.”

“He called it An Assault on Hollywood?”

“Yeah. He said it would be the last romance comedy.”

“The Last Romantic Comedy?”

“Yeah.”

Crystal waves the empty folder to Mom. “Was there any papers in here?”

Mom shakes her worried head. Crystal can tell the conversation has confused her. “I don’t know, Crystal, everything’s just like it was. All I threw out was a bunch of junk and trash.”

“Did Ed have other stories?” she asks them.

Benjie and Mom both nod. Mom says, “He was back there in his office writing or reading all the time. He said he sent you some stuff but you never wrote back. He thought you didn’t like it or were still mad at him.”

Crystal vaguely remembers some emails from Ed after last Christmas. She ignored them and then forgot them, life rushing forward and the mind going where it goes.

“Dang, I need a drink of water,” Mom says en route to the faucet. “You guys want one?”
Crystal crosses to the hallway. The first door on the right is the second bedroom, which Ed made his office. She pushes the swollen door open and it makes a small screech. In one corner used cans of house paint are piled with paint-splattered plastic sheeting and crusty brushes. A large tangle of rope.

Against the back wall is a desk and file cabinet. She sits in the metal folding chair and her knees knock the desk. Frig. The desk and chair are too small. Found items. How’d he even fit here?

Atop the desk is another manila folder. The label, again in Ed’s scrawl, reads: *The Weightless Machine*.

This folder too is creased with wear but empty.

She opens the file cabinet. Hanging green dividers contain other folders, each bearing a handwritten label. She leafs through a few: *The Billboard Terrorists; Behind the Cheap Curtain; Occupy Main Street; Camp Desperation; The Astronaut and the Reality Star; 64 Days: Conquered Worm*. Why is that one familiar? She remembers: *Conqueror Worm* was supposed to be the title of John Kennedy Toole’s next novel. When she read his biography she thought it an amazing title. Toole, losing his mind, believed somebody had stolen his book.

Sixty-four days was the length of his final, mysterious road trip. He committed suicide and nobody ever found the manuscript, if he’d even written anything. Was Ed writing about that?

*64 Days: Conquered Worm*, like every folder in the file cabinet, is empty. None contain a single written page.

The room closes rapidly around her, conforming dizzily to her shape. A mouse in a mouse-sized space. Everything is small but she looms, cannot move. Everything here could sit in
Ed’s giant hand. She feels herself on his rough palm, held near his nicotine stained lips, and he whispers: *You know they killed John Kennedy Toole.*

*Somebody killed your dad.*

“Crystal?”

She jumps, banging her knees against the desk. “Goddangit!”

Mom stands in the doorway, the hallway tight and dark around her. “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to scare you. We were going to head up to Jeff City and see Ed.”

“OK,” she says.

“What are you doing?”

“Just looking through stuff. You say everything here is like you found it?”

“Yeah I didn’t touch none of his papers. Ed don’t like people messing with his stuff.”

She holds a folder in her hand.

*The Weightless Machine.*

“I’m going to stay here at Ed’s while I’m in town.”

Mom’s face wrinkles like she ate something distasteful. “Why?”

“I just want to.”
6. Black Ice

Crystal drives rural Highway 55 to Jefferson City. “I need to kill my nerves,” Benjie had said, so he smoked the rest of Mom’s joint, and Mom, of course, couldn’t say no, so she also took “just a couple little tokes,” and now both carry the quiet heavy dullness of a daylong stoning. Crystal hunches over the steering wheel. She dug around in Ed’s closet and now wears two thick flannel over-shirts and a green wool cap with furry ear flaps. She smells cigarettes and sweat in Ed’s clothes but she feels covered.

Benjie still tries to find reception on his cellphone. “Want to listen to the radio?” he says.

“It don’t work,” Mom says from the back seat.

Good. No consumer pop or strident pitchmen. Silence settles as the sky darkens low and cold over the country highway. “Oh my gosh,” Mom says. “Looks like snow.”

Clusters of trees huddle naked and forlorn. The farm fields gather shadows. The other vehicles crowd Crystal, all way too big, and not just tractor-trailers, which she can respect from a working class position. Every frigging truck now is like a militarized tank fighting for a scarcity of road. Their headlights are bright knives. Her tiny Saturn trembles, bumps the gravel shoulder, and comes back. She feels frayed. The coffee she made before leaving Ed’s trailer casts an anxious pall, and a shameful need to evacuate.

“Could this be the year?” would be a perfect tagline for *The Last Christmas*.

Dangerous Deals Only a Few Miles Away.

One of Ed’s folders was labeled *The Billboard Terrorists*. What does that mean? Could one blow up billboards? That might be something.

Jefferson City is Silas’s nearest city, the Missouri state capital. It has the closest shopping malls, department stores, and Red Lobster, the finest dining hereabout. But Jefferson City mostly means the regional hospitals—a dread associated with accidents and illness. Like Mom’s festering, near-fatal brown recluse bite; Benjie’s alcohol and prescription pill overdose; Ed’s respiratory infections and diabetic seizure. Fret. Crystal hates hospitals. Her family, like many around here, can’t afford insurance and thus never go to a doctor unless it’s too late.

What did Ed do to his self this time? She knows he did something. When she gets home tonight and is alone she must, A) watch this goddang-stupid-frigging first episode of *Fit To Pitch*, and B) search Ed’s belongings.

From the back seat Mom says, “Crystal, slow down please, you’re driving too fast,” and Crystal blasts air out her nose.

***

When they get to Still Hospital the on-duty doctor in Intensive Care is a taciturn man who also needs sleep. He tells them there has been no change. Ed is still non-responsive. He carries weak vital signs and only life support keeps him breathing. Then the doctor says, "If these conditions persist, pretty soon we will need to have other conversations. As to what to do next.” Sissy and Sonny Presser clutch one another and make low moaning sounds. Crystal stands close, breathing the acrid antiseptic air. Fluorescent lights flutter. Long waxed hallways recede. No one knows what to say.
Crystal files last into the hospital room and before she makes her way past the first, empty bed and white divider curtain, Benjie falls weeping at the sheet-covered mountain of Ed. Mom also cries loudly as she holds and comforts the little brother who holds their big brother. Connected via tubes and wires to an array of machines, Ed is pale, his eyelids blue and bruised, his skin irritated where the goatee and hair has been shaved.

Frig jesus. She looks just like Ed: the upturned nose and receding chin; the heavy jowls; the cauliflower ears. Sweet Mary Mother of Frog, I cannot bear ye.

She stands at the bed’s foot and grips its bars, but her hands feel distant, puffy and numb, not hers. She towers atop tiny feet. The all of them loom over this hospital bed and it cannot possibly hold. The entire building buckles beneath them.

Ed’s assisted-breathing apparatus, sucking and releasing, returns her to her breathing. Her heart’s dim thud. She takes hold of Ed’s sheet-covered feet. Somebody needs to cut his toenails.

His eyelashes are so long. Moist and glossy. Are hers that long?

She swears his eyelids flutter in the fluorescent light.


“You’re supposed to keep talking to them,” Mom says, rubbing Benjie’s round shoulders.

Please come back.

Crystal steps slowly from the hospital bed. She’s so tired. Drifting, she brushes past the curtain to the room’s other side, the dark side, where the other bed sits empty. She descends to its cool papered cushion. Crinkling. The bed is just the right fit. Her body spreads, fills the space. She feels a gentle motion, a drawing and releasing. Everyone can have a bed. Here we can float with one another. She hears high sounds, echoing sounds. Calling sounds that carry the world’s distance. She dives.
“Crystalbear?”

“Crystalbear?”

Her eyes open, breaking a wet, sticky crust.

The hospital room is filled with bright daylight. Ed, propped against a pile of fresh pillows, sits up in his bed. He sips a cup of coffee from which mist rises. His goatee and gray hair have been combed and cleaned—no grease, no yellow nicotine stains.

He smiles at Crystal with pleased wonder.

Something large seems to brush by their space.

“Crystalbear,” he says. “You made it.”

Crystal stirs, the bed crinkling beneath her. Her tongue chafes her mouth. She’s so dry.

“Have a drink of water,” Ed says.

A glass of water sits on her bedside table. She finds her hand and reaches. She drinks.

Water fills and lifts her matter.

“I was so tired,” she says.

“You’ve been asleep for five years.”

“What?”

“I waited for you to wake up.”

She is small. She perfectly fits the bed, the room, and a space beyond. Spaces move against spaces but she cannot quite define them.

“Don’t try,” Ed says.

“What?”

“I love your hair. You look beautiful.”

She smiles.
“You look so much like your dad.”

Ed leans slowly from his bed and seems to fill the room. “Crystalbear, listen,” he says, “We got tricked.”

Crystal watches Ed’s mouth, the sounds have shapes, and she begins to float from her bed.

“I don’t know how anybody makes it down there, but we did,” he says.

“Listen to me,” he says, “There is a problem and the universe is trying to…”

***

“Crystal?”

“Crystalbear?”

She resists but then slowly rises from the deep, her self coalescing.

“What?” she hears her self growl.

“I’m sorry, honey, you got to wake up. Visiting hours are over.”

She’s in the hospital bed. The hospital room. Mom and Benjie gaze down at her with wide, wet eyes. She moves her head. Drags a heavy tongue through her dry mouth. She tries to move her arms and legs.

“Here, baby, have a drink of water,” Mom says, offering the glass.

She drinks deeply. The water courses through her, lifts her.

The curtain has been pushed back and she can see Ed in his bed before the dark window. He breathes by machine, a respiratory back-and-forth sounding. He is a silent edifice with shaved head and glossy, blue-bruised eyelids.

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Sleet falls as they push past the sliding glass doors of Still Hospital and into the cold night. Crystal’s face shrinks against her shoulders. She *hunkers*, a word and idea she has always liked. Ed’s thick flannels and furry hat are made for hunkering. Mom and Benjie hunker too, and the three of them cross the slick parking lot on careful, tip-toe steps. Lit by overhead halogen lights, the descending ice flashes and flickers, pricking exposed skin.

Crystal unlocks the Saturn and they slump inside. The engine wheezes and threatens to stall. No, please. She pumps the gas and turns the key again. The engine fires. She pushes the gas in hard revs. She feels the mechanism even out and start running. “I got to get this thing looked at,” Mom says in the backseat. Benjie flaps his hands at the heater vents as the engine warms.

They huddle in silence. The hospital’s antiseptic smell seems to have carried with them.

“Dang, I’m starving,” Benjie says.

Right. She hasn’t eaten anything since…when? Peanut butter at dawn in Los Angeles?

“Let’s grab a bite,” Mom agrees.

Crystal knows where they’ll go. “McDonald’s is right on the way out of Jeff,” Benjie says.

“We should get something healthier,” Mom says.

Benjie shakes his head. “Ah, nah, it’s right on the way. Super easy. Get in, get out, beat the weather home.”

She knows it’s gross but Crystal can already taste the burger and cheese luxuriating her mouth, giving way.

“Be careful driving,” Mom tells her as she drives out of the parking lot. “Black Ice—you can’t see it but it’s there.”

“I know,” Crystal says.
“Especially on bridges,” Mom continues.

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McDonald’s sits on the highway overpass. They eat beside their own dim reflections in the booth’s dark window. They watch headlights criss-cross in the rain.

“You know,” Benjie says, chewing his cheeseburger, “I actually haven’t seen Sonny look so peaceful in a long time.”

Mom nods. “He looks like he lost weight. I kept telling him he needed too. Of course, who am I to talk.”

“I wonder what’s going on in there?” Benjie says. “I mean in Sonny’s mind.”

Crystal bites her burger and considers Benjie. It is a really good question.

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” Mom says, dipping her fries in ketchup.

Crystal feels full but continues to eat. She had ordered a kid-sized cheeseburger but then got another one. More than full, she feels saturated at the bottom of her. Swollen. This is the last time she will eat fast food. She eats and then wishes for a brush to scrub not only her mouth but her body’s insides.

Fluorescent lighting banishes every shadow in the restaurant. She wishes it were dimmer. She can see everything and everyone too clearly. A thin coat of grease dulls every surface, and can be felt in the air and nostrils. The nighttime crowd eats quietly and quickly, their heads down, slick wrappers clenched. They chew, sip, chew, sip.

A little boy aged seven or eight enters the restaurant alone and crosses to the counter.

“Jeff City’s getting so bad for crime,” Mom says.

Crystal bristles. “Did you say that because you saw a black person?”

“No, Crystal. I was just saying what everybody says…”

“Mom, it’s racist code-speak that everybody uses.”

“Crystal, I’m not ra…”

“You have to understand that the problem in cities across America is poverty and institutional racism. Whites receive and then repeat this narrative about ‘crime’ but nobody talks about the purposefully underfunded public schools, the daily high costs of poverty, and the pervasive lack of jobs and opportunities and access and healthcare, not to mention frigging Jim Crow mass incarceration…”

“Crystal…”

“Let me finish. You have to understand. These realities don’t just ‘happen’—they’ve been constructed by a systemic white supremacy…”

“Please don’t raise your voice with me, Crystal. I’m not no racist. I just say things wrong.”

Benjie sips noisily from his soda. “I’ve got black friends now in Los Angeles.”

Crystal blows air out her nose. It never ends. She eats.

The little boy scratches his ear and watches the employees prepare food. He pulls out a phone and checks it.

She pats her pockets. Where did she leave her phone?

“When do you guys have to go back to California?” Mom says.

“I don’t know,” Benjie says. “I need to call Gil in the morning and check in. I’m sure they’re going to need me to keep filming.”

“How’s your work going, Crystal?” Mom says.

“I don’t know,” she says. She sips her Diet Coke; sharp tingles on her palate.

What happened today on set? Her phone must be at Ed’s.
“Gil really wants to hook up with you all’s show,” Benjie says. “He said if he could get his hands on that *Celebrity Teenager* what he wouldn’t do. Which was a joke, but really, he’s amazing. He knows everything, Crystal.”

“No,” she says. “Stacey would never do that.”

“I keep meaning to get cable so I can watch more often,” Mom says. “I used to go to Ed’s and we’d watch. We loved that one with the farmers.”

Behind and above her an itch irritates her neck and ear, like rough fiber. “The one with the Farmers?” she says.

“Yeah,“ Mom says, ”Where they was set on fire at the camping trip? That was so funny.”

The itch radiates down her arms and legs. “That one didn’t air yet,” she says.

“What do you mean? Me and Ed seen it a few weeks ago.”

“Yeah, I seen that one,” Benjie nods.

“That Stacey’s really something,” Mom smiles. “Remember all those years ago when we used to sit and watch her on that singing show? What’s she like in person?”

Her hands wish to flutter and scratch, but the itch is everywhere and unreachable. “I don’t know,” she barely says.

The little boy receives six grease-spotted paper bags. Bags in hand he bumps out the door and disappears in the rainy night.

She picks a hard chunk of cheese from the wrapper and sticks it in her mouth. She is a dark blob in the window. *The Big Dang*. Greased, the lower parts of her loosen and erode. She used the restroom when they first got here but she needs to go again. Everything will rush from her.

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Crystal drives slowly home. Temperatures have plummeted and the road is a slick black ribbon. The steadily falling sleet glistens like a field of needles. The car’s worn wiper blades squeal and scratch the streaked windshield but do little to clear her view. While Mom and Benjie snore, Crystal, hands tight at ten o’clock and two o’clock, leans to discern the two lanes from the black shoulder and fields. Tonight no one else travels rural Highway 55.

The Presser Snore rattles and grinds, rattles and grinds. Like old machines struggling to start. It’s a fabled snore. She’s never been able to share a sleeping room with her mom or uncles. She lays awake all night and studies each pained sound.

Does she snore like that? Of course she must. She must snore like a displeased god. A monster growling and clicking in the deepest water. Sometimes she will wake suddenly with the echo or memory of it.

She will never be able to share a sleeping room with another. Share a bed with another.

A shape darts swiftly into her headlights and she slams the breaks. The car fish-tails, its rear rushing to its fore, entering the opposite lane, and Crystal surges. *Turn the wheel the opposite way.* Mom and Benjie flutter and gasp, but she turns the wheel, bears down, prays no actually I don’t want to go, not now, not like this, please, and the car rights, slows, and slides to a stop in the middle of the dark highway.

Mom and Benjie recede again to deep sleep.

Her body throbs.

Breathes.

Her body. Her.

Sleet flashes and falls all around her.
She looks behind her and sees a large dark shape by the road, but it is immobile—the backside of a billboard.

In Los Angeles it is never night, never dark. Lights are always on, finding and defining you. She had come to never notice. But this Missouri night is black and boundless. She knows not where she ends and it begins.
7. Fit the Pitch

When Crystal bumps onto Crest View Lane Mom wakes with a start. “Whoa, I really conked out,” she says sleepily. “Thanks for driving, babe.”

The rain-wet trailers sag and lean in her headlights. Dull lights flicker in most of them. Television lights. A few still bear strings of Christmas lights.

Ed’s single-wide swells into shape, the soggiest, saggist of them all.

She tells Mom, “I’m just going to jump out and let you guys get on home. The roads are getting pretty bad.”

“Crystal, why don’t you come out to the house and sleep? I got your room made up real nice and I can pull out the couch for Benjie. He usually falls asleep there anyway.”

“No, let him have his room. I want to stay here.”

Mom pushes air out her nose.

Crystal parks by Ed’s truck and leaves the engine running. Mom undoes her seatbelt, “Here, let me come in with you and make the bed…”

“Mom, no, it’s fine. Go home. Please. I’m just going to plop down and go to sleep.”

“He probably doesn’t have any clean sheets or anything…”

“I don’t need sheets. I’ll sleep on the couch, it’s fine.”

“Well, Crystal, if you’re planning on sleeping on that couch you better put something down…”

“Mom, god, it’s fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mom takes Crystal’s face in her hands and comes close. Her eyes glisten, all pupil. “I love you so much, Crystal. You’re my little baby, you know that? The beautiful light of my life.”

Crystal’s cheeks loosen. “I love you too.”
“Please try to get some rest.”

“Okay.”

Mom leaves the headlights on as Crystal slogs through rain to the trailer. She climbs the steps, key in fist. She turns and waves mom off. She unlocks the door and shoves inside, the screech dampened too.

The trailer is dark. She feels the wall until she finds the switch and lights the front room. The walls and carpet soiled; the air musty and cold. She stands still as Mom drives away; the tires crunch gravel, recede, and are gone.

Ice rain ticks the trailer’s metal roof.

She senses something. Movement in one of the rear rooms.

Her throat tightens. “Hello?”

She’s not alone.

“Who’s here?”

She crosses to the dark hallway and stops. The office door is closed tight.

Quickly she wrenches open the door and flips the light switch. Someone sits at the computer. She lurches backwards against the wall.

Frig jesus.

It’s only Ed’s massive windbreaker on the back of the chair.

She checks the bathroom and Ed’s bedroom. The place is hers. Her outpost.

She turns on the heating unit and it grinds to life. The vents whisper thin warm air but she leaves on her flannel and furry cap.

Her bags sit on the couch. The phone is inside. She can’t look.
She crosses to the kitchen. Pinned to the fridge by a Precision Painting magnet is a photograph Fret and Ed she’s never seen. Two chubby young guys arm in arm with guitars on a bar stage—The Horn in downtown Silas. They have long hair and hippie beards. Their rubbery faces laugh for the camera. Shirtless and sweaty. Guys get to do that. If she had a beard and long hair and laughed she would look like that. She can smell their sweet and sour reek.

In the few photos she’s seen of Fret he’s almost always laughing. Why then?

She opens the fridge and finds a sparse selection: a few cans of beer and generic soda, two chocolate bars, eggs, bologna, and butter. She wishes it were diet soda but pops one anyway.

She breaks off half a chocolate bar.

Alright. Let’s frigging do this.

She finds the TV remote and sits heavily in Ed’s recliner. She points the remote and plays the premiere of *Fit To Pitch*.

In the opening shot we float above an animated, spinning Earth. A flashing billboard stuck in the planet reads *Fit to Pitch*. We hear Gil Tannen-Sterling voice-over: “This crazy marble in the corner of the Milky Way is home to billions of movies.” A figure floats into foreground: Gil Tannen-Sterling in a gold space suit sits on a rocket recliner. He smiles perfect teeth in his glass helmet. “But what’s your movie?” he says. He raises an outsized remote control. “Are you *Fit To Pitch*?” He presses a button and his recliner flips backwards, shoots digital flames, and blasts toward the Earth. The camera drops with and then past Gil, into Earth’s atmosphere, through mist and cotton clouds, emerging high above California and still dropping. Gil’s rocket chair zooms into frame as we near Los Angeles. “Houston,” he says, “It looks like we’ve got a movie.”

A flight controller responds, “Roger that, GTS, it looks you are *Fit To Pitch*.”
A shrill be-bop horn blasts and we race toward impact with the Hollywood sign. Crash landing sound effects as the title graphic explodes onscreen:

**FIT TO PITCH**


Crystal’s cramped apartment is just the other side of that scruffy hill, but it seems unlikely she ever lived there.

“Welcome to *Fit To Pitch.*”

Cut to Studio Backlot filled with busy Film Crew Extras. Gil wears a hot-pink suit. “I’m Gil Tannen-Sterling.” He points a long finger at the camera and winks. “But ya’ll know me.”

Do we?

Extras cross behind him carrying light-stands and other equipment. “One day I was out here making movies,” Gil says, “And I looked around and asked myself, Where are the real people? The real movies?”

He points his familiar finger and smiles. “Where are you?”

Cut to an Executive Boardroom. An in-progress Studio Meeting. The Studio Executives’ mouths move but no sound emerges. Gil, now in a power black ensemble, steps into frame. “And so I created *Fit To Pitch*—the show where you, yes you, bring your movie to Hollywood.”

Something’s wrong with Gil Tannen-Sterling’s face. A digital airbrushing seems to exude from the very cells of him. He’s a well-built man, tall, maybe 50–60 years old—he projects a
been-there, seen-it-all affectation—and yet his shiny face bears no wrinkles or other mortal wear. He might be 30 years old, he might be 18. He might be thousands of years old. What is he?

Sounds keep coming out of its mouth. “You’ve got a movie. I know you do—an action flick, a thriller, a crowd-pleasing comedy, whatever. What you need is a veteran of the movie game to turn your movie dream into movie reality.

Cut to Hollywood Boulevard. Four smiling people—including frigging Uncle Benjie—stride in lockstep. In voice-over Gil says, "This season we looked at your pitches and brought four of you to Hollywood. Meet Dorene, Benjie, Bill, and Ramses. I’m going to put these rookies through the paces. I’ll throw them at agents, managers, studio execs, and marketing gurus—all the bad top dogs. I’m going to rough them up, buff them up, and puff them up."

“And at the end: one pitch shall be chosen.”

“A big movie made.”

“Who is it going to be?”

Cut to photographs of the four contestants: a middle-aged black woman and the usual three white men: Benjie; a buzz-cut older guy; and a bird-faced teenage boy.

Holy frigging jesus. Please, no. Crystal grips the recliner. She wishes she could turn the show off; not just here but everywhere.

“Which of these four will be Fit To Pitch?” Gil says. “Don’t go anywhere because we’ll be right back.”

Before she can react an overloud commercial erupts: a Naked Baby, singing along to the Beatles’ “Helter Skelter,” drives a red convertible down a seaside highway. Crystal jabs the remote to fast-forward: the Baby, now with a grown-man body, parks at a seaside property and proceeds to build a large home. In the final shot Man-With-Baby-Head stands arm-in-arm with a
Gorgeous Model on their new deck, watching the sun set over the sea. “Sunco Petroleum” flashes onscreen, followed by the slogan “Good Ideas Get You There.”

Crystal shoots air from her nose. It’s an endless obscenity. She closes her eyes as the other commercials fast-forward. Before _Fit To Pitch_’s next segment, she presses pause.

Ed’s trailer tightens around her. A tree branch scrapes the metal roof.

Can she do this?

Can she do anything?

She should sleep. Wet, heavy sand has settled at her bottom.

But she has to see what happens. She presses play.

In the next segment we learn the so-called “Pitchers” live together in an airy house in Venice Beach. Many windows and brightly colored rooms. A couple blocks away the Pacific Ocean slaps the beach and women in bikinis walk side by side.

Gil Tannen-Sterling conducts one-on-one “Pitch Meetings” in a room called “The Bullpen.” He sits in a throne-like seat across the table from Benjie.

“Benjie Lyle Presser,” Gil smiles, “Give me your pitch.”

Benjie sucks a big breath and grins sheepishly. Oh god. His eyes are bloodshot. He’s high or drunk or both. Gil arranged this. “Um, well,” Benjie says, “I guess the best way…”

“Stop,” Gil says.

Benjie blinks. “What?”

“Already: NO. Benjie, when you make The Pitch, there can’t be any ums, wells, or I-guesses. You either know or you don’t. Don’t waste my time or the good people of Hollywood’s time. We’re very busy. You have got to come focused and deliver the goods."

“Okay,” Benjie says to his lap.
“One more time. Give me your pitch.”

“Gil, it’s called *Hot Tub Baby Machine*…”

“Terrific title.”

“Right? Um, this one’s got a little, I mean a lot of something, I think, for everybody. It’s a coming-of-age, super-hero, love story.”

“Great, great.” Gil smiles. “Please, tell me more.”

Crystal chews her fingernail mercilessly.

Benjie shifts in his seat. He scratches his broad belly. “Um, okay: Jim Drummond is the biggest dork in high school, a world-class dork, but on the biggest night of his life, at the biggest party of senior year, he ends up in a big hot tub with the five girls he loves most.”


“Well, all this supernatural stuff or something happens and Jim accidentally makes all of the girls pregnant.”

“Whoa! He has sex with all of them?”

“No, that’s the thing, he doesn’t actually have sex…”

Gil shakes his head. “I urge you to keep thinking about that one, Ben.”

Benjie scrunches his nose and nods.

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Gil says, “Bill Gulliver. Big Bill. Give me your pitch.”

The buzz-cut, grim-faced old guy strikes the shiny table with his fist. “Mr. Tannen-Sterling…”

“Please, call me Gil. Or GTS.”

“Gil, four words is all I need: ’A real life Red Dawn.’”
Crystal of course knows the 1980s red-scare teen movie, but what does ‘A real life Red Dawn’ mean? Also, it’s five words.

Gil nods excitedly. “A real life Red Dawn?”

Gulliver squints. “I call it The Last Christmas.”

Crystal rises in her seat. Her movie. That’s her frigging movie…

“You’re pushing buttons, Bill,” Gil says. “Tell me more.”

“Picture this: a small Midwestern town like any other on a day like any other. Main Street. A McDonald’s like any other McDonald’s, except,” Bill leans forward, “Inside we see that the whole McDonald’s is full of Islamics.”

“Muslims?”

“Right. And they’re eating our burgers, drinking our sodas, talking Islamic and everything. And then we see other scenes around town and these Islamics are everywhere, doing all our stuff.”

“It’s a town of Muslim-Americans?”

“No, no, no,” Gulliver says. “Gil, they’re terrorists.”

Crystal is numb. Bill’s pitch has flipped her whole idea.

“Terrorists?” Gil says.

“Right. Then we cut to quick shots all over America and we see that everybody everywhere is Islamic Terrorists. They’ve taken over our country.”

Gil arches his sculpted eyebrow. “Keep going.”

Bill says, “But then we cut to the woods above our little town and we see an encampment. A rugged band of real American survivors. Some call it Camp Desperation but the
patriots don’t call it that. They call it Camp Hope. Christmas is coming up and they want their country back. They don’t want this to be The Last Christmas.

Gil pyramids his fingers at his chin. “And then what?”

“Well, basically, it’s just a big fight between the Patriots and the Islamics,” Bill says. “I need to kind of figure all that out. But if we can get Bruce Willis…”


Crystal tastes metal. She pulls her finger from her mouth and sees the nail covered in blood. Piss ship. She looks around the trailer but doesn’t see a paper towel or anything else handy.

She wipes the blood on Ed’s flannel.

The sleet falls harder, drumming the trailer.

What’s happening on this TV show? Her idea for The Last Christmas is certainly not original, in fact that’s kind of the whole point. But the same frigging title? The same frigging Bruce Willis?

She begins chewing another nail, and presses play.

***

The 40-something black woman’s eyes are sharp and serious, her posture perfect. A wrap elevates her hair. She’s striking.


Smith? Los Angeles has swallowed up many millions of young women called Smith.

Dorene locks eyes with Gil. “Shark Date,” she says, “The scariest movie you ever seen.”
Gil nods and shakes his head at the same time. Dizzying. “It’s got the magic ring, Dorene. Tell me more.”

“It was Twyla’s first date. She didn’t know it would be a Shark Date.”

“I can see the poster and I love it. What happens?”

“Twyla and her best friend Letty—city girls, mind you, coming of age in a hard world—meet two boys one night at the club. Funny, charismatic, white guys. After drinking and dancing these guys convince Twyla and Letty to ride with them to the beach where one says he owns a cabin.”

“Classic,” Gil says. His outsized head floats closer to Dorene and Crystal doesn’t like it.

“Well, they drive way out of town. The girls ain’t got a clue where they are because everybody’s partying. They get to a secluded, ocean-side cabin and commence to playing on the beach. The choppy water is dark and wild under a full moon, Gil. You have to understand that this is a strange adventure for Twyla and Letty, something new, eagerly facilitated by the guys, who keep bringing drinks from the cabin. Under the full moon, Twyla feels all kinds of forces messing with her reality.

Dorene’s sure voice and story fills the trailer, like a balm on Crystal’s blasted nerves. She forgets she is watching the worst show ever made.

“Twyla sees Letty swimming out past the surf with one of the guys. She hollers after Letty, asks her to come back, but Letty can’t hear her. Twyla realizes she’s been drugged; she doesn’t know the sky from the land or sea. And suddenly her guy transforms terribly into insane eyes and aggressive hands. He’s trying to tear off her clothes and force her to the ground.”

Gil shivers excitedly. He nods.
“Cut to Letty swimming in deep water. She pushes through waves because it feels so good on her body. She too is lost in her self. Drugged. She hears the boy laughing weirdly behind her, and then she feels her swimsuit ripped off. She turns to see the boy’s crazy face and he’s all up on her in the water. We have a frenzy of violence, shot in extreme close up, Letty fighting and drowning. And that’s when the shark hits them.”


Dorene bears down: “Boom. Enter mortal terror; via the camera we thrash in horrible proximity to Letty. Her shock is our shock as the monster’s jaw repeatedly take hold and rend her.”

“That’s the sound of tickets selling.”

“Back on the beach, Letty’s screams reach Twyla. The guy tries to overpower her but she fights like hell, mother[censor], claws his eyes, rips his balls, and gets free. Then she plunges into the water.”

“Twyla swims and tries to find her friend. She’s desperate. And we, of course, know what’s out here—the giant shark.”

“Finally, Twyla grabs a hand in the water. She pulls the body to her. It’s Letty, her eyes wide and otherworldly. Twyla swims with her friend toward shore. She feels something gigantic brush by her in the water. A huge, dark fin surfaces only feet away and then disappears.”

“Somehow her feet find sand. She carries Letty to shore and they collapse. Hysterical Twyla tries to wake Letty. Then she looks down and realizes Letty has been severed at the waist. Dark blood and guts rush from her mangled friend. Twyla starts screaming. Then she loses consciousness.”

Crystal, Gil, and the entire universe listens to Dorene’s pitch.
“When Twyla wakes up she’s on a beach and it’s dawn. She is naked and bloody. She looks all over for Letty, but hauntingly she is alone. The two guys are gone too. She’s alone on a raw stretch of sand by a choppy ocean. In one direction water, and the other only dunes, a sandy wasteland. That’s when her eyes focus down beach and she sees two dark figures running toward her.”

“Twyla starts running. She turns and sees the figures pursuing her. As she gains speed the camera closes on her face. Then, we cut back to the night before, she and Letty and the two guys arriving at the beach, young and laughing, ready for a good time. It’s like the whole thing starts over…”

This is the best movie Crystal’s ever seen, but Gil Tannen-Sterling starts shaking his head. “Now, here’s where I’m losing you, Dorene. You had the good guy, the bad guy, and the shark…”

“No.” Dorene brings it: “We build to the shark again. The whole dang thing, GTS. The audience sees what it already saw except in different shots, different edits. Thus the audience experiences a strange and dramatic predicament: a certain dread alongside a growing hope that something might happen differently this time. They cannot not watch. And then the audience’s first great reward comes when, out in the dark water, the frigging shark tears into the guy instead of Letty. And Twyla seems to have an opportunity to save Letty.”

Gil shrugs a skeptical face. “We’ll keep working on it, Dorene.”

Crystal wants to reach into the TV and grab Gil by his face.

***

The bird-faced boy Ramses Michael Patrick spreads his pink hands. “Gil, picture this,” he says, “The Weightless Machine.”
Crystal feels a sharp tug in her mind. A familiar shape.

Ramses continues his pitch: “The year is 2033. The United States of America, like the rest of the world, consists of deeply divided, warring classes. The two main ones are called Floaters and Grounders. Floaters have gained access to or created some kind of alternate universe. And the Grounders, still stuck on crappy Earth, can’t see or reach the Floaters. But the Grounders are sure the Floaters exist because they seem to keep messing with life on Earth, exploiting resources and sowing discord.”

Crystal can’t move. She lives in a tiny space in her throat. “Okay, so what happens?” Gil says.

“Glad you ask. The most popular product among Grounders in 2033 is a body-sized box called the Weightless Machine. Life on the planet is a mess. The Grounders have almost no food or clean water yet most of them trade what little they have to buy Weightless Machines. They live inside their Machines, which transmit to their consciousness an ongoing stream of televisual product, an endless virtual dream state. But some of the Grounders believe The Weightless Machine is a mind control tool of the Floaters, and they begin violent insurrections against what they believe are Earth-based Floater targets…”

Gil breaks in, “Ramses, listen, I can tell you’re a brilliant kid…”

Of course. The young white guy is always brilliant. But something else is happening here that Crystal can’t define.

“…but you got a lot to learn about The Pitch.”

Ramses, his tiny mouth wet, listens closely.

“So far you’ve told me a whole lot of stuff. Stuff, stuff, stuff. What you haven’t told me is what happens.”
Crystal remembers she has a remote. It slipped between her thigh and the recliner. She digs numbly beneath her.

Ramses says, “Well, it’s complicated…”

Gil waves his large hand. “No, it’s not. It’s never complicated. Not in this business…”

Crystal turns the TV off, and in its absence the dark room vibrates. Her ears have pressure like she’s deep underwater.

She rises from the chair but then dizzies. She feels a sharp pinch in her chest, which she grabs at. Her other arm tries to find the chair behind her. Her vision contracts. She holds her self against the chair, halfway between sitting and standing. Her chest squeezes tighter and she presses it with numb hand.

This exact feeling somewhere before? This very moment somewhere before?

The dirty carpet vibrates. She could collapse there. A perfect fit. Is this what happened to Ed? His shape depresses the carpet fibers.

She closes her eyes. She tries to breathe. Falling hail pounds the metal roof, shaking the trailer.

The pinch in her chest relents. She pushes from the chair and stumbles into the hallway. She shoves the office door open with a metal on metal screech.

The manila file folder sits on Ed’s desk. It is worn from once-held papers but now empty. The title scratched in dark pencil:

*The Weightless Machine.*
8. Figures and Figures

Crystal retrieves the heavy, blue denim blanket from Ed’s bed, turns off the light, and, still in her furry hat and clothes and shoes, wraps her self tightly and lays down on the couch, her face to its dark corner. The smell of cigarettes and pressed ass. She breathes open mouthed, wet heat on her face.

The rhythmic clicking of the ceiling fan’s pull chord. She can feel the fan fingers circle the room. She finds her armpit. Breathes her. A familiar idea shapes, and she only remembers it here: she travels a great distance to find another who smells like her.

To press close. To fit. How welcome that.

In a long narrow room lined with hospital beds. Each bed holds a sheet-covered body. Ceiling fans click all the way down the room, their shadows flickering the ceiling and walls. And far down the room someone moves between the beds.

Mom wears her wrinkled nursing scrubs. She holds a thick notebook in her hand, slowly inspecting each patient.

She wants to call Mom but cannot sound.

She realizes she is in one of the beds. And she cannot move. A fan clicking overhead.

“Crystal.”

She can just turn her head. Uncle Ed sits in a bed beside hers. He smokes a cigarette and smiles. She wants to tell him he can’t smoke in here but she can’t sound.

“It’s hard to move at first but you figure out how,” Ed says. He blows smoke away from her.

Ed’s bones are visible under his thin skin. She looks down and she too has wasted to nothing. She is but a slight impression on the bed.
“Don’t try,” Ed says.

“It’s lucky we got beds next to each other but I think that’s the way it works out.”

“Watch.” Ed stubs his cigarette in an aluminum ashtray bedside. He flicks the sheet from his body. In a blue hospital gown he floats from the bed. He moves around in the air, like pushing air. He laughs with his full body and the call echoes the distance of the room.

She dizzies. Closes her eyes.

“Do you know who we’re waiting for?” Ed says.

She feels a dry tingle on her arm, which then tickles the length of her. Rich soil and river. Close to the face. Other sounds travel, almost familiar. Crystal feels a loosening in front of her. On the verge of a sound she almost knows…

A ringing. Insistent. The hard fibers of the couch in her face. Her old belling landline.

Crystal kicks off the smelly blanket. She struggles to sit up. The trailer is a freezing metal box. The carpet too close, too dirty. Grainy dawn light around the window’s curtain. Her phone keeps ringing.

The heater has quit.

She moves stiffly to her bags. She finds her phone.

_Amy_

_Ship frigging piss ship_

She can’t, but she has to. She lurches into the phone. “Oh hey, Amy,” she says. Her voice a dry scratching. She tries to clear her throat. “I’m sorry; I couldn’t find my phone for a second…”

“Where have you been?” Amy demands.

“What do you mean?” Her breath condenses in the cold trailer.
“We’ve been trying to call you all night.”

Crystal shakes her head. “I never got a call…”

The Worst says to somebody else, “It’s her.” Then to Crystal she says, “Fucking Josh and Angle got in a massive fucking wreck on the freeway last night. They were driving our truck.”

Her body numbs. “Josh and Henry?”

“The two fucking P.A.s”

She lives only in her tight throat. “What happened to them?”

“They crashed through a divider and into oncoming traffic on the fucking 101.”

No, no. “Where are they?”

“They’re dead. Them and bunch others.”

No, “No…”

“Tell me about it. It’s a goddamn nightmare for the show.”

Crystal collapses in the recliner.

There are voices in the room with Amy, hectic activity.

“Crystal, what I needed to tell you right now is that all these people need to talk to you.”

“What?”

“They need to ask you about your schedules.”

“What schedules?”

“The production schedules. It’s about the hours Josh and Eddie were working, how long and stuff, their turnaround times, all that crap.”

_Your_ schedules. She begins to understand what’s happening. “But I don’t have anything to do with those schedules.”

“You made the schedules, Crystal.”
“No. Those are the show’s. I just did the show’s schedules.”

“Right. And now you need to talk to these guys about it.”

She would strike Amy down. “No!”

“Crystal, calm the fuck down. We’re all in this together.”

“I’m not talking to fucking nobody. Those aren’t my goddamn schedules.”

“Listen, me and Michelson and Freddie have been talking it over. All you need to do is just go into those schedules and change everything a little bit. Move the hours around and everything will be fine.”

Crystal can see every call sheet in her head. She knows every space, name, figure, time, and awful turnaround.

“I’m in Missouri.”

“I know.”

Crystal careens to the window curtain and peeks outside. Hard-packed ice grips every surface of the trailer park. Low, dark clouds wall the sky.

“Just fix the schedules and send them back to us as soon as possible,” Amy says.

“I can’t.”

Amy pauses. A coiled presence. “What do you mean?”

Crystal stumbles to the card table. Ed’s chair groans as she sits. Two empty folders before her: *Hot Tub Baby Machine* and *The Weightless Machine*.

“I mean I won’t do it.”

Amy explodes: “Jesus Fucking Christ, Kermit, just get on your goddamn laptop real quick and change the fucking call-sheets. Change the fucking time-cards and schedules.”

*The Big Dang* is annihilation.
Amy continues, quieter. “Look, we’re not even union, it’s not even illegal. It just looks really bad. Think of it like this: the hours will all still be what everybody really worked but you’re just taking out the extra safety hours we built in. The two or three or four safety hours every day.”

_Safety hours._ No such thing ever existed. If they had, she would have gladly given them. Michelson-Katz Productions and _Celebrity Teenager_, like most of the new non-union reality-TV productions, pay no heed to workplace rules. This is why many—like Second AD Tanya—have left the business. Those who remain take the reality gigs because there’s little other production work.

Amy’s words are slow and purposeful. “I think if you just do that you won’t need to talk to anyone.”

Amy’s talking about six months of daily paperwork. A mountain of documents.

Crystal tries to turn the heat on but nothing happens. “Amy, the task you propose is impossible.”

“No, it’s very possible, Crystal. Very possible. Very easy. Just make sure all the turnaround times look good. And the weekly totals and stuff.”

***

She gets off the phone with Amy and checks her messages. Amy hadn’t called—Crystal knows she’d been fired. But Josh and Henry had called and sent texts all day and night, questions about everything, right up to several hours ago when Josh texted: “We made it! Park is shot. Day wrapped. Driving back to office.”

Hand held to mouth, Crystal lurches for the bathroom. Puke pushes past her fingers before she reaches the toilet. She vomits across the floor and then into the stained bowl, dark
matter and clumps piling in the shallow water. Black soda water and chocolate and cheeseburger and fries; blood and yellow bile; god knows.

Spent, she slumps against the plastic toilet. Wipes her hand across wet lips, and wipes that on her flannel. She flushes the toilet but the lazy water pressure leaves her puke in the bowl. She flushes again. The toilet’s brown walls move under agitated water, but still puke remains.

***

She tries the heater again. The unit will not start. She ties her furry ear flaps tightly under her chin.

She digs in Ed’s dresser drawers. 5-XL t-shirts stained in paint and worse. Shredded socks. Blasted underwear. Then she finds a drawer of thermals. She pulls a tent-like pair of leggings and does not inspect them too closely. Sitting on the bed she grunts out of her slacks, and then dons the long underwear. Then another pair, and over that her slacks. She takes off her boots and puts on several layers of socks.

In Ed’s closet she finds a heavy work coat covered in spots, sprays, and streaks of house paint. It squeezes over her flannels, and she looks like a puffy Pollack. In the coat’s torn pocket is a crushed blue and white pack of Basix—Ed’s generics—two bent cigarettes left.

She stretches her arms and legs, feels her layers conform to one another. She can barely move, but she is a warm, self-contained fugitive.

_The murderer hunkered down in a trailer in rural Missouri._

She sees something under the edge of Ed’s bed. With difficulty she kneels down and finds several orange pill bottles.
*Oxycontin.* Prescribed to *Edward Lyle Presser.* Piss ship. Folks call the pharmaceutical opiate “hillbilly heroin.” It’s marketed as “a pain killer.” For many its become a basic element of the food pyramid.

But at least the DEA busted him for weed.

All of the bottles are empty.

Is this how he did it? It’s frigging easy to overdose on pills and liquor. It’s the American way.

Crystal pockets the evidence.

In the kitchen she searches the cabinets. She opens one door hanging by a single hinge and several dark stains skitter quickly. Crystal slams the door and it falls from the cabinet, crashing to the counter and causing more small stains to scatter and disappear behind cracks. She shudders. Roaches. Roommates. Accomplices.

The coffee maker hasn’t been cleaned since, well, ever. The pot’s opaque with grime. She fills the basin with water, and sets black oil to brew.

She goes to the fridge and freezes.

The photograph of Fret of Ed. She takes it from the fridge and studies it. They’ve just finished playing music. Their fat folds are slick and shiny with sweat.

Their smiles are electric. Their eyes bright. They seem to rise from the photograph. Possessing some kind of enigmatic afterglow they beam at the photographer. Today in photographs we seem to project quickly, and only at the camera as object, which stands in for the self. But in older photographs the aura seems to belong just as much to the off-camera photographer. One can see so much in the eyes of the photographed; their reaction to the photographing friend. A shared mortal moment. A love.
Mom must have taken this photograph. The orange timecode of another era’s camera reads 80289.

Only weeks before Fret’s death.

Fret smells like sweat. Like stressed armpits. He smells like something else Crystal can’t name, something she smells when pressed to her self. She does this now; presses her palm tightly to her nose and mouth, inhaling the smell of her.

She notices something written on the back of the photograph:

*There is a problem and the universe is trying to work itself out.*

She’s pinned to the kitchen floor’s peeling linoleum but feels an abyss around the trailer.

*There is a problem and the universe is trying to work itself out.*

Where has she heard that?

Written cursive in a fading blue ink. Not Ed’s handwriting.

Coffee in hand, she sits at the card table. She opens her laptop. The thing hums and glows. She grits her teeth. Then the desktop image, a favorite photograph: grainy Nina Simone, her eyes wet and pointed over the piano, her mouth articulate and purposeful. Nina not conscious of camera or performance because she has work to do.

It must feel so good to sing. To truly sing.

To sound.

She opens the *Production* folder and then opens the *Call Sheets* folder. Six months of reality-TV call sheets and schedules. She opens *Week 1* and sees a cascade of files. Piss ship.

What were Josh and Henry’s final thoughts as they lost control? The scene is a nightmare that requires no conflict or set dressing. What does one see or think or become when the bottom disappears? The bottom is illusory but we take it for granted. We step heavily over it our entire
life. And then one day its zooming toward our eyes faster than anything has ever happened. She feels nausea rise. She sucks coffee. Chews a scabbed fingertip.

She needs to find a lawyer, right? How does one find a lawyer? How does one explain things to a lawyer? How does one pay a lawyer?

How does one explain anything to anybody?

Outside, up a few trailers, she hears a car trying to start. Chug, chug, chug, die. Chug, chug, chug, die. Without looking she can see the dirty exhaust in the cold morning. Chug, chug, chug, die. They are not going anywhere.

If she could remain iced-in here at the back of Crest View might that solve her problems? “Smithy, will you call the National Weather Service and get us a Cataclysm for this scene? Thanks.”

She opens the call-sheet for Week One, Day One. At the beginning of the season she was one of two P.A.s, the other a dude named Jason who left after two days, saying he just got the financing for his first indie. “How?” Crystal asked. “My dad,” he shrugged. She asked him what the movie was about and he said, “It’s about a guy struggling to make his first movie.”

That first day of production on Celebrity Teenager Crystal worked sixteen hours with no break and no meal. The first episode was called “Just Say Whoa.” Its set-up involved Stacey Wilde at drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Stacey ends up teaching the Counselors a thing or two about Recovery, and the episode ends with everyone singing “Baby Dynamo.”

Crystal almost walked that first day too. But at one moment between takes and tasks she had five seconds to pause, clipboard in hand and headset in ear, cringing for First A.D. Amy’s next directive. She stood at the edge of the Rehab Set, watching Freddie and Camera stage
“Movie Magic.” Standing thus, a presence materialized next to her. It was Stacey Wilde, smoking a cigarette even though nobody was supposed to smoke on set.

Stacey smirked. She shook her thick, dark-red hair. “Kind of a shit-show, right?”

Crystal looked around. Apparently Stacey was talking to her.

“I think it’ll be pretty good,” Crystal the team-player said quietly.

“Yeah?” Skeptical Stacey looked at Crystal. Her freckles were so vivid—countless maroon continents on a light brown sea. She was smaller in person than Crystal had guessed. Crystal could easily lift and hold her. But her voice was basso and outsized, and she had a huge head.

Crystal sensed a window and went for it. “What did P.T. Barnum call it? The Greatest Shit-Show on Earth?”

Stacey laughed. A rich, expansive laugh. Like Ed’s now that she thinks about it—a full-bodied laugh sounding from the hot guts.

Dang, Crystal loved it. She loves to make somebody laugh. Especially that laugh. Stacey.

“That’s right. That’s right,” Stacey said. “Are you one of the producers?”

Heat in Crystal’s neck. She sucked and held her heavy gut.

“I’m a production assistant.”

Amy, The First, had stressed one of P.A. Crystal’s biggest jobs was to make sure nobody smoked on set, and she could almost hear herself tell Stacey to put it out. But she didn’t.

Stacey stood right next to Crystal. Breathing. Her red hair ready to move every which way. She wore a tank top and jean shorts, and smelled unwashed. She smelled strong. Like rich, wet soil.

“What’s your name?” she asked.
“Crystal.”

“Crystal? Did you change it?”

“No. My dad gave it to me.”

She’d always been embarrassed by her name, for reasons she could not precisely name. Like everything else, it had become the intellectual property of her peers, who thought it a stupid, weird-sounding word.

“Cool,” Stacey said. “It’s a great name.” She blew smoke toward the set, and shook her huge head. They were quiet. In Crystal’s peripheral vision Stacey’s face kept changing—the dark freckles were frustrated, shifting continents.

“How’d this happen?” Stacey said.

“What?”

Stacey raised her hands, twisted her lips, started to speak and stopped. She shook her head again.

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Crystal saw tiny Stacey on Show It To Them! making alien sounds. Long, resonant calls. Nobody could describe it but everybody listened; people smiled and cried and listened. It was weird to be near this Stacey now—a mediated object become mortal, familiar but still foreign. Smelling like river soil.

Crystal wished to reach out and touch her freckled shoulder.

She should say something to Stacey, but what?

Stacey said, “Well, I guess you guys will let me know when the Shit-Show’s ready?” She looked at Crystal. Her eyes were wet, black tunnels.
Crystal nodded. She tried a smile but imagined it looked like a grimace. As a child she’d learned to smile with closed mouth to conceal her crooked teeth. Blowing smoke, Stacey turned and headed for her trailer, by far the most expensive thing on set. “Well, C, I need to do a little rehab before the rehab if you know what I mean.”

She called Crystal “C.”

Now, sitting in Ed’s freezing trailer, Crystal can see her breath puff and disperse. Open-mouthed, she exhales, and examines the brief cloud. She grabs the heavy denim blanket from the couch and wraps her self. She is a mountain before her laptop, studying call-sheets and tombstones.

The task Amy and production demanded would take countless hours. Days if not weeks. But she could do it.

Refigure the figures. And the figures.

She opens her email. She ignores the new block of emails, and searches “Ed Presser.” She thinks she remembers the emails he sent—she can almost see the attached files?—but she can find nothing now. She even recalls his unfortunate email address: epress69@rabbitnet.missouri.net. That search too produces nothing. Finally, she scrolls manually through her emails of the past few years. Nothing from Ed. Where did they go? Did she delete them?

What “stories” could he have sent her? Paranoid rants about her dad and government? Terrible jokes?

She shuts the computer and pushes it away.

She places materials in a map on the card table: The Weightless Machine and Hot Tub Baby Machine folders; The Last Christmas manuscript; Stacey’s Rolling Stone; the photograph
of the sweaty Traveling Hippos. She finds a pencil nub chewed to hell by Ed’s teeth. When was the last time she used pencil? Crystal tears a clean page from her notebook, sets it on *The Weightless Machine*, and writes:

*There is a problem and the universe is trying to work its self out.*


Then she writes:

*The Greatest Shit-Show On Ear…*

But the telephone rings and her pencil breaks, jagging.
9. Benjie Steps In It

She lies beached on the cold, damp living room carpet. A body going bad, spreading. Emitting sink. Later, locals will arrive to gawk and chuckle, stuff a cigar in her blowhole, and carve names in her side.

She can hear the surf behind her head, a watery itch.

The curtain has been sealed with blue painters tape at its edges but daylight swells tiny cracks and holes in the fabric. How to fill them?

Tiny dark shadows flit the walls and ceiling, stop to consider her, and then hurry along again. She too moves countless skittering legs.

A rumble growls, coming closer. The crunch of gravel. Goddangit; a car. Outside. The trailer. Her feelers bristle and reach. She struggles to right, to roll over. Get up, get up, Big Dang.

Already a car door slams. Heavy steps clump the front stairs. Shoes scrape ice and snow at the stoop. The front door shrieks open. “Crystal?”

Mom flips on the light and screams.

Crystal’s eyes clench, she waves her arms. “Turn off the light!”

Mom rushes to her. “What happened?”

“Help me up. It’s just my stupid back.”

“Oh my god, Crystal I thought…” Mom doesn’t finish.

“Help me up,” Crystal growls.

Mom takes Crystal’s puffy paws and struggles her to a sitting position.

“What happened?” Mom’s face a wrinkled oval of concern.

“Nothing. I was just trying to stretch my back out and fell asleep.”

“On the floor?”
Crystal goes to her knees. She breathes heavily. Using the couch, she stands. The trailer shrinks around her.

Mom’s hands flutter to Crystal’s cheeks. “What’s wrong?”

Crystal bats her hands away. “What do you mean?”

“You’re awful flush, do you have a fever?” Mom pushes a palm at Crystal’s forehead and again she waves it off.

“Why is it freezing in here? Why is it so dark? Crystal, why did you do this to the windows?”

Crystal labors air out her nose. She turns off the frigging light and then sits at the card table. She closes all her folders and notes. “What are you, the cops? The stupid heater quit working. And I like it dark when I write.”

Mom makes her that’s-weird face. They both see the empty jar of peanut butter on the table with spoon sticking out, surrounded by emptied soda cans. Crystal has peanut butter stains on her shirt. She rubs her mouth and chin and feels the greasy remnants of peanut butter there too. Her mouth is dry. Her head hurts.

“Is that all you’ve had to eat?” Mom says.

“I’m on a diet.”

Mom’s face scrunches. “You should maybe think about a shower, babe? It’ll make you feel be…”

“Stop.” Through the still open door Crystal squints at wintry Crest View. The neighbor trailers icy and mute in late daylight. “Shut the frigging door already.”

Mom looks outside. “Well, I thought Benjie was coming in.” She closes the door. “Benjie’s got a big problem, Crystal.”
Such is the thesis of an impossible work. “Frigging god,” she says. “What now?”

“They made some video of him.”

Outside the car door slams. Crystal has nowhere to go. Heavy steps plod the stairs. Bald Benjie enters, red-faced and agitated in a big puffy coat. He shakes his phone.

“Do you have reception?” he asks Crystal.

Crystal shoots air out her nose. “I don’t know. Why?”

“I keep almost getting it and losing it.”

Benjie’s eyes blink pink and raw. He’s been crying. He was always the crying uncle, the crying little brother.

“What’s wrong?”

He raises his phone forlornly. “Crystal, they made me a virus video.”

She translates. “Gil Tannen-Sterling?”

“Well, no, not Gil. The show.”

“Benjie, it’s the same dang thing.”

“Well. Whatever.” Benjie holds his phone before Crystal like it’s proof. Fresh tears well in his eyes. “They made me the racist and now it’s all over everywhere.”

Her chewed fingernails grip the card table. She moves her left forefinger to her mouth and chews anew.

“You want to watch it?” Benjie says.

No.

Mom has returned from the bathroom with a wet rag. Ever the caregiver she tries to clean Crystal’s face, but Crystal pushes her away. “Mom, seriously, leave me alone.”

“It’ll make you feel better.”
“No it won’t.”

Benjie sits opposite Crystal. He hunches over his phone, tapping and jabbing. “You won’t believe what everybody’s saying about me.”

Crystal swipes the rag from Mom’s insistent hand. She wipes her face. The warm wetness does feel good. She scrubs her face with it.

“There you go,” Mom smiles.

“Mom, please, I’m not one of your frigging invalids.”

Mom recoils. “Crystal, that’s terrible.”

Benjie pokes his phone. “Here it is.”

Whether Crystal wishes it or not Benjie sets his cracked, finger-smeared phone before her. He plays a video called “Benjie Steps In It” on the Fit To Pitch website.

In a montage-about-town sequence Benjie’s seen walking Venice Beach boulevard. “I don’t know. It’s all pretty crazy,” Benjie drawls in voice-over. “I mean, yeah, there’s lots of stuff out here I ain’t used to in podunk Missouri.” Two men roller-blade by holding hands. Cut to Benjie’s surprised face. Crystal sees immediately that the two shots don’t match; they were only edited together. Then a group of young black men are seen selling CDs of their music. Cut to Benjie (stoned, she can tell) looking over his shoulder—again in a different time and place—making an agitated, uncomfortable look. In voice-over he’s heard to say, “It’s kind of scary.” Cut to the kitchen/dining room of the Fit To Pitch Venice house. The pitchers hang out: Benjie, again stoned, smiles rubbery at Dorene Smith, and says, “You know, I always heard that you all can’t swim.”

“Excuse me?” Dorene says over her coffee.
“I mean, it’s just a thing people say, that black people can’t swim. But you all can swim then?”

Dorene rolls her eyes and searches for the right words. “Benjie, you little [censor].” Crystal sees “you little dummy” but the show’s censor makes it worse. And Dorene seems more baffled and amused than angry.

Cut to Ramses Michael Patrick shaking his head and covering his eyes. Cut to Benjie backing up with his hands out, trying to explain himself. He bumps into Brad Gulliver, who spills coffee on his slacks. Red-faced Brad barks at Benjie, “Hey, watch it [censor]!” Crystal sees “Hey, watch it, Partner!” but again the censor makes worse.

The video ends on a freeze-frame of Benjie cowering.

Crystal closes her eyes. In every moment the nightmare attains new nuance.

“I don’t understand,” Benjie pleads. “I’m not the racist.” He punches buttons on his phone. “And all these people on the message boards are just having a dang field day about me. I keep trying to explain myself to everybody but it just gets worse and worse.”

Indeed, below the video comments cascade.

“Look, Benjie…” Crystal says. Where to start? “Firstly, most of these comments are not real persons.”

“What do you mean?” Benjie says quietly. “Saboteurs?”

A catch in Crystal’s mind. Something familiar.

“But, like, here,” Benjie points at the screen. “This guy is calling me ‘KKCray.’ What does that mean?”

Crystal chuckles. “That’s actually kind of funny.”

“Crystal, I hate the KKK!”
“No. I know, look…”

“And this chick right here says to me, ‘Do you all know how to slim?’”

Crystal laughs high and hard. “That’s actually hilarious.”

Benjie pouts and types. “I don’t understand any of this.”

In the kitchen, Mom watches nervously. “It’s like they want to make everything racist today.”

Crystal clenches. “Mom…” Where to start? “Our society is racist. And today, quite necessarily, folks are trying to have honest, productive conversations about it.”

“Well, they don’t need to put me in the conversation,” Benjie says.

“Stop saying they,” Crystal demands of them both.

Mom shrugs. “Well, I don’t even know what they want to be called anymore…”

Crystal rises, and throws the rag on the table. “Please. Stop. You don’t know how to talk about this and you’re making everything worse with your manufactured indignation. White Supremacy is real and complex and all around us…”

“White supremacy?” Mom says. “Crystal, we’re just poor folks who ain’t got nothing…”

“Right, right, but listen. All class disadvantages considered, you still grew up white in the twentieth century United States and you never had to think about a whole range of very different life experiences and limitations. That’s white privilege, and we need to be able to listen to people relate their real experiences.”

Crystal paces the living room. Listen to her. She hears and sees her lecture.

Mom stares at the kitchen floor. Nervously she says, “I never had any privilege.”

Crystal heaves exasperation. She starts to speak but stops. It never gets anywhere.
“I’m trying to listen,” Benjie says at his phone. “It’s why I even asked Dorene the question to begin with.”

“Benjie, the whole thing in that dumb video—besides your stupid, racist question—was you saying ‘you all’ like there’s some non-normal group outside of and opposed to normal you and your normal group.”

Benjie shrugs. He pushes his face toward the tiny bright cave of his phone. “Sorry. Dang. I don’t know how to say things.”

Crystal groans loudly. She sits at the table, Ed’s chair bowing below her. “But it’s more than that…”

“And Gil won’t get back to me or anything,” Benjie says. “I’ve been trying to call him all day to fix this video and get rid of these comments but I can’t get ahold of anyone at the show.”

“Benjie, this is what they do.”

“Who?”

It’s a good question. There is no answer. Crystal sweeps her hand. “Everyone,” she says. “Everything.”

Benjie shouts suddenly at his phone. “What? No!”

Crystal braces. “What?”

“Benjie, just turn that stupid thing off,” Mom says, “You’re going to drive yourself nuts.”

“Somebody changed my FaceTorque page!” Benjie says.

Crystal bends to look. “What do you mean?”

“Somebody changed my profile photo to a stupid Confederate flag!”

Fear bristles Crystal’s skin; dread behind and above her. “Really?”

“Yes, look! I didn’t do this. I would never do this.”
Benjie’s FaceTorque profile does feature a Confederate flag image beside a “status update” that reads, “Just stickin’ up for my heritage too.” Below this inanity, countless “comments” are cascading.

“Delete it and change your password,” Crystal says. “Right now.”

“How do you do that?” Benjie says.

“Delete the frigging account, Benjie. Get out of there.”

Benjie makes a shocked face. “What? Why? I need this to talk to everybody.”

***

Crystal follows Benjie gingerly down the trailer’s icy steps. One hand grips the lumber rail while the other braces against the cold metal wall. Dark clouds crowd the earth. The day she missed already wanes; gray light seeps into hardscrabble ground, into sagging trailers, cars, and trees.

“Careful,” Mom advises from the door.

Each breath bunches before them and disappears as they circle the trailer. Their steps crunch mud furrows and ridges crisp with frost.

“Sonny had to do this all the time,” Benjie says over his shoulder. “It actually don’t make any sense why they made these things this way.”

The back lot slopes down to the creek—a dry, disheveled rock path among crooked trees. Ed’s old country property featured a running creek where she loved to go by her self and play. She caught and released crawdads. She watched minnows make emergent patterns. She made ripples. Here at Crest View’s creek she could catch rusted cans, car tires, or a broken lawn chair.

Right behind the trailer squats a new monstrosity. Some kind of large wooden box. Oh, dear god—an old hot-tub.
“Where’d this come from?”

“I don’t know,” Benjie says. “Sonny got it somewhere. He was going to get it hooked up but it’s just been sitting here.”

*Hot Tub Baby Machine.* So this is where it happens; the dark seat of anxious Jim Drummond’s heroic powers. A radioactive hot tub bites his gross pecker; a top secret government hot tub showers him with gamma rays; a criminal hot tub kills his dad in a dark alley. She considers lifting its warped plywood cover but keeps a distance.

Benjie breaks ice off a metal box mounted to the trailer. “This is it right here, Crystalbear.” He pries open the box and flips a breaker switch. The heating unit complains, grinds, and then rattles into life. The whole structure shakes with it. Benjie grins at Crystal. “Houston, it looks like we’ve got a movie.”

Her face pinches in the cold, her eyes watering and hardening at the same time. She scans the area to make sure no one watches or listens. They’re alone out here in the dark-blue dusk. She fishes the Basix pack from her coat pocket and offers it to Benjie. “Ed had these.”

“Whoa.” Benjie’s eyes widen. “Thanks.” He pulls a lighter from his jeans and lights the cigarette. He takes a deep drag and exhales. “Dang, I needed that.”

Crystal speaks quietly, “Tell me about Gil Tannen-Sterling.”

“What do you mean?”

“Does he know about Ed?”

“Well, yeah, I guess he does.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, he asks us about everything.”

“Recording?”
“Huh?”

“Gil videotapes you when asking this stuff?”

“Well, yeah, he records everything all the time.”

Frig jesus. “What exactly did he ask about Ed?”

Benjie smokes his bent cigarette. “Nothing really. Just that he’s my brother. But Crystal, I’m the one that got picked for the show.”

The wind picks up, a cold front from the north. A few winter birds skitter the creekside trees.

“Did you tell him about The Weightless Machine?”

“The what?”

“Ed’s story?”

“I’ve never even heard of it.”

“It’s frigging Ramses’s pitch on the show.”

“Oh yeah. Right. The people in boxes.” Benjie squints. “That little dick’s some kind of know-it-all and his movie doesn’t make any sense.”

No doubt, but, “It’s one of Ed’s stories.”

“Huh?”

“Ed had a story called The Weightless Machine.”

“Really?”

A sudden voice startles them both. “Crystal, that’s just one of your dad and Ed’s old jokes.”

Crystal turns. Mom’s worried face fills the small bathroom window. “God, Mom, what are you doing? Have you been spying the whole time?”
“I wasn’t spying. I just got worried about you all out there.”

Crystal blows air out her nose. “So what’s the dang Weightless Machine?”

Mom says, “Your dad and Ed used to try to come up ideas they could sell, and that was one of their favorites. It was some kind of machine people could buy and float around in while they lost weight. Fret said nobody would ever leave it.”

“Right, right,” Benjie smiles. “I remember. They had a Traveling Hippos song about it. They called it the perfect product because everybody can see everybody else at the same time and everybody thinks they’re losing weight but only because everybody is gaining weight. Something like that.” Benjie sucks his cigarette to the butt. “But Crystal that’s not the same thing as Ramses and Gil. It’s just coincidence.”

Benjie flicks his cigarette butt. It lands grossly on the snowpack and hisses.

Coincidence? Crystal doesn’t mention The Last Christmas.

She says to Benjie, “What happens next on the show?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what happens next on Fit To Pitch, the television show you’ve been filming?”

“Well…” Benjie chews a chapped lip. “The next episode airs tomorrow night.”

“And what happens?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You lived it.”

“Well. Yeah. But that’s the weird thing, Crystal. It’s all confusing. It’s like I’m watching the show to see what happens next.”

Mom moves from the bathroom window. “Somebody’s phone’s ringing in here…”

Benjie bats at his pockets. Digs his phone out. His eyes fall. Not him.
“Don’t answer it!” Crystal yells at the trailer. “Mom, don’t answer the frigging phone! Mom?”

Silence. With each breath or movement the snowpack below her crunches. Night gathers in dark stains at the bottom of everything. The wind lifts leafless branches and creek trash.

Mom returns to the window. “It’s for you, Crystal. It’s somebody named Amy? From Celebrity Teenager?”

Crystal shakes her head rapidly. She moves her lips, trying to sound, but nothing comes out.
10. HTBM: Piss Ship

Global media named them “The Miracles of Beaverton,” as well as “The Drummond Septuplets,” which wasn’t even frigging accurate given the siblings had five different mothers. The improbable conception, and subsequent offspring, of Beaverton, Alabama’s Tim Drummond and his wives Dorene, Gwen, Dessie, Llorona, and Magdalena beat out numerous wars and environmental disasters to become Earth’s biggest news story in 2017. But of course for Bruce Willis, a heavyset, long-suffering classmate of Tim and the girls—one of whom, Gwen, she may have loved—it was all just one more goddang reason to graduate high school get as far away from Beaverton as she could.

Willis moved to Los Angeles and, after numerous failed attempts to establish a career, found her self working as private investigator. Turns out she had a knack to crack tough cases involving underserved clients with nowhere else to go. But Willis also had nowhere else to go; a loner estranged from family and home, she drank heavily and found a taste for the sweet oblivion of narcotics. For many years she tried to ignore what would become her biggest case: the Drummonds, PRODUCTION, and The Ship.

Very soon after their miraculous birth, the Drummond Septuplets became synonymous with a product then being beta tested: The Weightless Machine, a kind of combination virtual reality device and isolation tank. The mysterious, multinational company behind The Weightless Machine branded itself PRODUCTION. The tagline for its keystone product was “Your Emergence.” When PRODUCTION brought The Weightless Machine to market consumer response was off the charts. Everyone wanted one, whether they could afford it or not. In a time when many humans on planet Earth couldn’t purchase basic services, much less healthcare or
homes, The Weightless Machine quickly became “The product that precluded other products.” All one had to do was “Buy the Machine, Climb In, and Feed.”

PRODUCTION had a long range plan. Representatives of the company traveled to Beaverton, Alabama and signed the newborn Drummond children to an 18-year contract. Then they partnered with the underfunded International Space Conglomerate in a profit-sharing agreement that allowed PRODUCTION unlimited access to an empty, low-orbit space station circling the Earth. Newly christened The Ship, this space station became home to The Drummond Septuplets. The Ship was also the name of the entertainment feed, which came free with purchase of The Weightless Machine. The Ship, featuring The Drummond Septuplets, became the most popular feed on Earth.

Onboard cameras and microphones captured their every living moment, and back on Earth, first millions and then billions of feeders climbed into The Weightless Machine and received The Ship, a feed that ran every day all day.

The Drummond Septuplets, by all appearances, believed themselves alone on their Ship, the only seven of their kind, living creatures in a sentient space which provided directives and supplied their every need. Four girls and three boys oblivious to their observation, they created among themselves a very strange family. The Drummonds spent many hours a day “swimming” in the zero gravity amphitheaters of their ship, and as they swam they sang in a language of their making. Their “songs” were repetitious, multifrequency vocalizations—soundings not unlike whales and other water mammals: wails, moans, whistles, clicks, cries and exhalations. Earth’s feeding audience especially loved these segments called “Swims.” When all seven of the Drummonds came together swimming and sounding they were called “The Grand Armada.” In the zero gravity amphitheaters the young, naked Drummonds floated and moved hypnotically,
brushing over and under one another, calling and responding. Their songs repeated phrases and structures but also changed over time, each of the children continuously adding new parts that became part of the collective song.

The de facto leader of the undulating Drummonds was the red-haired one, Stacey, daughter of Gwen Drummond. Stacey’s thick long hair moved on its own, a bright sensory organ. Mysteriously, all the Drummonds had solid black eyes, and Stacey’s, when she swam near a camera and gazed at what she didn’t know was a planet of wet-mouthed feeders, were the deepest and blackest.

Save for a few deeply regretful lapses where she slipped into a Machine to see Stacey, growing yearly into Gwen’s double, Bruce Willis was one of the few who avoided Weightless Machines and The Ship, and not just because of her personal involvement with the Drummond phenomena. Something about PRODUCTION and the growing ubiquity of their Weightless Machine business left an awful taste in her mouth. A taste that for many years, unfortunately, was easy enough to wash away.

The Ship became both more popular and more divisive as the Drummond Septuplets matured. Some believed the show an abomination, others wanted to do nothing but slip into a Weightless Machine to gaze at the Drummonds and swim with the Drummonds and listen to the Drummonds. Meanwhile, turmoil escalated across planet Earth. Class divisions were extreme and wars over water and food resources became commonplace. More, people with power and money began to disappear from the planet. A popular myth developed that quantum experiments had accessed another universe and that Earth’s elite had taken refuge in this other universe while continuing to maintain strict control of Earth and its resources. Thus developed the global
concept of Floaters and Grounders. Floaters had left the Grounders to a brutal, Earthbound existence, and the large majority of Grounders had become innocuous feed-receivers.

Some Grounders believed the primary method of social control was PRODUCTION and its many Weightless Machine feeds. They believed that The Ship had been the first machination of the unseen but all-powerful Floaters. While an estimated one of every two Grounders on planet Earth couldn’t not watch The Ship from The Weightless Machine, others splintered into groups dedicated to ending The Ship’s run. These competing factions became increasingly violent in their drive to disrupt what they believed was a massive Floater/PRODUCTION conspiracy to control Grounders. But the Anti-Floater Grounder action groups were themselves deeply divided. Each believed the others were agents of the complex, obscure PRODUCTION.

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L.A.’s broke-down private investigator Bruce Willis is sympathetic with many anti-PRODUCTION sentiments, but she abhors both violence and groups. She’s prefers to keep to her self, her work, and her own woeful habits. However, in the year 2033 she receives a confusing message from Gwen Drummond in Beaverton, Alabama. The call prompts Willis to go home for the first time in 18 years. While confronting her past and a family of troubled Weightless Machine addicts, she stumbles into a plot by an anti-PRODUCTION group who call themselves The Last Christmas. Radical Baptist Extremists, The Last Christmas believe The Ship is an abomination, and they target father Tim Drummond, who now holds lifetime tenure as Beaverton’s Mayor and High School Basketball Coach. The Last Christmas’s plan involves bombing a high school basketball championship game between the Beaverton Indians and Buckeye Indians.
Exhausted, frayed Willis thinks she’s looking for lost love Gwen Drummond, but in the 18th year of the Drummond Septuplets’ contract, The Last Christmas bomb plot turns out to be part of something much bigger: an impending global apocalypse. Can Willis and Injun Joe, the Beaverton High School mascot in whom she finds an unlikely ally, save her family, save Gwen, save Beaverton, and save the Earth?
11. Gil T-S

She is a hard bed of whale bones petrified on what used to be the shore of a ocean. The painters tape has started to peel, and a harsh light intrudes. Just outside the trailer shapes move. Hectic activity. Behind the trailer she hears a familiar voice say, “Beautiful, beautiful. The hot tub in the flesh.” She does not want to figure it or know it. She pushes away from the voice, wraps her blanket tightly, and presses into her couch’s corner. The nest of her. The smell of her unwashed. A fruit past ripe but sweet. She nested perfectly on Fret’s chest. His arm holding her. “Crystal?” She presses her palm to her face. Smells the smell of her. One crosses the universe searching for one who smells the same. To move closely and inhale. “You made it,” she says. “A great weight lifting. The front of her giving way.” I did not think you would ever make it. “Two sleeping would be one sleeping. Bodies warm and entangled. No beginning no end. Sea creatures. ”Crystal?” Overhead the fan slowly turns. Long shadows fingers feeling the room. The pull chord clicks rhythmically. The top of the fan must be dirty. She should get up there and clean it, test the fan’s strength…

“Crystal?”

Someone tapping the trailer door, knuckle to metal.

“Crystal?”

Somebody’s at the door.

Somebody tries to turn the door knob, but it is locked. Crystal sits quickly from the couch. Blood throbs in her face. She feels puffy, swollen. The furry hat crooked on her head. Her clothes bunched at her crooks.

“Crystal? Hey you in there?” Piss ship, it’s Benjie. “It’s Benjie.”

A bellow rises from her. “What?”
The knocking stops. She pictures him step from the door, his face doughy confusion.

“Uh, hey,” he says, “You’re never going to believe this but I got the crew out here and they were just going to shoot some stuff…”

Inside Crystal continents collide and crack. Water boils from her depths. She stands from the couch and the trailer shifts below her, sliding against the earth. She steadies, then crosses to the door. Fumbles the lock. Rips the door open with a terrible shriek.

“Whoa,” Benjie says. He blinks in the excruciating sunlight. “I’m sorry—was you still sleeping?”

A long white passenger van sits parked before the trailer. It is the nexus of hectic activity: numerous men unload production gear, the hard travel cases of digital cameras and microphones. The crew’s actions are crisp and efficient. Their sun-glassed faces are scruffy. Production professionals clad in North Face gear, like if they weren’t here they would be scaling a tower of rocks. A couple of the them notice her squinting from the trailer door. They look at each other briefly—some kind of shared private joke—but keep working.

A young kid in a wool cap sits in the van’s passenger seat, clutching a stuffed clipboard. He squints at her and she feels a disconcerting shock. The peach fuzz goatee, the confused-about-everything look—it’s frigging Josh, her frigging production assistant in the pink flesh.

Her dead production sssistant.

Josh nods curtly at her but then returns his attention to the clipboard. He flips through pages trying to find something.

She cannot breathe. Frigid air squeezes her face. She grips the doorjamb. “Goddangit, Benjie.” Her voice dry and small. “What the frigging frig, man?”

“It’s Fit To Pitch.” Benjie smiles. “Gil brought the crew and came to Silas to shoot me.”
Cold dread. “Gil?”

A tall man in a long black coat strides from behind the trailer. His huge head wears sunglasses and a cowboy hat. A tiny, hunched kid trails behind, scribbling Gil Tannen-Sterling’s directives on a clipboard.

Fear paralyzes her. The kid is frigging Henry, her other dead production assistant.

“That hot tub is perfect,” Gil is saying. “Let’s get a bunch of shots of the tub and the creek. And some shots where we can see the whole trailer park in the background. We’ll shoot Benjie in the hot tub drinking a beer and talking on his phone. And writing.”

“Gil,” Benjie says, “This is Crystal.”

Gil’s face points at her. He breaks into bright white smile. He takes off his sunglasses and climbs the trailer steps, his long-rider coat billowing. He reaches his giant hand toward her.

“Crystal Smith, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. A pleasure. I’m Gil Tannen-Sterling, but please, call me Gil, or GTS, whatever feels natural.”

She doesn’t mean to shake Gil’s hand but her puffy paw is pulled as if by magnet. His hand absorbs hers, firm but soft. Practiced. Then he bends, by God, and kisses the back of her dry hand. Nobody has ever done that before. But in the cold and shock she feels nothing, neither his lips nor her hand. Gil stands erect. He’s pleased. Even two steps below Crystal he towers over her.

He has preempted any action, and she cannot move. Up at the neighboring trailers rumpled folks are coming outside to light cigarettes and stare at the production crew.

“I just woke up,” she says. What does that mean? She can’t think.

“No problemo,” Gil says. “Listen, Crystal, I promise you we’ll stay out of your hair.” He removes his clean cowboy hat off and smiles down at her. “Let me say how terribly, terribly
sorry I am about your Uncle Ed. He was one-of-a-kind. But listen, please don’t worry about a thing, because myself and my crew are here to help.”

Here to help what?

Henry coughs at the bottom of the steps. He flips nervously through his paperwork. Over in the van, perched in the passenger seat, Josh watches closely.

“How about coffee?” Gil says to her. “Francisco, you got those coffees?”

Francisco? Josh jumps from the van with a coffee cup in hand. He hurries to the trailer and lifts the cup to her.


She barely shakes her head. Her hands are distant from her body, but she takes the coffee cup. Hot. Starbucks. Is there a Starbucks in Silas? She sips. Well, yes, delicious. A familiar reward. She drinks again. Immediately she feels her guts gather. Heaviness lifts from her chest and her eyes sharpen. She trains them on Gil Tannen-Sterling who has continued to nod and smile.

“You don’t have a permit to shoot here,” she says.

Gil’s face flicks swiftly from Crystal to Benjie to Henry. “No,” he says. “We have all the necessary permits. Wigman?”


“Silas is thrilled we’re here,” Gil says to her. “I can’t say enough about the support. I already got the whole thing figured out—we’re going to call this episode ‘Missouri’s Secret.’”

Gil claps Benjie’s back, and Benjie wobbles and grins. “Benjie and Ed already signed off on everything,” Gil says.
In the trailer’s dim light Crystal quickly gathers her pages, notes, and materials from the card table. She looks around the living room for anything she might have missed. Benjie peers past the curtain, watching the crew outside.

“You didn’t know they were coming?” Crystal says.

“No, no. Gil called me first thing this morning and said they was already at the airport in Kansas City and driving down.”

Her work in hand, Crystal stomps the dark hallway to Ed’s bedroom. She kneels by the bed and hides everything underneath. She pulls the blankets over the bed. Leaving the bedroom, she slams the door shut with a screech.

“What did he mean about Ed signing off on everything?”

Benjie chips his lip. “I don’t know. I think he just meant it as a mistake or whatever. I’m the one who said he could shoot here.”

“Why here?”

“Well, Gil came out to your mom’s place but then said it would look better for the show or whatever if I lived here at Crest View.”

Crystal pulls her furry hat low over her eyes. She tightens her flannels. “Benjie, you’ve got to get them out of here.”

“Why?”

Where to start? “What about your dang viral video?”

Benjie shrugs. “Well, I asked Gil about that and he told me it was all to build excitement for the show. He said don’t worry about it, and then he showed me some of my fan mail—people
actually love me, Crystal. It’s amazing.” Benjie pulls a rumpled stack of envelopes from his back pocket. “Me and Bill Gulliver are like the most popular ones.”

Right, of course. The two biggest frigging idiots on the show—the outright racist and the unconscious racist. Crystal shoots air out her nose. She looks out the curtain.

At the next trailer the crew films a little boy in short-sleeves pedaling a tricycle on the frost-covered ground, his arms red and goose-pimpled in the cold. Francisco/Josh, who must be the Second A.D., talks to the father, a heavy guy with red jowls and one eye patched. Patch nods while signing what must be the release forms. On Celebrity Teenager Crystal’s had to con the legal consent of many. Farther up the road, Gil in flowing coat stalks the trailer park, pointing at things. Movie Magic. Gil is followed closely by note-taking Wigman/Henry, who must be the First A.D.

“Do you know these kids, Francisco and Frigman?” Crystal says to Benjie.

“Who?”

“Gil’s production assistants—the young guys?”

“Oh. No. He has, like, new dudes working on the show every week.”

“So Gil is, like, Producer and Director and Writer and everything?”

“I guess so.”

“Where’s everybody else on the show?” Crystal’s heavy shoes scuff the carpet as she paces. “Dorene and Bill and Ramses?”

“I don’t know. I guess they’re still in California or whatever. Gil said this would be my episode.”

Blood throbs in Crystal’s neck. “That doesn’t even make any sense. That’s like not even what the show’s about.”

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Crystal grabs the cardboard coffee cup. Empty. “Goddang it!” She throws the cup at the kitchen but without weight it flips and falls to the peeling linoleum.

“I don’t know,” Benjie says hesitantly. He scratches his belly. She can tell he’s gearing up to ask something. “Hey, you ain’t by any chance found any of Sonny’s weed in here have you?”

“You’ve got to be frigging kidding me. No.”

“Anything else? Like, his anxiety pills or whatever?”

“Anxiety pills?” Rage blooms in Crystal. “Guess what, Benjie? I did find them.” Crystal pulls the pill bottles from her flannel pocket. “Empty. He popped them all after your and Gil’s stupid frigging show.”

Benjie’s face shrinks. His lips quiver. “What?”

“Right. Gil Tannen-Sterling murdered your brother and I guess you’re the accomplice.”

Benjie shakes his head, unable to speak. He starts to cry. But she will not stop. “Where’s frigging Mom?”

“She had to take care of her patients today.”

Nobody’s out at the house. New possibilities shape Crystal’s mind.

Benjie wipes his eyes with the damp sleeve of his coat. “Crystal, I don’t understand…”

“Get out of here!” she screams.

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Crystal digs in Ed’s closet. She finds a large Silas Indians duffel bag. His head feather bent, Injun Joe forever bears an era of sporting fun with paralytic grin. Crystal grabs the materials from under the bed and stuffs them in the bag. Then she storms Ed’s office, rips open the filing cabinets, and pulls the other empty folders. Lastly, she turns to Ed’s pile of work junk.
The large tangle of rough rope fits perfectly in her bag.

Crystal screeches out the trailer door and down the steps. Sunlight glints sharply from every frosty surface. Benjie has waddled up to the crew and watches them film two chained dogs humping in a yard. Francisco secures the release of a round woman in bathrobe and curlers.

Crystal opens Ed’s Toyota, tosses her bags in the passenger seat, and squeezes behind the wheel. The cab has a stale smell of spent cigarettes and old fast food, the discarded bags of which pile amid other floorboard junk. She turns the ignition and the truck wheezes and grinds, but won’t start. Piss ship.

Her windows are frosted but in the sideview mirror she can see Gil Tannen-Sterling hurrying down Crest View Lane toward her. Crystal pumps the gas and tries the engine again—a sorrowful chugging, the industrial age’s grungy end, and nothing. Gil runs now, rapidly clearing the distance between them. His coat is a billowing black wing. His mouth is moving at her. Crystal tightens a fist and brutally punches the steering wheel several times; something she’s seen Ed do. She turns the key again and pumps the goddang frigging gas. Chug, chug, chug…and then the engine starts! The exhaust pipe spits a black cloud. Loud music swells, the tape player picking up where Ed left it: the belling storm of Jimi Hendrix. If you can just get your mind together. Jimi was one of those killed, Ed said Fret said, and she believes it. Crystal revs the engine, shifts into reverse, and spins from the trailer. Then come on across to me. She squints through frost fractals: Gil stands directly before her with his hands out, his mouth making soundless shapes. Crystal shifts into first, feels the tires catch the icy gravel, and punches the gas. She surges toward Gil and he barely dives clear. We’ll hold hands and then we’ll watch the sunrise. The truck slides on the ungraded road, but Crystal rights it, up-shifts, and then careens past
gaping Benjie and neighbors and crew, whose cameras have turned to film her leaving. *From the bottom of the sea.*
12. Rope Swing

Her icy windshield defrosts into wet, sliding continents as the engine warms, until every landmass disappears. She clears the debris with grinding windshield wipers that need replacement. She approaches Silas High School and gets stuck at the red light as a stream of vehicles leave its parking lot. Piss ship. She’d thought it was morning but in this universe it’s Friday afternoon. The SHS Indians are let loose. She crouches in her seat. Growling trucks driven by shaggy boys in ballcaps who stick dip in their lips. Frosty cars with gangs of laughing, long-haired girls who look in visor mirrors. The many students who can’t afford cars slump in groups of two or three through winter mud, following Silas streets home or god-knows-where. There will be fights tonight, with self and other. Gross things huffed, smoked, or popped. Eyes gone red, narrow, and even sadder.

Then a line of sooty school buses leave the parking lot. Dirty windows frame pale faces, some sullen and tired, others manic and throwing things while the driver barks. Living way out in the country, Crystal was a bus kid. First one on, last one off. She learned in elementary school there would be no camaraderie on the bus, not for the fat, weird chick in cheap clothes who habitually squints and defers. So she read. While the bus’s tinny speakers repeated top forty radio songs and kids shouted cuttingly she read and read and read. Trying to disappear. Until Steph McDaniels got bored and noticed the blurry, blobby girl, and led the bus-riders in the Big Dang name-calling or the biologically incorrect Shamoo whale sounds. Everyone sounding at Crystal. Steph McDaniels’ Greatest Hits defined the era and still influence popular sound. What’s the opposite of nostalgia? Ah, shame.
The dirty buses crawl by. Hurry the frigging frig up already. Crystal’s truck now sits in a line of rumbling cars waiting for Silas High School to clear. She keeps eyeing the rearview mirror, every figure possibly Gil Tannen-Sterling pursuing her. *Shark Date.*

Dorene Smith’s is the only good movie in the universe and it will never get made. Like the entire world, the entertainment business is for overconfident, genre-minded white dudes. Crystal wishes she could see what happens to Twyla and Letty. She would P.A. or Second or First or do whatever to see Dorene make that movie.

She places her puffy hand on the duffel bag. Feels the coiled rope.

The last bus crawls by. Silas High School has emptied. The bronze tomahawk hangs over its parking lot. Her stop light turns green. She shifts gears and lurches forward.

But then *piss frigging ship* she gets stuck behind her old bus leaving Silas. Highway Z curves through farm and creek country. She keeps trying anxiously to pass the bus but straightaways are few and far between, and when she does nose around the bus she sees a car or tractor coming. Z is a road she knows by heart. She dreams about it a lot, which she always forgets until she remembers, like now. Her walking this long road in dream. Time constricts as you try to reach a vague but pressing destination. When a car appears on the rise behind you and approaches rapidly, you slip into the field to hide, but there is nowhere to hide, so you lay down on the grass, press your face to soil, and hope the car does not see you, does not stop, because if it does you will have to get up and start running, and you can already tell your feet are too heavy to run, so of course as you listen fearfully the car stops, and you’re paralyzed as car doors slam and manic voices near.

Crystal turns the tape player back on. This rock music isn’t terrible. It’s actually welcome noise. *Have you ever been experienced?* Well, Jimi, yes and no, unfortunately. I wish I could
make sounds like you make because it is an empty universe, cold and indifferent. Guitar sounding an undersea song, traveling world to world, a revolution of noise and new meanings. It really is crazy this guy died at 28. How would our world be different if he were still sounding, still upsetting old orders?

Two boys with unkempt hair press to the bus’s back windows and flip her the bird, laughing without sound. Classic. The bus breaks to a stop and three staggered blonde siblings get off. They start down a dirt driveway into the woods, but the middle boy turns to shout something at someone on the bus.

On the opposite hill is the nicest house out these parts—Judge McDaniel’s place. Where Steph with her perfect teeth and breasts got on or off the bus, either ratcheting or relieving Crystal’s dread. Where might Steph be these days? Besides scanning *The Silas Advertiser* and social media for dangerous humanist propaganda penned by one fat piece of shit named Crystal Smith?

A straight stretch of road opens before the Robinett’s pungent turkey farm and she veers into the left lane, trying to pass the bus. But Ed’s truck has zero pickup and she falters in the lane, the truck’s body shaking like to come apart. She’s stuck beside the bus where kid faces point and laugh. The bus driver—it must still be Old Vern Hempstead (she doesn’t even want to look)—slows for her, a great act of kindness. She drives past the bus and lurches into right line.

Nothing now between her and home.

Hendrix’s octopus tendrils wind from the speakers. Crystal turns the stereo up. Was Fret and Ed’s music like this? She sees the photograph of the sweaty, smiling hippies. *There is a problem and the universe is trying to work its self out*. What were the Traveling Hippos like? If the band been around only 15 years later they might have documented everything like people
today. Record and post online every steaming pile of crap. But the Traveling Hippos slipped into
the void. The way we should, and do.

Highway Z descends into Blue Springs Valley, the terrain of woods, creeks, and wet
fields Crystal knows best, today cold and hard under whale-gray sky.

Crystal turns onto the narrow driveway lined closely with leafless trees. She steers the truck through the muddy ruts left by melting ice. The bus would drop her off at the road and she would walk this driveway. Through the trees she can see secluded Blue Springs Creek. A little water runs over its rocks. She loved to be alone with the creek and woods.

She bumps into the low field where the house sits. Well, they called it the house but it’s actually a doublewide trailer. Faded blue with gray trim. To the untrained eye it might not even look like a trailer. Mom was always proud of this place. And for Crystal at least it was far away from everything.

She parks before the lumber deck Ed had built for them many years ago when he was quite handy and active. “Everybody needs a good deck,” he laughed. He wanted to build “one that goes all the way around the trailer,” like their dad’s old place, but Claire told him that was too much, and besides she couldn’t afford it.

She grabs her duffel bag and climbs from the truck.

Breeze and a few birds. She never learned like old writers what birds made what sounds or even lived where. But she hears their nameless whistles and calls. The air is wet and close. Grey clouds separate and slowly scud. So quiet out here. Saturate. She can smell the rich, moist soil.

What took her so long?

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She lets her self in. The trailer is warm. The furniture familiar and worn. The ceiling fan is still. She drops her duffel bag on the couch next to Grandma Smith’s pink and white afghan. She never knew her Dad’s mom, who died when Fret was a baby. She was a wonderful woman, Mom has said, and it was too bad Fret lost her when he did. Other than the homemade blanket, Mom long ago cleared the trailer of photos and other reminders of Fret.

Crystal kneels to smell the blanket. It smells like Mom now, like this home—a hint of lavender and cedar, a touch of old books, mildew.

The blanket, like everything in the trailer, is folded and neat. Mom has always been a dedicated housekeeper, even through long hours of work and depression. Still, the space always had a damp feel. Like the elements are near, saturating the thin walls.

On the false fireplace’s mantle sit a series of framed photos. Little Crystal’s tiny, pink face stares from a puffy coat in the long ago field. She looks stunned. A photo of her at film school graduation, her draped, black gown like a gigantic shroud. The same stunned expression. Wishing to disappear. She’d told Mom not to take the picture. Unemployable and heavily debted—the writer of self-involved stories that made no sense.

*The Big Dang.*

A black and white photograph of Lyle Presser with the kids: eldest Ed, middle Mom, and baby Benjie. Blurry faces. They stand in front of Ship Shape Shoes—Lyle’s old shoe store in downtown Silas. Back when there were stores in downtown Silas. Lyle had served in WWII, the Navy, and then he came home and started his business. Back when the country invested in its citizens, as long as they were white. Her mom and uncles remembered Lyle as a hard-working but mean man. They said his depression worsened when their beloved mother Lydia died during
Benjie’s birth. He got angrier, meaner. Finally, he put a shotgun in his mouth—another American tradition. 11-year-old Benjie found his body.

In the photograph Lyle hulks and leans, his broad shoulders bearing an invisible weight.

The stance of both Ed and her self.

Then a photograph of Mom, Benjie, and Ed as wide-eyed young adults in front of a Christmas tree. Arm in arm, shaggy and fuzzy faced, they laugh in the direction of the photographer. Who took this photo? She never considered that before. It had to have been Fret. She takes the frame down and stares at it. They were happy, beaming at the camera. Beaming at the person behind the camera.

People in photograph but gone. The photographer gone. Missing mothers, missing fathers. Each a mind, a body, and an unfathomable history. Gone.

God, it’s so easy to be maudlin, but honestly, realistically—you really have to wonder what the whole fucking point is? We’re dropped here to dread the disappearance of everyone we know. And our self.

She turns each of the photographs to face the wall.

She uses the bathroom. The print above the toilet still says “Tinkle Tinkle Little Star.” Then she goes to her old bedroom. It looks and smells like Benjie’s now. She is gone, save her boxes in the closet. She digs one out. Worn books of course. Virginia Woolf. Her old favorite. Last year she drove to Malibu in the middle of the night and sat on the cold sand for hours. Trying to gather the courage to walk into the water.

Other loves among the creased books: Foster Wallace, Plath, Sexton, Poe, Gray, Gilman, Kafka, Melville, Toole. Christ, no frigging wonder. A sorrowful collection, heavier than the universe.
Trying so hard to look but unable to see.

No plots. No plot.

Ed was wrong. Nobody needed to kill them. Everything did.

Twinkle Twinkle Big Dang.

She carefully slides the box back in the closet.

_Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages._

In the living room she studies the ceiling fan. Fret’s fan.

The once white metal has weathered tan brown, the color of cigarette stains even though Mom hasn’t let anybody smoke cigarettes inside the trailer since Fret.

She grabs Mom’s stepladder from the kitchen. She places it under the fan.

She unzips the duffel bag and removes the rope. She sits on the couch. Her fingers work to untangle the thick, scratchy nylon.

Ticks on the trailer roof. It’s raining again. Cold pricks.

She has googled “how to make a noose” before, has practiced, and does so now.

Takes off her furry hat. Her flannel layers. Folds them neatly on the couch by the blanket and her bag.

Mounts the stepladder. Knots the noose to the fan’s base. Arms raised, she smells her self. A heavy musk, sweaty and damp. A sour fruit well past ripe. She puts her face there. Breathes deeply. No name for the smell but Fret and the nameless other elsewhere in the universe.

_There is a problem and the universe is trying to work its self out._

Fret circled this room when she was a baby. She rode off his chest. He was trying to tell her something. But all words become the same empty shape.
She steadies her self atop the stepladder. Tightens the noose around her neck. Tiny, distant feet tiptoe the trembling top step.

Tilts the ladder free, drops, tightens, kicks, hands briefly ballerina, rushing upward, a bulge at the bubble’s top tightens, pops
13. The Grand Armada

Clicking echoes forth and back. A high whistle in the water, a series of high whistles, followed by reverberating exhalation, and we know the body is near. In the dark we brush bodies and flex, and from the body we sound back: a series of whistles, repeating those just heard, and the long exhalation—feels so good in the the body—which we follow with a high sigh. Many high sighs respond, and we know where every body is, each moving near us in the dusk. We flex and drift, push near the one who called. We are attached by chord and we are growing, learning to swim. Again we sound—a soft exhalation, a happy cry, and mother pushes near and sighs. The dark gives way to a gray and dark blue suspension through which shafts of light cascade and shimmer. Around us the shapes of siblings pulse and move, turning and sounding. Our song is laughing, a shared pleasure, a communal placement, and each contributes, not only repeating but also changing the song. More distant, others move in a great circle around us, circling and sounding, which creates the stillness where we float and move, the center of a great system. But nearby a low tone sounds, a thudding in the body—a warning picked up by others and amplified.

We flex and turn, and find ourselves in a shaft of light. Above us that light brightens, and we seek it. We see on the water’s surface a dark shadow. A wooden boat. And from the boat numerous figures lean, looking down on us. Men.

Our fear mounts and mother pushes near. She smells like us. A face to face nuzzle. A quickening. We become aware of a throbbing in us—our body yearning to sound. One with the yearning we spread out, trembling, and a great release seizes us, not falling but weightless, rising, and everywhere a single thought:

“Crystal!”
Lips pressed to our lips implore us, a warm and familiar breath fills our body. Then pressure on the chest, pushing. And then the lips again, breath filling our body, which reverberates and yearns to sound.

We remember. The boat. We try to sound and warn the others…

“Crystal, come back!”

A face and eyes ours, just above us, looking at us.

Claire is crying, her face red and wet and sounding. Her eyes bright blinking buoys.

“Crystal!”

Crystal’s body returns, swollen with pain. Her head throbs. She seizes with cough, and gags. Mom rolls her to her side, where she spits bile, coughs, and spits more bile, her body shuddering.

And then she is breathing. Blinking. Cheek on beige carpet. The world stretches out from her: Mom, the living room, the trailer. A dark, gaping hole in the ceiling where the fan had been.

“Crystal!” Mom presses her to Crystal’s chest, weeping and clutching her daughter.

“Crystal.”

Piled nearby on the floor: the rope, the noose, and the fallen ceiling fan, a jumble of wires where it ripped free.

“Crystal, can you hear me? Are you there?”

“I’m here,” she hears her self say. Her first words.

Mom’s purse had toppled to the carpet along with several grocery bags. Spilt milk and eggs and juice. A field of damage radiates from Crystal.
Mom shifts position and lays face to face on the floor with her. Close. Mom’s hands caress her face. Mom’s wet, scared eyes implore and feed her eyes, filling her with familiarity and yearning. Wholeness. “Oh my baby, my baby, my baby…”

Crystal realizes she is also crying, and then the crying carries through her, intensifies. She sounds. Water and fear pour out of her, her body trembles, every pore releasing tears. Her hands rise, find her mom. She presses her face to her mom’s chest, grips her mom’s body, pulls everything close. She moans as she cries, and the sounds join her mother, long and high, exhalations reverberating from the trailer’s walls. Crystal and Claire hold one another so close they become one, breathing and sounding.

***

A ragged rope burn encircles the folds of her neck. A dark bloody gash opens where the falling fan blade hit her forehead. She considers her bruised self in the bathroom mirror as Claire cleans the wounds.

“Why?” Claire says.

She doesn’t answer. She feels heavy with shame and yet her mind is clear. The edges of her face and eyes are so vivid. In the mirror she floats before her self, pulsing. The bathroom’s every detail is available to her. Mom’s mermaid figurines flex their swimming bodies and smile. The crocheted picture above the toilet says “Tinkle Tinkle Little Star.” Rain ticks the trailer roof. Outside she smells the cold, moist soil of the valley. The bathroom vent’s warm breeze brush the back of her bare, damaged neck. She smells Mom’s aloe and avocado shampoo, the light dry lavender of her mom’s pale wrinkled skin. Mom’s eyes glisten, and Crystal knows they see her every part.
Claire dabs the dark scar with antiseptic and Crystal feels a sharp pinch in her forehead. Claire stops. She still wears her light green nursing scrubs. She looks at Crystal in the mirror. “It’s a miracle.”

Was it? Maybe. Maybe too shoddy engineering.

Claire’s face crumples and she starts crying again. She presses her forehead to Crystal’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry, baby,” she says. “This is all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault,” Crystal says. Her voice is dusky, distant like someone else’s though it rings her body. She feels again the place she had been after the fan—underwater with the others. And above them, where the water ended, were men.

She bends to the toilet and throws up. Coffee and blood. Black and yellow bile. She kneels to purge her disgusting insides. Claire rubs her shoulders in soft circles. Crystal cries. Her bare arms grip the cool porcelain. She closes her eyes and lays her head on the coolness. Her face wet and dark. The smell of her sour and close. Familiar.

Claire runs water in the sink and soaks a rag. She hands the rag to Crystal who grips it, but makes no move to wipe.

Claire says, “There is a problem and the universe is trying to work itself out.”

Crystal lifts her head from the bowl. “What is that?”

“Something your dad always used to say. Sometimes he said it was a children’s book he wanted to make.”

“What happens to the universe?”

“I don’t know.” Claire smiles. “But you know what he said when you were born? He sat and held you a long time. He was crying and smiling. He looked at me and said, ‘She’s going to
be one who figures everything out.’ He said that about you a bunch of times your first couple months.”

Crystal’s heart thuds her body. “And then he hung himself.”

Claire closes her eyes and inhales. She sits on the bathroom tile opposite Crystal. She rests her head against the wall. She stretches her legs to place her feet against Crystal’s thighs. They fill the small space entire.

Claire trembles and starts to talk. “I don’t know what happened, Crystal. I mean, I knew your dad was depressed. Ever since we was kids he had a melancholy streak a mile wide. I think I always thought it’d just get better, you know? Go away or whatever. I thought he was just feeling bad for himself, and everybody feels bad for themselves. But instead it got worse. And he started drinking more and more and doing other stuff and it was just real bad. He wouldn’t give himself a break. He always thought he was dumb and uneducated, that he had missed some chance to better himself. The worstest thing was he was the smartest, most funniest person I knew. He was always coming up with ideas. Saying things nobody else said. He loved making music and writing songs. But then, like, a curtain would come down on him. After you was born his extremes got worse. He was overjoyed and obsessed with you, but he was also filled with fear. He was scared about making enough money to support the family. How to be a good dad. Him and Ed started their business together but it was real hit and miss and he didn’t know what else to do. But there was something else too. He was imagining things, Crystal. Crazy things. He said people were watching him, following him, trying to kill him. I say all this now, but at the time I didn’t really know how ill he was, or I would’ve tried to do something. I should have tried to do something. Nowadays they call it mental health or whatever, but still there ain’t a place a poor person can go get help.”
Mom studies her small hands shaking in her lap. Pale, paper-thin skin. “But even with everything—he never said a single word about suicide, Crystal. We went through the same thing with Daddy, but even that, awful as it was, kind of made sense. With Fret I never had a thought in the world he could do that to himself. Or would do that to us. To this day it doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Crystal feels the wet rag in her hand. Warm. She peels her head from the toilet’s rim. Wipes at her lips and chin. “I was with him,” she says.

“When?”

“The day he did it. I remember being in the living room under the fan. He was trying to tell me something.”

Claire’s eyes wrinkle. She shakes her head. “No, you was with me when he did it. You was just a little baby. I had taken you to the laundromat to do clothes. In fact, I had had to get us out of here that day. Fret had been out all night drinking and doing whatever and he came home crazy. Him and Ed got in some big fight.”

“About what?”

Claire’s shoulders heave as she sucks a big breath. “I don’t know, Crystal. But…your dad and Ed was close. Closer even then me and your dad was, I think. They loved each other but also they also brought out the worst in each other.”

Claire reaches her hand and runs it along Crystal’s hair. Where her long hair used to be.

“Well’s something I never told you,” Claire says. “After your dad died I read his journals—he always used to keep a bunch of notebooks. I found out him and Ed was lovers. Like, real lovers. It was a big secret between them.”
A space opens in Crystal’s mind, and into that space thoughts which never took shape find fit. “They were gay.”

“Well, I guess so, yeah. I mean, your dad and me was very close, but to be honest it always felt like we was more siblings than lovers. It bothered me, and after I read his journals I was real mad. I was furious at him and Ed, Crystal. Just furious. I felt ashamed and cheated. Like I should have known. You have to understand that the way we was all raised this was like the worstest thing you could be. A sin. I think that’s part of what bothered your dad and Ed. They didn’t know how to be. Nobody in Silas was like that.”

But of course people in Silas are like that. “Where are Fret’s journals?”

Mom’s eyes squeeze new tears and she shudders. “It’s the worstest thing, Crystal. I took them all out to the burn barrel and I burned them up. I was so mad. But, God, it’s the thing I feel most terrible about today. I know now how much those notebooks would mean to everybody. For years I’ve wished I had them to give to you. I couldn’t even talk about it. And Ed hated me a long time for what I did. Said them was his books too, the history and songs of the Traveling Hippos.” Mom hands flutter to her cheeks and hide her eyes. “I’m so stupid, Crystal.”

Lost words. Lost ideas. Oblivion. The most overwhelming thought. What was in those books? What was in that mind? But Crystal slides close to her mom and hugs her tightly. Sobbing, Claire falls into Crystal.

“I’m so sorry, Crystal.”

“No,” Crystal says into Mom’s body. Mom lived her entire life for Crystal. The two of them are a shared shape. “You didn’t do nothing wrong. Nobody knows what to do.”
“We was all so heartbroke,” Mom says. “I realized we was all in the same boat. We all had the same loss. Missing Fret is what brought me and Ed back together. It’s why Ed loved you so much.”

Crystal sees him in the foyer of Silas Middle School, bright sunlight surrounding him. Yelling out her name as the entire school laughed. “I could never tell what Ed thought of me. Nothing ever made any sense with him.”

“He loved you more than anything, Crystal. He saw Fret in you. We all did. He loved you but didn’t know how to show it. I think that’s a thing that’s wrong with all of us—we don’t know how to give each other love. After Fret died everybody lost themselves.”

Mom rubs Crystal’s back and neck. Her face comes very near Crystal.

“I knew, you know,” Mom says. “Just like with Ed I had a feeling. I rushed home and found you here.”

Crystal can see her reflection in Mom’s moist eyes.

“Don’t leave me, Crystalbear, please. Please don’t leave me. I couldn’t do it again. I know Fret wishes he was here. I think a terrible mistake happened. All of us should be just be together and love each other. We don’t know how each other feels.”

Crystal’s face in the bathroom mirror—it is the face of all them and more. A figure sculpted by genes, time, and the elements. Sculpted by the mind. By the gaze of others. It is her face. Her eyes.

_We got tricked, Crystalbear. I don’t know how anybody makes it down there._

“Please don’t leave me, Crystalbear,” Mom says again. “I want you to get help. Talk to somebody. Will you please do that?”

Crystal hugs her mother tightly, inhaling her.
She hears her self say, “Do not be afraid.”

***

In the living room Crystal dons her flannels and her furry hat. The warm interior. As Mom makes a brothy soup in the kitchen Crystal quietly turns the mantle photographs to face the room. Mom, Ed, and Benjie before the Christmas Tree. Their Last Christmas. They look at Fret with love.

“I got tomorrow off,” Mom says, watching her. “I was going to head up early in the morning to see Ed and talk to his doctors. If you want to go.”

“Okay,” Crystal says, her throat swollen. She needs to see Ed again. She needs him to wake up.

She tries to imagine Ed and Fret together. It would have been a lot of flesh and sweat. Ed had started to ask if she was a dyke and she hadn’t let him finish. Growing up in Silas she never knew a single gay person, though of course she did. Slurs like *fag* and *queer* were foundational discourse of the playground, the street corner, and the living room. Her peers played *Smear the Queer* and *Tag the Fag*. The churches warned of deviants and hellfire. Her whole life Ed never dated anybody. She never really thought about it.

Fret and Ed, the Traveling Hippos. They lost each other. To bear it takes a courage she never credited.

“You know,” Mom says, steam rising from her stove, “I’ve been wanting to start doing water aerobics at the Silas Rec Center. They got a real good deal going. You should do that with me. If we get in better shape we’ll feel better. You want to?”

“Maybe,” she says. Could she put on a swimsuit and get in the water with others? The last time she tried to swim in public was the Silas City Pool in sixth grade. Steph, already finely
figured in a bikini, saw Crystal hunched on the shallow end steps in a huge, wet black t-shirt and casually named her “Shamoo.” Steph’s biggest hit since “The Big Dang.”

But swimming now does sound nice. To move her body in the water and get in shape.

She remembers The Grand Armada. The great undersea floating after the fan fell and hit her head. Whistles and high soundings. Calling and responding. Mothers and calves learning to communicate. How to move. How to be. A still center in a terrific spinning.

But there was a boat above them. Men. Something terrible about to happen.

She wants to tell somebody about her ideas for HTBM: Piss Ship, her sequel to Hot Tub Baby Machine. Her resurrection of Ed’s strange franchise. It might not be bad. But it’s not ready.

The fallen fan looks small and slight on the trailer floor. Where the fan tore loose its wires are a tiny octopus. Blood wets the blade that hit her head. Her neck and head burns. She has to be careful; climbing that stepladder she was somebody else. She got very lucky. Her frigging weight saved her. Mom saved her.

Mom, a mind reader, smiles and says, “Soup and salad coming up, babe. Why don’t you come get another drink of water?”

The universe is changing around her, operating in ways she can’t understand. She needs to act.

She digs her phone from her bag. It’s dead so she plugs it in. As always her chest tightens, not wanting to look at her messages. But she must.

Oh god. 116 unanswered calls from Amy. And since she left him with Gil and the Ghost P.A.s, she’s gotten four calls from Benjie.

“What is it?” Mom asks with alarm.
What is she going to do? How to do all this? A part of her looks longingly to the coiled noose.

Get it the frig together, Big Dang.

She flips through her messages. A great surge fills her. An hour ago, right about the time she climbed to the fan, another call came:

*Stacey*

***

Outside the rain has stopped but the midday sky is close and heavy, threatening bigger storm. The cold tightens her cheeks. The color of every thing—cars, trailer, deck, field, woods, clouds—is rich and saturated. Beautiful. Phone pressed to ear, Crystal strides across the field to where the dark oaks glisten. Her boots crunch frosty, hard stubs of yellow grass, but she seems to hover in the air like cool precipitation.

Stacey’s dusky voice plays back in voicemail: “Crystal?” A good question. “Is this you, C?” Yes, this is C. “What the fuck?” Another great question. “What the fucking fuck, man? What’s happening?” A series of terrific questions. She hears Stacey moistly suck a cigarette and blow. “I can’t get any kind of straight answers out of anybody out here and the show’s in fucking free-fall, man. Fucking free-fall. Please, C, you’re the only one who ever knows a fucking thing. Call me back. Please.”

*Call me back. Please.* The best words she’s ever heard. She enters the woods. *The only one who ever knows.* Just to hear Stacey’s voice is a tremendous relief. She replays the message as she walks, wet black leaves underfoot. Branches brush wet streaks on her flannel. Tiny, nameless brown birds alight and dart. She could follow this trail to the creek with her eyes closed. *Call me back. Please.*
With tingling in her belly and shaky hands, she hits call back. After a pause and a weird click—is someone listening?—the line rings. She has Stacey’s private number for show emergencies, but she’s never used it, and never has Stacey called her.

Crystal’s heart drops when the call goes to voicemail. Stacey’s message says, “Leave a message, motherfucker.” Goddang, that’s the kind of voicemail message Crystal needs to record. She bets Stacey didn’t have to record fifty takes of the outgoing message, each take excruciatingly more frog-like and receding.

The voicemail beeps and Crystal is on stage: “Stacey? Oh, hey, this is…Crystal, I, uh, just got your message and wanted to give you a call back. I’m, uh, in Missouri actually and I…” She trails off. I what? Her throat seals, she panics, and she ends the call.

She steps over a fallen tree and descends the rocky bank of Blue Springs Creek. Water gurgles cold and clear over polished stones. She sits near the moving water and looks again at her stupid phone. Should she call Stacey again? She presses call back, but quickly cancels. She presses call back, but cancels.

Goddang it. She feels a weird sensation: Stacey should be right here but she’s not. Stacey smells like running water and wet earth.

Call me back.

Crystal heaves a chesty grunt. The vivid creekbed is red, orange, tan, brown, and every shade between. Creek stones look larger and more vibrant under water, but when you pull a stone from the creek and take it home, it dries to become a pale version of what you had seen.

Reluctantly, she plays The Worst’s most recent message: “Smithy?” Amy’s banshee scream. Crystal pulls the phone from her ear. “Where are you? Where are you? Where are you? I can’t even begin to say what kind of fucking nightmare you’ve left us in. But I promise you
you’ll not work in this business again. It looks like Josh and Henry’s fucking families are filing some kind of law suit against the show. Be advised, I went ahead and changed all your documents and submitted them for you to the investigating authorities. The next call you get will be from them. Good luck, Fat Frogfuck.”

If Crystal were to lay in the creek, naked, she could not feel less frozen. It’s been an awful trip from Fat Kermit to Fat Frogfuck.

Maybe prison presents a solution. Maybe she could just go away. Three hots and a cot. Get good at yoga and meditation. Lose weight. Write and direct all-women plays with her community. The first one up will be titled Who and Where are You, Frogfuck?

Moving down the dread list, Crystal plays Benjie’s last message. “Crystal?” Human conversation begins with and never leaves the basic questions Are you? Are we? “Hey, it’s Benjie. I was just wanting to check on you. I’m so sorry we barged in on you earlier. But listen, we’re going to screen the next episode of Fit To Pitch and film a big party tonight at The Horn. Gil said it’ll be a big fundraiser for Ed. He said he really, really wants you to come. And I do too. Bring your mom. We’ll make a big night of it. Okay. Yeah. I hope you’re all good, Crystal. I love you. This is Benjie.”

Oh, Benjie. God. Arms on her knees, Crystal slumps before the whispering creek. The Horn is a notorious bar in downtown Silas. Pretty much the only business still open in downtown Silas other than Roosters, the bar across the street. The Traveling Hippos used to play The Horn; it’s where the fridge photo of Fret and Ed was taken. Ed has broke noses and had his nose broken numerous times at The Horn. Benjie has at least two DUIs dedicated to The Horn.

The Horn is a perfect place for the Apocalypse.
She missed the transition but late afternoon has become dusk. The clouds darken. Shadows gather under everything. Little points ripple on the creek. It’s raining again. Crystal feels it poke her face. She wonders what it would be like to be tiny, living in the creek, below the water. A bug or crawdad burrowed in the rocks and sand, waiting for spring. She’s not sure they even do that. But they must go somewhere when winter comes. All these years she lived on the creek and she never figured out what the water animals do. What it feels like down there. What it smells like.

And still Stacey does not call back.

Movement in the woods behind her cause her to jump. She turns.

Mom peers through branches, her eyes scared.

“Crystal?”
That night she and Mom eat together. She sips soup and reassures Mom she is fine, she made a mistake, she wants to live. Mom says she couldn’t go through it again and Crystal knows this to be true. Mom grips her hand and she lets her. Grateful eyes glisten.

When Crystal brews coffee Mom says she would never be able to fall asleep if she had coffee this late.

After dinner they settle into the low-lit living room and turn on the TV. After growing up before it, she doesn’t watch TV anymore—a bad choice, she knows, given her so-called career choice. But here it is custom and she sinks habitually in the couch while Mom slow-rocks her recliner. Mom has cleared the room’s debris field and it’s almost like nothing ever happened, save the black hole in the ceiling.

Jefferson City’s local news anchors lead with “shocking developments here in the nation’s heartland”—this afternoon homemade bombs destroyed numerous highway billboards. Crystal’s breath catches and her skin tightens. Mom shakes her head and murmurs, “I just don’t understand what’s wrong with people today.” The bombed billboards include Highway 55’s “God is Watching” and “Abortion is Murder,” along with two on Highway 63: “Marriage is Between a Man and Woman” and “Judgment is Coming.” All of the billboards black with white text. Jim Stanley Duggin, the grim, balding pastor for Mount Grapple Evangelical Church, sponsor of the billboards, wonders “why this President Obama hasn’t yet called these terrorist acts.” The anchors nod. They assert that “some are calling this an escalation in the War on Christianity.” Some, but not exactly these anchors. Duggin nods in agreement, “I’m afraid this is what happens when we as a nation turn our back on the One True Lord.” The suspect sketch depicts a heavy-set man who looks not only like Duggin but also Uncle Ed.
Dang. Somebody actually did it. *Billboard Terrorists*. When they go to Jeff City in the morning will they find Ed’s bed empty? She feels she watches her self watch the news. Who moves this world’s players? Composes this world’s texts? The thought occurs to her that she might, after all, be dead. But then again her neck and head hurt, her heart is heavy, and she is afraid of death.

In weather news, Doppler Dan Dollar says to expect the worst storm of the winter tonight. “Freezing temperatures and sleet are going to make our roads treacherous, so don’t drive if you don’t have to.” Mom shakes her head again and grunts, because if it ain’t one thing it’s another. Mom has begun to drift in and out of consciousness, her eyelids fluttering by TV light just as Crystal knew they would. Soon Mom is snoring, and Crystal rises quietly, Ed’s keys in hands, and slips out the front door.

She drives the truck back along Highway Z. The rain has turned into sleet that cuts and flashes in her dim headlights. The tires must be bald because she can feel the truck want to slide on corners. She drives slowly, the radio turned off. A thing barely breathing in the dark cab.

In downtown Silas she drives slowly past The Horn. Gil Tannen-Sterling’s white production van sits parked amid a great many cars and trucks in the bar’s neon lights.

She continues down the street. She doesn’t even mean to but she parks before the dark storefront that decades ago housed Grandpa Lyle Presser’s Ship Shape Shoes. The plan had been for his kids to assume the business, but by the time he died Walmart had absorbed local trading. When Crystal was a kid an ill-advised health food store tried this location, and that was followed by a life insurance place, but now the building’s empty. For Sale or Lease. Smudged yellow newspaper lines the windows but cannot be read.
Two blocks away, The Horn is very busy. Across from The Horn, Roosters looks darker and more depressed than usual. Ed called this downtown drinking district the Bermuda Triangle even though Roosters and The Horn technically comprise only two points. The Bermuda Segment. Crystal climbs from the truck and quietly shuts the door. Rain falls about her. She drops her furry ear flaps and pulls her hat low. She can see and hear her labored breath as she moves in the boardwalk’s cold shadows toward The Horn.

By the *Fit To Pitch* passenger van a hunched silhouette stands shivering under dripping umbrella. It is Francisco/Josh on unlucky security detail, keeping an eye on the gear. Crystal steps from the boardwalk to the darker street and from there approaches the van’s rear. A compressed din of music and voices throbs inside The Horn.

“What’s the game, Josh?”

The P.A. startles at the sudden hulking shape. “Can I help you?” he quivers. He wears a production headset and radio. When Crystal steps forward his confused face remembers her. He looks over his shoulder to The Horn’s closed door.

“Jeez,” he says. “You scared me.”

“How did you guys get back here?” she says.

“What do you mean? From the trailer park?”

“No. From the accident.”

“I don’t understand…”

“There’s no need for the game,” Crystal says, stepping closer. “I know who you are, Josh. I’m actually very glad you guys made it through.”
Josh shakes his head. He retreats from Crystal but bumps into the van. She advances. The rain splashes from his umbrella into her eyes, blurring and blobbing the scared production assistant. She wipes her face. “Josh, please, just tell me the way back.”

“You’re going to have to talk to Gil,” he says quietly. “I don’t know anything. I’m just the P.A.”

He is not lying. His face bears no whit of knowledge. No answers. She feels heavy disappointment. Suddenly it’s cold and wet out here, dark, and the bar sounds a steady, head-aching din.

“Can I get you a coffee?” Josh says.

Crystal shakes her head slowly. She steps onto the plank boardwalk and pushes into the bar.

The Horn comprises a long, coffin-shaped space, noisily packed tonight with people. Everyone faces away from Crystal and the door toward the deep back of the room where bright camera lights create a stage near the bar’s end. She can’t see what’s happening back there but she hears a collective cheer as Benjie’s face fills the room’s wall-mounted TV screens. The second episode of *Fit To Pitch*. Onscreen Benjie listens to somebody and nods. His mouth moves but no sound comes out. Everyone cheers again. Benjie sits in a conference room with casual, well-dressed men who question him. He shakes his head and searches for words. Behind him is a mock-up poster for *Hot Tub Baby Machine*. A close-up of the cartoonish poster reveals a teenage dude with a shrugging, shit-eating grin holding seven babies and sharing a hot tub with five women, all of whom bear similar expressions of surprise. The hot tub floats on jets over a town where a mass of people—jocks, cops, doctors, teachers, parents, military—fight to climb ladders and reach the tub. The movie’s tagline asks “What Kind of Party Is This?” Crystal dizzies; the
crass disaster of a pitch still doesn’t make any sense. It’s misogyny but is it irony too? Is it funny? Is it entertaining? Is it a farce? Is it authentic? But again everyone in The Horn cheers. The onscreen executives raise their eyebrows and nod their heads as they shake Benjie’s hand.

Crystal, stomach sucked and face tucked, pushes and excuses herself through the crowded room. Being big is always bad, but especially in public. Especially at home. A noxious curtain of cigarette smoke hangs over their heads, stinging her eyes and throat. Up under the film lights she can see the shiny pompadour of Gil moving cameras and crew around. The back of Benjie’s bald head sits at the bar, next to a big-haired blonde woman, both arched to see the TVs. Dorene Smith appears on screen, cutting a shrewd smile as she shakes the hands of the entertainment executives. The bar crowd loudly boos Dorene, and Crystal wishes each of them ill.

Somebody grabs her by the shoulder and shouts, “Ed!” A devastating blow. She squints at a grizzled guy in thick plastic bifocals. His smile disappears when he sees her. Barely perceptible, he mouths, “Fret?”

She winces.

It’s Doug Harbison, owner of The Horn, old running buddy of her dad and uncle. “Holy shit, Crystal?” he says. He gives her a hug, his breath sour with whisky. “My god. I ain’t seen you in I don’t know how long. I thought you was…” Maybe because of her look he does not finish. “I didn’t know you was in town!” he says with a rubbery grin. “What are you doing these days?”

She points toward the production at the bar.

“Oh? You’re working on the TV show with Benjie?”

She nods.
“Cool! Man, this is really exciting for everybody. After all this shit with Ed this is really a neat thing for Benjie. I’ve never seen him this happy.”

She looks to her uncle at the bar. Happy?

Red-eyed Doug leans in close. “How is Ed?”

“Not good,” she says.

“Goddamn it,” Doug says sadly. “I got to get up there and see him.”

So do I.

“Listen, you tell your momma to call me if she needs anything. You hear? I’m serious, you tell her to call Doug Harbison. I’ll do anything for that woman.” Doug grips Crystal’s shoulder. “You all are good people. You hear that? Good people. The best. I love your dad and uncle. I wish they was here tonight playing for everybody.”

She squeezes a smile. Doug is a mess but an earnest, sweet mess. “Listen, I really need to get up there.” She nods at the lights.

Doug claps her on the back. “Cool! Terrific to see you, kid. You find me before you leave, alright? Say bye. Please.”

“I will.”

Crystal pushes through the crowd. She hears a lusty boo and glances at the TVs. Dorene displays a mock-up of the *Shark Date* movie poster: two silhouetted women in the foreground, one carrying the other, while behind them two figures pursue. All within the outline of a shark’s saw-toothed mouth. The frigging coolest.

A thick cordon of folks surround the scene at the bar. Cameras film Benjie as he speaks to the blonde woman leaning close, her hand on his shoulder, her lips near his ear.
Piss ship—it’s goddang Steph McDaniels. She’s gained a ton of weight, both in body and hair, and she wears a garish amount of make-up, but the pretty, curved features of her face are still in place, still striking.

Steph’s red fingernails tickle and scratch the back of Benjie’s bald head. Benjie turns to look at Steph and suddenly they are making out, their tongues locked like sea creatures. Several cameras lean close. The crowd cheers again. Gil watches the obscene kiss on a camera monitor, flipping between angles. He nods approvingly.

Crystal wishes to rip the succubus Steph from her uncle smother it.

Steph unlocks lips from Benjie, wipes stringy saliva from his mouth, and flashes the cameras a winning smile. Benjie smiles open-mouthed like he cannot believe it. What kind of party is this?

Steph’s eyes find Crystal at the front of the crowd and they stare soundlessly at one another. Crystal sucks in her belly. Steph’s face smears in the camera lights. Smirks. She winks at Crystal and then leans back into Benjie and bites his ear. The crowd’s triumphant cheer sounds like an explosion.

It’s like Steph wants to frigging eat Benjie’s cauliflower ear. Crystal feels a tickle at the back of her neck. Oh my god. She cannot help it; she wishes it were her under those teeth.

No asteroid comes, no bomb blows, no Jesus shows; we are each other’s apocalypse, and, without rhyme or reason, we keep happening.

An arm falls over Crystal’s slumped shoulders. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Gil Tannen-Sterling says. He wears camera make-up, gold-yellow hair, and a red, white, and blue silk tracksuit; one of the people. Gil admires Benjie and Steph, Steph now trying awkwardly to
mount Benjie on the barstool as the cameras adjust. Don’t fall, Crystal thinks as she shrugs from Gil’s grasp.

Steph falls. Benjie tries to catch her but his hands fail and Steph nails the hardwood floor as the crowd says, “Ooh.” Folks help Steph to her feet and she raises her arms like a made field goal. Everyone cheers. Benjie clumsily hugs her from behind and she begins grinding on him.

“One of the things I love about my art,” Gil says, leaning close and screaming at Crystal to be heard over the crowd, “Is that when all the pieces assemble before my cameras, I never know what’s going to happen. But something always happens, and it’s almost always a life-changing moment for the players.” Gil’s breath does not stink. In fact it smells like a new car.

“How did you find Steph McDaniels?” Crystal screams.

“I didn’t find her. Like everyone else she just showed up, answering the call. She found the camera. She has a natural instinct for where it is and what it sees.” Benjie, Steph, and friends down shots of something neon green. “The dynamic between she and Benjie is fantastic. He’s had a hard-on all night.”

The last words Crystal ever wants to hear.

Braced against grinning Benjie, Steph tries to climb the bar. Please don’t, Crystal thinks, but Steph does. She rises hesitantly above the room and then raises her arms. She’s already found a trademark—the Made Field Goal. The crowd raises their arms in return, celebrating wildly. Wobbly Steph catwalks the bar, knocking drinks to the floor. When did Steph gain all this weight? She’s too big to be up there, a danger to her self and everyone below, but Crystal can’t help admiring her confidence, her body. The crowd endorses, drinks, and smokes, watching the cameras and Steph. They want to climb up there but can’t. As the crowd swells, harried Henry/Wigman scrambles to collect signed releases from everybody in the room.
On the TVs *Fit To Pitch’s* episode two continues. Ramses Michael Patrick introduces to the studio executives his poster for *The Weightless Machine*: an overhead, upside-down image of a metal, coffin-like box. The machine’s glass window frames a woman’s terrified face. Her bloodied fingers claw the window.

Her hand a distant, numb thing, Crystal points to the TV. “That’s Ed Presser’s story,” she screams at Gil.

“Come to my office,” he says.

***

Gil’s office is Doug Harbison’s office, a private, messy room in the back of The Horn, just off the stage where The Traveling Hippos used to play, where Fret and Ed stood for the photograph. As Crystal sits at the desk, she imagines the many gross things Fret, Ed, and Doug must have done in here.

The bar noise is dampened by the closed door, but her ears ring. She smells cigarettes in her hair and clothes and the very substance of Doug’s office. She hovers just outside her body, vaguely noting these sensations.

Gil watches her. His seat is much taller than hers.

“What happened to your head?” he says.

She feels the forehead wound pinch tightly under its bandage. She doesn’t answer.

“Coffee?” he says.

Ok, yes. She nods.

Gil unclips the radio from his belt. “GTS for Francisco?”

The radio squawks rain and static. The faraway kid says, “Go for Francisco.”

“Hey, could you bring two coffees to the production office?”
A pause, then, “Roger that.” Squawk and gone.

Gil rolls his eyes for her. Smiles for her. His teeth the cleanest, best-cared-for phenomenon in Silas. Hers grow more crooked in her tight mouth.

“You don’t like the show,” Gil says.

She stirs. Hears her thick voice. “I trend away from fascism.”

Gil laughs. “Sour grapes.” His eyes shine, not unfriendly. “In other words, you are an unsuccessful writer or filmmaker.”

She doesn’t know how to respond.

“I’ve looked at you,” Gil says.

The door opens to loud country music. Francisco enters with two Starbucks cups. “Two black,” he says, giving one to Gil and the other to Crystal. She has no idea where he conjures this coffee but she’s glad to have it.

“How’s it going out there?” Gil says to his P.A.

“Pretty good?” Francisco nods. “Benjie and Steph are leading the bar in a line dance?” Crystal groans inside. She drinks deeply her coffee, and feels her mind sharpen. Francisco avoids her eyes. Here in the office’s open-bulbed fluorescence he doesn’t look exactly like Josh. Which saddens Crystal because that means Josh and Henry remain dead, and she is still to blame.


“Roger that,” Francisco says. He exits the office.

Again the bar noise is distant.

Gil sips his coffee. “You work production on Celebrity Teenager,” he says.

“I did.”
Gil nods. “I heard about their accident. Bad stuff.”

Her mouth puckers. “That’s the business, right?”

Gil shrugs. “That’s life. It sucks.” He does have wrinkles; tiny cracks filled with make-up at the points of his mouth and eyes. “Benjie said something very weird to me, Crystal. He said you said I killed your Uncle Ed.”

Frig jesus. Her stomach knots. He’s moves ahead of her. “Did you?”

Gil laughs softly and shakes his towering head. “Of course not. Crystal, why would I kill a golden goose?”

She doesn’t understand.

“Here, let me show you something,” Gil says. He clears a space on Doug’s desk and opens a laptop. He turns the laptop so she too can see the screen. He plays a video:

Benjie sits in the dry, broken hot-tub behind Ed’s trailer. He is shirtless and laughing, a beer in hand. “…what?” he says.

Ed operates the phone-camera. Off-screen he bellows, “Tell him it’s a franchise. Tell him there can be as many *Hot Tub Baby Machines* as he wants.”

“As many hot tub baby machines as you want…”

“Point at the camera.”

“What?”

“Point at the camera when you say it.”

Benjie points at the camera, “There’s machine hot tub babies…”

Ed blasts air out his nose. “*Gil*, Benjie. Tell Gil there can be as many *Hot Tub Baby Machines* as he wants.”

Benjie keeps pointing, “As many hot tub baby machines as he wants…”
“As you want.”

“…as you want.”

“Goddamnit, Benj…”

The video cuts. It resumes with Benjie in the hot tub at dusk, under the trailer’s harsh exterior light. He strains to read Ed’s off-camera prompts: "Jim Drummond is Springfield High School’s biggest dork…until the night he sneaks into the year’s biggest party…and climbs into a magic hot tub… with five beautiful women…and accidentally impregnates all of them at once…Then things get weird…Something extraordinary has happened in Springfield…but is it evil or is it good?…Some call it a miracle, others an abom…an abondination…Competing terrorist groups including…the media, government intelligence agencies…and religious factions…descend on Springfield seeking to both defy…

“Deify,” Ed says.

Benjie squints, “Deify?”

“Just say it,” Ed says.

“Dang,” Benjie says. “To both deify or destroy Tim’s new family…Young Tim has a lot to learn…about power and responsibility… as he fights the terrorists…fights to win the hearts of his baby mommas…and fights to make the junior varsity basketball team.”

Benjie stops. “Ed, I’m telling you, the movie doesn’t make any se…” and the audition video ends.

Gil Tannen-Sterling looks from his laptop to Crystal. “Amazing, right?”

The pitch is confounding, insane, but also, maybe, perfect? Crystal wishes she were there in the back yard with Ed. To hear his voice. To laugh with him. She’d even have a beer with him. She’d ask him questions.
Gil says, “Naturally, I wanted both of your uncles for the show. And Benjie agreed right away. But Ed declined. He cursed me at length in fact. Very colorful guy, your uncle.”

“He knew you wanted to exploit them,” she says.

Gil smiles. “I wanted to give them the platform they deserve. Your uncles are outsider art, Crystal. American originals. Today’s TV audience loves a rough-hewn outsider.”

“Train wrecks love train wrecks.”

Gil laughs. “Crystal, you remind me of Ed.”

She shrinks in her chair.

Gil continues. “But then, the night the first episode aired, Ed called me. He was, let’s say, _extremely agitated_, but still hilarious. He told me he wanted in on the show. He said I had stolen his _Weightless Machine_, his _Hot Tub Baby Machine_, and his baby brother, and he wasn’t going to stand by and let me, quote, ‘fuck them the fuck up.’”

The same night Ed lost consciousness. “So you did steal _The Weightless Machine_?” she says.

“Of course not. Crystal, to be honest, your Uncle Ed is, at very the least, delusional. Ramses’s story is Ramses’s story. The kid pitched it to me himself. If you want to know the truth, everyone has an idea called _The Weightless Machine_.”

Outside the office, The Horn’s crowd cheers. God only knows.

Gil wears a consoling expression. The coffee cup is already empty in her hand.

“So what happened to Ed?”

“He had a stroke, Crystal. You know what kind of shape he was in. I’m very, very sorry. It sucks.”
Grief weighs her throat. She tears. She needs to go see Ed. Why hasn’t she spent more time with him?

“Crystal, I needed Ed. Benjie, God love him, doesn’t know Ed’s pitch. Mind you, nobody’s even watching *Fit To Pitch*. The first episode’s viewers only numbered around 3,000, the majority of whom live in each contestant’s hometown.” Gil’s eyes shine. He points to the bar. “Like Ed, Benjie and Steph out there present brand new possibilities, and I am always looking for brand new possibilities.”

“New brand possibilities.”

Gil claps the desk. “Exactly.”

The Greatest Shit Show on Earth.

Finally she figures a move she can make. She leans forward and locks eyes with Gil Tannen-Sterling. “All right,” she says. “I wasn’t going to tell you this, but… I found Ed’s script.” Gil goes erect. “And it’s a frigging franchise, Gil.”

“Give me your pitch,” he says.
15. Blue Movies

In the shadow of old Ship Shape Shoes Crystal hunches in Ed’s pick-up. Two blocks up The Horn throbs busily; it’s well after midnight but nobody’s going home. Movie Magic. The grim-faced dudes in Gil’s crew stomp to and from the van to grab or deposit production gear. Francisco, still standing security detail in the worsening rain, nods at each as they pass but nobody nods back.

She tries to start the truck again. The engine coughs two weak wheezes, and then nothing. Deader than dead.

To punch the steering wheel would be futile tonight. She slumps her furry head against the frigid window.

Can she follow through on this deal with Gil? She’s using Ed’s name, but still, it’s kind of her first writing deal? Right? That’s something, right?

Does she write?

Her head hurts. Her back hurts. She’s dirty. A turned, bottom-heavy fruit. The truck is a cold metal box. What if she just spread here? Live out her life among the cigarette butts and crushed fast food bags? It’s cold and getting colder, but with the rain ticking the roof, the streams running down the windshield, the soiled closeness—she could stay here forever? Curl up with her crystalized breath…

The phone rings and she jumps. The tolling landline. She pats the pockets of her flannels, her slacks. Goddangit thing, where are you? The rings ring everywhere. Terror ratchets; she’ll miss the call. Miss Stacey. She digs in the seat’s trash.

Oh wait. The dang thing’s right in her breast pocket.

Amy. Her blood drops.
Frig you too, Frogfrig. She answers. “What?”

“Crystal? Did I wake you up?”

“Not really.”

“Okay, good. I know it’s kind of late there.”

She doesn’t respond. Amy’s voice runs weirdly syrupy tonight.

“But I just had to call you. You’re never going to believe this, kid.”

Kid. At 23, Amy’s only one year older but her title and 150 pound weight differential gives her seniority.

“God was looking out for us,” Amy gushes.

“What do you mean?”

“Blood tests came back and those kids were fucking stoned.”

“Who?”

Amy sucks and then blows cigarette smoke. “Those fucking P.A.s.”

“Josh and Henry?”

“Right. Those two little shits tested positive for pot. The accident was their fault, not ours. They put us through all this for nothing.”

She thinks again about their moment of impact on the Hollywood Freeway. The rending series of impacts, the hearts torn and stopped.

“That’s terrible,” she says quietly.

“No, Smith, it’s great. For the show I mean. We’re not culpable.”

She can’t speak. Breath fogs from her nose.

“I’m sorry about all that stuff earlier,” Amy says. “Everyone was just really freaking out over here. You can’t imagine.”
The rain’s become tiny chunks of ice. They knock and bounce off the windshield.

“But everything’s back on track,” Amy says. “In fact the press has been great. Ratings are way up. Arnie and Greg and Garamond want to start shooting next week. Will you be back by Monday?” Then quickly: “How is your mom doing by the way?”

This means Stacey Wilde doesn’t need her anymore. Why she won’t call back.

“She, uh, she died,” Crystal says. Barely a voice.

“Oh my god, Crystal. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s life. It sucks.”

“You’re telling me. But listen, Crystal, getting back to work will be good for you. Moving on. All that. And I have a huge surprise. We want to offer you the position of Second Assistant Director. You’re the Second. You’ve earned it.”

“Listen, Amy. I just made this other deal. I quit.”

***

She climbs from the dead truck. The hail pummels the street. It stings where it strikes her face and hands. Up at The Horn, Francisco rushes around with his umbrella crushed.

She drops her furry ear flaps and raises her collars. Crest View is a twenty minute slog through town. Or she could take refuge in The Horn.

She walks stiffly into the ramshackle neighborhoods of central Silas.

On unlit streets lopsided shadow houses grip the frozen earth. Dark cars sink in driveways. Hail pin-balls her. Shudders keep coming, clenching her body entire. Way below freezing tonight. She imagines giving out. To lay down on the hard sidewalk, an icy crack inside icy cracks. The hail turns to needles of icy rain, icing her eyes shut. Pieces of her face chip and fall toward her distant feet. She keeps thinking *one more block*. The houses don’t speak. Even
piled together a gulf of black silence separates one from the next, and each from her. In the yards, toys, furniture, and other discarded objects collect deepening coats of frost. In some windows she sees flickering lights. Eyes must be watching her suspicious shape pass. She always wondered who lives in every shuttered home? What and how the people inside did? Until she was 18 this was the only universe she knew. Clapboard Silas. Damp Silas. Suspicious Silas. Half-closed eyes holding watch from the perimeter of self.

She thought she knew better. She felt judged but she became the harshest judge.

Maybe she’ll just sit down for a second and catch her breath.

She knows nobody here, and nobody knows her. Each barely hanging on.

She can’t make it. Her steps catch on the buckled sidewalk. One more block. One more yard. One more tree bent under the weight of ice. One more step.

She cannot feel her feet.

She just wants to get home.

She just wants to get home.

A pang trembles. Overwhelms her. She stops. Drops her face. Oh god. You can’t out-hunker this. Lay down here by the tree growing from the sidewalk’s broken mouth. The ice clothing is your skin is the world.

Another one found frozen in the dim dawn.

“That’s that Crystal Smith…”

“Who?”

No.

She begins to hum. Body sighs. Low and trembling. She shapes them in her guts. Makes a moan that builds and reaches. Becomes a cry. Becomes a wail. Carries. The long sounds of
early Stacey. Reverberating howl, all body, all sound. Eyes closed and crying. She turns her face to the hail and the night and cries.

The hail halts—at first she thinks it fantasy, but then the memory of the hail’s stings seems to float from her body. A warm current moves in, surrounding her. She rises from her chest. Her face gathers. The song echoes in her thick body, along her arms and legs. If there were less of her she would not have made it this far. She moves her feet.

She cuts through a stand of trees and then across a crunchy field. She walks, and walking, she warms. Walking feels goddang good. Breath lifts her matter. She needs to walk more often. Move. Moving, she crosses the dry creek.

Above her, Ed’s trailer thums. She hikes uphill, past the hot tub, circles the trailer, finds the steps, the front door, the welcome screech, and then the warm interior. My god the warm interior. She stands dripping. Stopped, the cold creeps back. Toe to heel, hand against the wall, she struggles her frozen boots free. Then she sheds the hard clothes, the flannels, the t-shirt, the slacks, the thermals and socks. She stands naked, bulbous in the living room, shivering. She scoops her blanket from the couch and wraps it around her. She descends to the couch, curls into its corner, and cocoons. Oh god, grateful to pause. She’s never been more exhausted but there’s never been a better bed. She fits perfectly here. She breathes moistly from her nose and mouth. Smell the warmth of her. Her last shakes subside, her musk spreads, and she merges with the couch and blanket.

***

An abrupt noise shocks her to the surface. She shifts her dense body and the couch’s stiff fibers separate from her cheeks and forehead.

Another noise. Something heavy moves in the trailer.


“God, that’s perfect,” somebody else says. Gil Tannen-Sterling! “Bring camera two over here,” he purrs. “Francisco, hit them with that little light. Stephanie just keep doing what you’re doing. Benjie, buddy, don’t give out yet.” The trailer shakes again, a frantic thumping in every wall. Steph and Benjie’s raspy voices wrap around each other like snakes, climbing the ceiling. “Oh, oh,” they both wail.

And then silence.

“God,” says Gil. “Goddamn. That’s good, guys.”

Horrified Crystal can’t move. She wants to tell them to stop but she can’t speak. She squeezes shut her eyes, curling into the couch. A terrible wave crashes over her and she dives.

***

She wakes. The trailer dark and still. The heater purring. She tries to remember something she feels she’s supposed to remember when down the hall the bedroom door opens.

She stiffens. She’s not alone. Someone shuts the bedroom door quietly. Someone walks slowly down the hall, coming nearer. A large shape stops at the room’s edge. Darker than the dark. Breathing heavily.
“Crystal?” somebody asks. But Crystal has no mouth. The person comes closer. Stands above her. “Crystal.” A familiar voice, anxious. “Hey.” It’s Steph McDaniels. Her hand touches Crystal’s bare leg, and begins to gently rub. Just as Crystal wishes it, Steph comes down to her. “Crystal,” she says again, parting the blanket around Crystal’s body, Crystal shifting to let the action happen. “Crystal,” she says again, her breath warm on Crystal’s neck right before her moist lips make contact. Oh god. She licks and sucks Crystal’s neck. Oh god. What’s Steph’s smell? Tiff Goldsworth’s sharp perfume. But she’ll take it, god, she takes it, she arches her head and Stephanie’s tongue travels the neck line, past the jaw, to the expectant ear, and there she sucks, oh god, her teeth chewing the lobe just so. Crystal turns her head and the other tongue knows, meets her tongue, and they are kissing. Two mouths one, tongues tasting one another ravenously. Steph’s hands travel all over Crystal, stroking and gripping her. Crystal’s body moves to find the hands finding her. Opens paths for the finding hands, oh god, every action preordained and perfect. Steph kissing down her chest, warm kisses on her breasts, circling her nipples, and then down, butterflies her stomach, a delicious bite, a promise. Steph lifts and parts Crystal’s legs, and Crystal lets her. Steph pushes the coffee table and kneels on the floor. Steph spreads her, lifts her, and descends, oh my god, teeth tickle and bite her inner thigh, the tongue flicks across her center, just over, oh my god, and teeth tickle and bite her other thigh, the tongue flicks, please now, do it, and the tongue finds her, enters, and she grips the couch. This, this, yes. She presses herself to the probing, oh god, Stephanie now sucking her, working her, Stephanie twenty tongues triggering her, perfect fingers finding her, filling her, oh god, tongue and finger and she one, she extends outward from her body, curling, oh god, she hangs delighted in space, oh god, there, anticipation, and she grabs Steph’s head, presses her to her, opening, and Steph’s tongue turns her, oh... she gives loose at the front of her, going, letting go, and she shouts, god,
she shouts, she envelops her, oh god, presses her to her, and Steph’s tongue again finds her, yes
god, again, flickering her, lifting her, oh god, lifting her, and she explodes outwards in waves,
er her legs squeezing her, squeezing every last river and ripple as she shudders and multiplies and
relinquishes a long noise wet noise…

Steph comes back to her, atop her, and the two lay as one on the couch, gripping one
another, a perfect fit, Crystal’s mouth still moving but the noises softening, a warm lassitude
spreading, and she slips under warm water…

***

She wakes anxiously. Tangled in moist blanket on the couch in the quiet living room.
Dawn’s turquoise light glows at the curtain’s edges. Her hands and feet feel distant, numb, but
she shifts her heavy body, stretches, and tingles sensation ally. She is wet, slick at every pore of
her. The couch too is soaked. She smells seawater. And her. Her many parts make a rich aroma.
Raw, electric. Holy ship.

She also smells perfume? Tiff Goldsworth’s *Acrid Evenings*?

Steph McDaniels. Memories of the encounter flood her. Steph came to her on the couch.
Came in dream. Holy ship.

She rubs sticky crust from her eyes. Again she stretches her arms and legs. She lifts her
ass and stretches farther. Goddang. The most welcome pleasure suffuses her.

She can’t remember the last time she slept so well.

But then the previous night returns entirely: The Horn; Benjie and Steph; Gil Tannen-
Sterling; her pitch; Amy’s call; Josh and Henry; the storm; the death-walk home; the couch
dream.
Dread leaks through the walls. This then is her. Another day of Crystal Smith. The trailer contracts around her—slight, porous, shoddily constructed.

What’s she supposed to do next?

A car approaches the trailer, gravel crunching under tires. Piss ship. She covers herself in the the blanket, labors from the couch, and crosses to the curtain.

Mom parks the Saturn. That’s right, they’re going to see Ed this morning.

But more: a silver SUV sits before the trailer? Who…?

She hears a noise in the hallway. The bedroom door opens, and a figure stands in the dark.

Naked Steph gazes.

Crystal thinks to go to her.

But Steph points at the bedroom. “Sorry,” she says. “I’m here with Benjie.” Crystal blinks. Steph sucks in her stomach, covers her perfect breasts, and shuffles quickly into the bathroom. She closes the door behind her with a raspy scrape.
16. I Was Just Joking

Crystal, like Mom, listens very closely to Ed’s doctor.

“He’s begun breathing on his own, which is a significant improvement…”

“Ed’s awake?” Mom says.

The doctor squints. Crystal can tell he’s tired, and that he’s had this conversation before, but he’s not unkind. “No, I’m sorry, Ms. Presser—he’s still unconscious. But his condition has changed. He’s in a state we call unresponsive wakefulness. His body is experiencing sleep and wake cycles and…”

“A vegetative state,” Mom says.

“That’s right,” the doctor nods. “Today we call it unresponsive wakefulness…”

“I’m an In-Home Caregiver,” Mom says. “I’ve helped take care of folks in the vegetative state.”

“Great,” he says. “So you know what we’re talking about.”

The hospital’s fluorescent lights and antiseptic air make Crystal light-headed but she strains to focus. They stand just outside Ed’s room. Through the open door she can see him thinned and pale on the bed. His skin almost translucent in the fluorescence.

“So he’s getting better?” Crystal says. She still feels raw beneath her clothes. She can smell her self, and Steph. She hopes nobody else can. “He could, like, wake up?”

The doctor shakes his head. “It’s not out of the question, but we must keep in mind that such instances are very, very rare.” The doctor seems just a few years older than her. How’d he become who he is? Someone with a job and responsibilities and skills? “Now, a person in this condition can make involuntary actions. They could appear to move their face. They could suddenly cry or laugh. They could even open their eyes. But they aren’t ‘seeing’ anything, so to
speak. They aren’t aware of themselves or their surroundings. They remain non-conscious. The high probability is that Ed will persist in this condition.”

Mom nods. She’s squeezing her shaking hands together.

The doctor clears his throat. “Now, the thing we need to decide is what happens next. In terms of hospital care, we’ve done all we can.” He looks from Mom to Crystal. “Have you looked into the long-term care facilities near your home?”

“Yes, I know them,” Mom says. Her wet eyes tremble. “But we always promised not to stick each other in a nursing home.”

The doctor inhales. “I certainly understand those feelings,” he says. “But you want to think carefully and realistically about this. He’s going to need around-the-clock care. For loved ones, even in the best of situations, this becomes extremely exhausting and expensive…”

“I can just take him home?” Mom says.

The doctor looks to the waxy floor. “He’s ready to be discharged, yes.” He measures his response. “You have adequate room to put him up? And the time and money to care for him?”

Mom starts crying. Of course she has none of those things.

But Ed’s got a bedroom. And Crystal’s not going anywhere.

“We’ve got room,” she says. Both Mom and the doctor look at her. “I’m his roommate. I want to care for him.”

***

Crystal stands outside the Crest View trailer and feels the midday sun’s steady pressure on her face.

_I live here._
Doug Harbison’s gathered together a group of buddies to help move the hospital bed, equipment, and Ed himself into the old bedroom.

“I’ve never seen him look so relaxed,” Doug says as they wheel Ed from the van.

“Still heavier than a goddamn brickhouse,” pony-tailed Cliff Sexton grunts as they struggle Ed’s body up the narrow front steps.

“Careful there, watch his head,” Mom says at the door.

“I’ve seen this head take beatings like you wouldn’t believe,” laughs Tony Robinett, who got busted and did time with Ed.

“I’d believe it,” Mom says.

I live here. This is what I do.

Crystal’s never before been grateful for the small town’s support system. Like her dad, Uncle Ed had friends. Country rascals going gray and stooped. None of them have much but they help each other hold on. She hears them inside the trailer, laughing and coughing, trying to figure everything out. “Look, Ed!” Mom says. “You’re all back home now!”

The sun shines from the trailer’s silver trim. The sky is vast and cloudless, but the late winter air is still cool. The breeze lifts her thin hairs.

I live here. This is what I do.

Benjie went back to Los Angeles with Gil Tannen-Sterling. Stephanie disappeared without a word. Crystal talks to Benjie on the phone, feeding him the story for Fit To Pitch, but they never discuss that night in the trailer.

Under Mom’s training Crystal begins to care for Ed. He breathes on his own but remains in another world. Thin and translucent, but a concentrated weight. Crystal cleans his face and body with warm, soapy rags. Twice a day she connects and pumps formula into his stomach’s
feeding tube. She changes his diapers. Checks and cleans his catheter. She rubs and moves the long, flabby muscles of his arms and legs to keep them from atrophying. She changes his sheets and watches for bed sores.

She has never paid this much attention to the body of another.

“There you go, Crystal,” Mom says. “You know, you could be a nurse if you wanted to.”

The entire trailer comes to smell like rubber, plastic, and the traces of excrement. But that’s all right.

She sits beside Ed’s bed and studies his face. Who is he in there? Where is he? Tiny ripples on a surface of water. He is slight, and getting slighter, but she determines to keep him here. Keep him surfaced in this world.

She matches her breath to his, and thinks about floating. Like a skitter-bug atop the surface of the creek, ripples where the legs touch, floating on sensate tension.

*I live here. This is what I do.*

Money is a problem. That spring the Affordable Care Act is implemented, offering an insurance option to those like Ed with *pre-existing conditions*. But Missouri leads the vanguard of red states who oppose the Medicaid expansion, determined as hell to put a stop this *Obama-care* and make sure its underserved citizens suffer and die at the same rate they always have. One day in the Quick Stoppe, buying Diet Cokes and peanut butter, Crystal hears a guy call the ACA *nigger socialism*. Piss jesus. She grinds her teeth. The guy is morbidly obese, breathing raggedly, and will soon need some kind of emergency healthcare. She should say something but her throat clamps shut. She blasts air out her nose. We all need help and yet the powerful compel us to blame and hate each another for our pre-existing conditions.
But crafty Mom figures out how to claim Ed a small monthly benefit. As his caretaker, Crystal earns seven dollars an hour, capped at thirty hours a week. She figures it’s almost the equivalent of what she made on *Celebrity Teenager*.

And per the vague agreement he crafted with her for Ed’s movie, Gil Tannen-Sterling makes good on his promise to cover Ed’s hospital bills.

She hangs the photograph of the Traveling Hippos on Ed’s wall. She sits beside him in the evenings and says, “Ed, I’m sorry. I never stopped by. I never wrote or called. What was it you wanted to say?”

But of course he doesn’t say.

*There is a problem and the universe is trying to work its self out.*

Missouri’s so quiet. She hadn’t noticed before. In Crest View Trailer Park truck engines growl, red-faced kids or their folks might shout, trailer doors slam and screech, but always the noise becomes silence. And at night the sky opens an endless vista of stars. She’d forgotten what stars looked like. Felt like. She stands behind the trailer, adjacent to the hot tub, cold but hunkered, hands in her pockets, looking up. She breathes in the stars. Each one so many planets, so many possibilities. She imagines one who smells just like her somewhere out there looking.

*We live here.*

She shaves Ed’s giant head and while she’s at it she shaves hers too. Later when Mom sees it she gets a crestfallen look but quickly recovers, kissing Crystal on the cheek. “I guess it’s easy to take care of,” Mom says. Crystal nods.

She thinks often about watching *Celebrity Teenager*, or checking Google-Alerts for Stacey, but she does neither.
That last Christmas when Crystal wouldn’t talk to him, one of the things Ed said to her was, “Never stop writing.”

While Ed sleeps in the back bedroom, Crystal cleans his old office space. It is a tiny room she fits perfectly. She sets a twin bed beside the desk and piles it with blankets. In the army green file cabinet she hangs Ed’s empty folders just as she had found them. Above the desk she pins a notecard: *There is a problem and the universe is trying to work its self out.* On another notecard she writes: *Sometimes I wish I had never learned the language of people.*

Every morning she emerges from a brief sleep to write, by hand, in small, pooled lamplight. Her pencil presses, scratches, and scrapes the fibrous pages.

If you stand quietly in the hallway door and observe her from behind, you might see a fine mist above her head as she writes.

***

Crystal sits beside Ed’s bed. With the TV light opposite, Ed’s eyes almost seem to flicker. Like he could smirk any second, or grunt. She wishes he would.

She’s moved the TV to Ed’s dresser. On it now a muted woman pushes a large toothbrush in and out of her mouth in slow motion, eyes closed, luxuriating in the feeling, foam on her red lips. The commercial’s title reads “Colgate…Clean in the Extreme,” and then mercifully ends. Crystal could use a brush not only for the inside of her body but also her mind. She lifts the remote, un-muting the TV’s sound.

In the now familiar show bumper, space-helmeted Gil winks at the camera and says, “Sure, everybody’s got a movie, but who’s *Fit To Pitch*?” His rocket recliner shoots toward earth, leaving in its fiery trail the title *Fit To Pitch.*
Mom hurries into the room with two glasses of water. “Did I miss it?” She gives a glass to Crystal.

“It just came back,” Crystal says, craning around Mom to see the TV.

Mom sits on the other side of Ed’s bed. She rubs his blue-veined arm and says loudly, “Ed, Benjie’s show is back on.”

On the TV, FTP’s bebop horn theme and a shot of the Venice beach house establishes us. Gil says in voice-over, “Good morning, Pitchers!”

Cut to the sunlit living room, where Benjie, Dorene, Bill and Ramses sit sipping coffee.

“Good morning,” they say. Gil, wearing a silver tracksuit, stands before them at a chalkboard.

“My friends, you’ve come a long way,” Gil says. “I truly believe that sitting in this room we have four pitch-worthy properties.”

The Pitchers blink and nod, a little confused as always.

“But…” Gil says, and lets suspense hang. The Pitchers show concern. Benjie grimaces. “Hollywood studios today are not interested in a little movie here and there,” Gil says. “They are looking for longterm investments.” The Pitchers nod. Ramses raises his hand but Gil keeps talking. “Today’s studio wants a property they can grow and nurture, something they can make a part of not only our lives, but our kids’ lives, and our kids’ kids’ lives.” Gil turns to the chalkboard and writes one word in large letters. “They are looking to create a FRANCHISE.”

Dorene makes a note on yellow legal pad. Bill cracks his knuckles. Benjie chews his lip. Ramses raises his hand again.

Gil continues. “Now, I’ve asked each of you to think about how your little film…” He draws a tiny, squiggly circle, then makes an arrow. “…might become a huge franchise.” At the end of the arrow, with a flourish, he draws a large circle.
Crystal winces. The image looks like a sperm cell attacking an egg.

Gil turns to his Pitchers. “Capeesh?” They nod. Ramses says, “Capeesh.”

“Okay then,” Gil says. “Today I will meet with you one by one in The Bullpen to hear your franchise pitch.”

Gil turns to Benjie. “Benjie Lyle Presser. We know you’ve had a bit of a hard time here lately.” Benjie nods. “Ed, your beloved brother and writing partner, had a stroke.”

Cut to Benjie at Still Hospital. He sits beside Ed’s hospital bed, holding Ed’s hand. Gil continues in voice-over: “You went home to Missouri where you fell in love…” Cut to Benjie and Steph kissing sloppily in the The Horn’s nasty bathroom.

Crystal blows air out her nose.

“…and then love kicked you in the nuts,” Gil says.

Cut to Steph giving a video testimonial: “Frankly, Gil, sex with Benjie, I’m sorry to say, was like an acorn hunt.” Steph laughs. “He said to me, ‘Please don’t tell anybody, Steph, but it’s like a micro-penis or whatever.’” Gil nods consolingly at Steph.

“I swear,” Mom says, shaking her head at the TV for the thousandth time.

Crystal wishes to climb into the screen and throttle Steph. This video was called “Even a Blind Pig,” and went viral after Episode #3 “Missouri’s Secret.” The video was boundless in its crassness and cruelty—to the blind, children, Benjie, Steph, the human species, pigs, the universe. Then, another frigging show video went viral, wherein a wasted Benjie called Steph and broke down in devastated tears. One couldn’t understand a single word he said; he seemed to emit a language of pure sobbing. “Crying Benjie” instantly became a meme. Internet auteurs filmed themselves as Benjie, conducting daily business or reading well-known texts in sobs, gasps, sucks, whimpers, and moans.
On the TV now, Benjie gulps in the Venice living room. “I’d rather forget all that ever happened, Gil,” he says.

Bill Gulliver laughs while showily adjusting the crotch of his jeans.

Gil nods understandingly at Benjie. “Love hurts,” he says. “But through it all you’ve kept fighting.” Benjie half nods, not so sure. “And your Hot Tub Baby Machine keeps blowing minds. More than one Hollywood exec has said to me, ‘Gil, I don’t get it, but I think it might be amazing.’”

Dorene rubs her eyes and shakes her head. Ramses smirks.

“Benjie Presser, are you ready to turn your Hot Tub Baby Machine into a franchise?”

Red-eyed Benjie nods.

“Say what?” Gil says.

“Yes,” Benjie says. “Yes. I believe I’m Fit To Pitch.”

“Fantastic,” Gil says. “Let’s you and me hit The Bullpen.”

Crystal moves to the front of her chair. She gulps a drink of water. Come on, Benjie. Do this.

Mom leans near Ed and says loudly, “Ed, Benjie’s going in the bullpit to make your movie.”

“Shhh,” Crystal says to hush her.

“Sorry,” Mom says.

Ed’s chest rises and falls. “He can hear it,” Crystal says.

Cut to Benjie sitting slump-shouldered at The Bullpen’s shiny black table.

The Bullpen is now a moodily low-lit space; hundreds of candles on pedestals; walls hung with blood red curtains. If Gil told Art Department to give him the creepiest place possible,
they pulled it off. Against the back wall hangs the latest poster mock-ups of all four films: Benjie’s *Hot Tub Baby Machine*; Dorene’s *Shark Date*; Bill’s *The Last Christmas*; and Ramses’s *The Weightless Machine*.

In his throne, Gil crosses his legs at the knee, pyramids his fingers at his lips, and considers Benjie. “Mr. Presser,” he says. “Give me your franchise pitch.”

Benjie clears his throat. He closes his eyes. Watching the TV, Crystal also clears her throat. She’s been over this with him a thousand times. Benjie begins, “Okay, by now everybody knows the story of Tim Drummond and his five women—their magical transformation in the mists of the backyard hot-tub. At the end of *Hot Tub Baby Machine* Tim has overcome the forces who sought to vanquish him, he’s made the junior varsity basketball team, and he’s won the hearts of his babies’ mothers, marrying them in a televised ceremony watched by millions, maybe a billion global viewers. The twist is that when the babies are born—all on the same day, at the same time—they possess amazing powers. Fantastic singing powers.”

“Singing?” Gil asks.

“Right.” Crystal moves her mouth with Benjie. “They moan and wail in concert with one another. Wordless, haunting songs. A new language. *Hot Tub Baby Machine* ends with the seven babies singing while Tim, the mothers, the hospital staff, the gathered townspeople and international media—everybody in the world—listens in a trance.”

“End Episode One,” Benjie says. Exhausted, he stops. Crystal chuckles. He’s got it right so far.

From the other side of Ed’s bed Mom says, “I still don’t get it, Crystal. That doesn’t sound like a real movie to me…”

Crystal shoots air out her nose.
“Hot Tub Baby Machine Episode One,” Gil repeats, eyebrows raised. “And where does the franchise go from there?”

Benjie stands from the table. “Gil, I’m glad you asked.” He crosses to the first of two sheet-covered stands. “First, some background. In Episode Two we learn that a mysterious company called PRODUCTION has put the Drummond Septuplets under contract. Separated from their family, they grow up on a space station called The Ship, where they believe themselves the only seven creatures in the universe. But, every moment of their lives is broadcast to planet Earth, watched obsessively by billions of viewers inside fully-immersive entertainment devices called Weightless Machines. The Septuplets, naked and alone, float inside their Ship and sing haunting songs as the whole world watches them grow. The show is also called The Ship. Meanwhile, Earth is in chaos. Global food and water shortages have led to ceaseless conflict. Violent factions blame their troubles on PRODUCTION, the Weightless Machines, and the Drummond entertainment, and these factions seek to destroy PRODUCTION and The Ship, as well as one another.”

“Episode Two takes place in the year 2033, the year the Drummond Septuplets turn 18 and their contract is set to expire. We meet a young woman named Bruce Willis who grew up in Beaverton with Tim and the now-missing mothers. Willis is a troubled private detective, long estranged from Beaverton, but one day she receives a mysterious call from Gwen, one of the missing mothers, and she decides to return. Back home, Tim Drummond serves as Beaverton’s lifetime mayor and high school basketball coach, but some consider him an authoritarian figure in collaboration with PRODUCTION. Bruce Willis stumbles into a plot by a Southern Baptist extremist sect called The Last Christmas to blow up hundreds at a high school basketball game. Their goal is to eliminate Tim Drummond, send a message to PRODUCTION, and kickstart the
apocalypse. But they hadn’t planned on Bruce Willis, who teams up with Injun Joe, the school’s Indian mascot, in an effort thwart the attack.”

Gil listens to Benjie’s pitch with increased skepticism. “It’ll work, it’ll work,” Crystal pleads with the TV.

“But at the end of Episode Two something else happens. The attack in Beaverton is but one of hundreds world-wide. It turns out PRODUCTION plans a global genocidal tied to The Ship’s final broadcast.”

Benjie takes a breath. He’s sweating, exhausted. “Keep going,” Crystal urges.

Benjie says, “Can Bruce Willis save her family, her town, her planet, and her self?” He sweeps the stand’s sheet free, revealing a spotlit new poster.

“HTBM: Piss Ship,” Benjie says. “Episode Two of Three.” In the poster’s foreground the space station floats. From a window peer seven anxious, naked teenagers—four girls and three boys. Below them, planet Earth smokes and burns.

“Tell him it’s the dark sequel,” Crystal says. “The franchise bridge!” Benjie blinks, “Think of it as the dark sequel, Gil. The franchise bridge to Episode Three.”

Benjie moves to the next sheet-covered stand. He sweeps the sheet to reveal another poster: five shadow figures—women—standing before the giant, shadowed ship. The title reads HTBM: The Five.

Benjie says, “Now, in the trilogy’s final episode we..”

“Whoa, whoa, there fella.” Gil stands, an amused expression on his face, and his hands out. “Listen, you’ve already gone well over your time.”

“Let him finish,” Crystal cries to the TV.
Gil gestures at the posters. “This whole thing here needs some work, buddy. To tell you the truth it’s all very convoluted.” Is it convoluted? “But, listen, I love the seven teenagers in the space station. Tell me this, have you thought about casting?”

“I have,” Benjie said. “I think we cast this thing with young stars from different countries. That way we create an international box-office spectacle. In the lead, if we can get her, Stacey Wilde would lift this sucker into orbit.”


“Speaking of which,” Gil continues. “I have a very big surprise for you, Benjie.”

“What surprise?” Crystal and Benjie say.

Gil addresses the camera. “We all know that sometimes the heart makes us do funny things, some good, some bad. But at the end of the day, what we all want, is to feel less alone.”

Gil turns to Benjie, “I understand you’ve felt alone, Benjie?”

Dread squeezes Crystal’s chest. She steps slowly toward the TV.

“I have felt alone,” Benjie says. “I’ve felt confused and scared and alone.”

“I think somebody wants to say something to you, Benjie.”

Gil spreads his arm to the curtain, which parts to reveal Steph McDaniels. She is crying, smiling.

“No,” Crystal.

Benjie says, “Steph?”

Steph comes forward. “It’s me, Benjie. Listen, baby, I know now what I did—all the things I said—I know they was wrong. I don’t know what happened. I was just joking, but it all came out wrong.”
Steph takes Benjie’s hand. “Can you forgive me, Benjie?”

Benjie cries too. “I forgive you.”

Benjie and Steph kiss. Gil applauds. Turning to the camera, he says, “I don’t know what’s going to happen with Benjie’s movie, but I think he’s found his leading lady.”

Crystal’s head feels far away from her body. Save the viral videos, she has not seen Steph since the night of the ice storm. She’s wondered if what happened on the couch really happened, but her body misses the memory. Steph bites Benjie’s ear and he and Crystal shiver. Steph smiles perfect teeth for the camera. Benjie clutches her, weeping. Crystal hears crying in the bedroom too.

“That’s really sweet,” Mom says through tears.

“No, it’s not,” Crystal says. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. “What about the goddang movie?” she says to the TV.

In his bed Ed laughs, and Mom screams.
17. All of the Grid

Has she ever been asleep? Has she always been asleep? In the bottomless night she shudders in her bed. March’s brief, sunny afternoons are a tease. Missouri’s winter clings to the hard earth, creeps through the cracks of weak walls, and crawls quickly over your shoulders and neck, gripping your chest. Wrapped in crappy blankets she squeezes forward shivering. She imagines one of these whole-body chills that comes on and doesn’t quit; the final surge you can’t stop. Could be any night. Tonight.

Nobody hears her grunt. Nobody sees her burrow like an animal.

She’s always heard folks say *If you don’t like the weather in Missouri just wait a minute.* But every minute we’re waiting.

Nobody here to breathe her musky reek.

Wind shakes the trailer.

Something’s wrong. Wronger than usual. The trailer’s too quiet. Too cold.

Piss frigging ship. No air blows; the heater’s broke.

She sits up stiffly. Her back is swollen, throbbing. Migraine vice-grips her skull. She turns on the desk lamp. The messy notebooks on the desk. Crushed Diet Coke empties. Clothes piled in a corner. Mud-caked boots by the door. With puffy hand she grasps her phone. 4:07 AM. Did she sleep? She can’t remember going to bed. Her breath makes cold, sluggish clouds.

*Ed.*

Something’s wrong. She feels too alone.

She follows the dark hallway to Ed’s open door. The room is pitch black. Right before she flicks on his light she knows Ed Won’t be in his bed.

But there he is. His skin icy blue.
She hurries to his bedside. She leans close to his face, listening for breath.

He’s not breathing. “Ed,” she shouts.

She shakes him. The blue whale is a husk of its former self on a frigid beach. She does not will it but the memory of the middle school lunch room returns: massive Ed entering the school painted blue, shouting for Crystal in front of the whole world, a crowd who, in almost mystical unison, howl, “Sham-mooo, Sham-mooo.”

They didn’t know Shamoo was a killer whale.

“Ed!”

She checks his wrist for pulse.

She feels nothing.

She closes her eyes. Please, she prays.

There. She finds a tiny, distant throb. He’s alive.

She sits beside her uncle and weeps. She hugs him.

“Ed, please, please, please wake up. Ed, please. I need to talk to you so bad.”

The big silent hole. She can’t understand how humans have ever survived the going away of loved ones. How do you do it? It is a cruel, terrible existence. A senseless, awful curse. Why even be alive in the first place? She can’t survive without her uncle. Without her Mom. She can’t even imagine. She shunned but she can’t live without them.

She covers Ed in blankets. She goes to her room, gathers her blankets, and covers him with those too. She wraps the layers under and around him, cocooning him.

She has to fix the heater. Where Benjie showed her. Outside.

***
Trying to make as little noise as possible, she opens the trailer door. A cold wind puckers her face. She huddles behind the door, scanning the trailer park. In the distant east dawn’s grainiest beginnings gather, but her trailer crouches on the planet’s dark, downhill side.

She steps one slow foot at at time down the icy steps. Somewhere in Crest View a door wrenches open. Somebody coughs. A pallid TV light pulses in a couple of trailers. People slink inside them, watching her. She shrinks against her own trailer. With one hand against the cold wall she circles on careful, quiet steps to the dark back yard.

With a tight fist she knocks ice from the transformer box. She pries it open. Please, she prays, and flips the heater’s breaker. The trailer gasps, grinds, and then starts purring.

She imagines the warm air envelope Ed, and is glad.

The misshapen hot tub hulks in shadow. If the stupid thing actually worked, right now would be a perfect time to soak. Maybe one of these days they can all get it going.

She places a hand on the warped plywood cover and gives it a push, but it doesn’t want to move. With two hands she shoves the board and it drops heavily to the far ground.

A bunch of stuff has been stashed in the tub: several large bags of fertilizer; spools of wire; nails; duct-taped cardboard boxes; plastic containers of a dark liquid.

Fear nails her to the frozen ground. She’s no chemist but this crap looks like the makings of small bomb factory.

Billboard Terrorists. Mount Grapple Evangelical Church. Was Ed a part of something? A plot?

He may not have killed himself after all. Somebody may have killed him.

It would be very easy to do that.
The trailer rattles. Wind shakes the creek’s naked trees. Pretty soon it will be dawn, then light.

She peeks around the trailer to the neighbors; she scans the woods and creek; she sees nobody, so why is she sure she’s being watched?

She must hide this evidence.

She goes to the fallen board. It’s swollen and heavy but she manages to lift an edge and lay it against the tub. Her feet slip in the frost, her raw hands sting, but with many ragged grunts she shoves the cover back atop the hot tub.

The crime has been barely concealed. One thing’s certain: we are the work of amateurs.

Piss bloody ship. What is she supposed to do? Is she an accomplice to terrorism? She blows on her frozen hands. She studies the swollen tub. Goddamnit, Ed, you stupid, crazy frigging crank.

***

Back inside the trailer she feels grimy sweat under her clothes. Hidden by the curtain, she peers out the window. The neighbors give no sign of who sees, but the sun peeks over the horizon. In the waning dark the world looks forlorn, barely tacked together. Even a tiny blast, be it nature or bomb, would blow this trailer park and everybody in it to shreds.

She closes the curtain. She paces the living room. The trailer wobbles on its foundation.

She has to take the evidence up to the garbage cans at the top of Crest View Lane. She’ll have to do it one item at a time, past all the trailers in the dark. Impossible, but she has to. She has to get rid of it.

She opens the trailer door and starts down the steps. A brutal wind blows through the park, and she hears a loud noise. She stands still, listening.
All the way up Crest View Lane the dark trailers sag and lean, hiding shadows. She watches closely.

*There.* Three trailers up. Somebody lurks behind a satellite dish. She sees the bright tip of a cigarette flare and recede. Then the person crouches.

She hurries back inside the trailer.

She marches into Ed’s bedroom.

Behind blue-bruised eyelids Ed or whoever he is has neither grimaces nor laughs.

Was he capable of violence?

Of course he was.

She needs to talk to someone about this.

There is no one.

She gets her phone. In Los Angeles it’s 2:00 in the morning. She can’t believe she’s doing this, but she calls Benjie.

“Crystalbear,” he answers on the second ring. “God. Thank god. Listen you’re never going to…” but then his voice disappears in loud static.

“Wait, what?” Crystal says so loudly she can be heard beyond the trailer. Quieter, she says, “Benjie, what?”

“…down here all alone,” Benjie says. He slurs miserably. Frigging wasted.

“Benjie, I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

A long squall of white noise. Crystal clenches in the living room. She flips on the overhead light but it casts the room and her in too sharp relief. She turns off the light. In the darkness she sits on the couch. “Benjie, where are you?”
Benjie's voice returns. “Sorry, sorry. Can you hear me now? I’m on the beach and the wind is blowing like nuts. I just crawled under one of these lifeguard huts.”

She knows the huts—raised wood structures with ramps into the sand. Southern California’s homeless and strung out wash up against them in the night when the beach gets brutally cold and windy. She can see her uncle shivering. “What are you doing at the beach?”

“Oh god, Crystal, I don’t know. I was just trying to sort my head out. I had to get out of that house.” He has both the marble-mouthedness and strained articulation of inebriation.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know, Crystal. I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Benjie, you need to get off the beach and get somewhere warm. Right now.”

“This is my home.”

“No it’s not.”

“Oh god, Crystal. I’m so sorry.”

Every word is a terrible new hint. “What do you mean?”

“I tried. I really really tried. I did the story just like you told me to.”

He’s talking about her pitch. “Something happened on the show?”

“Didn’t you see…” A blast of wind drowns Benjie’s voice.

“Benjie, I can’t hear you.”

“…we lost,” he says. “We lost. Didn’t you see?”

We lost. The import of his words shape her mind. The last episode of *Fit To Pitch*’s six-episode season was set to air…when? She looks at her phone. In two nights. “It doesn’t air until Thursday,” she says.
“Oh yeah, I always forget. I thought you was watching. We filmed the final ceremony today. *Hot Tub Baby Machine* lost.”

A chasm cracks inside her. “Gil said we lost?”

“Yep.”

Late here in this ridiculous game with Gil she hadn’t even considered the possibility of losing. “Even with the franchise? Even with *HTBM: Piss Ship* and *HTBM: The Five*?”

“Actually, he said that’s where the whole thing got off the track. He said at first we had a good thing going, a feeling-good thing, and then it just didn’t make any sense anymore. He said when we had Tim and the girls in the hot tub we had everything. Which actually, I’m sorry, Crystal, but I agree with. The whole thing was supposed to be a comedy.”

“It is a comedy,” she says quietly.

“I don’t know,” Benjie mumbles. “Hey, man, you got a cigarette I can bum?”

She too feels the cold wind. “Who are you talking to?”

“That’s cool,” Benjie says to somebody. Then to Crystal, “What?”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Just this guy.”

“You’re with somebody else on the beach?”

“No, it’s just this guy.”

Fear worms in her heart. “Benjie you’re not supposed to be out in Venice at night.”

“No, it’s cool. I know these guys.”

Oh my god, Benjie. “Why don’t you go back to the house?”

“It’s like a mad house there. Fucking Bill and Ramses and Steph. I can’t figure anything out anymore.”
“Steph’s still there?”

“Oh yeah. You should see her, Crystal. She moved into the house and everything. She was supposed to be with me. But then she ended up Bill’s room and then she ended up in Ramses’s room too. Hell, for all know she’s in Dorene Smith’s room right now. I can’t win for losing."

“Steph’s still in the show?”

“Oh yeah. She’s like the big star now or whatever.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t know. She’s really good, actually. Everybody says the camera loves her.” Benjie starts crying. “I love her too.”

Crystal can’t even muster a breath to blow out her nose. “Benjie, whose pitch won the show?”

“Dorene Smith. Can you believe that. Shark Date? I mean, talk about a movie that doesn’t make any sense. Everything happens twice or whatever? Stupid.”

Dorene Smith. That’s a surprise. But actually, goddangit, Dorene deserved to win. Shark Date is a great movie and she was the smartest person on the show. That’s what makes her win surprising.

But Crystal thought she and Gil had an arrangement. More, caught up in writing, she had come to actually like her story. The old, heavy futility weights in her chest.

“…still there?” Benjie says, wind shredding his words.

A thin light plays at the curtain’s edge. Outside is morning. There was another whole point to this call.

“Benjie, do you know about all the stuff in Ed’s hot tub?”
“What stuff?”

“Fertilizer, wire, nails…”

“Oh yeah. That’s all his garden stuff.”

“Garden stuff?”

“Yeah. A while back he had this big plan to grow a bunch of food back there. Like daddy used to do actually. Ed said he was trying to get all of the grid.”

Gardening equipment.

“Off the grid?” she says.

“Right.”

What’s wrong with her? The trailer is a crumpled aluminum can, and she the spoilt contents.

She and Benjie listen to the wind howl in two worlds at once.

After awhile he says, “Crystal, I’m really, really sorry.”

“For what?”

“I know you don’t like me.”

She hollows. “That’s not true, Benjie. I love you.”

“No, I know you’ve always been embarrassed about me and mad at me. And it’s okay. I understand. I’m sorry.”

Crystal sinks into the couch. Her throat tightens, and tears gather there. “Benjie, god, I’m sorry. I know I’m mean. I’m so frigging dumb. But really, I love you so much. I love you so, so much, Benjie. Seriously. You’re the coolest, funniest, best uncle anybody could have.”

“Really?”

“Really. I wouldn’t know what to do without you.” She realizes she means that.
“Crystal, I always only wanted to help everybody. I’m sorry I keep fucking up. I don’t know how to do things. I don’t know what’s wrong with me…”

That sound with Benjie—it’s the surf. The beating sea. She’s been to the beach at night. She’s stared at the sea. She almost entered it.

“Benjie, please get up and go back to the house. Please. For me.”


Then Benjie mumbles to somebody off-phone, “What? Walk ahead of you? Off the beach?”

A terrible dawning in her. The stark bottom of vertiginous worlds. “Benjie, who are you talking to?”

“It’s just this camera-man from the show.”
18. PRODUCTION Strikes Back

Something unexpected happened in 2033, the year the Drummonds turned 18 and their contract was set to expire. As the end of the *The Ship*’s feed neared, viewers—an estimated seventy-five to ninety percent of Earth’s Grounder population—experienced terrific distress. PRODUCTION promoted the date as it had no prior feed event. Thus, at the end, the *The Ship*’s audience included not only full-time feeders but also the occasional feeders, those who had weened themselves from the feed and those who, like myself, claimed to hate the feed. On that last day almost all of us on planet Earth sank into Weightless Machines to see what might happen.

*The Ship*’s final episode was called “The Grand Armada.”

That morning the Drummond Septuplets came together in the The Ship’s central swimming amphitheater, site of their grandest spectacles. Long limbs and hair akimbo, Stacey in the middle, they floated in an hypnotic tangle. But they weren’t singing as they usually did; rather, they emitted a multipart, sonorous vibration. The collective body of them vibrated with increasing frequency as they nuzzled one another, their heavy eyelids closed and shiny, their mouths making little stimulated shapes, their minds inward, shared. And the vibrations were shared by every feeder in every Weightless Machine on Earth. Something strange was happening. Nerve bundles in the very core of us keened. With little kicks here and there of the feet and hands the Drummond mass began to spin, condensing tighter and tighter into a thrumming, electric, body-to-body ball.

Like the rest I lost my self in the Drummond’s primal pod. This account is the closest verbal approximation I can make. We became the Drummonds, and the Drummonds us. We were all weightless, floating in water, a kind of age-old coming to be, dusky blue and dark grey,
body temperature. Our eyes opened and we saw shafts of light cut the water around us. We were a tiny whale suckling our mother, surrounded by other suspended calves and mothers, fluid moving through and around us. We sensed a great body of us stretching into the distance, hundreds of others. The whales at the great pod’s edge swam in anxious, quickening circles. Centered in the pod we were still and protected. The dark waters around us filled with light, becoming a translucent space. We were near the water’s surface and at once we became aware of another presence. A boat’s dark shape floated on the surface, and from that boat faces watched us. A group of naked men. I think we sensed something was terribly wrong but an enchanted calm held us. The men’s faces expressed a mystical delight, and before we knew what we were doing we swam toward them. We pushed our nose from the water, and saw them clearly. Seven men dirty and exhausted. Speechless. One came forward to touch our forehead. One scratched our nose with the tip of his harpoon.

We should have done something, but I don’t know what we could have done. It was already too late.

The tumult at the distant edge of our pod pitched. We understood there were other boats, other men, and that several of us were mortally injured. The mass of whales thrashed and fought, pushing nearer us in the middle. We wondered suddenly where our mother us. We kicked from the boat, dove deeper into the water, and there she was, looking for us. But a warning sound carried through all of us, and just as we neared mother, quickening our pace, the great frenzy of our pod crushed us. Disorganized and screaming, we tried to flee. The water smelled of milk and blood. Monstrous fear. Whales were being wounded all around us. A terribly wounded whale tangled in a long rope thrashed among us, its rope whipping a razor sharp harpoon that cut and sliced us. The water became unbreathable with blood. We were cut off from mother, crushed
skin to skin, being cut again and again. We felt our skin tearing, parting. Every feeder on planet Earth kicked inside her Weightless Machine, reached, fought, but there was no getting free. We were bleeding out. Dying. A great final surge come over us, a moment of clarity wherein we were off the feed, we were back outside The Ship, inside our selves, but it was too late. We tried to breathe but instead of breath a black wave rose, and we were under, and then we were gone.

In this way PRODUCTION nearly eliminated human life from planet Earth. Billions died that day inside their Weightless Machines. The last war wasn’t even a war at all; they just shut everybody off with the flick of a single switch.

***

It’s weird that nobody ever asked about the Drummond Mothers. In retrospect their disappearance is striking; one would think they would have had something to say about relinquishing their newborn children to the show and PRODUCTION. Before the children knew anything, they were taken from their mothers and placed on their own, alone, inside the near-orbit space station recently converted by PRODUCTION into a living, fully-enclosed, billion-eyed cell. Or, as the Drummond Siblings know it, home. According to the press, Tim and “his wives” struck the deal with PRODUCTION, eager to be a part of this new development in human entertainment. And the five mothers, no longer mediated phenomena, ceased, in effect, to exist. As far as I or anyone knew. But then Gwen Drummond, who I’d never forgotten from our time together in Beaverton High School, reached out to me.

As I was to learn from Dorene, Gwen, and the others, they’d worked very hard—from quite early in the The Ship’s run—to halt the feed and reclaim their children. They called themselves, as the other survivors later would, The Five.
I wouldn’t make it. I guess I always knew I wouldn’t. I was just a grizzled detective with a giant, dying fish in her stomach, a fish always crying for another drink or taste. But at the very end of “The Grand Armada” I had another vision: the five middle-aged mothers—Dorene, Gwen, Dessie, Llorona, and Magdalena—pilot a low-orbit spacecraft above the dark, tomb-silent planet Earth. Before them appears The Ship. They nose up and dock to the space station. Heavily armed, the universe throbbing like a heartbeat around them, The Five prepare to board the many-eyed ship that has for the past eighteen years enclosed their children.
The bedroom smells like rubber, plastic, and soured body. Slowly, carefully, Crystal removes Ed’s soiled diaper. With a warm, soapy rag she cleans the pale folds of him. Of course she’d never had to see Ed’s penis before—his or anyone’s, thank god; in that way she was luckier than many young girls—but his penis has now almost completely retracted into his body. Really, such a transformation would do all men good.

“I’m sorry,” she says to him. “I misunderstood. That happens to me a lot. I’m sorry—it turns out you’re not a terrorist after all. Just a weird hippie.”

She lifts and washes his pale limbs. For being so thin, he remains heavy—a dense weight. She rolls him over to clean his creased back.

“Thank you for always helping me and mom when you did. For helping with rent and fixing our place up. Thank you for picking me up from school. I’m sorry about those a-holes.”

The vivid veins and arteries of him are blue and red. A remarkable complex.

“Thank you for trying to talk to me. I know it’s hard.”

Slowly, carefully, Crystal connects the formula bag to Ed’s stomach tube. She works the pump. The milky liquid always looks fulfilling. She too needs more vitamins and nutrients.

“What were you going to plant in the garden?”

“We lost Fit To Pitch.”

“Nobody’s ready for The Last Romantic Comedy.”

She finishes morning care. Mom will come later today, after work, and they will change these bedsheets. She sits in the bedside chair and studies Ed. He seems to shine in his cheeks and eyes today. It’s not just that he’s lost weight and his face is relaxed; he looks like the younger
version of himself, shed the strain and exhaustion. Ready to laugh without derision or mania. She would love to hear him laugh again.

Joy. That’s the element both Fret and Ed exude in the Traveling Hippos photograph. And it suffuses Crystal’s best memories of Ed. Benjie too. At their purest they possess wild joy.

She’s not sure she’s ever felt joy. What happened to her?

She realizes the bedroom is a dank, stuffy cave. The entire trailer is. She crosses to Ed’s window and swipes open the heavy curtain. Morning light fills the room. She never noticed that the rising sun shines directly into the trailer.

The sunlight surrounds them, brightening every corner, cleaning the room.

Ed seems to float above his bed.

She closes her eyes. She too seems to hover.

In the silence blooms a harmonic sounding. A coming-to in every particle of matter. She feels she has been here before—the strongest déjà-vu she’s ever felt. Ed in the bed, her by the window, and the sounding.

An urge-to in every thing.

It’s Stacey. Young Stacey on *Show It To Them!*—eyes closed, face raised, sounding like a wolf, a bird, and a whale. Calling.

She relishes her vibration. Imagines responding.

Then the sounding ceases. She slowly opens her eyes.

It was her phone. The ringtone she’d assigned Stacey Wilde. She’d never heard that ring.

She hurries into the living room. The phone’s on floor where she must have dropped it.

*Missed Call: Stacey.*

This too has happened before. Where and when?
She hits call back, and crosses to the window. This curtain too she sweeps open, ripping free the painters-tape seal. Light blossoms in the room. Gives definition and clarity to the carpet, the couch, the kitchen table and kitchen. To Crystal. She circles the living room while the phone rings. Once, twice. Please.

“Crystal?” Stacey’s voice is dusky, close.

“Stacey?” The word sounds weirds on her lips. Like hearing her voice for the first time. It too is dusky.

“Oh my God,” Stacey breathes. “It’s like a miracle you’re here right now.”

Crystal takes a chance. “You’re the miracle.”

“C, what happened to you?”

C! “I came back to Missouri.”

“Why?”

Why? Outside the window icicles hang from the trailer’s eves. In the sunlight they tick tiny water drops.

“My uncle had a stroke and I’m helping take care of him.”

“Are you coming back?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Crystal, please, you’ve got to come back. I need you.”

She can’t be sure this is happening—words whose shape she had sensed, wished for, but never heard articulated. She can feel the blood circulating in her hands, her legs, her head. No longer numb and puffy, the nerve bundle near the base of her spine lifts her tail.

“I quit the show,” Crystal says. She doesn’t know what else to say.

“Right on. Listen, man, I just fucking quit the show too.”
“Really?”

“For real, C. I mean, fuck… that… shit. When we went on hiatus because of those poor P.A.s, I couldn’t believe how good it felt to be off the air. It was like the best thing that happened to me in years. Then we went back and I swear I wanted to kill myself. Especially without you there, C. I mean, seriously, you were the only one holding that set together. That fucking cocky ass-drop Freddie and that bitch First A.D Amy…”


“What?”

“I call Amy The Worst.”

Stacey laughs. The ringing, body laugh with vibrato and depth. Crystal’s favorite sound.

“That’s fucking hilarious, C. Seriously, you are the funniest motherfucker I ever met. Why aren’t you doing stand-up?”

“Actually that’s something I always wanted to do. But I can’t get in front of people.”

“Right. Right. You’re a writer.”

“What?”

“You’re a writer. You have to do your work away from the needling eyes of people. You have to think about what it is you want to say rather than just shit out the mouth in front of people all the time.”

That’s actually true. Crystal never thought about it like that.

“Seriously, we’re all just mouth-shitting on each other. It’s burying us. We can’t even smell it or see it because we’re just acclimated or something. I don’t know. It’s something I’ve been thinking about.”

“The words come before being.”
“What?”

“Rather than an element of being, a kind of sounding or clear interface with one another, our words are often a nervous defense against silence. Or unthinking, automatic responses generated by misunderstanding, mistrust, agitation, and anger. Fear too, I think. Mostly fear. We savage each other, and it begins with words. Rather than accept the abyss that is both between and within us—maybe listen to it, grow into it—we stave it off with endless, knee-jerk reactions. And the words only increase misunderstanding, the distance and anger between us. Each of us is convinced that I and I alone get it, whatever the frig it is, while certain nobody else gets it. We make accusations and judgments and conclusions that are always incomplete, if not entirely incorrect. It’s another thing each of us thinks everybody else does, but that we our self would never do. Our memory—terribly faulty in any event—is long when it comes to the other, but short it comes to the self. It’s like we’re only half here. Half being. Or not being. Unconscious and mouthing off. An endless stream of mouth-shitting on everyone and everything, while feeling mouth-shitted on. An endless, aggregating madness. Or something. I don’t know. Actually, I don’t know.”

“Madness. That’s right.”

Crystal knows Stacey’s standing on her balcony, before the city and sea.

She smells like a river yearning toward that sea.

“I love the way you say things,” Stacey says. “It’s weird that I keep thinking about you.”

Crystal feels her spine’s pitched vibrato bloom through the top of her legs and into her chest. Her hands tingle. Every hair grows, reaching. “I was thinking about you too,” she says.

“Really? You never let on. I thought you didn’t like me. You kept a distance.”
Deja-vu. Crystal sees one of her selves at the edge of a room, all eyeballs, eyeballing everyone. One time Ed showed her, for reasons that made zero sense at the time, how to handle your self in a brawl. He said to back into a corner where no one could get behind or surprise you, make a strong base of your legs (he slapped each of his thick thighs as he demonstrated the position), square yourself, lift the fists, and you’re ready to take all comers. He smiled his gap-toothed smile.

She’s been braced at the edge of an imagined bar brawl her entire life.

“Which to be honest was actually refreshing,” Stacey continues. “You wouldn’t believe the endless fawning and sycophancy in my encounters.”

Crystal would believe it.

“When you didn’t come to my Christmas party I really figured you hated me.”

Crystal becomes aware of multiple realities. “They wouldn’t let us into the party.”

“Who?”

“The doormen. They sent our limo home.”


“I don’t know.”

“Well, look, whatever. It was an awful, embarrassing party and I’m really glad you didn’t see me.”

Again, silence. But a fertile silence.

“C, listen, there’s this thing that came up, something really fucking weird, and I need somebody’s help. I didn’t know who to ask. But I kept thinking of you.”

She yearns. “What thing?”
“There’s this TV show called *Fit To Pitch*…”

She’s a universe of thrumming parts. A thrumming part of universes. She floats weightless, she listens…

“…I’m sure you haven’t seen it. I remember you being all proud you don’t watch TV. Anyway, somebody showed it to me—it’s a shitty little thing, a reality-TV show about terrible movie pitches or whatever. But there’s this one guy on there who has a story he apparently pitched me in? The dude’s weird as hell, some kind of strange hick, and I can’t figure him out. The story almost doesn’t make any sense, it’s weird as hell. But for some reason I keep thinking about it. I think I actually really like it. It’s really messed up. Dark and funny. I think I love it, actually. And I want to get the movie. I want to make it. My name’s still attached to *Celebrity Fucking Teenager*, and they’re shooting the show with Stiff Goldsworthy like it’s still me. So I’ve got all this money rolling in and no time commitments and I want to make something good. But I need help. This hick’s story needs work. I need a writer I can collaborate with, and I keep coming back to you, C. How funny and mad you are. So, yeah, listen, sorry I’m all rambling this morning, I’ve been awake for a bunch of days. But I’m trying to option this movie. And I want you to write it. Maybe even direct it? I remember you went to film school, right? It’ll be the weirdest movie anybody ever saw. Do you think you could do that? Would you want to do that?”
20. Little Tramps

Her plane circling Los Angeles, anxiously awaiting the go-ahead to land, Crystal feels something is wrong. This isn’t news in itself; she’s sensed things are not right her entire conscious life; the habit of thought fits, as they say, like a glove. But she doesn’t trust the gross frigging glove. It’s stained, sticky, and stinky; the very image nauseates her, like she swallowed it black and oily. Looking down on the city from her small window seat she would like to enter new possibility glove-less.

But *The Big Dang* rumbles with a bad feeling.

Firstly, she’s sure there will be no ride awaiting her. Stacey said she’d send a car to the airport, and that car would whisk Crystal to West Hollywood, to the Atlantis, where she has a room waiting in Stacey’s penthouse. And she wants so strongly to be there, to be a living part of that mysterious space. Her stomach tightens at the thought, sends electric tickles to her limbs. The wish is overwhelming, has come in unbidden surges since Stacey’s phone call. Crystal glances at the middle-aged, modestly tailored businessman beside her and feels guilty for her thoughts. Can he sense the chemical tempest in her? Can he see the sweat drenching her slacks and flannels? Can he smell her soured, sweet fruit? Oh, that’s disgusting. But no, of course, staring at his laptop, Men’s Wearhouse gives nothing away. Neither of them have a clue about the other, or ever will.

She blows air out of her nose. She hates these cramped seats.

She has twenty-seven dollars cash to her name, money Mom lent her, which won’t even cover a cab from LAX to West Hollywood. Once again she travels on the vague hope of a deal, a job more wish than promise. If Stacey says they’ll make the movie does that mean they’ll make the movie? Of course not.
But Stacey bought this plane ticket. And said come.

Six years ago, flying to L.A. for film school, Crystal was so glad to be leaving Silas, but she looked down on this metal and concrete metropolis with a new terror. She wondered how one becomes a person who lives in the city, a person who gets around and does things. But slowly she came to know the roads, the areas of town, and some of the industry’s ways; in a sense she lived there.

Now she wonders how one becomes a person among people.

Los Angeles is an unbelievably vast erector set. Man-children came, claimed the valley from fisher-people and farmers, and proceeded to place one massive piece on another in every direction, one day on another, one generation on another, and the teeming grid grew. The weather and light was like a dream, made for the camera, made for the twentieth century. Quick-stepped, squinty men erected sets, pointed their lens, and told expressive actors to dangle perilously from clock-faces and steep buildings, to point their guns and shoot, and to slip their dresses off their shoulders, god, yes, just like that. Lower. Look back at us. Just like that. God. Your skin and other private parts in the light. “Look,” Hollywood said. “Look.” And everybody did. Increasingly everybody wanted to be where they thought they looked, and what they thought they saw.

The city seems way too heavy for the valley. Everybody jokes about it, but the shelf really could drop away at any moment, dissolve into the sea. It’s not a matter of if but when.

She too is a temporary precipice. Her mind reaches for purchase.

If she could just make it to Stacey’s place, make it to Stacey, that’s enough for now. After that…whatever. Yes, things will go wrong. Things will go away. We will disappear. But in the meantime her and Stacey could be something to each other? Figure something out?
There is a problem and the universe is trying to work its selves out.

She carries the photograph of Fret and Ed in the chest pocket of Ed’s flannel shirt. The two of them post-sounding; wet with sweat, breathless and beaming. Excited, electric. Eyes bright seeds.

An urge-to in every thing.

Right now Crystal Lorene Smith is not of anywhere. What might she be beyond both Silas and Los Angeles?

At the airport in Kansas City, holding her child tightly, crying as she always does but not tragically or despondently, her tears instead a fertile blessing, Mom had said, “You amaze me, Crystal. You always have. Feel good. Feel strong. There’s a whole lot of us who need people like you to see the world in new ways.”

Hope, Crystalbear. Look and listen closely. Compose.

***

Lined up in the plane’s aisle, the passengers are relieved to be aground but already impatient and agitated, ready to go, to get. They come as close as they can to pushing without pushing. Mind pushing. Breaths heaved. Eyes rolled. Phones grabbed, glowing, and getting fingered. They say to the devices, “Are you there?” or “Where are you?” or “I’m here.” Crystal hugs her single carry-on, the Silas High School duffel bag with a quilt pattern she’d sewn over the genocidal celebration of Injun Joe’s severed head.

Leaving the plane she nods and smiles to the flight crew who nod and smile back. She just hopes somebody will be at the top of the terminal. She doesn’t know what to look for.

Exiting the accordion ramp-way Crystal scans the waiting crowd. Every head on a raised neck looks for the one; eyes meet eyes with disappointment before moving to the next.
Standing back from the crowd is a small man in a trim black suit and black derby. A bushy mustache twitches on his face. He holds a sign that contains one large blue letter: C.

Crystal laughs out loud. Blood blooms in her cheeks. Relief. Stacey sent somebody after all. She pads toward the strange chauffeur, raising her paw in embarrassed greeting. She’s not sure how to treat service.

But as she nears something seems to be off about this guy. The mustache flickers and moves, dancing really, manipulated by its nearly hidden face. She hesitates.

A smile opens beneath the mustache. It cannot help itself. And as in dream, Crystal knows that mouth. The guy flicks the sign away and performs a soft-shoe tap dance. His elbows point out, he dances closer to her. Comes to her. “C,” he says, “You shaved your head.”

The voice warm and spirited. Resonant.

Stacey.

Stacey removes her derby to reveal her own shaved head. Crystal smiles. As she wishes it, Stacey floats right up to her. “C,” she breathes, “You look hot,” and her welcome lips graze the corner of Crystal’s waiting mouth.

Crystal drops her bag and enfolds Stacey. In one fluid movement they are kissing, kissing, Stacey’s tongue in her mouth and hers in Stacey’s. Everybody around them disappears, the airport disappears, the city. Crystal and Stacey a many-mouthed, sensational entity. Crystal always wondered if she even knew how to kiss, but it turns out she does.

Pressed to one another time disappears. She hears a growing sound. Stacey hums as they kiss, and Crystal realizes she hums too. Their body soundings join, course through Crystal. She lifts Stacey closer, holding her tightly under the ass, and Stacey’s legs wrap around her, clench her tightly. Stacey’s face is now above Crystal’s, so close, so wet and alive and ready. Animal
eyes, all instinct. Crystal pushes her face into the musky warmth of Stacey’s neck—her moist, aromatic soil—as Stacey twists into her; curling, nuzzling, both bodies sighing and growling, they breathe one another deeply.

“God, you smell so good,” Stacey whispers. “You still smell the same. Your smell always drove me wild.”

Longed-for shapes fill; words of dream. “What does it smell like?” she whispers.

“Like a river, C. Rich, wet river and earth.”

Time suspends.

Slowly, maybe over centuries, she returns to the airport’s thrumming din, people. Somebody is clapping, another is whistling. She turns to look and a thick string of saliva stretches between her mouth and Stacey’s. She wipes her mouth on Stacey’s shoulder. A few people stand and stare openly at them, like trying to figure something out.

Stacey’s hand travels her spine, rubs the top of her bristly head. Stacey’s nails tickle the back of her scalp, and ecstatic pathways tremble. She laughs loudly, her face arching upwards.

“Do we look like the Manson girls right now?” Crystal says, and Stacey’s laugh as she clutches and falls into Crystal is the strongest, most ringing sound in this universe.

“Let’s go home,” she says.
21. Atlantis W. Hollywood
22. Dawn Saboteur

She’s suspended in shallow water. She doesn’t move. If she moves the whole world might change.

She’s learned to breathe without breathing. Without moving.

Drops of rain on the water. Above her. Raining. The world moving. The water vibrates her body.

She tries to not move. She doesn’t open her eyes.

The water smells like her. Like blood.

She’s wounded and doesn’t move.

The panic is ancestral memory. Nonverbal flashes of anxiety, terror. The massacre. She remembers now, and cannot stop the memory.

Where are the others?

She was with the others when everything went wrong. When the world changed.

There had been a boat above her. She moved toward it. She nosed out of the water. One of the men scratched her with his harpoon. Mother sounded for her, and she descended.

Warning sounded from the pod’s outer edges. Other boats. Panic grew, coming rapidly closer.

The water boiled with blood and bile.

Everyone was cut. She was cut. Deeply. She was pushed, and like that she swam, but slowly she gave out.

Her mother’s gone.

She lost them.

She wonders where the boat went.
Where Mother went.

She floats in shallow water. She doesn’t move.

The rain falls harder now. The water agitates her body. She bleeds out. The water rings where rain strikes. A ringing everywhere.

There’s water where her face is, and then her face. Slowly she coalesces. Crystal. She’s in the broad bed of Stacey’s master bedroom. The room is dark.

Her phone was ringing, the old belling landline, but it has stopped.

Her limbs feel saturated. Her eyes swollen. She labors breath from her clogged nose.

This bed’s sheets are the nicest she has felt; like a cool, loose second skin.

Her arm seeks the bed’s other side.

She is alone.

Where is Stacey?

Wasn’t there a clock or something in this room? A nightlight? Nothing now but palpable, heavy darkness.

Even at the edges of the big window’s curtain there is no light. No light under the door from the hallway. The penthouse is tomb still, silent. Fear wells in her. She can’t move. Her feet and hands are distant things, numb, weighted, almost another’s.

When was her phone ringing?

When last was she alive?

She stares where the ceiling fan would be, if this room had a ceiling fan. She closes her eyes, and breathes. Stacey’s shown her stretches and breathing exercises. Long breaths, slow, in through one nostril, circle the body, and out the other nostril.

Relax your body, Stacey said. You’re always clenched. Always holding it in.
Don’t hold it in.

Strengthen your core but don’t clench the rest.

This is why your back and head kills you.

Smile while you stretch. Open-mouthed. I love your teeth.

Feeling returns to her limbs.

Was she wounded?

She sits up in the bed. She’s naked. Has never been this naked. For three days she has not worn clothes. She and Stacey have lived alone in the top floor of the condominium high-rise, and, miraculously, no one else has come.

But now she wants to cover her body. She stands from the bed, and wraps one of the slick sheets around her.

“Stacey?” she says, trying out her voice. Weirdly doubled and thin, it doesn’t quite sound like hers.

And in its wake nothing. No sound responds.

She tries the bedside lamp, but it doesn’t work. With her hand she follows the wall to the light switch, but it too doesn’t work. She follows the wall to the room’s big window. She pulls back the curtain.

Beyond the balcony the entire Los Angeles basin is dark. No light in any building, no headlight on the innumerable streets. She sees the outlines of structures, the silhouettes of grids, but no sign of light or life.

“Stacey,” she says loudly, and her voice scares her.

There is no sound in the apartment.
She gropes to the dresser she’s been using. Her phone sits at the top, next to her notebook. She powers her phone and the screen comes on. The light hurts her eyes and she turns from the phone. When her eyes adjust she looks again.

*Missed Call: Benjie.*

Using the phone’s light, she leaves the bedroom. The long hallway is dark. The carpet is like soft fur beneath her feet, the back of a big animal, silent and tensed. The penthouse’s broad circular living room is dark, as is the surrounding balcony window. Off the living room, the kitchen and dining room are also dark and empty.

“Stacey?” she says.

She tries to call Benjie back but hears only silence. No service. The phone only works on its remaining battery. The memory of the phone ringing as she woke is distant; she doesn’t believe it. She turns the phone off and lets her eyes readjust to the dark penthouse.

She slides open the glass balcony door. The air of southern California, especially at this towering height, feels like nothing at all. The temperature of body. The temperature of being. A pleasant sea. She and Stacey stood out here at night, naked, laughing, and together. Stacey went down on her here, repeatedly, discovered and moved her, and she never felt so alive. She cried out over the city, sounding again and again, her rising sounds louder than Los Angeles, and Stacey said, *Yes.*

*God, you smell so amazing. You taste delicious. I wish to crawl inside you and live forever.*

But tonight Stacey’s gone and the city, from the mountains to the sea, is a black grid. She realizes she’s never been able to hear the wind up here over traffic noise and the city’s other thrumming dins, but now she hears a low howl as the wind comes over the balcony, lifts her bed-
sheet, and tickles her soft bristles. The sky is full of stars. Real stars. Pulsing washes of them, bright blurs and blobs of them. Los Angeles’s first stars in a long time.

She approaches the rail. She looks hesitantly below. Forty-three vertiginous floors down, Sunset Boulevard’s an unlit ribbon where no cars or people move. She dizzies. Has to step back from the rail.

She wraps her sheet tighter. She’s never felt like this before; peace and fear distributed evenly in her body. Sensate at the very front of her, she can feel she and the world being.

Inexplicably she wants a cigarette. With her phone she lights the glass patio table, knowing a pack of Stacey’s smokes will be there, and there it is, along with the lighter in the braided leather case. Stacey would not have left the penthouse without her smokes and lucky lighter.

The black lighter case had seemed gross to Crystal, sticky, stained. But now she picks it up and its tiny leather braids are smooth, fitting perfectly her fingers. Fret would’ve had a hippie lighter case like this.

Crystal knocks a cigarette free and pins it to her lips. Ed-like, quick. She lights and inhales. Turning again to the shadowed city she exhales a long, slow cloud, and watches it rise, then blow away. A chemical buzz blooms in her. The short hairs of her head grow, the thin fur of her arms and legs stand.

It strikes her that she might be dead. A nervous sensation in her stomach, just above her sex. Sadness begins to overwhelm her and she takes another drag of cigarette.

She should be able to have a smoke out here with Fret and Ed, no? Finally talk to them, be with them. She turns to the dark living room knowing they will be standing just beyond the glass, watching her.
But all she sees is her reflection, a hulking shape before the silent, empty living room. The entire world’s silent and empty save her and the wind, which at her thought again picks up, ruffling the sheet around her.

Where is Stacey? Crystal follows the balcony around the penthouse. In recent days she’s thought how much Ed would love this balcony: a deck that goes all the way around the house. That’s what he wanted to do at her and mom’s trailer. Like the one at Grandpa Lyle’s place, the home Ed lost. She can hear Ed’s rumbling laugh. This Atlantis W. Hollywood penthouse balcony is near the top of a world. He would look at her and smile open-mouthed, his face and hair electric, and he would say, “Holy shit, Crystal. Can you believe it?” She sucks her cigarette and the smoke trails her as she circles the great balcony over the city.

Behind Atlantis W. Hollywood the Hollywood Hills are dark and dense. Now they’re just the hills. Who or what moves in the thick undergrowth?

Small feet on cool concrete, she slowly circles back to the glass table. Stacey’s smokes and lighter. The silent cellphone.

In the night sky, the stars are bright, cold things, distant yet close. Twinkle twinkle little blob.

And orbiting just above the Earth, she knows, is the Drummond Space Station, The Ship.

This is Earth after “The Grand Armada.”

This is Episode Three in real time. HTBM: The Five.

Thus silent Weightless Machines populate every dark building and home, and the dead body housed inside each will turn, over time, to dust in the machine. Planet-wide, the Grounders have been snuffed.
Earth reset. Earth now a noiseless resource for another universe or dimension. She still doesn’t get it all. It’s a dark shape in her mind, the outline of a mechanism. Mechanisms.

Somebody turned us off.

But up there at The Ship, right now, The Five are docking. They board the space station to look for their children. They knew PRODUCTION’s plan, and they tried to get to The Ship on time, believing their mission planned, but PRODUCTION anticipated their actions, and quickened its own.

We see each of The Five in close-up, their eyes grim and focused, their bodies lean and taut, and their heads shaved. Gwen, mother of Stacey, haggard, one eye a useless black marble, readies her gun. Her working eye cries. Dorene, mother of the twins Twyla and Letty, her ebony face lined in raised scars, puts a hand on Gwen’s shoulder, and asks if she’s ready.

Yes, Gwen says.

Dorene looks at The Five, and they back. Words are unnecessary. Dorene nods, and they nod. They place their oxygen masks over their faces, and grip their weapons. Dorene opens the hatch to The Ship and leads her team in.

The space station is silent, dark. They follow a long hallway. They’ve studied The Ship’s Weightless Machine feed for this day, and they know the space station’s basic layout. They move quickly toward the Dormitory and Swimming Room.

PRODUCTION’s plan was brilliant. Even as The Ship overwhelmingly became the Grounders’ Weightless Machine feed of choice, many of them believed the show a hoax, filmed at some secret location on Earth. Over the years there were many competing theories as to where on Earth the Drummond Septuplets were actually housed and the show shot. Thus, competing groups like The Last Christmas and anarchist Brainfux carried out relentless bombing
campaigns, each seeking for different ideological reasons to eliminate the feed’s source. But the feed always continued. The bombings only led to counter-bombings and counter-counter-bombings. Really, one could say these external circumstances—global discord, mutual destruction—were part of the show’s mythology and appeal.

Meanwhile, *The Ship* really was orbiting the Earth, and the Drummond Siblings really did live there, naked and alone and self-involved, untouchable song-makers swimming and sounding in space, their every gasp, laugh, and mutual inquiry caught on camera. They were the shiny, cursed apples of Earth’s relentlessly feeding eye.

The Five move quickly yet carefully through *The Ship’s* dark corridors. They know the siblings are here, but they do not know what kind of security measures have been programmed into the *The Ship*, or who else might be on board.

The Five enter the Dormitory. In rotating shifts, the children slept in pods which look just like Weightless Machines. This schedule left some of them available at all times to sing, swim, and be viewed. They believed their mutual being relied on always continuing their songs.

The Five check, but the sleeping pods are empty. They continue through the *The Ship’s* narrow corridors, each of them breathing, being, and thinking thoughts unknowable to the others.

They come to the Swimming Room’s hatch. This was *The Ship’s* central amphitheater, the site of the sibling’s greatest spectacles. Dorene looks back at her peers. They silently brace themselves, and then Dorene opens the hatch.

Inside, piled on the floor, are the seven teenage Drummond Siblings. Grief swelling their throats, the mothers run to their children. They untangle the too-cold bodies from one another and check vital signs.
“The Grand Armada” was the final swim of the siblings too. They likely never knew. Holding the bodies of their children, a great cry rises from The Five, a cry that fills but won’t be heard beyond The Ship.

Looking up at the night sky from the balcony of Atlantis W. Hollywood, Crystal is overcome with vertigo. She reels from the balcony railing, reaching clumsily for the table. She sits, breathless. Her head and chest pound, her vision contracts. The entire condominium high-rise seems to wobble, threatening collapse. She leans between her knees and vomits at her feet, gagging on the taste of cigarette and bile.

At first she thinks she imagines the great rushing sound, but then she alerts to a terrible shaking of the building and earth. The sea on the western edge of the city rises in a towering wall, the shiny glints in its dark surface numerous as the stars above, as implacable, and the cataclysmic wall of water seems briefly to freeze in time before it comes crashing over the city.

Crystal tries one last time to stand. Her last sensation is that of vomit slick between her toes, the bed sheet sliding down her body. She puts a hand out but there is no hold. She falls as the building falls in an instantaneous roaring rush.

***

It emerges from sleep a consciousness with no self, no body, knowing only reaction, fear. A room dark without definition. And then mechanisms work: she returns, first to her body, the room and bed, and then to a Crystal. She is in Stacey’s big bed, at the top of Atlantis W. Hollywood, and it seems to be night. She reaches across the bed and finds nothing, no companion.

“Stacey?” she tries to say.
She clears her throat and tries to sit up in bed, but her body’s numb, difficult to control.

“Stacey?”

The room, and penthouse beyond, is silent. The dream’s fear throbs distantly in her limbs.

The bed sheets are so sleek as to feel wet. Then she realizes they are wet. She pushes the plush bed cover off, and places her hand in a pool of water around her. The smell hits her. Piss.

Oh god, she peed in the bed. In Stacey’s bed. Frig jesus. It’s been a while since she had an accident, but suddenly she is all accident. Mortified, feeling like she doesn’t want to be caught, she climbs from the bed and sweeps the sheets, blanket, and mattress cover into a pile. She lifts the sodden pile and looks around the room. She has no idea where to put them. Of all the penthouse’s many appointments, a simple laundry room is not one, which baffles, even angers her.

The clothes hamper is in the closet. She stuffs the disgusting evidence in the hamper, and closes the closet door.

She stands naked in the dark bedroom, unsure what to do next. She has been here three days, and while she’s felt as comfortable with Stacey as she’s ever felt with anyone, alone, as she is now, she doesn’t feel at home. She feels like a trespasser.

She goes to the light switch and has a feeling it won’t work, but when she flicks the switch the indirect lights in every wall warm, giving the broad bedroom shape and definition. The bed uncovered. She uncovered. She goes to the bathroom and finds the robe Stacey gave her. “The blue one,” Stacey had said. “For my blue Crystal.”

Where is Stacey? She leaves the bedroom and pads down the hallway, the carpet like fur beneath her feet. Often in this condo she feels like she lives on the furry back of some giant
creature. She can feel it move beneath her, shift. Sometimes she swears she can hear it breathe, or sigh, or growl.

The lights are off in the sunken living room and adjoining kitchen and dining room, but beyond the glass balcony doors Los Angeles’s innumerable lights sparkle. She slides the door open and steps onto the balcony. “Stacey?” she says. The traffic and white noise of Los Angeles is a steady, monotonous wash, even forty-three floors above ground. She goes to the railing and hesitantly looks down upon Sunset Boulevard. Even in the middle of night, head-lighted cars are backed up in both directions. She sees tiny tourists and other revelers walking Sunset and its side-streets.

Not for the first time, she wonders what it would be like to fall from this height. To crash into a Hummer or Corolla, her everything annihilated. What would you think on the way down? Where does the mind do when it knows it’s over? The thought sickens her and she steps away from the railing. She goes back inside the penthouse.

In the back bedroom her phone is ringing.

*Stacey.*

She runs for the phone, maybe the first time she’s run in years, and it feels like her legs and arms don’t want to work in unison. Her toes stub in fur. She hears the animal growl.

She finds the ringing phone. Her heart clenches.

*Gil Tannen-Sterling.*

It is three-thirty in the morning.

“What?” she answers.

“You’re in L.A.” Her neck creeps. Gil sounds too close. She can hear his tongue flick and lick his lips. She checks behind her, closing the neck of her bathrobe tighter.
“How’d you know?” she says.

“Benjie.”

She hasn’t spoken with Gil since her story lost *Fit To Pitch*. Mom must have told Benjie she was here, because she hasn’t contacted him either. Which would also explain why Benjie’s called several times the past few days, leaving messages she couldn’t listen to.

She paces the floor, watching her toes work the fur. Knead the beast.

“I guess he told you about our new show,” Gil says.

“What show?”

“Steph and Benjie; we’re calling it *From Shame to Same*. We already sold it to Bravura Channel. We got the sweet primetime slot after *Celebrity Teenager*. It’s a big push. We start shooting in Silas the week after next. In the first episode Steph and Benjie marry. Steph’s dad, Judge McDaniels, will officiate. You might remember that Judge McDaniels is the same who sentenced Benjie’s DUIs in county court. And now he marries his daughter to Benjie. Amazing, right? Really, you can’t write this stuff. We’re calling the first episode ‘A Fresh Start?’”

Every word he homes is a sharp nail in her heart, but that last question mark is the driven stake. Pinned, she hangs in the air. She stares west out the penthouse window. The improbable heavy city and sea. Somewhere between here and there Gil coils, speaking at her.

“But listen, that’s neither here nor there,” Gil says, and she feels a quick tug on her mind.

“I’m mainly calling because I just ran into Stacey.”

Stacey? Crystal recoils at the sound of Stacey’s name on his lips.

Her free hand makes a fist.

“Where?”

“Oh, here at the club.”
“You’re at a club with Stacey?”

“Yeah. It’s crazy. This really is the biggest small town in the world. But anyway, she mentioned this little thing you guys wanted to do. Your little movie. Your HTBM: Piss Ship or whatever it is.”

She can’t believe that Stacey’s where he says she is, or that she would tell him about their movie.

Stacey’s not at a club somewhere is she? When Crystal fell asleep earlier they’d been watching an amazing, heartbreaking documentary about Nina Simone and the last thing she remembers Stacey saying was that she “never did anything for anybody with her music.”

“Yes you did,” Crystal said. She lay in Stacey’s lap, Stacey tickling the top of her grateful head.

“You talked to Stacey?” she says.

“For a good while. Yeah.” He makes a show of clearing his throat. “It was real nice.”

If she could she would reach through the phone and grab Gil with two hands by his face.

“She told me all about your little movie.”

She would then shake him until all of him was broken.

“What about it?” she says.

“Well, look, the basic thing about it—like I told her—is that I own that story now and you guys can’t make it.”

Crystal’s bottom drops out.

“You don’t own that story,” she says too quietly.

Gil laughs from his shoulders. “Actually I do.”

She has no words. She hates the sound of it, but she can tell he speaks a terrible truth.
“It’s part of the standard show contract I have with all the contestants on *Fit To Pitch*. The pitches become the intellectual property of Tannen-Sterling Productions.”

There’s no way Benjie understood that. But then neither did she.

But of frigging course.

“You are the world’s worst motherfucker,” she spits.

“Hey,” he chuckles, “Listen, kid, I’m just looking out for my legal properties. You’re the one who chose to do the show behind Benjie. Which, by the way, I deeply appreciate. You did some good stuff. But he’d already signed all the contracts.”

Blood swells her neck. “But you’re not even going to make the frigging film,” she shouts.

“No,” Gil says, “Actually I am going to make the film. You guys got me thinking about what I was missing. I’ve decided to shelve Dorene Smith’s movie and instead Ramses is going to direct *The Weightless Machine*. We’re going to fix it up and work in some aspects of your story. As you did with Ramses’s story, quite frankly.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Well, look, you did. But whatever. Here’s the thing. I’m going to give Ed a co-writer credit…”

“He doesn’t want a co-writer credit.”

“Well, look, that’s what he’s going to get. I’m sorry, capeesh? But, hey, like I told her tonight, I’m super stoked to bring Stacey on board. I think her and Ramses will work great together.”

She sits heavily on the bed.

He lets those words hang.

*Her and Ramses will work great together.*
She sees the pieces, but she needs the nightmare completion. “Stacey’s going to do your movie?”

“Yeah, I asked her tonight, and she said she’s way onboard. Really cool, right?”

One day she will kill Gil Tannen-Sterling.

“How’s Ed doing?”

Her body tenses. He mentions Ed to taunt them.

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Gil chuckles. “You sound tired, Crystal. Listen, don’t worry. We want to take care of Ed. I’m going to put him in From Shame to Same. Steph and Benjie try to nurture him back to health. The first truly comatose reality-TV star. Maybe Steph tries to decide who she loves more, the brother who’s asleep or the brother who’s awake. You can’t write this stuff.”

***

One-thousand pound Crystal sinks in the circular couch of the sunken living room. Beyond the penthouse windows and balcony, dawn is a gray accomplice. He wishes to re-hatch the plans with you every morning, and you try to remember what happened to the old plans, why they weren’t working, and then what about these new plans, what’s in them for him? Is he doing this to confuse you? Or is he too a confused phenomenon?

The afterglow of the Big Dang.

It’s all wet out there. The sky is wet.

She shivers. Wraps tighter her robes. She wears the blue robe Stacey gave her and also the gray-pink robe of Stacey. The same colors as the coming dawn. Two layers, and she could use more. Goddangit. She can’t believe she didn’t pack her furry hat and flannels. She’d give anything to have them now. On her body. She isn’t a person without them.
She isn’t anything.

Los Angeles makes you forget how cold it can get, the top layer of everything always wet.

Dawn knows more than she. A gray saboteur.

Beyond the kitchen she hears scratching. Somebody unlocks the front door.

She hears a body slip into the penthouse and shut the door.

When Stacey appears at the edge of the living room she stops at the sight of Crystal. She wears a short black skirt, fishnet tanktop, and the blonde-bob wig, one of many wigs she keeps in a dedicated closet.

“What’s up, C?” she says, itching now under her wig’s edge. Her words are thick, viscous. Her thin arms and legs have goosebumps. Her face is pale. Her lips made-up like light purple bruises. Eyes locked on Crystal, Stacey shivers. She seems surprised, but also trying quickly to plot.

This is always the thing with Stacey—Crystal can never tell who exactly she is or what she knows. She can come on so strong. And then she’s gone.

“Where were you tonight?” Crystal finally says.

Stacey’s face hardens. “Where was I tonight? Why?”

“You weren’t here.”

Stacey walks into the kitchen, disappearing from view. Her steps sound clumsy, her movements outsized. Drunk.

Crystal listens to Stacey open a cabinet and get a glass. She runs the faucet. “You’re drunk?”
Stacey returns to the living room’s edge. She drinks, watching Crystal over the rim of her glass. “Not hardly.”

Stacey animates. “Listen, Crystal, christ—you fucking fell asleep or whatever, and then some friends called me from the bar downstairs. I just went down to meet them for minute and try to unwind. You know I can’t never sleep. But then I just kind of lost track of time.”

Crystal doesn’t say anything. She tries to look at Stacey but her eyes waver. She looks past Stacey’s shoulder to the dark hallway.

Stacey keeps going. “Listen, Crystal, I’m so glad you’re here. I need you here. We’re doing great work together and you’re getting me hella off. But you know we’re autonomous beings, right? We aren’t each others bosses. Listen, I’ve had bosses, plenty of motherfuckers, and I don’t want another.”

Crystal shifts her gaze to her lap, her blobbed and blurry hands. Her damaged fingernails. Right. Right. She has to keep up with this. “I’m sorry,” she says finally. “I’m sorry.” She doesn’t want to but can’t help it—she starts crying. “I think I had a really bad dream. And then frigging Gil called me.”

“Who?”

“Gil Tannen-Sterling—the motherfucker from *Fit To Pitch*.”

“Crystal, what are you talking about?”

“He said he was with you?”

Stacey makes a confused face.

“He said he owns our story and that he’s going to make it now. He said you were going to be in his movie instead.”

Crystal breathes from her compressed chest. “Really?”

“God, yes.”

“You haven’t talked to him?”

“No.” Stacey steps into the sunken living room. She comes to Crystal, and Crystal’s so glad. The weight shifts and Crystal weeps as Stacey slips into place beside her, touching her dry, tender hands to Crystal’s exposed neck.

“C, it’s okay. It’s okay. I’m with you. What’s wrong? Are you feeling all right? Why are you wearing two robes?”

Crystal sucks breaths through her nose. Her body’s clenched tight, a stone statue. She’s tired in her throat, behind her eyes. She shakes her head. Her shoulders twitch. The shadow comes over her, and she starts crying anew.

“Oh baby,” Stacey comes closer, holding her tightly. “Baby. It’s okay. It’s okay. God, this motherfucking dude said all that shit to you?”

Crystal nods her held head.

Stacey’s quiet for a while. She smells like cigarettes and alcohol. But also she smells like the moist bottom soil of a river. Familiar. God, the whole thing can and will disappear at any moment but Crystal’s so glad Stacey’s here, being with her.

Her wheels having turned, Stacey sits up. “Wait, he said he owns your fucking screenplay? The one we’re trying to make?”

“Right. From that stupid show. My Uncle Benjie was under contract and through him—stupidly I know—I gave Gil the whole thing.”
“And he knew we were trying to make the movie?”

“Right. He said Benjie told him and then he had to preempt it. But get this: I called Benjie just now and asked him and he said he never told Gil we were making the movie. He says he didn’t even know.”

“Tannen-Fucking-Sterling,” Stacey says. “Crystal, what the fuck’s wrong with that guy?”

Parallel to the condo, a helicopter whirs through the gray, indefinite morning. Its cold metal against the gray sky makes Crystal’s head hurt. The copter could easily be looking through these windows. Their room the Atlantan stage. Crystal and Stacey flesh.

“I don’t know,” Crystal confides when the copter passes. She hears her voice thicker than it is. “But he’s a saboteur and he killed my father and he’s killing my uncles and me.”

Stacey detaches from Crystal. Looks at her. A mechanism is almost visible, or knowable, at the very back of Stacey’s eyes, behind Crystal’s blurry shape, but her eyes are inscrutable cameras.

**End Book One**
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