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A Right-Hand Man: A Novel

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A Right-Hand Man: A Novel

by

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ABSTRACT

A RIGHT-HAND MAN: A NOVEL

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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This is the first half of a Catholic novel about a mailman with a hook hand. It is about the power of friendship and invites us to think about the posthuman.

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AN ADVERTISEMENT

Hello, this is Marina, your author. Nice to meet you.

There are a hundred errors in this thing, and a hundred things might be said to prove them beauties. But it is needless. A book may be amusing with numerous errors, or it may be very dull without a single absurdity. The mailman, Herman, is ready to teach, and ready to obey, as simple in affluence, and majestic in adversity. In this age of opulence and refinement whom can such a character please? Such as are fond of high life, will turn with disdain from the simplicity of his tiny apartment. Such as mistake crassness for humor, will find no wit in his harmless conversation; and such as have been taught to deride religion, will laugh at one whose chief stores of comfort are drawn from the future. This is the story of my friendship with a mailman.

We begin with a prologue and then Herman's diary. For reasons that will become clear, I take over then. I am new to writing, and you will sometimes remark: "Dios mio! Why did the silly girl write like that! Why is there a mailman who has a hook hand? I don't know anyone who lives that way!"

But I don't mind if you get upset. Sometimes I get mad when I realize that Herman, my friend, really is dead. I used to wash his hook for him. He had a hook-hand, and I would scrub it with the special soap and say:

If my barren spirit
had your fertility,

it would've already forged a heaven
to make its world whole.

It was not a mean hook. It was used generously. Now, on with the show, even though you will not believe me no matter how hard I try. I know how Herman must have felt.

- Marina Guerrero

PROLOGUE ¹

It's a waste of wood, aint it?

Rodney McMurtry played coy with his crowd. He lit a match above his guitar while the crowd mimicked his signature hee-haw. A young boy cried out that he loved America. Through the smoke McMurtry saw his fans for all they were. His adoration for them returned.

What about the fire code? Aint we supposed to play by the rules?

A stagehand came out with a kerosene can. The crowd would go home with a memory worth more than this cheap maple, and at every backyard barbeque, and in all life's hard times, they'd hear this sizzling sound.

Anyone smell fajitas?

Cinders. A wave goodbye. Backstage, he changed out of the rhinestone suit, ate the Junior Mints. Reporters by the tour bus asked about *Janitor Blues*. Everyone wanted to know his inspiration; no one wanted to believe.

Came from a mailman with a hook hand. Like I said.

You're yanking my chain, Rodney.

Herman Cortes. Hired me to sweep, mop. Start over.

When they came with their mics, guilt hit him again. His friends had died. They had fought thugs who were trying to close the Tempe Post Office once and for all. He was over in

¹ It's Marina! How are you doing today? This is me trying to write in the third person. It is like I am here but not really here. I guess I am floating. I like to chat with you in the footnotes. That's a fun word, "Footnote," since you can't go anywhere without your feet. Just ask a maid, like I was! It is all hustle and bustle being a maid or a mailman. Here I am attempting to talk about Rodney. I will try to be very objective here (Grrrr).

Tucson that night, strutting on stage, a conscious parody of a country singer the type Herman had told him he could be. He could have been there in the trenches smashing his guitar over Henry Derby's skull².

He often phoned the girl, the one they'd died protecting. "Ballad of a Loose Woman" was about her.

You holding up? Meeting nice men?

Too many. You know, I went by the gravesite. I said you were thinking of them.

I never stop.

By the tour bus a fan yelled *Do the wolf cry*. McMurtry obliged with an *Ayuuga*. He would let them pimp him. He would twirl a fake lasso when asked. They wore tee shirts bearing his name. "Redneck Hunchback," the song, was about generosity, that most exquisite obligation. He was a different man now, infused with love; knowing so many dead will sure change you. You see them at night in your bus. You put on your giant confederate belt buckle, and you know it's going to be about the people from now on. That's why the extra shine goes on those boots. For friends. They'd showed Henry Derby the strip mall king, just who he was messing with.

When he'd drifted his way to Tempe, laryngitis had him croaking like a frog. He couldn't get a job as a lounge act. That's when old man Herman recruited him, broke, broken, into the Tempe Post Office. The furthest thing from clean. Being a janitor in that hellhole had inspired "Honky-Tonk Skunk," the start of a long climb up the charts.

² This is the bad guy. Every story has to have one. I do agree that we all share the evil.

A notorious skunk lived in the walls. A big sucker. Herman was trying to feed it when his hook triggered something primal; it squealed, stamped its foot, and went nuclear. “But goes thy heart with this?” Herman asked. Then the recognition: “Ah thy stink has mortal merit!”

But he laughed in spite of it. Just do this every day, a billion times, and then you win. Herman had said that.

Born Andres Cheval in Le Havre, France, under the shadow of a neon Arby’s sign, McMurtry had traveled far. Still, the hardest part lay ahead. Refuse to build walls. Keep the battle always in front of you. Find new pledges to keep.

In his tour bus, a girl cozied up beside him. He was too tired, and she smelled of the ubiquitous perfume, Exertion by Bernice, flowers watered with diesel. Bernice had died at the Tempe Post Office, and now he sold her formula at his shows. A promise was a promise.

What he wanted was to call his niece with the latest Lemony Snickett and read a few pages to her. It was sad, but sadness was nothing now.

What had life really been like for Herman? How real could his joy have been living with a hook? After the skunk, they got Herman a wood crate full of tomato juice. He was singing Meat Loaf while he scrubbed down with a bristle brush. “Surf’s up,” was some strange choice for a guy who never saw an ocean. My body’s burning like a naked wire I wanna turn on the juice, I wanna fall in the fire I’ll drown in the ocean a bottomless sea I’ll give you what I’m hopin’ you’ll be giving to me.”

Herman's former maid ³reached out the other day. They were going to meet when McMurtry came through Tempe. What might come of that he didn't know. If she wanted closure, he'd help. Give her some clean earth to till. Have a little jubilee over coffee and donuts.

³ That's me!

CHAPTER ONE: HERMAN

In the Tempe Theatre I played Cordelia from *King Lear* and was hanged each night. My director gave me this thankless role though I am a man and might have been king; when I cannot sleep at night I wander the house: Howl, Howl, you are men of stones I will recite, quite frightening my maid. I was wont to improvise even in a noose. When death comes, fake or real, I will not behind a fern like in commedia dell'arte; I will face my executioner with a full litany of truths.⁴

I am a skilled mailman. It is itself a performance, and I ask constantly what a skilled mailman would do when I am tempted to do what an ordinary mailman might. I wish I were among my public now, yet I must sort mail...an ankle injury keeps me from the sun and the rain. In the wilds of Tempe, Arizona I found a providential quality I cannot replace...one must be strong when trying to win Mailman of the Year, my quest these fourteen years.

A game of paintball with the local children torqued my ankle. I have not been the same.

Old boy can't shoot paintball with an arm like he got.

You'd be surprised at all the things I can't do.

It might be assumed I could not play, but, to me, my hook is but a metaphor. So, I stuffed a day's-worth of Planters' in my rain slicker. I waived my right to sue and hid high on a hill as the rain came, a man, his thoughts, his rent-a-musket. The differences between me and the children were really nothing at all...I meant to show not who I was but who they could become.

⁴ It's stage comedy. This is Herman's diary, but I have added little footnotes. Friendship is the way that two stories merge.

The rains fell while I hid listening for the alarm of twigs breaking underfoot. A telltale crunch of sneakers to let me know the right time to strike...

Time's up, mailman. Unless you some kind of hero.

Maybe to someone...

Little did they know that I had made a scarecrow of a mailman. An old shirt on a stick flapping there in the wind. You wouldn't know until you got close, until the Pop! from behind you, a paintball from another century.

Fell for the old razzle-dazzle.

I was running. I felt a sentimentality, a frisson, as from the low-riders running beneath my window blaring their hip-hop.: We're from a place where they peel your cap, and you ain't got a prize under...I like that one. These songs seem to feature some fresh, young disciple -- a mailman is such a teacher too. He shows his sheep how to find free coffee in the city, where are the root-raised slabs that can turn a route into a heartbreak. These men, he hopes, may someday take up the mailbag in their own lives. Perhaps a select few will become mailmen. They too will bind themselves with the tattoo of Hermes.⁵ It is not so forlorn a hope. May their carbuncles be few!

But as I spun to the ground to reload, my sneaker gave way on a muddy patch, which wrenched my body into a hard landing. A crack escaped from my body. I lay wheezing on the ground while my legs would not obey me. Children circled my body. I remember Good

⁵ Hermes is the patron saint of letter carriers. This was on his shoulder.

Samaritans lifting me onto a golf cart. One took my shirt from the scarecrow, draped it over me elegiacally. A blissful afternoon ended, and I waved a one-armed goodbye to my new friends. ⁶

Summon thou meat wagon. Sweet heaven, oh, let me be not mad!

How can immortal desire be fulfilled by an imperfect body? I came from the womb without a left hand. I lived as a monster until the day my best friend Steve told me of an opening at the infamous Tempe Post Office...he allowed me to ramble uncaring into an enchanted country, saving me from uselessness. Something I was withholding in myself had made me weak...my bold spirit was wasted without some divine task. ⁷

But Steve is gone. ⁸ I'm left with memories of him who guided me from postal janitor to mailman. We were to be Mailmen of the Year, co-winners, dressed in snazzy bowties, a giant and an invalid who overcame the world and themselves...Billy Joel's music would have played our song...I just may be the lunatic you're looking for.

I might have spoken of the playgrounds of our youth, where the leitmotif of our lives began. Boys snagged pop flies while we awaited the bell. We practiced our drollery reclining against the shade tree. Held back two years in special classes, he already stood taller by a head -- a shaggy Jewish coconut that grew wild from neglect. They once smashed a Lite-Brite over him, and he stood there crying among the plastic pegs.

Steve taught me not to worry. What they stole, we'd find again. He knew that life would be a constant percussion of man and his world. He met it in charity. When someone stole my

⁶ I am not making fun of him. He was my friend. Why do people think I'm making fun of him? I'm not mean.

⁷ What it was a monster? Is it behavior? Appearance? Cast of mind? Is it a changeable condition?

⁸ Steve is not Esteban. They are two different characters. I don't want you to go and ask for your money back. "I am angry with Marina," you will say. No! Don't be angry.

lunch, we ate his cup of soup with two spoons. I remember sharing Chicken Noodle and oyster crackers. He took up my protection, cared for the first cur he met...and through his terminal bout with syphilis I would be with him too. He told me that people like me would someday get all we deserved. Some conditions won't be cured by penicillin; they become a performance of a strange life...

Karaoke partners never die, they just fade away...he was a stalwart on those Friday nights...we forgot our hard week and our songs absolved others of theirs...good music is indistinguishable from magic, and I have not sung since the last duet...people are not afraid of their darkness, only afraid of the latent polka that's inside of them...it is the uncanny, and will not be denied...

I just heard a loud crash. "Señor, do you believe in an afterlife?" the maid asked.

"Why?"

"Otherwise your favorite mug is lost forever."⁹

This diary is hard for me. I should have been Mailman of the Year looking back on Mailman of the Year, writing in full knowledge, yet I will not, in waiting, lose my chance to participate...one does not know the future or if it exists at all...just yesterday I would cruise in Steve's Ford Tempe with the funky steering...we were quoting *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, prepared for everything...ensorcelled with the world's wonders without tinge of fear...this diary is, at least, a part of myself that cannot be taken away. In moment after moment,

⁹ Dios mio! How can a mailman have a maid!

half-blind, I will go forward with my account...perhaps it is important...perhaps Mailman of the Year is a sort of palace where my retinue awaits.

My wits have begun to turn happy again. The Post Office always cures my contradictions, and here are little joys to help me survive, Epsom Salts, the chatter of television, and my favorite mail shirt on a cedar hanger. The air conditioner, Mr. Coolalot, puts on a bravura production. Do not call him washed up.

* 10

All has not been simple. I emerged from mother's womb with one arm, and at four took up a steel hook. It is curled like a question mark, lighter and better at grasping than a replacement hand, yet my steel makes people distrustful; particularly in romance I must seem oafish or dangerous. Women think I would scratch them during our ecstasies. My first kiss would come at school, result of a bribe. I remember the swooning spell of her lips... my whole world was dipping away...but seven minutes in heaven seemed a dream I might always be plucked from. To tell of my life is to tell of frustrated desire.

But there was Steve's friendship, and we would pay homeless men to get us rice wine. We stumbled the city like drunken sailors...we went to our prom stag and spiked the punch. All we needed, we had. By the bleachers we smoked the best of his bad weed stash and he said, "From here we might end up anywhere," which was also the slogan of the defunct TempeJet.

If you wish to visualize me, I am tall, perhaps not thin, mid-forties with a gentle sprig of hair. My nose is wide, eyes big and brown. Though I have Spanish genealogy, my bronze color

¹⁰ It's an asterisk. An asterisk means breaktime! I like to get up and dance a little. I like to think that I gave you a reason to do so. Cha-cha-cha.

comes not from natural swarthy skin but a farmer's tan. I cut my mail shirts to provide maximum air flow. My maid regards me quizzically. Her name is Marina. I see her with broom or feather duster, which she calls Señor Plumero. She is buxom, with a round, un-wrinkled face. She always wears a scarf. "You put the bozo in rebozo," I tell her.

With the neighbors she plays a dominoes game called Chickenfoot. She is somewhat melancholy owing to being single. She tells the character in a romance book, "Don't break her heart please." I hope she does not offer me lovemaking. It will come as a knock on the door, or perhaps she will climb into my bed and tell me "I yield to you." This is not something I think about, except Marina has her fake General Jiminez and I have no one, not even Steve.

She is a mystery. I do not know her age. Once I caught her watching C-Span although she does not seem to know English well. My Spanish is rusty, but I heard her on the phone saying that the point of our age is to live an illusion without succumbing to disillusion.

She eats the frozen Gansito, a combination of fluffy, softy cake, strawberry jelly, and marshmallow covered in chocolate. They have sprinkles too, little pieces of heaven that redeem all the bad aspects of the world; heaven, though the notion seems withheld from people like me, would be a saccharine land...St. Peter in oven mitts with a plate of macadamia cookies...the word Tiramisu literally means 'lift me up,' and I will walk by the confectioners', press my nose to the glass, and imagine it all arrayed especially for me...it is as if the Mailman of the Year was made for a soul like mine, disquieted, relentless like the old ghost Banquo whom I played in the Tempe Theatre. I would rise through the trap door in the stage with my patented low moan...a specter almost irrationally devoted to righting wrongs...when one loses the belief in redemption he can scarcely go on...

We go on at the Tempe Post Office; though we are called cursed mailmen, our fate is not fixed, not for my postal janitors whom I hired with no background check, nor for Pedro the Mailman who once burnt down our breakroom cooking bananas foster...he might have found consolation in the ashes...sifting the wreck of our lives, we may find the courage to flambe again...

My life is disjointed, but many quiet times are not covered in my diary. You can, if you wish, imagine me at the Euclid Avenue Buffet, in the corner cracking crab legs. I cover my hook in a cloth to not dirty my steel from a splatter; the oysters are worth such precautions. Once, during a better time, Tempe had the world's best seafood. I am something of an Ur-Mascot at my buffet, and the manager gives me free Fanta. We have an unspoken arrangement.

Other times I am in my Saab headed to Hayden Butte, a hill with a view of man's diligence qua diligence...even in our late age he goes on adding to the oasis. I have heard remarks that such cities as ours ought not to exist any longer...they are divorced from any foundational necessity...yet the same is said of the Tempe Post Office, let the whole blooming thing be at an end, it is said, which is what my aunt told me about my piano recital, you are middle-age she said...Chopin is stirring in his grave it was said...then let him dance it was said...

I return from my sojourns to Hayden Butte to write these entries close to the time of events as they feel to me in my passion and my hurt – new, lively, blazing, as my father, a talented stuntman, lived his life, jumping over burning cars until the day he died doing what he loved. I would fain think of him when I become Mailman of the Year. Pain can be turned by an enterprising mailman into resolve...otherwise, though his post office be up in the stars he is master of nothing, mere custodian of his private horrors.

I think always of my fellow mailmen. For those who have suffered in our line of employ, an avatar will emerge, a Mailman of the Year. I think of Walter Bunting, perhaps, part of the “suicide club” of airmail pilots during World War One. They went without parachutes in an expectation of less than a thousand hours of flight...you would have neither radio nor beacons on the ground or towers to guide...you must have seen inherent value in a nation or a job...you must have had a belly of coffee and a thought of your home growing ever more distant...that disturbance on the wing was nothing compared to the disturbance you were born into...

“Marina, where are the scraps of paper on which I had written many fine ideas?”

“Señor, I recycled them like you asked. You said you wanted to turn them into something great.”

I had been about to make an apposite quote from some Arnold, perhaps either Schwarzenegger or Toynbee...“The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play.” Yes, that sounds like me. That sounds like those restless and difficult people I love.

The way of our mailmen is constant parrying of one’s defeats, sadnesses, fears. When Guadelupita the Mailwoman finally returned after an absence I saw how hard it was for her; sick with intractable nymphomania, she wore her hair unbrushed, her uniform wrinkled. The problems were written in her tired eyes and smeared make-up.

Did you slip up again?

Yes.

How many men?

Seven or eight...does that make me a nympho?

Merely excitable, perhaps.

Will they ship me away?

No, we are already away.

But we are among friends. It is sometimes that our very desires are mis-wired. We have abundant energy that goes to a short or runs in a moibus...when Guadelupita asks if I will join her behind the vending machine with her I say no...I am scared of my body she says.

That anxiety common enough. When Fayard the Mailman conducts amateur Voodoo in the breakroom and makes offerings of our remaining office supplies, he is only looking for a sign of a less tainted world. I can only be an incautious, imperfect example for them. Perhaps I am blessed to have no illusion of perfection, to be incapable of the same from the very moment I came through a tunnel and into my world.

The worst of our foes is Lord Henry Derby, the famous strip mall magnate. He continues his ancestral feud with the Tempe Post Office, perhaps as a pretext for his eugenic beliefs. He has public officials harass us...his hackers made our web site re-direct to Old Navy, the store he wants to build on our land. He is as a cat playing with his mouse. We the slovenly...we the indigent and dumb and aficionados of processed snacks...we have been shipped to this place, some against our will...welcome to the Tempe Post Office and welcome to our extended death rattle...can I interest you in a fine selection of forever stamps?

Perhaps I, myself an impossible creation, am set on an impossible errand...

“Let it be so! thy truth then be thy dower.”

“Señor, that’s not the endowment a girl wants.”

That is my maid, the saucy columbina. Perhaps we will get her a laugh track. But here she comes with a meal of huaraches. I never had enthusiasm for the pinto bean before. Without my ankle injury, I would not have had no need to hire her. What a funny universe it is that takes and gives such companionship.

Even as I write, Derby plans his next scheme to shut us down...to find some ordnance or cease and desist we must respond to... like his social media blitz or the billboard out by Hohokam Expressway, a picture of our post office next to a sad emoji. When he rented a plane to fly a mean banner back and forth over our airspace he hoped we would internalize his rebukes. Yet a fine mailman never surrenders. His devotions, clownish though they seem, grow in spite of tragedy...he will improvise even with plantar fasciitis...he will do an impromptu Vaudeville routine though he wears a walking boot...

One has had fine ideas rolling around the brain until the first mugging or a freak wind blows his new sunhat into traffic. A mailman understands to take the economy of preparation.

From the comfort of my nook I make the following boast: Derby will never get his wish. We will never feel the ill-wind of a crane knocking down our building. We do not exist to make money for anyone, not even ourselves. If we must ever be in the red, then let it be so.

“Señor, should other subsidize you? Doesn’t your philosophy prevent progress?”

“Oh, your immortal progress! How, how, Marina? Mend your speech a little, lest it may mar our fortunes!”

“The world is not your *Wheel of Fortune*. The fantasy has rotted your mind.”

“That’s what that smell was. Then let the brain molder, and, our assumptions gone, the truth of matters be revealed.”

We choose to believe in our own dignity even in abundant contrary evidence. It is us standing against the world, as Steve said, and in our quest for peace, safety, joy, perhaps all of world history may be found. We are venerable as the Laird and Dines building, a drug store that doubled as a city hall. This is a city of satyrs. Mouer Park, built with Depression-era stone benches, built ad-hoc, just because, is not more critical than our post office. When I hired Gandulf the Magnificent, janitor and erstwhile stage magician and victim of a wrongful death lawsuit, I meant him to understand that we are always worth more than anyone supposes; that he, with just a frozen bottle and a wet penny, surely had it in his destiny to create the marvelous. Come, miracle maker, join us! Put the torts and criminal neglect behind you; show the world that the most dangerous thing in the world is not a plaintiff lawyer but the persistence of human joy.

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“Señor, tell them how you visited your mother’s house. I like the part where she threw a beer can at you. Then you thought she had thrown all of them, but she had a spare in her housecoat. That made me happy.”

My devotion to dear mother is in vain! Today was her birthday, yet I arrived in Mesa to find her drunk. She says my birth cut short her acting career; they had called her Maricopa County’s answer to Hepburn, and then I came bringing infections and preeclampsia to her. She

¹¹ It is Marina with a footnote. I do not think Herman knew the following happy coincidence: the conquistador with whom he shared a name used to draw wheels of fortune in his notebooks. They were meditative, according to Laura Esquivel, an author I like, “He [Cortez] would enter a state of deep relaxation, pleased by the concept of a circular time that would cause one to be at the bottom one moment and then, just like that, at the top.” This is fun, right? Though it is not all that strange to have liked Señor Woolery and Señor Sajak. It is a fun game.

claims that my life caused Todd, my twin, to die in utero, that I took his place in the world. Todd, her authentic son, is buried, and the fraud is alive working for the Tempe Post Office. That is her claim. Perhaps her womb was not exactly the Hilton for me either.

I gave her a copy of *The African Queen*, and she handed it back defiantly. “You want to give a gift? Get out. That’s your gift. Settle down with your syphilitic boyfriend. Maybe you two can go steady.”

It was time to go. The door was one of those slow-closers that could not dramatize my hurt. Following me outside, she unleashed all the pith she’d dreamt up since my last visit. This is how they all end...a Saab is a girl’s car, how can a mailman with a hook even do sort mail...

“See you in a month, mother.” My devotion rises above her requests not to come back.

“Why couldn’t you choose a fake arm like everyone else? Nobody likes you. Mailman of the Year is a kid’s fantasy.”

I told her Mailman of the Year is in the bag, which was also my slogan when I ran a poorly-conceived city council campaign. She has hated my quests since childhood. I’d wanted to see all the amusement parks in Arizona, see all the birds in the world...these larks reminded her of her own vanished dreams.

This meanness is not the full story of her life. More than once we have waltzed across the floor as though I were not deformed...how easily beneficent circumstances might have given us a different life! The consolation of *Six Million Dollar Man* in the evenings might have been ours...We can repair him, we have the technology...

With the three of us huddled together, we would have been unstoppable. Would she watch her sons change according to the height chart on the wall? When I came home after curfew would she freeze me with her stare? Tease me about my feud with metal detectors? Not drink or waste away in old housedresses?

But the standard American life never was. At seven, I tore up the sonogram photo she kept in her room. She said that I killed her son again.

My birth is a lost story. I have no forensic science to give me the truth, to help me sleep. If I say my twin chomped my arm, if I say he strangled me with an umbilical cord until I cried out, I cannot know this to be so. But Marina hears me wake up wheezing and choking when I fall asleep on the couch...I toss in turn...am I to attach evidentiary value to this? Conceptually we may call truth what we cannot change, but metaphorically it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us.

It is, perhaps, a sort of rapture to be born in the digital age, as others are now, onto the sanctity of the Cloud and its rapt impulses to preserve all memory...people reject their century's radical surveillance, yet I understand the nefarious opposite. Being unseen is destructive.

My little diary must be quite strange, a mystery between two half-born blobs. No resolution seems possible...we ought to have grown up to go to the state fair eating corndogs and cotton candy... we should have traversed Tempe together on my seventh Halloween. I dressed as a hot dog dragging a wheelbarrow of candy behind me. Why does that hot dog have a hook, people wondered. My brother should have been my big bottle of mustard.

I should have had Steve, Todd, my father, a mother who cared. I should. I should. I should is my constant refrain.

Todd visits me in dreams and taunts me, yet when he passes through the wall of my conscience I cannot say for sure who he is. I realize he is someone I will never know. I have thrown pillows and berated him, other times I have gone close to him almost in affection...neither makes me feel better...he is reminder of the horrid dark of the womb when all was permitted. Yet he is my brother too, and once I dreamt he became an actor. We could play out a little David Mamet, two siblings, two chairs, two boyhood stories and on into the sixth act when the grief was over. If people hate Tempe because it is a battleground, yet it is an aegis compared to the nine-month dark before it.

“Señor, are you okay there in your nook?”

“Right as rain. Never better. I am a fine mailman who does not let anything stand in his way.”

She told me not to miss Wheel of Fortune. We watch it together. She buys too many vowels, whereas I believe in buying few, solving on impulse. Her presence is good for me. She has a half-baked biography I do not understand, yet it is true of me too, and such people find one another. Once we were watching *Law and Order* and she cited Moriarty v. Blankenship, which I think she invented, yet my maid sometimes talks of writs of certiorari, and I can only respond with writs of Little Debbie, which she brings to me on a plate. Very good at argument, she claims to have been a prosecutor in another life.

In her room she makes tearful calls in Spanish to her aunt. Perhaps she is homesick, so I make tease her to distract from sadness. We met when she came to see her Post Office box. I saw a latent je nais se quoi. “The job comes with three hots and a cot,” I said. “You would make the hots.”

“Please let me see my mail.” She looked tired and worn.

“You can call me señor,” I said.

“I may?”

“Yes, you can *and* may. It is a term of respect.”

We have an understanding. When I yowl and say, “Come not between the dragon and his wrath,” Marina brings to me an icepack for my ankle, or when she cries I know to let her win at Uno next time. She does not know that I let her win; when I say that I let her win she does not believe me...

My life has been a careful study of all nature’s creatures. Once I saw a rare Bendire’s Thrasher in the brush; he sat patiently for a sketch in my journal even though this one-armed child was a slow sketcher. Perhaps one like me was novel to him too. When he flew away I was sad, but not altogether sad. Known as mimids, these birds change their notes; their repertoire develops as they grow. We exchanged songs, and we are always together now. I remember his yellow eyes, white crest, how his cascading song twilled a life of travels. Who can have sadness and self-doubt when they have just sung the universe?

CHAPTER TWO

Today, while in a reverie, I wandered to a part of the post office I never visit. I was plucking the frosting from a Big Texas Cinnamon Roll, and I heard a familiar throat-clearing noise. Kenneth.

He sat playing FreeCell in this dark corner of earth he called a workstation. Clicking more-or-less randomly on the screen, the tide of battle had turned against him. His sandals were off, and I counted the toes on his bare feet. I took no human quality for granted.

“That’s my rugrat,” Kenneth beamed as I eyed his desk photo. He had a Mexican child. I told Kenneth that I too had rugrats of a sort, which was not untrue; “I am trying to raise my Marina,” I said.

At the mention of my children, he trained his beady black eyes on me. He needed a babysitter; he was to have a night off to search for his mail order bride who had gotten re-routed.

“She is Russian?” I asked.

“Ragbekistan,” he said, “I’m not made of money.”

I did not want to serve him, yet I needed to start building connections.

“Please, please, please babysit for me,” he sniveled. “I promise You’ll be free by twelve.” I told him man was never truly free in a society he had not designed. Perhaps I could counteract Kenneth’s influence on a future generation.

I arrived at Kenneth’s house armed with *The Giving Tree*. That book ought to be required reading for all children; it was my first and most critical interaction with a philosophy of life.

Kenneth waited on his porch in a black-tie and cufflinks. He said he was off to meet his sweet Svetlana.

"Did you inform your kid of my hook?" I asked. "He'll scream bloody murder otherwise."

I have had to improvise this way before, and it is always best to introduce my hook rather than let that terrible steel speak for itself. I had Kenneth get me a little ketchup, to use as a prop, an enormous amount of which I spread on my good hand, to look like blood. With children, one must get their attention somehow.

"Little Manuel, would you like to see what I just bought?" I had hidden both arms behind my back.

"Yes, show me, show me." He looked up from his coloring book, which I could see was going poorly for him by any reasonable standard.

"I have something very surprising to reveal," I exclaimed.

"Oh, oh, I bet it's a prize," he declared.

"It's an industrial nose picker," I told Manuel, putting the steel flush with my nose.

"Satisfaction is – "

Manuel screamed. The ketchup had done the trick, thick and clotting on my face, and Manuel soon bolted out of the room, which was a good sign, as kids enjoy exercise. Manuel and I made a great noise as we ran through the halls. He would shove some object in my way to bar passage while I would cry out in pain and pretend wrath as I lumbered forward. "Three easy payments they said. No more boogers they said."

"Get away!" he screamed.

"Can anything deliver us from our mortal agony? The body will not forgive us our trespasses!" I said playfully.

When Manuel did come out of hiding he had overcome his trepidation. All went well. It is best for a child to run through all his energy in play. We settled down with *The Giving Tree*. This is a very critical book. A tree gradually gives everything it has to a boy, its wood, bark, and finally when it is a stump it allows the boy, in the wake of his final failure, to have a spot to sit. The tree charts a course to personal martyrdom, which is exceedingly stupid. We must avoid that. A true hero knows when to say 'enough,' and he will constantly judge his sacrifices against the worth of those he saves.

And the boy loved the tree very much.

Please. I did not wish to be used, chopped up, and discarded like that. Each time I do good for the people of Tempe, my only windfall is some fresh violation or injury. We deserve a little reward in the end. One must have compassion for oneself...the good deed is the compensation people say...then why don't you do any charity I say?

I told Manuel, "it says that the tree was often alone after all it gave. How would that make you feel to be the tree?"

"I want to be the boy," he said.

"Well, that's certainly convenient."

When we were done reading, he told me, "I don't want to go to bed. Let me stay awake with you, Uncle Herman."

I cooked him alphabet soup and we watched *Drive* with Ryan Gosling. I know its few lines by rote. The main character, an existential hero, has no history and few emotions. He barges into a strip club (I made Manuel close his eyes) and undergoes enormous risk at little personal benefit. This idea, we know, is correct in its conception. It is drilled into us by all the best movies. When I take in Steve McQueen for the hundredth time I find myself pursing my mouth tight as it will go by the end. The top teeth can feel the ones below. What's it like to feel like someone every day?

I have lived a hard two-thirds of my life. It has been frustrating. I am further away from Mailman of the Year than ever (but you knew that). Bernice, the mailwoman who dreams of her perfume business is just as far away from "making something" of herself as the rest of us. All we have is that most dubious prize - each other. Steve would agree.

By the end Manuel was asleep on my shoulder. I didn't move as the credits rolled. We stayed like that for a while.

*

When on the crest of an opportunity the inimitable singer-songwriter Meat Loaf rises up from my soul...And I never really sleep anymore, and I always get those dangerous dreams and I never get a minute of peace and I have to wonder what it means.¹² Marina wished for a janitor job her cousin, a former engineer who fled Mexico and, I hoped, a sturdy ally.

¹² In the codex of my mind, I see the nook even though it is many years later. Herman is still there singing. The color of the room is warm. Truthfully, someone lives there in his place, and it occurs to me from time to time that I might like to walk through. Is it still my home, as he said it always would be? My hair used to clog the drain. The souls of all the cups I broke may still hover around. They know me well! Once he caught me dancing to a song, the *dama del año*, and he wished for me to be a wave over the sea, that I might ever do nothing but that.

“Hello, I am -- ”

“Silence, goon,” I cried. His outfit did not match the rough-and-tumble janitor I had in mind. Suspenders? A pink shirt? He had no sense of our drama. I took his sunhat from him. I tried it on. “Perhaps you will never see your precious hat again? Now what do you have to say for yourself?”

He stood at attention. I lifted up his chin with the dull side of my hook. “Hmm,” I said. “Hmm.” He would need training, yet when I poked him to see his constitution I found him tough. The Tempe Post Office could be quite a mean eeplus pitch. He would need to adapt.

I told him to kneel and be reborn a janitor. “You will work for me,” I said. “You will perhaps go home miserable and wake up in agony.”

But this Esteban should not be misled by his good fortune. Henry Derby refinanced our mortgage so it is adjustable, going up by a few points per month. There are the hurtful practical jokes of our rival post office, Apache Station, their empty piñata trick has worked on us many times...perhaps next time there will be candy, so it is hard not to keep believing...into this story of suffering my janitor will be thrust...no one appreciates us...packages are often lost here, causing customers to abuse us via the comment card system. I did not set the prices. I did not drop your precious cargo. Go to the Apache Station if you love it so much more. Many things are not my fault, yet I am blamed just the same.

“You will work in a place where the living envy the dead,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said.

He is in a mail service with not a little brutal history...Mailman of the Year are perhaps as much a warning as a model...when the Puritan, Elizabeth Lovejoy, would not renounce her claim to be a mailwoman, she faced the brunt of civil authority...you can see her portrait in the Hall of Mailmen, bonneted but not entirely closed off, seditious in her way, conscious how she was in a chronology...yet, I say this, if all is miserable in our duty, if we are too solemn, then the errand of our personal salvation has no worth...a little joy must be part.

I am not a religious man, not when the very culture around me opposes these high principles; yet I know the texts a little...if I speak in the tongues of men or angels but do not have love, then I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal...and it is to create an impulse loftier than fear that absorbs my principal energies.

Este must deal with the food thief who ravages our fridge. It will be his apprenticeship. This omnivorous monster took two of my puddings yesterday. It undermines all that we value and I had been looking forward to them all day.

“I can put deadly chemicals in the food,” he said.

“No, buddy, that’s extreme...that’s murder.” I liked his pizzazz though.

Fortunately, I think I know the food culprit. All signs point to the obese mailman Kenneth. You cannot sate his unreasoning desire for your food with charity or logic. When I bring an egg sandwich I later smell egg on his breath. One time I pulled the old trick where I said, “You have egg on your chin,” and he went to wipe it. He won a power lifting medal at the Mailman Olympics, and for him, the world is merely free calories. I won the sack race event, yet you don’t hear me making a big deal about it all of the time even though I rallied from last place against many mailmen...one caballero can make a difference, and no one can tell me that I did

not win that sack race. Although my ankle is hurting, Slow and steady wins the (sack) race is what I say. I practice a Tao of resistance. I have suffered underresourced places before I was born, so when the food thief wrote a note to me, I promised to fight his cynicism.

Our post office has the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, only pitiless indifference.

But were Steve here he would find a way this nihilism of the spirit. When we were in the Home for Wayward Youth together he carried me through the days of forced pills and boredom, when our incarceration enervated the mind, dulled its edges. Even under the depressants, his face, was never sad...his bushy eyebrows were a genealogical wildness, a sort of heirloom of an earlier species, so you know *Homo Steveus* has always been here with his topological and beautiful face.

He turned eighteen in that Club Med of ours. No birthday cake, no presents. He refused to sign himself out, stayed for the spaghetti, so he said. The price of loyalty was one he enjoyed paying. Our days went by in Connect Four and dime novels, what was left behind.

Later, after a misspent life, you joined the post office, an acrostic of meanness: asbestos, Benzonatate addiction, communication disorders, eye trouble...through all this you revisited the pain of the nothingness in that home, which was worse. You pledge how no one will make your people sign off on a life you haven't chosen. You and Steve found what turned out to be an incontinent ferret and released him in the halls of your high school, and then they sent you away to a youth home For your own Good. They were so right...

Sometimes, at night, when the maid is asleep, I remember our old mail horse, Pinkeye, who got equine distemper. He liked to hear me quote Richard III sotto voce...I miss those days.

When he started biting we took him to Tempe St. Luke's where the doctor came to give the bad news:

It's an experimental surgery. We're grafting a surgical cone onto him to make him think he's a unicorn.

Is it risky?

Hell yeah it is.

But Pinkeye only got deadlier, and now he's gone from us. I miss his savage heart. He's part of the montage that never leaves a man. I remember feeding him hay through this slot, his mean, sad eyes encompassed love and madness.

We are always made to think that the place we suffer is a place dreamed up. It is a politics of the unreal that we wield against us.

"Done writing, señor?" I heard her shuffling the Uno cards.

We'd play for a little while. I liked the game, primary colors gone crazy (our theme, I suppose), fundamental qualities transmogrified, infused with reverses and skips. Control the wilds. Like a cuckoo, place your egg in another bird's nest. Experiment with mycology. Try multi-level marketing again and again. Dig for oil under the Tempe Post Office. Try to get lucky. Nixon and his Madman Theory.

I have a crack team. Bernice shaves her head and she home-brews perfume. An autodidact chemist, a Samoan, lapsed Mormon, smoker of Rulli River cigarettes, owner of a purple house that is the plank in the eye of an entire neighborhood. She takes a while to warm up to you.

And who should come slouching to Tempe to work but Eli the Hunchback with his late-stage scoliosis. Too bent to deliver, yet he scrapes his way along...too many of the forgotten work here...Jorge Torres-Flores, our rock, an abstemious Marine in a coma from a bullet in his neck, and he lies at Tempe St. Luke's - our only source of care thanks to Lord Henry Derby blacklisting us. This is our world, birthplace of bootleg stamps and the *Tempe Post Office Gazette*. Find the world's worst crossword puzzle there. I rather appreciate the byzantine quality -- a test of language skills will always be a test of patience, faith. Who would believe in us enough to sit through the sorting of all our meanings?

“Señor, I will believe. I work here.”

“Thank God for that.” I chase the maid with my hook and she pretends to run. It's Señor Gancho on the loose again.

Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.

*

Esteban's surveillance has failed us all. In the breakroom, his Elf on a Shelf was found turned around, useless, perhaps the most elegant way to defeat the device. My Lean Cuisine was gone. Kenneth smiled at me “Maybe someone noticed the giant, hollow elf next to the fridge. Or that it's March.”

“Your victory is hollow,” I said.

“Are you sure you didn’t eat the lunch yourself?” The fool was trying to gaslight me. That was my trick. I once put a fully cooked potato in the microwave of my mother’s lover. Imagine his face as he looked at a starch he could not remember ever wanting.

At night, Marina was dancing to music. “I’ll be Maid of the Year too.” There was no such title, but my maid was delighted, taking me into her big arms. We danced around the house while she kept saying “dama del ano” – well, she would not win even that fake contest she invented. With all the dust and cobwebs in here it must be Halloween. Well, I am sad about my defeat, but I will not be bashful at recording it. I have seen Marina reading the Gospel of Matthew, itself the work of a traveler, a tax collector on Herod’s roads...who better for tracking the world’s conditions than one has who walked it?

Tomorrow will be Henry Derby’s weekly visit, so I must take advantage of this plotless evening to describe Southern Avenue, lest the escalating tension divert my attention completely. We have four rooms, Esteban’s and Marina’s, with the remaining one for storage. My old metal detector, in the inimitable Relco Pacesetter lies dormant here recalling days of dials and smiles...she makes a grunt when she’s happy...sometimes I think about getting the Talkmaster 2300 with the customizable language, but there was nothing like a healthy ankle looking for silver dollars with the old girl. There’s a water ski in the closet too, no longer the terror of Tempe Town Lake until another champion of the waves shall emerge...is it true that the world of objects also await a champion, some vacuum cleaner to lead them all?

“No, señor, none of my sources indicate that to be true.”

My nook is separated from the hoi polloi by a bead curtain I do not regret purchasing, nor, if I could un-buy the lava lamp, would I do so. I would double-down, unrepentant, buying

twice as much kitsch...I regret nothing. All the universe's designs, all of the mistaken notes will result in a symphony...if I am sincere today, what does it matter if I am mistaken tomorrow...I like the confetti in my stomach from cake batter ice cream...I should not lose the ability to lose myself.

We have a security system whose name is Cody. His job is to ring a bell when he sees something fishy. Unfortunately, there were many false alarms, undermining my trust.

"You need to lay off the bell, bud," I said to him.

"It's fun."

"It's a fantastic bell," I agreed, "but it makes me hungry." It was an old dinner bell and I am conditioned.

"Are you going to give me any candy?" he said.

"Say the catchphrase," I dangled a mini-Snickers at him.

"Death before dishonor," he said. It is a good phrase...

Our unusable terrace slopes dangerously due to the building's foundation, yet it is this seeming deformity of the apartment that created the small, sloping wall that gives my nook its character, so it is that I have great compensation for never sitting outside or being able to grill like my neighbors across the street. A Zenith television sits in the den next to Marina's wooden folding chair and my loveseat. Often, quite like a movie theatre, the lights are turned low and the air conditioner runs at capacity. Tonight it saw a pivotal use that ought to turn the tide in the battle against the food thief.

I am sending Esteban into deep cover. We trained by repeatedly watching *Serpico* to show him the horrors he might face. He must pretend to be a food thief in order to draw out the real one. I ask Esteban “What’s with the mouse?” and he responds “He’s my partner. Specially trained. Just let him loose, send him through the little hole, then he comes back with the heroin.”

“I heard of that,” I poke him, which is no indicator of the pain he’ll soon endure.

“My name is an obscenity to every shithouse wall in every post office in the city.”

Marina complained that she wanted to watch *Harry Potter*, but Esteban had none of it: “I fought my way up as a Jew in the department in the days you were supposed to have an uncircumcised shamrock between your legs.”

She says that Esteban serves the same narrative purpose as Harry’s invisibility cloak, but I do not know of those books. I am going through Keith Richards’ new one. It is full of loves and losses. I think he would have made a good mailman.

*

“Life is filled with secrets. You can't learn them all at once.”

— *Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code*¹³

Amateur painter Mortonio Giordano was preparing to end his life. After the critical and popular failure of his “Puppy Mayor,” he had mourned the death of commercial authorship; popular art had been crushed under the segmented boot of abstract painting, and he himself

¹³ Hello. It’s the maid. I am telling an anecdote now. I would like it to be very good for you, and this will test what I have learned from Señor Alvarez’s writing classes.

meant to die within his own tradition rather than live in an upside-down world. This day he was to offer Tempe's art community a final, ugly display of contempt: suicide. They would pay for not paying him to put his work on the side of a bus.

Before him at the art gallery, a stranger with a hook kept angling his head before a piece of Abstract Cubism. The mailman asked, simply, if the painting he saw was upside down. The mailman kept back away to gain some perspective, and then Mortonio watched him get close again.

Mortonio enjoyed the companionship before he went upstairs to plunge himself ten stories. "There is nothing so vile in this country as the proliferation of high art," he chortled. "The murder of honest, consumer based artists is a matter of national sport. It is annihilation. I give the masses what they want, only they do not buy it because Joe Blow is *told* to prefer a museum piece he does not understand to real art designed specifically for his wants."

Mortonio told the mailman about "Puppy Mayor."

"So, it is a dog who is mayor? It's exquisite," said the mailman. "I imagine he faces great pressure being a dog. He must work twice as hard as his predecessor, yet he finds reasons to wag his tail in spite of difficulty."

"You get me," said Mortonio. He liked the mailman's critical eye.

The mailman's theory of art was not so much about the contact of material on a second material as principally concerned with artistic desire. Mortonio, he said, had that ingredient. One day they might awake in a different world where one had succeeded in waiting out the worst obstacles of existence. "Be content, oh doyen of the watercolor." He put his hook across Mortonio's shoulder.

“I have been trying for the same art prize for twelve years. It kills me. I enter contests for amateurs even though I’m a professional. I do not win, and this proves to me that the system is flawed. Tonight I will climb to the roof and jump.” His voice became a whisper. He showed that he had a cyanide capsule and a razor blade.

“Hmm,” said the mailman.

Mortonio pound his fist. “A golden retriever directing municipal government should make the heart leap. Instead they say I haven’t transformed anything. I took a dog and made him a rock star! I only needed to break the dog into a million fragments and scatter him across a canvas to succeed! But I don’t, and they tell me all dog mayors are inherently political. What does that mean?”

The mailman commiserated. “Where have all the Thomas Kincaid’s gone?” he agreed. He told the story of how he had been trying to be Mailman of the Year for thirteen years. He said to Mortonio, “Friend, I have something marginally better than suicide. What if I told you that my proposition would make you appreciate the life you now lead? I can offer you a position from which you would rise to entry-level.”

“How can I be lower than entry-level and still be employed? You mean I’d be a janitor? I don’t know. And isn’t going into a bad situation to enjoy my current life basically the plot of the movie *Saw*?”

“What is *Saw*?”

Mortonio explained the fantastic blockbuster and its sequels. Herman kept asking more profound questions. Why would someone make so many installments of *Saw*? It was incredible.

“They must be popular,” Herman mused aloud,¹⁴ “or no one *would keep making so many.*”

“Wait – people like to see suffering. That’s it. That’s it!”

Mortonio would draw cartoons for the *Tempe Post Office Gazette*. Herman had run it since the editor died from Aqua Lung.

“You mean pneumonia?” asked Mortonio.

“No. He was grooving to Jethro Tull when a train hit him.¹⁵ Died instantly. Can I call you Mortonio by the way?”

Mortonio huffed, “My name is already short for Mortonioni. If I’m not careful, I’ll be Morton one day and one step away from Mort.”

You sure didn’t want to go through this world as a Mo. Somebody could lengthen it to Morris at a moment’s notice. The lights dimmed then. It was eight and no one would die today. Herman thought of the Hall of Mailmen. He wanted his painting to be a little playful, encouraging, for all those who would maybe come to visit him.

¹⁴ “Said” gets boring!

¹⁵ Sometimes when I get sad about my friend I make a joke like he would.

CHAPTER THREE

There was a boy with a hook who used to sit in the old woman's apartment. She lived above him. She was his best friend at that time in his young life.

She said there was a golden door somewhere in the world.

"No, there isn't," he said. The boy was skeptical of the old woman's tale. "Where does the door even go?"

"I can't tell you that. An old woman knows a lot, but not everything."

"What if I take the golden door off of its hinges and I sell it?" he asked.

She considered this. "It would be heavy. You are a strong little boy, but the golden door weighs a ton. And it is on a cloud, so getting down is hard. You go through the door, not sell it."

And he replaced his sheep-counting dream with the golden door dream. Softly glowing light came from behind it. He kept asking the old woman about the door. He grew in wonder. He had seen it in his imagination, and now he had to find the magic place.

"How did you hear about the door?"

"From an elf." She was tickling him.

"There are no elves! You lie."

"That's because they can play their tricks better if you think there are no elves. See, it makes sense."

"If the golden door is on a cloud. I will ride an eagle."

“That is a good idea. Where do you find an eagle?”

“At the zoo. His name is Elvis Eagle.”

“Perhaps,” she said.

“What does that word mean?” he asked.

“It is a word that means ‘Maybe, but hopefully.’ Perhaps you will be the boy that finds the golden door on your Eagle named Elvis.”

“He says hunka-hunka burning love. And perhaps you will live forever.”

“Perhaps you are a king in disguise.”

And that was the story of how he found the word “Perhaps” that he has used ever since. And once he started using it, he began to think in a new language.

*

It was dark; night had fallen. Herman, a boy with a hook, sat up in his bunkbed and said off-handedly:

“Hey, Fulgencio Walker. A camp counselor told me that the Chupacabra came and took a child away.”

The child with the overbite whom he was addressing, was irritated. He tapped his flashlight on a wall.

And again, a stillness followed...the ear had accustomed itself to the coyote or hoot owl, and the whole, big, adult world did not bother with them inside of the cabin. The two boys stayed at a summer retreat for the disabled.

The child with the hook and the one with the overbite were the last ones awake. Elsewhere in the room, three campers, two of whom had muscular dystrophy, were asleep, and they spoke in their dreams.

“I do not have muscular dystrophy, mother,” said one, who woke up with a start until his body put him under again.

The boy called Herman saw his wee-wee rise. The sheet rose. He felt he would touch it when all were asleep. Was it proper to do so with the hook hand or the healthy one? He heaved a sigh, and tried to put the thoughts away. Something shook in the room, it must have been a convulsion from the camper with epilepsy.

“The forest is alive with tree-men who will take us away,” said Herman.

This time Fulgencio Walker was angry. “One minute a Chupacabra is making friends with a child. The next minute ents from Lord of the Rings will take us to fairyland. You are ignorant.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do not believe what a camp counselor tells you. They are as awful as you.”

Fulgencio Walker was subject to sad moods. In Herman’s opinion, life was swell. Steve would be back from Delaware at the end of summer. His spy magazines would have collected so they could read them all in a glorious afternoon. Suppose the Chupacabra and the Tree-folk were on the same side and that they enjoyed the company of children...they might not mean any harm. They might let you climb to their tops and see out, the tree people would. If the trees could not talk, then how did they know to make new trees, as they did?

Herman pondered for a long time until he thought of his mother. Lovely mother. She is reading a Time magazine, and he comes behind her. “It’s *Time* all right. For a hook.” He seizes it up. And they are running round and round the couch like a comedy troupe, and she is only faking

being mad. His dog is waiting in the fenced-in yard to be petted. He likes to pet the doggie. The doggie's name is John F. Kennedy. He is a poodle mixed with a super-dog from another planet.

Here is Herman's dad in the dream (his dad is not dead in the dream), so he knows it's a dream, and then it is over...he blinks and the house with the ugly roof is gone...he is in camp again. His mother wearing her long skirt is gone...she always says that this skirt is a realllllll man-killer, and she spends a long time, it seems to him, drawing on her eyebrows with a pencil...he is not to take that pencil for his own drawing...no, no, NO she would yell if he did that...she is called Layla or Laila or Lala back when he was really young, but he is an old kid now. Look how big he's getting. The hook is the same. He is growing into it...

He opened his eyes and sought the teddy bear, and his hook looked for the water bottle.

He drank and lay back, and again he was home. And so on till daybreak.

&¹⁶

Herman looked over at Fulgencio Walker in the bed across from him. It had been a day since he mentioned the legend of a big Chupacabra who stole children to play with him. Fulgencio Walker had a sad, mad mood, and he would drum his fingers on his knees. He couldn't stop his thoughts.

"What's it like to have two hands, Fulgencio Walker?" said Herman.

"Don't ask questions."

"But I have a hook, so I don't know."

¹⁶ Dios Mio! I don't know how to show a break within a story within a story. I am but a simple maid. I like the ampersand. There is something about the loops that reminds me of riding a roller coaster. I am typing mine, but they are fun to draw too. You should stop the reading and do that to see what I mean. Start at the bottom, go up and to the left, make a tiny loop, go down to the left, and trace over the first line. Muy complicado!

“I have eyes to see that,” said the other, his giant protruding mouth, to Herman, like an animal at the Tempe Zoo.

“Would you like to try my hook on?” said Herman.

“Why is a hook something to try? It is a disability. Do not forget. For you this life is an adventure book, and it’s foolish. Would you try having my overbite for a moment?”

“I would. I would eat an apple. Rawr.”

“It would come with migraines all the time. You did not know about that eh? My family was too poor to fix it, so here I am.”

Herman felt he was always offending Fulgencio Walker. The camp was run by Sisters of Mercy for free, and that was nice of them, right? It was a shame you could not tell Fulgencio he was beautiful. To Herman, he had two beautiful hands, but the overbite made compliments useless. His face was like the night, and he had a powerful pig nose, round, that could probably blow a booger a hundred yards.

“How far could you blow a booger do you think?” said Herman.

“It depends on the wind,” said the other. He wanted to ask Fulgencio Walker about his strange, thick hair, but it was night and a mood of quiet had settled in. At night, Fulgencio Walker ran out of energy and complained of how cool it was.

“How is it that in the coolness of the night we do not have a blanket, just sheets? Are we animals?”

Herman didn’t mind. He liked to be a ghost in his sheet.

“I understand why we’re here at this camp,” said Fulgencio Walker.

Herman waited.

“I’ll say it. I could have had my overbite reduced. But my folks had no money? And you – you do not have a prosthetic arm like other cripples. Your mother drank during her pregnancy, and now it’s over for you.”

Herman didn’t understand. “I have a friend who says that I’m special. She is an old lady I love.”

“Your friend would say that my overbite makes me special. She repeats her lies endlessly. Go to the Encyclopedia Britannica and see how many people who are royal look like you. Or me. That’s what to do. The worlds gets sick of looking after poor brutes like you. If they could give you a drug to make you vanish they’d make it almost free. They’d say to drink it. How’s that?

“I am a little boy with a hook. I am cute.”

“How many years of being cute are left? An infant with a messed-up jaw is cute too. Now I have headaches, so they say I’m unreasonable. They would be angry too. They put you here so you would recognize your disability. So you would stop wanting what you couldn’t have...they make the camp free. Free! Free! Nothing’s free. Ha!”

He sounded like a mean adult to Herman, but then again, he had had a headache once...it could make you want to cry. He wished to take Fulgencio’s headache for himself so the boy could sleep.

“I am tough. Give me your headache instead,” said Herman.

The other laughed. “I would not take it back. How’s that? You take my migraine, and then I’ll leave you to suffer. How about if I kill you with your own hook?”

“I do not believe you’re mean,” said Herman.

“I confessed that I was mean. Still, you will not believe me. You believe in a silly Chupacabra a hundred-feet tall, but not the reality in the opposite bunk. Well, life will teach you.”

“My mother says I can be the Pirate of Pen-Zance. Gilbert and Sullivan.”

“She tells the truth at least. You can aspire to be a lifelong cripple, lackey or flunkey.”

It was impossible to tell how old Fulgencio Walker was with words like that. Perhaps he was a teenager but just not very tall. His voice was deep.

Herman supposed the other was angry. “I will do my best to be a good pirate.”

“You say that all of the time. Do your best? That only helps those who hate you. They know perfectly well that you can’t last in life. They put you here for it. Supposing you get as far as amateur theatre actor, what then? It’s horrible to think of it...my father got a silver watch one time. He sold it. It was a reminder of what a waste he was.”

“Was it like the Gift of the Magi where he sold it to buy a gift for someone else and they sold that to buy a gift for him?”

“No,” said Fulgencio Walker. He frowned at the thought. “My father gambled and stole whatever he made. He chose that life over mortal despair. If I had a hat, I would tip it to him.”

“If I had a hat it would be a super hat.”

Tonight, the boys with dystrophy were sitting with the epileptic. The epileptic had his arm bandaged. The boys with dystrophy had canes, a black one and a brown one. Did you match your shoes to it or your belt?

Any of them would get in trouble if they took a walk, so here they were being friends.

“Did you get the hook at Tempe St. Luke’s?” asked Fulgencio Walker.

“I like it there. The doctor taught me to juggle.”

“You cannot juggle with one hand. I do not believe you.”

“I would not lie. It is not good to lie.”

“My God, my God!” said Fulgencio Walker. “You are something. You will serve your masters well before you die. Glory be yours.”

Fulgencio Walker seemed to be delirious. He did not take his pills anymore. “I refuse, I refuse,” he would holler.

“Tempe St. Luke’s is fun,” said Herman. “They have Mexican Night where the doctors dress up in costumes.”

“Does that seem normal?”

“It should be more normal than it is. “

“That is one way to see it! Am I insane, or are you? Ship of fools!”

Herman liked the coolness of the other side of his pillow. He also liked the warmth of his current side. He didn’t know what to do. It seemed that Fulgencio Walker would find this stupid.

“With my hook I will not cause trouble. Eventually people will say how my hook is just like a hand. It does most of what a hand does. Perhaps it is better than a hand.”

“If that is so, then cut your other hand off and then have two hooks. That will test your theory.” Fulgencio Walker shook his head. He asked Herman a question which he found curious.

“Did the Sisters of Mercy ever take pictures of you?” he asked.

“Yes. I like the camera. It is like a ghost is living inside who draws me. He is very quick.”

Fulgencio explained the pictures. “The Sisters of Mercy will use pictures of us. They will put them on tv. For so many centers per day, you could help a child like us. You get it?”

He didn’t. Herman did not mind the pictures. He wanted to be famous.

“You are more famous now, for pity’s sake, than you will be ever again. And why did they not spend so many cents-per-day to fix you in the first place? They built this camp instead. Where does it all end? In the grave, you hook-wielding idiot.”

“Somewhere there is another boy with a hook who will see my picture. I would like to be his pen pal.”

Fulgencio Walker went quiet again. Herman heard the flashlight shatter against the wall. “The dark admits no light,” said Fulgencio Walker. “I reject what little consolation they offer.

Whatever they give to me I will break. Let me have your flashlight now. Toss it to me.”

“You will break it. I need it.”

“Do you not trust me? Hmm? When I tell you that I acted rashly, will you believe my confession and that I have changed?”

“Will you promise me?” Herman asked. He lobbed his light to Fulgencio Walker. There was no way to see what Fulgencio was doing, but then came the sound of wood fighting with glass. It was dark.

&

Herman was ill. The boy with epilepsy had a bad flu, and he had passed it on to Herman. A camp counselor came in during the night, or perhaps it was a dream, and took the boy with elipepsy away. He would not be crying all the time anymore...

Herman was at school standing before the chalk board. Mrs. Tellerman wanted him to do his addition problems...what was on the one side of the cross and the other needed to be joined...

“Summer math,” yelled the teacher. What did it mean? Ah, yes, some sums are here, some are there...if you added up all the numbers in the world, what did you get? No one knew. He believed that Mrs. Tellerman knew because she knew all the secrets. He was in the pelican group, and some of the other boys and girls were robins. All birds were good. He had started to like birds, which was called orniphology...ornihornology? Something like that.

The boy who had the elipepsy (another hard one to say) had been nice. He was from a long island somewhere. How did he get here? Probably on a boat. Herman would operate the horn on the boat...that would be his job...

Outside a camp counselor gave a loud shout... "Oh no, oh, oh Jesus, he's gone for good."

Then more camp counselors. The boy wasn't moving. He was in a sheet like a ghost. They were pressing on his chest. He thought of Tempe St. Luke's. Maybe the boy in the sheet would go there. If you pressed on your chest hard enough, candy came out. He had not mastered the secret yet.

Fulgencio Walker had been awake the whole time. He said the boy was dead. Was this a dream?

Herman was looking at the little window and was not listening. He was thinking of all the colors of water. The boy from long island would have to take a bus, a train, or a car, or perhaps a donkey because Arizona was land-locked. There was no oceanfront property he knew. People perhaps had yet to discover the ocean. A long time ago they would discover oceans, and why not now?

The long island boat was like a boat in a warm tub. The people on it were fancy. Thar she blows, he would say as he blew the horn. It was important to have a knight on board to fight the dragons. You put them in a big cage. Chupacabra wanted to be friends.

Herman went to sleep, and it seemed to him that all nature was dozing, too. Time flew swiftly by; imperceptibly the day passed, imperceptibly the darkness came on in his dream, just like the world.

&

Two days passed. Fulgencio Walker said little.

“Are you feeling bad about Edward?” asked Herman. “Do not worry, he’s in a place where no one shakes or has sheezures.”

“Seizures.”

“What?”

“They’re going to send you home because of what happened,” said Fulgencio Walker.

“When a boy dies you go home.”

“And you too? You’re headed to your home?”

“I lied about having a home. I live here with the Sisters. I lied about hating you too.”

Herman felt bad.

“I will write you post cards all the time,” he told Fulgencio Walker.

“There is no address to send. The Sisters will move me soon enough.”

Then it was the night and Herman was led away by camp counselors. He was told not to wake the other boys up.

Fulgencio Walker had given Herman a toy top. It had seemed strange that such a serious boy would have that. Herman felt it in his pocket. It bulged a little. Outside there were a few lights on posts. Mosquitos flew. You didn’t pronounce the middle part like “quit” or Mrs. Guthrie got mad. She told you you didn’t listen.

“Now they will put Ed on a boat to a long island,” said Herman. He made a horn sound.

“Sure, kid,” said a counselor. “Everyone goes on a boat.”

“Yes, that’s the rule. You’ve got to have rules,” said Herman. He was ill. Your mother is there on the boat.”

“Course. There’s a rainbow and a unicorn too.”

There was a smell of wetness. They would have to climb the hill. The two camp counselors and Herman plodded along. They did not come near him because maybe he was sick. If the hill had been smaller and not made of hard spots and he had not been sick it would have been nice. It was good to have made friends. Fulgencio Walker said that the camp was made to make you feel like a nobody. "I won't let it," said Herman, responding, perhaps, to Fulgencio Walker who was not here on the hill.

"She'll give me head," said one camp counselor to the other.

"Could I get a new head? I want a dragon head," said Herman.

Overhead deep sky, bright stars, peace and stillness, exactly as at home in Tempe.

"Where are we now?" asked Herman.

"I don't know. Maybe you're dead," said the counselor."

"What does it mean to finger-bang?" Herman repeated the counselor's word.

"It means that you can make your finger go bang, bang."

"Like the Lone Ranger's gun. Kill the bad guys."

They made the top of the hill. Here was another hill. The top had been the bottom. He was looking forward to climbing another hill because the camp counselors would be with him, and he liked them. They knew a lot.

And then they were on the descent. Herman went rapidly towards the bottom. He was running. "You can't catch me."

After running five hundred yards or maybe a million miles, he did not know, he was less tired. He kept going anyway. He was singing Rocky Raccoon. He liked Raccoons. He pictured one in his head when he sang the song. When he pictured a racoon he thought of Halloween. When he thought of Halloween it was candy-time a dandy-time, which was a song he made up.

He was borne along by this energy. It had hidden away from him, and now he'd discovered it. He was named after a discoverer. You added an er when you discovered a discoverer! That was a fun thing. But he didn't want to kill anyone like the old Cortes. You were supposed to keep your hands to yourself. "No one ever said to keep my hook to myself," he'd bragged to old Mrs. Leonard, but you kept a hook to yourself too. You didn't finger-bang with it either, whatever that was, probably playing a guitar.

In the water below him, he thought there might be a sea-monster he would have to wrestle until it invited him to a tea party with a whale. You had to give them cheese from the moon first. Everyone knew that. Looking at this gorgeous, enchanted sky, Fulgencio had been mad because the moon had craters and nothing was perfect. Herman liked it plenty. Could you marry the moon? It was very old, but he would grow up too.

CHAPTER FOUR

I came to work to find Lord Henry Derby's Lincoln Navigator double-parked in our lot. "Tell the one with the hook," Derby squealed; he ordered his manservant Manfred to read me a recent court order. "Of course, my liege," said Manfred. Per the health department, we had radon. Lots of it.

Derby was again trying to seize our post office.

"Radon gas is colorless and odorless," Derby snickered. He turned to Manfred. "Their doom draws nigh."

"Very nigh, sir," said the manservant.

"Soon your lousy Post Office will be no more. And I, Lord Henry Derby, will be avenged. Do not fight the suburban sprawl that will soon cover the entire earth. You will work at a Mojo Bones. Every last one of you! And your sons, and sons of sons, will make happy hour mojitos."

"Very good, sir," said Manfred again, a pinnacle of professionalism who took a handkerchief from his pocket, blew on it, and wiped Derby's glasses. I really needed to hire help like that. Here we faced a foe as deadly as the dreaded "Other unspecified events of undetermined event."

It seemed that our postal picaresque would come to an end at last. There could be no hope, for the immeasurable radon coated everything in a sheet of death.

“Come along, Manfred,” Derby cackled. “Leave them to a non-zero probability of lung cancer.”

His words fell like a hammer. This could hardly be a hoax when the health of our post office might be at some terrible risk that people were telling us was real.

Worse even than that, no radon inspector would work pro bono. None took pity on us for our budgetary woes. At last, in desperation, I turned to Bing. At the bottom of a long-forgotten page I saw the name Goncalo Zambrano, last in the alphabet and our last hope.

Fortunately, he picked up on the first ring. A one-man radon operation, his voice was leaden. He laughed at my plea for help and gave a smoker’s cough. “The real cost is all the lives radon takes.”

“I don’t know anyone who has died yet.”

“Man may never live in harmony with radon. Woe incarnate, wave on wave of the violent and the insane.”

Zambrano would not stop until he eradicated radon entirely or himself was eradicated. Even as he did not believe he could win this ancestral war, he talked of how his own father had been lost to natural causes, and his father before him.

“Can you free us from the radon?”

“Can you?” he paused, “kill death? Before radon we are no more than mutes in dumb show. We will all ourselves decay into radon, and we will serve in its grave army.”

When I met him he wore a duster. His face was gaunt, his eyes black-lined. The muffler to his car made a rattling noise, and the stress of radon had caused him to take up smoking. It

was a hard life for him. We toured the Tempe Post Office together while he made notes in a giant book whose writing he took pains to keep invisible. "It is so," he would say, picking up some pebble.

Guadelupita gave him her bedroom eyes. He accepted a sample of cologne from Bernice without emotion. "It is heavier than air," he said, pained. "It's half-life is five billion years, longer, perhaps, than man's bespoke ancestor. Before we were here, this perfume waited."

We walked into the beginning of the Tempe Tunnels, dug by some pioneer mailman as an escape route from postal rampages. "Silence," he said. "The radon speaks. Listen."

"Well, we're below ground."

He touched the wall. He sensed something there. "You will enter this place if you want to wage war on radon. Prepare for it to change you, as it did to me. I was once carefree, until the demon chemical nitens stripped me of the boy I was. He coughed, "True wisdom lies in the determinism that we were always meant to battle radon endlessly." He grabbed me by my lapel. "We were meant to suffer brimstone! Our worthless lives have meaning only when we fight a foe we can't know or understand. Outside of the battle, we do not exist."

He ate some of the off-brand trail mix I'd given him from the vending machine. He said it was delicious.

"How will I know if the radon is gone?" I asked.

He laughed, coughing trail mix. "Winning and losing are the same. That is why I do not charge. To win is to be shorn of all you are."

"You kind of said that already."

From the pocket of his duster he pulled out a piece of charcoal and a testing kit. It soaked in the light but seemed to reflect none. “This is no ordinary charcoal briquette,” he said. “I bestow this upon you.”

“What?”

“I speak of radon, mailman. Heed me! You must take this special charcoal that I did not buy at a big-box retailer. Go toward the radon when every impulse cries for you to retreat. Be willing to re-learn your life. Usually I just tell people to open the windows, and this saves them. Not this time! Now you will need to open windows into yourself. Even as the darkness pours in.”

“Okay, thanks. Also, please get that muffler checked.”

“It muffles not,” he agreed.

I thought of the cancerous world below the Tempe Post Office and seeping up toward us; the wishes we had asked of the earth had given us, in the end, only radon. And I remembered studying the Egyptian doctor Imhotep on whom I’d written a fine three-page paper; when he’d been first to see cancer on an operating table, a thousand years before his contemporaries, what had he felt? The body under his surgical knife opened to de-center the known world, yet in that second of nihilism our doctor might have felt his conscience lead him upward and outward towards man and heaven. It is not too much to hope that he anticipated, in a second of trembling, the debates of Platonism that would come to his country millennia later, and in this strange knowledge - that what is seen might not be understood and what is understood might not be seen – Imhotep found a surrender that was not altogether so sad as one first thinks...

“Señor, do not talk of legends. The radon is affecting you.”

I will search the tunnels. Man will eventually be called to face the seventy-eighth worst significant killer...he must not blink. More common than bee stings or lightning, even deadlier than “Abnormal clinical and laboratory findings, not elsewhere classified,” his foe stands in front of him. What kind of a man is he? There is an old saying that the neurotic builds castles in the air, but the psychotic lives in them. Lord Derby collects the rent. I do not know how to live in the reality made for me, but I am doing my best.

CHAPTER FIVE

Southern Avenue has a cryptic sadness. Marina reads *Eat, Pray, Love* and seems to change the subject whenever I bring up her prosecutor past. Esteban is mum about this too. Maybe I could help them as they help me. But they must tell me what is going on. There is no power in secrecy.

Ah, forgive this plaintive turn...let me see what my Greek Chorus is doing.

“Señor, I am a Mexican chorus. I am going to take a siesta. Would you sing to me?”

“Let’s call it a nap to be cultural appropriate...Now we own all the stars and a million guitars are still playing...Darling maid, you are the song and you'll always belong to my heart...”

“Thank you, señor. I sleep now. Love and dreams and chickenfoot...three things in life are best...snore snore...the cleaning is hard...”

We once had a janitor named Rodney McMurtry at our post office. He was mute with laryngitis. That country singer could play a few licks. When I met him at a Rib Shack, he was barely getting out words. I asked to join him. I had a feeling.

He didn't resist. The lowly things of this world and the despised things were chosen because they are not boastful and only want the worthwhile things. I broke a little cornbread in half for him. I passed him the siracha too. "Go ahead, you'll never be the same."

He ate. He smelled like bourbon. "What do you want from life?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know." He rasped.

"Whose job is it to know?" I recalled earlier conversations with Steve. Without him I would still be a wriggling Cordelia without any understanding of human fate. I would not have been given all the things I needed to succeed. Here on the shelf is his signed copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield* that he took from the Tempe Home for Wayward Youth. We would sign each other's books as if this magnified the value – it did! But it did!

Ah, McMurtry...he began passing his words to me on napkins...he could have ignored me, yet he did not. He became a janitor for me instead, as I had become a janitor, so he would be a janitor slopping the water. As I had cleaned vomit, I would have him clean vomit. Oh, it's hard to come back in life.

"If I can turn this water a different color," I pointed to his glass, "will you come work for me?"

He wrote on the napkin that I couldn't. I told him to close his eyes.

When he opened them, the water was purple. I smiled, not revealing the trick yet.

He honored his word. I had told him about the promises that had been made to me. Now I made them too.

Once I had been wasting away at the DMV, a know-nothing rascal whose hook wandered when under the mistletoe with a girl. For my own aggrandizement I prioritized a certain meanness disguised as wittiness...Smell you later I said, speeding away in my flashy new Saab. How suave I was with my DMV123 vanity plate. My ready words won every encounter -- except the one in the mirror. I was miserable on the inside.

Then I followed Steve to a new life. It is better to look into the eyes of your fellow mailman and ask what is it that we can do together. Let us oppose what is wrong and stand apart from our old selves. Some will say that the DMV is fun, but the life is empty. Rodney McMurtry would see...

When the new life is hard, when I wish to break the covenant of the mail, I think of Eli, our hunchback who dreamed of flight. He stood in the empty lot of the Post Office with his goggles, the Tempe Gyrocopter before him in all its glory.

"Today we will usher in a new age of mail delivery," said Eli. He wore a festooned cape embroidered with a silver 'T.' And he pulled the cord and began to pedal toward his destiny. We watched him go, his hopes with us.

It is not a long story after that...sometimes I am sorting the mail eating a Peeps and I think of the cracking of a rotor and the slow, tortured descent...bathed in fire, the parachute coming to earth...we thought that the present would be a point of departure for the future, yet the smoking evidence of the Tempe Gyrocopter showed the opposite...we dragged the ruin into our storage shed to someday begin again...when he got out from Tempe St. Luke's he had a

complimentary pacemaker and a fresh start...he would not be broken...though some inner sense might have led him to disgust, he kept on...it is possible that he will fly again, I know it...

There is another story I must tell. Do you know of the Mail King? It was nineteen seventy-one in the reign of Postmaster Winton M. Blount. The post office was changing, but some refused to bow before this postmaster. A conclave of Tempe Mailmen met in the underground tunnels to oppose Blount. They swore fealty to one of their own, a postmaster like them. This schismatic's name was Ricardo Aviles Montrose, the Mail King. His followers would not rest until they opposed the reforms of the Postal Service. Time after time, they sent raids into the very post office they once loved, stealing Elvis stamps and, it is said, breaking the coffee machine. Now it makes only disappointment...

Kenneth heard this story from a friend of a friend...real or legend, few knew the occupants of the underground tunnels. To descend there would mean danger from radon and the hatred of some sunken post office five-hundred meters below the earth. A century ago, one Hiram Forrester used Chinese indentured labor to blast open the tunnel with dynamite. Meant to be a haven from rampages above, the tunnellers only created tragedy below. They were not enough.¹⁷

And how *does* a mailman turn water purple? Perhaps I will leave that to the imagination...¹⁸

¹⁷ It reminds me of John 8:23: You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world, which itself is a newer version of the ancient idea: "As above, so below." Dios mio! It is easier to go to the court and prove a man's guilt than to tell the real truth, as I try here, in my book. The people will say, "Marina, you have been known to spend time in Hogwart's, so we don't believe you! Are you drinking your butter beer again?" No, I am not. So much of my life has been untruthful that now I just want to do right by others.

¹⁸ For those empirically inclined readers, Herman had an affection for Crystal Light Packets.

CHAPTER SIX

Esteban had acquired a vintage jean jacket and a fake tattoo on his neck. He'd put on some muscle for his role. "I'm getting too old for this," he told me. I felt the same way.

The proper arc of life is escalation; as he grows in his role, it will become more difficult. He will surely feel, as he completes ever more difficult janitorial projects, that reality is not made for men like us. It is like my father on that fateful Idaho day. To seek refuge in the sophism of ease, to retire from the jumping of twenty-eight cars and proclaim one's right to precaution, that was not my father's way.

No one would blame a stuntman for going easily into his dotage. Geronimo Cortes was the name, in gold, on my father's jacket. I have seen photos. He would have known that his namesake spent his last years as an American prisoner...this was to be avoided...he did...

Geronimo was said to have swallowed the heart of his first kill, yet he came to rely on nourishment from his enemies...there is something in this of irony and human sadness...yet it can be a liberation theology too. At least the Geronimo's did something.

I have the blessing of inspired people. Re-reading the work of this introduction has taught me to count my fortunes. I learn as I go. Steve put the question to me whether I would end my days slinging paperwork or answer the call to a complicated life. The infamous Tempe Post Office had an opening for me...you could work there...all you had to was show your face. Tomorrow we begin fighting back. I begin to shape our offensive. Perhaps I have already begun.

*

“It's important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go. Otherwise you are left with words you should have said but never did, and your heart is heavy with remorse.”

-The Life of Pi by Señor Yann Martel ¹⁹

Esteban the Janitor stood before the mailmen. He determined to solve the post office's bat problem once and for all. They had drawn straws to see who would enter the crumbling radio tower, but the hunchback had lost.

Let me do it.

He had become mean. Hard. It was to win against the bats or close down, per Henry Derby and his notice from the health department. Herman was down in the tunnels already doing his part. He felt very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel.

Remember what we did here. When it comes time, you'll know what to do.

He wasn't pretending, or else he was long past knowing the artifice.

The mailmen offered Esteban what they could afford from the Army Surplus store; here was Kenneth's football helmet, too small, a makeshift shield, too big, from a costume party where Kenneth had gone as a gladiator.

Bernice placed two bottles of perfume in Esteban's belt. “Save the hyacinth for the leader. And thanks.”

¹⁹ This is Marina. I should tell the story of my cousin now.

Kenneth, who was a notary public, took the floor. Blessed are the Hungry was an interesting beatitude given the moment. Perchance he thought of his favorite vending machine. Nevertheless, Esteban's disappearance into the tower began his transformation, set loose a chain of dominoes that would change them all. Kill them. Solo tenemos lo que damos.

In the tower, was he lonely with buyer's remorse? It can't be known. The mailmen saw him only once more -- when he returned as Dark Esteban in the final battle. He had, by then, engineered the Mailman 5000, the machine with letter openers for arms that aided Henry Derby. The beloved cousins chose opposite sides again.

To have a dark angel may prove necessary. There is no human story without this conceit. To face such a vile opposition must be a blessing, as, like smelling salts, they may awaken our little sleeping society. The dark angel's defeat (they always lose) consolidates the race of men in love.

They shared a final Peeps in the break room.²⁰ They swore their oaths, consecrated the moment with collective memories.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The night I left for the Tempe Tunnels, I ate a final dinner with Marina. She treated me to those expensive olives with hand-stuffed pimentos inside. I liked how the embedded sweet

²⁰ If you wish to visualize the break room, Herman once referenced the defunct Orange you Glad, "...Which was really ahead of its time in terms of really focusing on one color of merchandise and the only place when one could pick up an emergency pumpkin."

pepper hit at the right time. Everything I was doing was with a mien of doing it for the last time. My hope gave way a little, I must say, although not completely. It would not get in the way of spending time with my favorite maid. Mother had not answered my call, and Esteban was lost somewhere deep within the Stanislavsky Method.

But at the end of a night of board games, the seriousness came on like a hammer blow. She sat me down. I wondered if she would try to kiss me. I did not know if that was what I wanted. A mailman with a hook was not like the swarthy men in her book, and would I kiss her back and question my devotion in favor of a domestic love?

It did not come. The kiss that would change a frog to prince sometimes does not come. The kiss that could settle a mailman's wanderlust may never arrive.

"It's a big tunnel without a map," she said. "What if you get lost? What if the radon makes you transform?"

What if we all do transform? That was the idea. She was underestimating the power of my example. It's too easy to submit to misrule. It seems we're predisposed to comic book villainy – a piece of is comfortable rolling in the muck.

Her hesitation was understandable. Everyone was abandoning her. We never saw Esteban without some bombast out of a spaghetti western, heavy lines under his eyes. Marina shared, if not the same priorities, the same psychic attrition as I.

"We won't become cooks in some strip mall Olive Garden," I told her.

“What’s wrong with Olive Garden?” she said. She tossed a pillow and it fell to the floor. “It’s honest Italian theatre. I will come see you and get unlimited soup, salad, and breadsticks. And you’ll say ‘Bonjorno, Marina,’ and I’ll still have a friend.”

I call this the Argument from Plenty. Some would say how our abundance means we cannot complain. Are we the first group who will willingly give up the right to our ideals? We cannot live that way. You can only die that way.

“But we have to consent to that life. Do you understand? Without our say-so, there is no law or rule we will follow.”

“Señor, I trusted you when you promised me a home here.”

“And you have your home. Southern Avenue is yours. If you’ll excuse me, it is time to redeem my life.”

“Blah, blah, blah, here’s the dramatic Señor Lear. I have been worthwhile, and the cartels ran me out of my country for it. I fled here hoping for more...”

“- you never answered me...was it el Iguana from the crime shows?”

“No, el cañibal. He wanted to put me in his recipe book. I came here for a quiet life, so he would not find me.”

“You can be safe here even if I don’t return.”

“It’s not the same...”

But what we have is never forever. I thought of Steve. “I lost my karaoke partner. Do you know who will sing with me? No one. I watched him die for nothing. I made him a promise.”

I was yelling. I blamed myself for his death. I hadn't known that.

"Let's sing," she said.

"You are tone deaf."

"Let me try. Take Sir Sing-a-Lot from the closet."

So much changed when you started singing together. My life would not become easier...

The machine was unwieldy, like moving a piano. I wondered would I someday live to use the whole contents of this closet again. I certainly didn't feel any plot armor. The hero was disposable. Would they write me out of my own work like they did in Tempe Theatre? One day I looked at the playbill and, just like that, stupid Merton Johnson had taken my role. He was a two-bit hack who had dandruff... there was nothing royal about him. He could not improve his way out of a paper bag... get some scalp shampoo, idiot...

"You want to sing?" I said. "You better be ready. Because when I do The Marvelettes, it's for all the marbles." I sent the lyrics through the printer. I asked if she could hang. There would be no holding back. If you want to sing, you do it with everything inside of you.

"Oh, maybe I'm not ready. What if I disappoint -"

But it saturated me already. "Come on and say goodbye if this is goodbye."

A karaoke machine isn't bad. You press a few buttons, and it lets you do the rest. It's just support for your best effort. That's all a mailman can want...

"Wait, Señor Postman," she started off.

“Did someone ask for a mailman?” I came in with my signature one-hand finger snap.
“Oh yeah. You got a hook. One-two.”

“Is there a letter in your bag for me. Please, Please Señor Postman. Why's it been a very long time. Oh yeah. Since I heard from this mailman of mine. There must be some word today From my mailman so far away. Please Señor Postman, look and see. Is there a letter, a letter for me?”

I was more than mad at all our losses. “So many days you passed me by. You saw the tears standin' in my eye. You wouldn't stop to make me feel better. By leavin' me a card or a letter.”

The last part was her playground, such as it was. This would be her show from now on.

“Please, Señor Postman look and see. Is there a letter oh yeah in your bag for me? You know its been so long. Yes since I heard from this mailman of mine. You better wait a minute, wait a minute.”

Maybe just one. I had my supplies. I snapped the leg brace on. I felt like some second-rate Odysseus, the only kind that would be allowed to work at my post office. Then I slung my mailbag over the shoulder, which seemed appropriate. I asked how I looked.

“The same as always.” If only. I felt beat-up, like I was part of a collective unconscious of pain. When and if I returned, would we still be the same?

*

I am a day into this maze. Past the dynamited sections, these tunnels become a natural cavern. Some systems of caves are known to be so vast as to contain whole biomes within them. I see the odd mushroom or water pool. The tunnels slope downward as I travel, gradually become more biotic. I do not know what to expect. Is somebody going to jump out of a grotto and end my adventure? My light is limited to my makeshift mining hat, which is a flashlight duct-taped to a metal shell. It is hot and uncomfortable in this place. I wait to espy others, consulting my radon testing kit as I head to the highest concentrations. This land is...terraformed. I sense I am not alone. Is there truth to the Mail King? Listen to the mouths of babes...and/or Kenneth.

*

I am not alone.

My beam shone down a narrow passage. In front of me was a forlorn figure, a mailman, sooty uniform, dirt on his white face. He saw my light and beckoned to me with a long fingernail.

A crumpled and grease-stained mail hat lay almost flat on his head. "Hey, I'm Bill McMahon the Mailman." His voice was friendly.

"Hiya," I said. His generic orthopedic shoes had long since ceased providing comfort.

"Of all the guardians in this tunnel, I, Bill McMahon, am the least fierce. You must bypass me to reach the more competent guardians of the mail!"

"Got it."

"I will test your knowledge of riddles three," he said.

“Sweet. Let er’ rip.”

“Good luck,” he said. He was a lousy riddler because he was rooting for me. He read off a piece of paper.

“I am he who lies down but never sleeps. I carry the weight of the world yet dwell in the world. I am mortal flesh but never die.”

He looked glib. I thought I might be missing something. “It’s a...mailman...right?”

“Okay. Round one goes to you. That was a warm-up,” said Bill McMahon. “Tell me, traveler, what hath four fingers and a thumb and liveth not? If you cannot answer I will be re-evaluated, and they’ll make me supervisor of the pit of sorrows. But I hope you win. I like you.”

I did not know his strange riddle.

I heard Marina’s voice in my ear: “Señor, you must flash back. The answer is contained in the days of innocence. Return to them and do not be afraid.”

“Marina, what if I get lost in my flashback?”

“Señor, I will come retrieve you...”

I am perhaps four years old, four months before St. Luke’s will give me my hook. I am watching the snow fall outside an Idaho motel. We are visiting my deceased father’s family. Mother is drinking from her bottle and ruminating on her lost career. I am too young to say words of comfort, but not so stupid to be unaware of the need.

“Someday we will act in the same play,” I say.

That irritates her. She banishes me. It is cold in my parka.

I try to make a snowman with my gloves on. It is hard to sculpt him with one hand. I give him a stick for his one hand, for I made him like me. He seems unreal. The wind nearly whips my hat right off. I want to go inside. The door is locked. My mother does not wake up when I am bang. I begin to weep tears that freeze to my face. She sometimes sleeps after drinking. There is just me and the snowman, alone together...we each have one glove...

I tell Bill: "Gloves are alive with one hand."

Guillermo gave me a high-five and read his third riddle. "Every night I'm told what to do, and each morning I do what I'm told. But I still don't escape your scold."

Nor did I know this one.

Then I heard a baritone from another time...Steve!

"Think of the old room," he said. I had a vision of a room with a *Return of the Jedi* poster. Two boys, a giant and an invalid, were sitting and reading nudie magazines. It must have been that time when the pipe burst in our school...for days we had no obligation but to sleep until noon and then head to the woods, the spot we liked where a footbridge crossed the stream. We would spend the day accomplishing nothing, being nothing...much escapes my scold today...I knew an answer for Bill.

"Every night an alarm is ordered and in the morning obeys. It does all it ought to do, and it is never enough."

"Well, I'll be a petunia in a hog patch," Bill said. He took his mail hat off and stomped on it. "I'm happy for you, but I really, really need this pit of sorrows job."

"You do an honest day's work."

“But I barely scrape by. If I don’t stump you, they don’t pay me. Used to be that you just had to work hard and telling esoteric brain-teasers could feed a whole family.”

“Maybe you can get another skill? Form a union?”

“Are riddlers in demand up there?”

I shook my head. The world had moved on without him. I went past him.

“Hey, Bill,” I said. “The more you take of me, the more I leave behind. What am I?”

“Footsteps,” he doffed his mail hat.

*

Communication continues through a composition notebook. Writing helps keep a rhythm, and by joining with an audience, I am alive as long as this has reached them...the diary is a sort of blood pressure cuff for me, measure of vital signs.

I practice my amateur cartography by marking the terrain. I pencil the grid as I go, not a little in anticipation of Indiana Jones comparisons when I return...While the true grail gives life, the false, will take it from you...I remember Harrison Ford when I am sad...You lost today, but that doesn’t mean you have to like it.

The tunnel reminds me of better times when I was a high school mascot. Ned the Normal, so named after Tempe’s old normal school, one of the defining features of the city’s early days. In my fat suit I would run up through the darkness of the locker room and into the light, helpless witness to Arredondo High School’s defeats.

Ned, Ned, Ned. He says we’re better off dead.

They called his name in the despair of another shellacking. Mocking me mocking them mocking me. Ned played out not just the arc of his event but larger issues of probity...

“Dodgeball itself,” Ned would moan to the crowd, “is an attack on our sense of fairness, the victory of the powerful against the one.”

“The best and worst we can hope for are now the same,” Ned would declaim at his baseball games. These bad old days are the good old days...

Four days. The intense longing for domestic life is a full lust now. I wish to spend evenings in the most idle pursuits. I wish for wasted life. Or driving Marina on errands in the Saab, a front seat driver if I ever knew one...we would exchange philosophies. Her mind was a comfort. At home is the comfort of a cheap sofa I shall, perhaps, never again lie on. A bowl of Ramen and Brie would be worth an entire kingdom to me.

What shall I write? I cannot sleep.

When I was a young, thirty-two year old mailman I found an old book at Pedro the Mailman's yard sale, *The Unbearable Lightness of Postmen*, by a Mailman of the Year who perished delivering letters amid the Spanish Flu. The distinct impression stays with me. The book was finished with the author's dying breaths. I remember it told me that we were all just walking each other home.

The cover picture was a mailman in, perhaps, Edwardian times. He wore a black suit, red chevron and a cravat like a clergyman...I embrace the soteriology of the book, and I am determined to supply the devotion that the text requires. I accept the radical effort necessary. Down here in the dark of myself I understand that this is just a long night of the soul...although I do not know what I will face, I move forward in clear purpose.

*

Five days. I still adhere to my diet. The cashew nuts will last me two weeks if I ration them. I have water enough. My mind must only stay sharp. The old rules are abandoned in a place like this, and I cannot know the character of the tests facing me. I can only attribute to benevolence, albeit one that will let me fail. In my brokenness I wait for a resolution that has not come. If some mythopoetic monster were in front of my flashlight beam I should welcome the combat. I would be devoured by that minotaur or put him, a captive, into my mail sack. I want to scream to let it be done.

Are my fellow mailmen holding their own against Derby's new mischief? I deputized Kenneth, my food thief. He volunteered for the job. He had no leadership, but he was willing, and that's got to be something. I took him aside and said, "Do you remember when I was the flag football coach in the Mailman Olympics?"

We were good, weren't we?" he said, a nostalgic twinkle in his eyes.

"No, we were terrible. That was supposed to be a 'before' example, with which I was to contrast our current situation..."

I remember a sweaty Kenneth in our huddle. "All right, K-Money, we're behind 41-0. We're going to run the statue of liberty, which is a diversion for the flea flicker. It's now or never."

"My helmet is too small," he said.

"This is not about your genetic faults right now," I told my quarterback. "I'm swinging you wide right. You'll suffer needlessly. I wish I could be out there suffering with you, but I'm

too old. Also, I have a hook. I want you to be better than I ever was. In my life I've made every wrong choice a mailman could make. I have hired a lot of janitors. One of them stole the old vending machine. I am said to have murdered my twin in utero. The inches are all around us..."

And now he had to lead the Tempe Post Office in all its struggles. People long ago said that I myself couldn't have led the post office, but then nobody wanted the job. After Steve departed, I went hat in hand to the postal inspector. "I think it's my time," I said.

"Hmm," he said. "If you insist."

"That's all I have to do is insist?"

"Pretty straightforward."

And so I came to the beginning. Now it was Kenneth's turn to take the job few could do and fewer wanted.

He asked me if I could believe a fat kid from Brooklyn would ever lead a post office...I was seeing it with my own eyes.

Eat my ravioli in the fridge. It's yours.

I did.

Perhaps none of this is fair.

Maybe it's fair when you view it at a distance. From the end you see it as it was.

I told him to remember me when I come back into his Post Office. He said all right.

I have met the second mail guardian of these tunnels, this one with a firearm by his side. He greeted me, sibilant, harsh, like someone kept their contempt in too long.

“I am Herman Cortes,” I told him from behind a mask of bravado. “A mailman from up above.” My beam revealed a china-white humanoid figure, old, his red eyes and ashy skin long adjusted to the tunnels.

“A mailman. From up above,” he repeated. “The arrogance. To come here.” He had a staccato language that nevertheless lacked no precision. His eyes were submitting me to scrutiny while he fidgeted nervously toward his weapon. His face showed smugness for a life he did not regard, clearly, as his equal. He gave me a burst of interjections when I asked of the Mail King.

“Many wish. For his wisdom. Why do I. Trust you? Why would I not bring your hook back to my King instead?”

“Because I am a fine mailman. What is your name who lives in darkness?”

He began regaining his old language as he heard mine. His full-stops came less often. “Obango. I was a mailman. I immigrated from Nigeria. Who opposed the post office. For our rebellion, I cannot ever show my face. Tell me: who is the one you call the United States Postmaster?”

“Patrick R. Donahoe.”

“Donahoe. I do not love that one. I will not kneel to him. Not my master.”

I asked if they planned to be here forever. Aviles was dead. His son, birthed in these tunnels, reigned in his place. “If I live forever, I will serve the mail king as long,” said Obango. He warned me that they were not without their defenses if this Donahoe came for them. I hardly doubted they were masters of their realm...

Lord Henry Derby and the radon failed to impress Obango. “You want our help? You people who supported Blount. He hunted us. You should have cared for your own. We could have had. A life of peace.”

“Blount is long dead, “I said. “There is a statute of limitations on your crimes.”

“You talk to me of the law? We are forgiven. We do not forgive.”

We were different. Evolution had hardly needed eons for its work... our way of sensing had diverged already. His corrupted laugh gave me a synesthesia, but only of the color black. I noticed his teeth were gone except for the yellow of scattered survivors. His old shirt was, almost buttonless. We were alike in so many ways. I too liked the feel of an old mail uniform.

“I must kill you,” he said. He reached for his hip.

“No, wait,” I said, not quite knowing how to stay his hand.

I heard a voice from the past! Information came to me in lightspeed. It was fortunate that I had a convenient epiphany at the last second. This is a vastly underrated skill, which the mailman must call upon in the hour of need. I heard the voice of an old teacher speaking to me from the past...

We were alone in her room. The sweltering summer of '81. She was fresh from college. I could feel the heat between us. “Herman,” she held up my latest factoring assignment, “there’s a lot to talk about.”

“This isn’t about factoring,” I declared. I knew the erotics of pedagogy, and I began to unbutton my Hawaiian. “This is about something far more fun, isn’t it? I’ve seen you eye my hook. I’m up here, by the way.”

I guess I was terrible at factoring. They've got a lot of moving parts. But sometimes a story can save. The universe, by not letting me do much good, was directing my energy. I who have had a knack for delivery would have been misplaced in the world of equations. So that a prodigious delivery talent was not wasted, the universe made my path ragged.

“Obango, don't kill me yet – don't you want to know about the world?”

“What world? This is the only world. I do not care for stories.”

But a mailman is forever the sucker. He must melt into the distinct pleasure of news – the impulse of man since he first drew the wanderings of ancient animals. The mailman thirsts for a free flow of speech. A neighborhood gossip dressed in his wide-brim hat, he draws you close to see...did you overhear what he just heard. He has it on good account...a mailman knows...a little birdy told him...

Tell me of your history since you betrayed us. Hmm. How do you live?

I rummaged my brain. Given license, by the prospect of violence, to forsake the rules of historiography, I might keep the performance dry, throaty, like old Alistair Cooke in his wing chair. Or I could turn history's eye to what goodness our world managed...passion or dispassion? What was right and what was correct? Every part of me cried out to be one of those Jesuits always reporting good little lies to those at home...fantastical adventures for the taking... I could be a mailman again. Like a parent who alters, unknown to his son, the text of their nightly book. It is harmless. With a benevolent disposition, why should I not tell him we lived in paradise?

I looked at Obango. What did *he* want?

I heard my maid from somewhere in the distance. “Señor, tell them of Minh Giap.”

The delivery driver for Euclid Avenue Buffet. He brought the caramel ca kho on his bicycle. On the street he was a flurry of motion, finding the in-betweens among city traffic. If I was dining in the night, he would take tea and milk with me.

At first he was shy. I had to open him up. I taught him to juggle. He taught me his people’s manners; my rice bowl should not touch the table while I ate. My hook reminded him of a crippled man he saw by the marketplace in the summer when he went home to Lào Cai. “I know that dude,” I said.

“No, you don’t.” I thought it might be Todd, a hook like mine, all grown up in another land.

“How old are you, Minh?”

He said seventeen. He lied. He was young, said the textbook I had seen him with. “You talk to girls?” I asked.

“I work too much,” he said. Handsome kid. Thick hair. Gangly, but he might be able to dribble a ball and do all right. But helping a family business at this age...

He leaned in. “You like this place?”

“It’s local. Like I am.” This was one of the places you couldn’t find on any map. I thought of those buffet chains in the strip malls, all pretend authenticity, a million square feet – no style, no roots though. The corporatization of buffets was my last straw.

“We have a secret,” he whispered. He couldn’t tell me what.

“I’m glad, kid. See no evil, hear no evil,” I told him. I liked the commotion back there. You had to keep a little mystery in your life.

I told all this to Obango. Sure, your mom and pop shop had to traffic in rhino horn. A customer might see the occasional weapons deal when he went by the kitchen. But you were progressing. Poor kids sometimes got to Columbia. Life was good. The broken-hearted could find some solace.

Do you have flying cars?

We have the dream of flying cars.

We might pervert them when they came. But if we were still children we had all the promise of growing up. Some of it anyway.

I told him of the playwright Wei Wu Wei; in college, I used to sit under the willow acacia and read him. His name translated to something like “Action as non-action.” Sometimes that’s how you felt. Life was still a lot of running-round. By hook or by crook. We were working it all out one wasted life at a time.

He let me live.

He hoped for good news from the above world. “World of light,” he called us. That was nice. I said I’d work at that until we deserved to be imagined that way. I couldn’t promise for all of us – I don’t have that power of course - I could live in peace and give it to others...yet simple Nature to his hope has given, behind the cloud-topped hill, a humbler heaven.

I wished him luck. Wei Wu Wei said “Almost all you do is for your self. And there isn’t one.” Then in that absence why was I in so much pain? It hurt being down here. Then again, what did I expect? Would I not have forsaken the world if I didn’t hurt like it did?

At the end, after he was behind me, I knew what he had wanted from me all along. Is it a world I can join? Is there a place for me after all I’ve changed down here?

When I went back to find him he was gone. Therefore beseech you to avert your liking a more worthier way than on wretches whom nature is ashamed...

...but there was joy above too, and he might find, in the world above, an audience quite willing to listen. He should ask. I would like that for him.

Esteban might be back at the house by now, his old self, running immaculate trains across the tracks, dapper in his pastels, conscious of his own arc and pleased at being alive. Marina too. She’d think of me in between episodes of crime shows. I like the way she calls the Court Justices “Señora,” and how she once over-brined a turkey even though she’s smart and deep. What book would be part of her routine tonight? General Jiménez is wont to make a comeback...he will always return from another front to another great love...is this ever exhausting? Is he caught up in all the bodices he’ll never rip? I read how in San Jacinto he manned a cannon under heavy fire. He slips through the enemy net. He is always only grazed, The General. He can say to the men at parade that they will never die.

A Reunion for Señor Gancho ²¹

²¹ It is Marina.

Few would know that the Fed-ex man in his crisp shirt had not long ago lived in the sewers below Apache Station. He kept it to himself. But before him now he saw the stranger with whom he'd shared a fateful rat kebab. By the beam of a miner's hat, their courses had changed forever...²²

“Attend the Lords of France and Burgundy! How are you?”²³

“Herman? I am well. I work for Fed-ex,” said Guillermo.

He had been a scurvied exile living five years below ground, surviving on scraps. Apache Station had released him when he fell below the minimum perfect standard on a performance review; this set in motion a voluntary exile. He had eked out his days on scraps as his guilt devoured him.

“Once I thought only death could cleanse me. Now I drive a truck,” said Guillermo.

Herman told Guillermo how the Tempe Post Office's arch-enemy had, at last, secured dominion over their land. Guillermo was asked to join a resistance team. They would make Derby look elsewhere for his predation. “You must pick up your katana one more time,” said the mailman.

Guillermo thought of his past and his future. There was rumor of making him an associate manager. He had so much to lose. He thought also of the way the hilt of a blade felt between the thumb and index fingers.

²² I like the dots.... I will use them too.

²³ Guillermo died in the final battle, so I must use my imagination. Señor Alvarez, my old teacher, said that everyone fills in the gaps, but honesty is the best policy. I still like the policy even though people were killed because of me.

“We will be closed by month’s end,” pled Herman. Weeks after that, the old branch will be torn down for a Starbuck’s. They would all be serving nutmeg lattes by the year’s end.

“It is good coffee,” reflected Guillermo as he stroked the beard on his chin. “Never bitter. I get a pumpkin latte in the autumn. They’re dangerous. Will the police help you?”

Herman shook his head. “Derby comes for the parts of American life no one cares to defend.”

A chill passed through Guillermo. His steady hand was needed in two places. Work had a bowling team, The Cougars. He might soon try online dating. After the subterranean life, he had found happiness again. His skin had its color back. He would try the opera and museums. But his loyalty was his everything...

Neither man knew the entire story. With the help of an engineer known as Dark Esteban,²⁴ Lord Derby was creating a horrible monstrosity to seize the post office by force. A Frankenstein monster of mail-related objects, the Mailman 5000 would shoot razor envelopes and slice a man open with its many letter-opener arms. My fallen cousin had powered it with fermented sugar from surplus Peeps. His sacrifice for the Tempe Post Office had boiled inside of him, turned to hatred.

In truth, Tempe Station only the most passionate of Derby’s projects. He had already sent his Manfred far and wide, scouting his next market. After Tempe Station, it would go on, and after that too. A first-year law student could see the entire ideological apparatus at work. Derby’s coat of arms was a bulldozer. He heralded an endless energy wielded against the indigent, dumb, or merely inconvenient, yet, his feat was remarkable for one reason; no more hateful a campaign

²⁴ Yes, my cousin.

against good people had ever become universally beloved. The secret, perhaps, was the softness of his targets.

Herman was asking Guillermo to understand this gentlemanly eugenics and not be afraid to stand for the downtrodden. He told him about Guadelupita. Didn't she deserve a place to feel truly good about herself?²⁵ The violence against them had started in the crib, maybe before, and now it had to end.²⁶ Though some official might raise the black flag half-staff on its pole, mothers of mailmen from Suchiate to Juneau would see their sons and daughters with fresh eyes. Those colicky babies with their tiny impossible tempers. The ones who kept them up nights for all manner of wants.²⁷

²⁵ I say "The Mailman" to remind myself that he became a shared symbol to his people. It makes me feel better.

²⁶ Despite my participation, I am not in full agreement with Herman. Neither did I agree with groveling before the political and economic Leviathan Herman described. I do not agree with this either. I was bred to bear the costs of violence, and I only wished to save my friends.

²⁷ We could be lifted high into the air then, in the days of innocence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I have been imprisoned. Knocked unconscious, now with a bag over my head I lie in a cell. They took my hook. It is a sad nakedness. How this narration comes by the reader I cannot know...unless my maid has taken up the story, then my delirium will never be known...

The night I left, I addressed this very contingency; a fine mailman must perpetually gird himself for loss...

“If I don’t meet the Mail King, if I don’t return, don’t ever stop. Tell our people to go on without me.”

“Señor, I will free you from the Mail King’s clutches if he captures you.”

“If I’m in danger, I will say the magic word, ‘Gansito,’ and you will know that it’s your time.”

“I will bring you a suitcase of them to where the worm people are torturing you. I will never forget you. Like in *Celestial Passions* when the hero is an astronaut. It is a good romance.”

“Well, not quite like that.”

“Señor, pretty much like that. Except instead of away from earth you went into a tunnel... love stories are the best kind...”

I sat in the cell alone. “Gansito,” I said, and then again, louder. Knowing no one could hear me I still said our sweet word.

Let her finish the story. Make it what she wants. I won't care.

I hear them returning. This is the mail king. If I am lucky, he may answer my questions before the end. I have so many, more and more as the years have gone on. I did not expect to die during my own story. Steve told me I was invincible. I suppose we were, for a while...

There's a little black spot on the sun today. Is that my soul up there? When they put the MIA flag up will it flap an elegy for me on a windy day? What was it like to not choose the hook that day in Tempe St. Luke's when I was four years old? I chose a hook as if I knew it was correct.

*

The man with Marina was named Don Miguel. A veteran of Apache Station's twice-annual beefcake calendar, Marina met him on MailmanMingle, the only place for singles who love the mail.²⁸ They had had instant kismet. His pectorals, hewn from years of exercises, were like enormous, rolling hills. The two lovers had finally succumbed to exhaustion.

“Did you like my trapeze, dear?” asked Don Miguel.

“It was perfect,” she said. But she felt troubled somehow.

²⁸ It's Marina. It is the moment before I hear the magic word. A feeling comes over me.

“I feel troubled somehow,” she said.

“I am super potent. Could that be it?” he asked.

This was the truth but not the whole truth. She felt distant even in the embrace of her lover in his hammock. The tighter he held her the more she metaphorically pulled away. She knew Herman was in trouble. He had said the magic word.

“I’ve got to make a choice,” she said.

Don Miguel was on top of her with his manhood. “Tonight, I make the choices,” he said.

“Oh, Don Miguel,” she said. “I must go.”

Since the time he said “Enshante, Marina,” quitting him had been impossible. She prepared to do the unthinkable. She instantly knew what to do as though she had always known the unthinkable would be what she had to do. “I must go,” she said again. But his arms were so strong.

“Let me take you tenderly before you go,” Don Miguel said. And it would be savage and tender all at once. Even though she was a lawyer with a framed portrait of Judicial Minister Margarita Beatriz Luna Ramos, she was a woman too. She felt divided between the mailman who needed her help and the hairless man in the hammock, calling to her, dangerous like a male siren.

“My friend is in trouble,” she resisted. “He is trapped underground. He went down there to rescue his post office from radon.”

“Mi amor,” said Don Miguel. He was multi-lingual like all Apache Station employees. When he said “Enshante” to her she had known right then he was used to getting his way. He

could not be allowed to have his way. She had to help the Tempe Post Office. There wasn't time. This was her story.

“You can't save them,” said Don Miguel melodramatically.

“I must try even though I am feeble.”

She was torn between the man in front of her and the risk of losing everything. She wanted to undo her purple housecoat, let it drop to the ground, and run to the sex hammock. She was in a romance novel that she didn't want to leave. A woman could love in this world and be satisfied, but from another world came a voice that whispered, “You don't have to be completely satisfied, Marina.”

Don Miguel had switched to speaking Albanian, another language he knew. But she turned away from him. When he kissed her mouth he only got her cheek. “Don't turn away,” he said in Albanian. It was too late. She already had.

Don Miguel stood in front of the door, barring Marina! “I need to exit,” she said, her chest heaving, her breasts aswell. “The life I need is out there. I may be a woman, but I must make a choice.”

“Whore!” said Don Miguel, in English.

To go through him she would have to touch his chest. She would risk losing everything she had decided on. The strength of her convictions might disappear and send her back to the hammock to make additional love.

People from Apache Station had everything, and they didn't know what it was like to suffer. With Don Miguel she felt like floating. She forgot all the pain of her earlier life. Here, oiled up, was the solution to the conundrum of life.

"I'll give you everything," said Don Miguel. "I'll give you even more than you could have imagined." He could wear a tux, she knew. He was shapely. They'd lose themselves dancing at Apache Station's parties; but deep down, she knew he couldn't deliver on his promise of everything. He could not give her one thing: the mailman she had sworn to protect.

"Your everything is nothing if we don't keep our promises," she said.

"You promised to be with me tonight," he said.

But it was a promise made under duress of embrace, a dangerous and seductive precedent in the laws of romance. But she saw Herman suffering down in the dark, stripped of his hook and his dignity. She had to help, even as she knew she didn't know how. In this world of romance, no one could ask why she did things. Hers was a world where life had made sense, but, now, suddenly nothing did. The old world was torn apart. She had to risk losing all the sense she'd ever made. She could run toward Don Miguel's heaving body or away from his hammock of seduction, but she could never be truly happy in his world. She should have let el cañibal eat her.

"Lord Henry Derby will enslave my friends!" she cried.

Exclaimed the raven-haired Don Miguel, "It is natural selection. The weak become sandwich artists, while those with genetic gifts become their masters."

"No, don't say that," she struggled against his arms, which were holding her oh so tight. "Why are you so strong and manly?" she protested weakly.

But part of her looked into his eyes. Her eyes knew that his were windows to the soul, and the coal embers spoke the truth. Don Miguel hated Herman and all his people.

“You’ve never even met them. Dios mio!”

But he was still too masculine for her to break away. And if she did not get out now she would end up feeling his throbbing pulse again.

“They are not even mailmen. Soon their suffering will end.” Don Miguel laughed. His coal eyes glowed with satisfaction. He wanted the mailmen to wear aprons and run an espresso machine. Marina knew that Don Miguel, part-time firefighter, full-time mailman, full-time model, would never care for them. She could not live in that world that cared nothing for the little people of this world.

“Not everybody wants to be a beefcake like you!” Marina tried to tear herself from the animal grip, but like a lion he held her, and like a cheetah he was quick to hold fast his prey.

“This world is run by beefcakes,” yelled Don Miguel. And she knew in her loins she was right. But then there was Herman, who chose to have a hook. What was that phrase that she had learned in Catholic school? She tried to remember despite Don Miguel’s machismo clouding her thoughts. Kenosis. That was it! Giving up your attributes to live differently. She knew that she had to submit to changes. She had to live among the people she cared about.

“Don’t you see you silly girl? Apache Station has a cheese wheel and a working coffee machine. We have health insurance and civil debates.”

“I don’t care!”

Then she had an idea. She needed to free herself for just a moment, seize the framed picture of Don Miguel, then threaten to break it -- the chance was slim but also possible. Even as the picture frame was so far away she had no choice but to make that one decision. The frame was also close though, and she managed to strongly get a wrist free and execute the plan. Don Miguel was surprised. He had not thought she would break the picture of him on his bedside.

“That is a framed picture of me,” he declared, unafraid.

“Señor,” she said, just as unafraid. “I’ll break it,” she exclaimed.

“It doesn’t matter,” laughed Don Miguel. “Every housewife in Maricopa County knows my face.”

She broke the picture, raising the glass shard to Don Miguel. She had to be willing to cut him with it. Could she do violence against his beautiful face? His eyes, once coal, now were salacious, drinking her.

“It wouldn’t matter,” he laughed anew. “You are too late to save them. I have all of your clothes.”

He had all the answers, but she had none for the way this hidalgo made love. But he could not hold her tonight. She gathered her housecoat about her. She would wear that then. Her hand fumbled in trepidation as she unlocked her bicycle. The night was mild, windless. She loosened her rebozo as she built speed. Her body fell forward over the bicycle frame. Lightning bugs lit inside of her. She became no more and no less than Marina’s body, cajoling with an old bicycle chain; signaling left, then right; vaguely attentive to the heat in her calves. Her blood was still easy with white wine. Then came the final stretch of stores, the small grocer, she rang the bell at the road sign for Southern Avenue. Home. She did not lock the bicycle. Let them have it.

Up the four flights, past the packages in the hall, past the torn carpet in the foyer, the derelict elevator, she paused. Once in the empty house she opened the emergency costume box.

Death was the end of individual passions, his broken Segway, the tin of bay leaves bought with such possibility, the list of house repairs, all waiting for what? Would a hush come over Euclid Avenue? For her, it would be hard to turn on the television or look at his book shelf. There was the *Count of Monte Cristo*, named, as he had said, after the sandwich. When there was time she would have a small gathering in his honor. She stood in front of the mirror holding the new cape up past her bosom. It fit.

*

Señor Guerrero parked the bicycle a mile from the post office so as not be recognized.²⁹ Bells removed, it was sturdy as ever. Guerrero had an interview at the Tempe Post Office upon which everything would depend. Since Esteban had been sent to Tempe St. Luke's, he had not been seen. It was Guerrero's one chance to infiltrate the post office, rescue Herman, and stop Henry Derby.

Despite all the questions facing him, whether he had done cleaning work before, where do you see yourself in five years, he had, at least, no uncertainty about the stakes.

Did Guerrero, by chance, catch his reflection in a rain puddle, a store window? Surely, he would have noticed the passage of years, real and artificial. A janitor with a tortuous curriculum vitae, Guerrero's black-gloved hands had wrestled madness and won.

²⁹ I hope it does not spoil the mystery, but it is I, Marina. I have been forced to become an actor. But it's okay, because I am still a narrator in the story, and a person's heart, they say, does not really change.

He was shown in to see Kenneth. He was poring over the Newton's Cradle on his desk, four identical metal balls attached in a wire frame. Kenneth looked up. "Guerrero, is it? Come in." Kenneth directed him to a plush orange chair.

Kenneth pretended to shuffle papers. "Says here in your cover letter you wear a mask at all times and have no references. But you say you have a can-do attitude."

"I can do anything," said Guerrero.

Kenneth weighed that heavily. "Your story is consistent. It checks out."

But it had been too easy. Something didn't feel right. What was familiar about Kenneth? He set two balls into motion against the others. "I sometimes think they are mailmen," he said. "While each of these is set in opposition against one another, they make no progress."

Guerrero wanted to see where this was headed. Kenneth told the would-be janitor to shut the door. "What kind of a janitor do you want to be?" asked Kenneth. Señor Guerrero knew that the frame was the problem.

"Do you know a woman named Svetlana?" he asked Kenneth.

"From Ragbekistan? That's my mail-order bride," he said. "After a six-month delay, I'm getting antsy...hard being a single dad and all."

Guerrero knew Svetlana from Advanced English with Mr. Alvarez. She was the girl in the corner who wrote about her brothers' martyrdom back home. She must have been rerouted during shipping. Guerrero wanted only one thing in exchange for uniting the couple, a chance to enter the Tempe Post Office. Now he had it in his grasp.

"Pretty much in the alone-zone," said Kenneth. He spun his rolling chair.

CHAPTER NINE

In an old folktale, a young girl has a lovely bow tied to her neck. It is never removed. We learn later why the ribbon is there. She will die without it. In most versions, the lover or husband will untie the ribbon. He may have permission or not, but he cannot bear her secrecy. Does the girl have an obligation to reveal everything? What can be kept from those who love us? When Marina wraps a teal rebozo round her neck, she thinks of the old folktale. An old friend on the peninsula, a prostitute who had testified against the Sinaloa. El cañibal got to her.

Señor Guerrero wore a red kerchief about his neck.³⁰

He came from the outlying forests of Uxmal in the south. He lived in a house of peeling yellow paint and climbing vines. Chickens ambled in the grass as he would wait for the green of the school bus around the bend.

He was adopted. His new father was crueler than his first. After the death of a young wife, the adopted father's days had little ritual but tequila. Guerrero cleaned the house and avoided what anger he was able. Diplomacy proved impossible – telling, with what he became later - and the boy in his youth, took to disappearing, taking that journey so familiar to children made precocious at violent hands.

He grew to adolescence. Those were the days when President de la Madrid was reaching across the borders for dollars, and money was coming in but not to the right hands. Those were the days of Pacheco's *Battles in the Desert* and Carlos and Mariana's famous romance across the

³⁰ It is Marina who is Señor Guerrero. Dios mio!

pages. Guerrero remembered little bits afterwards, the parts he'd read in school, about the children with orthopedics; the foot-and-mouth disease and the cow slaughter...feeling like an atom in the immense world, prepared many years before my birth like a stage set for a performance...the moment you know what was in your head really existed... and it defeated you all the time. He was awakened to the trouble inside him. Before he had been in the moment, and now he was above the moment and free to hate himself for the past...

He didn't know how to live life. He spent his time among his pachucos³¹, stealing, running, vandalizing; placating truant officers, they knew his silver tongue and will to power. He mastered numbers and words, in the way that you use them to beguile others, as magic acts. He was made to know his condition by a clerk who chased him out of his store by way of broom.

Guerrero's self-deception matured with his body. Lost deep in his library books he had venomous ideas...would he go into politics, that old source of authority? And his biggest fear came to him...it was having nothing...he saw how Fuentes called the navel of this country a brown body, the sum of its brown bodies, shaped like an empty cornucopia of hard skin and thirsty flesh and sweating thighs and scrawny arms—for them all, it could be a meaning, but never for her could it have a meaning, a prolongation, a continued presence in her own future, whatever that might be...

Couldn't his life have a meaning? And he dreamed of leaving Uxmal.

³¹ A juvenile gang member of Mexican-American ethnic origin. When I read Señor Lemony Snickett I like how it defines the words for you in the book. I feel like I'm being cared for.

But his adopted cousin with whom he lived was a few years younger. He had earned a promise from Guerrero that they would both escape the deadliness of the house and this town. They were to have left together.

But Guerrero, now fifteen, left his cousin behind.³² Guerrero left eggs boiling in the pot, the door open. His cousin would grow to become an engineer, but he was not the same ever again -- the time alone in the house made him the target of all the abuse. He soaked it all up all alone. It made him weak. Violence could strengthen you, but it didn't always.

Guerrero took work translating for a corrupt geologist in a mining company. Guerrero was smooth and took liberties that enriched his boss:

*Your palace in the sun*³³

He named Guerrero The Tongue. The geologist had a map that he colored red when he got the land he wanted. The map gained a lot of red because of Guerrero's coercion. They drank corn whisky until the very bottom of the bottle. There was a lot of wealth to celebrate. Words were as a railway.

The geologist said how he had been a good miner coming up. What had happened was that the system did not make it simple. "You see, it's the system. The problem is people," the geologist always said. When the ink stamp came down on each paper, and Guerrero imagined that he was hurting the same people who had, in his youth, sent him to live among dogs.

³² To his great shame.

³³ Montezuma's kingdom was rotten to its foundations. Jus soli.

Then, one day the geologist summoned Guerrero to his big office. The geologist had thought about his own son and daughter. He didn't want them making boreholes. They could take his blood money and live quiet, good lives.

“For a new start,” the geologist told Guerrero, handing him an envelope.

Then came law school at Escuela Libre de Derecho, then came the cartels, then began all the penance that was somehow never done... Yo confieso ante Dios todopoderoso y ante vosotros, hermanos, que he pecado mucho de pensamiento, palabra, obra y omisión. Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa...

But he couldn't actually see where his fault was. Life was like a wet cat, wriggling away from his grasp. At first he thought he was only holding it wrong, but it didn't want even his best efforts. Affection, loyalty were misplaced. He just wasn't wanted anywhere in the vicinity. The cat was going to shriek and make a bloody mess because of its own sheer unpleasantness.

She, Marina, did not know what was required of people in this world anymore.³⁴ She wanted to go under a cave of blankets like a little child and hide forever. She wanted to buy everything on QVC that she couldn't afford. But one day she began to see the future. She was dressed as a maid that day, since running from the cartels, she had had to adopt disguises. Marina, who was waiting on a letter from her abuela, saw an interesting person behind the post office counter. He had a hook.

“Are you a maid? I put in a personal ad about a maid. You'll do nicely.”

“I will?”

³⁴ I will become Marina because it is the past.

“Are you organized? Efficient? Have you seen *Mary Poppins*?” Who was this mailman?

“No speak a the English...not very good. Señora Poppins?”

“I don’t think Poppins ever married. There wasn’t time for civil niceties. She had much to accomplish.”

He said that his maid should call him señor. They watched *Mary Poppins* in the evening. It is about a nanny who is magical for an unexplained reason. Marina’s keen mind did not know why they were watching the film about a nanny riding the wind.

“Señor, I spot a...how do you say...continuity error? Is the umbrella magical or is the person?”

“Enough! We begin again!” He microwaved kettle corn and started the film over.³⁵

Marina repeated the lines like he wanted...There’s the whole world at your feet And who gets to see it but the birds, the stars, and the chimney sweeps...And here’s the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. He said he had grown to like *Mary Poppins* when it had been left on in a loop when he worked in a department store. “After an entire weekend, you cross this threshold where you like something.”³⁶

Was he measuring her sense of belief? Should she tell him she was a lawyer?

³⁵ He did not do so in a mean way. I do not know if this was a cogent training plan or something else entirely. Why his training included Julie Andrews or Pacino, I cannot definitively state. Many questions remained at the time of Herman’s disappearance, and his subsequent return was as brief as it was fatal. I suspect that he just thought you could learn to be something by examining it *in extremis*. If I wanted to be a lawyer, I should watch Ice-T. If one wanted to be a mailman, as he often said, one needed to ask what a magical mailman might do. Perhaps this held true for all jobs. It is a way of living worth defending.

³⁶ When Martin, the son I will have in this narrative, was an infant I showed him the movie. Close your mouth, Martin, you are not a codfish. Dios mio!

The days passed. His story unfolded. Herman had lost his friend Steve. All that made him happy. He saw his own losses as a type of metaphor for the losses of his post office. He offered vague, grand plans, only believable because of his sheer persistence, of taking on a wealthy foe, Henry Derby. A happy ending did not seem probable even if he did keep a grim joy about his labors.

She maid found that her mood had improved considerably in proximity to the mailman. She sat in her wooden folding chair, to which she had affixed a label on it quite like a director's and introduced Herman to the telenovela about the trickster priest, Martín Garatuza. It was the show that she had come to in her girlhood home; her father slept at that time, and she could have a little indulgence then. The priest, Garatuza, never used violence. He always escaped or got his happy ending. She show was a welcome relief from the mailman's doomed pursuits.

What will end these masses?

The mailman watched *Garatuza*³⁷ using the subtitles. They said the catchphrase aloud together. They were sharing something strange, deliberating on whether age of chicanery had truly passed. Was the day of the rascal over? Marina began to wonder.

They had a domestic peace, which had quite eluded them in their separate lives. Sharing their favorite shows pushed back the sadness that they both felt. With what rule set ought a mailman with a hook and a damaged ankle comport himself? Was it better to be effective or moral? For a lawyer turned runaway, turned housecleaner, how should her intelligence be translated to something resembling true wisdom? She wished to page St. Jerome on that issue.³⁸

³⁷ This is a funny show. You will like it.

³⁸ The patron saint of translators.

But she liked this life and the outbursts of theatre where the ordinary and the superordinary were one.

“Señor,” she asked him one day. “Is it better to be good or powerful?” He had been talking of Mailman of the Year again -- it was a contest that she did not believe in even though he had showed her a pamphlet, even though he had based a large chunk of his time and energy to winning. There were, of course, some heavy inferences he made; a purely textual reading of the flyer did not inform of a reader of the vast glories the contest held for Herman. As a lawyer, she retained a natural skepticism.

But as to power and goodness he said this: “Hell is empty, and all the devils are here...let’s be good... but powerful too...never forget to be both.” Was he right? Did he think he had the opportunity to do both? There was his idealism again.

They dueled endlessly in Uno, scarcely pausing for Herman to slap the Zenith back to life. In card games, the mailman was too whimsical. Marina won easily. It troubled her how easily. She didn’t have to count cards.

Señor, too bad for your luck -- here is another Reverse.”

“We need one of those once in a while.” When the mailman didn’t have much money, they played with M&M’s.

“But señor, you keep eating mine.”

“Forgive me. I know not what I do.

He strode a strange path, this mailman. Quite possibly deliberately delusional, he chose, when no one else would, to lead his castoffs against the power of Derby’s immense wealth. He

would need more help than he knew. She had been on the side of the geologist...Herman's aims could not be won by passion any more than he could survive lightning by sheer gall. There would be nothing so critical as a rubber suit, crass materialism aside.³⁹

His reasoning on all points was half-baked, untraceable except to a first principle of devotion. When Guerrero engaged the mailman's higher faculties, he produced no stupidity – only cupidity.

I'll give em the hook between the eyes.

His disconnect could be heartbreaking. But Herman's sense of the world was not some bizarre fantasy – no more illusion, at least, than his neighbors had. Or the untold millions who have been convinced to fight with men like him for scraps. His patrol through the world, clumsy, ugly, was not more ridiculous than others of its kind. Through love he thought he would create change. To have some voice in his future he fought as hard as men of his station. In his capacity to understand nests of associations a hundred generations old, he saw, at least, that self-government was virtually non-existent. He understood this much. When he wore his tiny flag pin he felt hopeful that someone would look after dimwits. His people might not die in St. Luke's.

He had given an immigrant a chance to start over. Would she do the same for him? He had no knowledge of a revolution, but he might deserve one. The girl was sharp. She had the old nihilism in her still. If the Tempe Post Office became a Books-a-Million, Kenneth making lattes for Derby as he passed through, greeting him, not knowing why they had lost, was this just? It

³⁹ I will try some *King Lear*. "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport."

was surely not unjust. Not by the strict definition. No one would starve in America. It was not a poetic justice, if that was the standard. What did she want?

She did not press the issue. She came near to interrupting his Wheel of Fortune, but he was concentrating. He had enough little joys to survive the closure of his post office. His sentimentality would disappear like a homesickness. The cure was time. The future would become what it would. She picked up *The Great Gatsby*. She lost herself. Everything was blue in that world. Herman would not dare to go alone into the radon tunnels. Fear would guarantee him domestic happiness. That would suit her fine too. She liked this place. His promise of a pension, not fifteen years away, was far from inconsiderable for men like him.

He was not dumb after all. He acted reasonably with his partial knowledge. He had questioned Bing on various subjects: “Who was Andy Kaufman?” or “How do you wrestle an alligator?” Computers likely hurt him more than helped. The dilettante will never outwit the modern centaur...consider a Lord Henry Derby who can coordinate the distant parts of his empire in real time. He will detect a chance for arbitrage while the mailman passes his whole life never knowing the definition – can he run to the dictionary at every bit of jargon he encounters? Would that make an understanding? Arbitrage! The mailman has only the leverage of his arms and legs.

This digital world is bad for the mailman. In some excellent books, he is made symbol of decline, yet he believes in his exempt. He keeps his vanity. Others make less than he does. They are confined more.

He probably felt a little tinge of dopamine whenever he learned the definition of “interlocutor,” a few lines by Shelley, or some more of the digits of pi; he did not, however

embrace skepticism. He had never left Tempe even as Derby's own capital flew about above their heads every second of the day. He thought short-term, ahead to the next Gansito or to the day his ankle might heal and the friends he would see again, the jokes he would tell his housewives. The mailman knew the world did not wish him to live in it. He only underestimated the violence with which nature enforced her eugenics...

But a strange love came over Marina for the guileless mailman. For one who had never been great with being a brother (or sister's) keeper, the universe was trying again. It sure didn't seem to be giving up. The universe seemed to say that he, Guerrero, was not sitting on this awful purple couch by accident of fate? From a part of Herman's diary, Guerrero recalled an entry of Herman's, provincial but not a little sweet in looking back:

There is an Amtrak that goes through Tempe, and after winning Mailman of the Year I would like to tour the great expanses of this country. There are no amber waves of grain in Tempe though it has sensory riches all its own...a mailman almost does many great things, but he should do them even more fully, as if others were always witnessing his courage...he has desired to hike the Appalachian Trail, even if he has decided not to because it was really just a lot of walking...it was perhaps my thirty-ninth year; I have a bag on my back, but it is not filled with mail this time...I am at the train station in Tempe during a hiatus due to the Bananas Foster Fire.

"I am headed for the Appachalain Trail," I tell the attendant. "Destination, adventure. I am not to be dissuaded."

"Cool," says the attendant.

Yet there are many things to do in Tempe as well, and as I stand there looking at my ticket I begin to reflect on my home and people. I do not belong on some trail when I have many wild people near here. I like them very much.

“I’m thinking of tearing up my ticket,” I tell the attendant, poking him to reveal his character. “If you wish to stop me, you must do so soon.”

He would never leave. Should he have?

[Author’s Note: I’ll skip to the epilogue now. This is about page 210 or so. Everyone in the novel has perished except for Marina and her son (from Don Miguel). He is grown now.]

EPILOGUE

Marina tried to read her book, but her eyes kept drifting over to the driver’s seat. She knew when she next looked away from her son that five more years would vanish. She was in awe of Martin’s handsomeness. Like his father Don Miguel, Martin’s eyes were full of complications, expressive of hardship. They would lead him to many romances.

“Don’t micromanage me,” Martin told her. “I’m almost eighteen.”

“It’s my job to be your mother.”

“I can see why you win your cases,” he gave up, “you nag the jury to death.”

She saw her own sharpness repeated in Martin. For years he’d fought this trip to the Hall of Mailmen.

“Can you believe we’re fifty miles away?” she asked.

“I can,” he tapped the GPS with a finger.

As they neared Washington D.C, she read to him, an old habit, always some apposite phrases to connect with those whom she loved most. “I like this detective,” she said. “Señor Langdon always solves his case.”

“Why do you still use that stupid title, señor, this señor, that?” he asked, as he had many times. The silly title comforted her. The high-minded part of her could relax, surrender. She had learned how to be happy on Southern Avenue. One idyll proved that there might be more out there, like we look up into the sky and imagine planets beyond our sight.

He had needed a friend as much as a housekeeper. Mailman of the Year, he said again and again. Hard choices came for them, Henry Derby out for blood...once again she thought of Martin beside her...the son of a cursed lawyer and a local hunk would probably not ride on the slipstream of life. He would have responsibility. Don Miguel himself died to save Herman though he did not like him. She was confident that her son would mature and make the world proud.

“Mailman of the Year sounds fake,” Martin said, restaging the old argument.

“Yes, it does,” she said. “Herman would have wanted you to come with me. He might have been a good uncle.”

“I wish he was never born,” Martin said.

“But he was,” she said.

They drove on. Marina continued reading from *The Da Vinci Code*. It was a good work after all. Probably not destined for the centuries, but all it wanted to be it was. The book swept her up and

touched her sense of mystery. Here were the words that caught her: "The propaganda and bloodshed had worked. Today's world was living proof." She made the sign of the cross at that. "Dios Mio."

Martin pulled the car over to the rest area. He and his mother walked side-by-side under the elms. When they came upon a map in the glass case, Marina pointed to their destination.

"Right there."

"Boring," he said.

"You'll be boring too. Your hair will fall out," she was being playful. "And everything in you will ache."

"But let me guess, through all of that, you'll love me?" He smirked at her.

But life, she knew, was more than just aches. Svetlana used to make her famous turnip cake and it was a better, sweeter earth. When your soul was aching, you had little games to play with loved ones. God cared on most days. Much could be hoped for in her son's life, to yoke himself to some great energy and let it lead him who knows where.

She wondered did Martin know what these moments meant to her. Not yet. Not until seeing mortality. Just yesterday she had been a child preparing nopal salad for Esteban. All the moments of life seemed to pass sadly away – the fight was to keep making new ones. Keep the past out, if you could. There sure was a lot of it.

"So," he said.

"Sew buttons," she said.

Inside the Hall of Mailmen, the lazy attendant nodded from his chair and past him they walked through the gallery. Few others passed by. Was it sad, this empty Hallway of Mailmen? She

looked at Martin and postponed this reckoning. Here was a portrait of Albert White, smug in final martyrdom. A mailman who looked freezing, who was to die in a blizzard, mutton-chopped and ready to mush his dog pack on and on. The angel Gabriel, the patron saint of mail carriers, had protected his servants as far as he could. He could not coddle them forever. Mother and son walked the long hall. What would Mortonio's painting of Herman look like? Well, it would last for forever no matter what.

Near the gallery's end hung the portrait Marina sought. She found herself reading the inscription to tamp down her disbelief: 'Herman G. Cortes.' It was as he had wanted. He chewed a toothpick just like Ryan Gosling. One would have to imagine the words behind the grin or else settle for the silence. Every man becomes laconic eventually, and the end of language was present in the mailman.

Martin stood beside her, "The guy is a fool," he said.

"Fool! What a word!" she said. Martin had learned that word from her and she from Herman. She felt many memories at once, some satisfying, others of plangent sadness. The painting, by existing, showed she could never again ask him: "Señor, can you show me the good feather dusting technique?" and have him do half the work.

"This is how a man cleans."

"Tomorrow I hope to use the plumero half as well."

But her feelings were her own puzzle, not his; he could have none of that confusion now. How often he had thrown a 'yet' in there, mid-thought, vacillating between good and bad. The emphasis on joy must have worn him out, but it had worked. Let the old mail horse rest now.

She squeezed her son's shoulder. And there it was. Now, at least, she had no fear that this mailman who meant so much to her would go to oblivion. Not without his coveted award. There was, in this victory, something to fight the old cynicism if it returned. It was in her, and she would always have to dance with it even though her bones creaked and she wanted rest.

More jarring to her than this painting, she felt how someday soon she would be called to join her friend. Here came the creeping changes that marked the near-end of life, and they had outgrown her ability to trick them out of existence, and now in ten years or fifteen would come the same pull to eternity. The cartels never went away. She saw their shadows sometimes, and the footfalls reminded her of the truth that waited. She would see el cañibal on the road. "Getting a little doughy, aren't you?" she'd tell him, and run from the greying killer. Then again, maybe he too had transformed into someone else.

Standing beneath the portrait for the last time, allowing Herman to inflect her, she remembered her first mail carrier and the song of his own invention. He had been a whistler. She recalled how he took a special letter out of his bag on a dusty morning. There was no better bargain than a stamp. For so cheap, you could make someone feel any kind of way. She read the letter, from Esteban. He wrote that he loved her and would soon return. They would skip stones and lay about all summer.

Such a bounty as a letter would ever be undeserved -- the miracle of such an everyday, ordinary miracle bore repeating from time to time; far did the girl transport the memory of this simple letter, up past the place of the ancient Nahua, and eventually in an old car up to Arizona where she would become a maid.

The girl chased that mailman on her little legs: "Dia del Cartero," she called after him, and then again. Today was Postman's Day. She opened her hands to reveal the gift.

Para protegerte she said.

This bracelet would now protect her mailman. Better to give him the help. He worked hard. She slipped it on his arm and he exchanged, for the charm, a lesson on whistling. We can force air around a sharp bend and make all the music we want. There are many good things, she knew, right then. The world may be good even to people, tiny as we are – we are cared for as figurines.

Then she heard Herman's voice again, acerbic, dirty with gravel, a Lear monologue. Peeking into his nook, she heard him decry his life. The man of Southern Avenue would be allowed to play only Cordelia, maybe through some droll casting director exacting his vengeance. Herman would move on from Tempe Theatre, such as he could. He hadn't the sadness for Lear. Even bent-backed, broken-footed, and wailing over his losses while he waved his hook, his complaints could not last long. A transfiguring presence seemed bent on making him happy.

She laughed, standing there watching him in his nook. "Nothing will come of nothing: speak again," he said, a smile breaking onto his face.

"Again, Senor?" she returned. And on and on like that. And on and on like that.

VITA

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CONTACT INFORMATION

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.
1 Corinthians 1:19

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PUBLICATIONS

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Rhetorics of Pain/Trauma
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Studies of Visibility**

Relevant Research Skills:

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Mind-mapping

Presentations:

Christopher Giofreda. (2016). “The Animal that Therefore is Locked Away: Reimagining Christopher Smart’s ‘Jubilate Agno’ through Jacques Derrida.”
Paper presented at the Far West Pop Culture Association Conference at UNLV.