

SUMATRA
Collective Casuistics

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Characters

CHRIS — An American girl.

WILL — Chris' brother.

Wired. A technology trader, traveller and rebel. Newly wealthy.

PETE — Chris' father.

Scruffy. Perhaps a beard. Hasn't shaved in a while.

Fiercely independent.

MEG — Chris' mother.

Starched and prim. A faithful church-attender. A sturdy woman, Pete's match if it ever came to a fight.

BLUE MAN — Chris' first boyfriend.

Chris' brother Will met the man in Sumatra. Not quite human: his skin is blue.

MAGIL — Pete's companion. Slinky.

DAN — Meg's companion.

Clean-shaven. Played by the actor who plays the Blue Man.

Dan's skin is not blue.

PREACHER — Pete's other self.

A crazy peddler of gin and cheap remedies. Played by Pete.

Setting

The waiting room of a quaint and eerie Victorian train station. Poorly lit. The walls don't fit together right. Three doors: one at back opens onto station platform and train tracks, and two stage left which go into the men's and women's restrooms, respectively. A low bench on the stage right wall. A ticket booth, destinations board, and flashing "Train Approaching" sign. A light switch and a telephone. Upstage, at least four small windows looking out in direction of tracks, with shades. An old jukebox.

Note

An asterisk in the text indicates that the next speech begins to overlap at that point. A double asterisk indicates that a later speech begins to overlap.

The stage direction [*beat*] indicates a short pause, akin to a rest of a single beat in music.

ca·su·ist·ry (kăzh' -ōō-ĭ-strē) *n*

- 1: Specious or excessively subtle reasoning intended to rationalize or mislead.
- 2: The determination of right and wrong in questions of conduct or conscience by the application of general principles of ethics or religious doctrine.

— **ca·su·is·tic** (kăzh' -ōō-wĭs'-tik) or **ca·su·is·ti·cal** (-ti-kel) *adj*

Ode on the Mammoth Cheese

Weighing over 7,000 pounds

James McIntyre (1827-1906)

We have seen thee, queen of cheese,
Lying quietly at your ease,
Gently fanned by evening breeze,
Thy fair form no flies dare seize.

All gaily dressed soon you'll go
To the great Provincial show,
To be admired by many a beau
In the city of Toronto.

Cows numerous as a swarm of bees,
Or as the leaves upon the trees,
It did require to make thee please,
And stand unrivalled, queen of cheese.

May you not receive a scar as
We have heard that Mr. Harris
Intends to send you off as far as
The great world's show at Paris.

Of the youth beware of these,
For some of them might rudely squeeze
And bite your cheek, then songs or glees
We could not sing, oh! queen of cheese.

We'rt thou suspended from balloon,
You'd cast a shade even at noon,
Folks would think it was the moon
About to fall and crush them soon.

1 Indigo

[Lightning and thunder suddenly plunge the audience into the waiting room of a seedy, dimly-lit train station. It is raining, and water runs down the Victorian walls. The clock points after midnight, and the ticket office is closed. Chris is sleeping on a low waiting-area bench against the wall.]

[The next flash of lightning can be seen through the windows at back. Ravens are in the trees. Steam vents quietly from under the male and female rest-room doors, through whose cracks a faint light can be seen. Thunder. Another flash of lightning.]

[The blue man enters from the rain, with a flashlight. In the ultraviolet, we do not notice the tint of his skin. He is carrying the burlap bag in which he arrived over his shoulder. He examines the room, shines his flashlight on the sign on the ticket booth, which reads “Will Call,” pauses, keeps looking, and discovers Chris. He kneels beside her, almost caresses her face, but stops, his fingers not touching to disturb her rest. He whispers tenderly.]

MAN: Baby, I'm back. Sorry about not calling ahead, but the gammas shooting out of this place are doing the year-2k to my comm gear. Looks like power's gone, too. . . you look great. Just like I remembered, those long days in Vegas, working nights, fancying myself Captain Ahab harpooning the gargantuan pasties. You floated like a velvet painting on the cheap wood paneling, dancing in my sight, shimmying to beat all the hulas in Tinderland, but that's all right, 'cause dreams are meant to move.

Yeah, I'm back. Couple dollars poorer, couple dollars richer; wading in deep water but nearing the shore. Migrating on the dark winds of primal urge. I'll probably be gone before your eyes greet the dawn. Drifter, dirt-road king, that's me. My friend, he wouldn't even stay for his funeral before he hop-bang-skipped out of town; they buried an empty coffin in the rain. Rain like tonight, babe.

It was rain like this last time, too, remember that? I think so, at least; it mighta' been tears clouding my eyes instead of Oregon showers. Me cryin', you cryin'—I still don't really know why you asked me to go, but I always listened to the lady. You were probably right, too, I dunno. I'm here now, for a while. Took me quite a bit to find y'all camped out here beyond world's end—heck, the info-tracker just shows black beyond the Metropolis, these

days—but those nights with you were the only happiness I’ve really known: green rubber garden-hose summertimes, plastic bubble machines in the sunlight. Fragile hollow spheres of cleanliness and air. Funny, I’ve never considered myself clean. Maybe I was the air.

[Another lightning bolt startles him, for an instant, and is gone.]

Seeing you sleeping there brings all kind of memories. You still love me, too—and it’s not just by your postcards I can tell. Just looking at you lyin’ peaceful—everything around you’s changed but you and me, we’re still the same. Just hearing you breathe, I can tell.

[sings softly]

My cries of love
fly from the asphalt
Your lovin’ me’s
your own sad fault.

The wind’s pickin’ up. My roof will be torn to dust if I don’t go nail it down. It’s hard to leave now that I’ve seen you, but I can’t stop yet; I’ve got one more job to do. Maybe it’ll be the death of me, maybe not. I needed to see you once more before it’s done; now that I know where you are, not rampaging tumbleweeds could keep me away.

[Checks his watch.] I’m going now. Train’s due real soon. I’ll be back, perhaps.

[He goes towards the door, then looks back.]

I hope so.

[A train whistle sounds in the distance, softly, and the mysterious blue figure is out the door and gone. A soft-building rush of air as the express glides past without stopping. The blue man vanishes with his train.]

[Lightning and thunder follow the train like a sonic boom, shaking the station with the wrath of Zeus. Bats shuffle overhead as dust rains down and the ravens outside stir. The roof creaks as a giant weight shifts. Chris awakes and fumbles for a lantern, but the lightning’s return stroke aborts her attempt. This bolt shoots up out of the ticket-booth towards the sky, starkly illuminating the sign which now reads: “Call Will.” The light on the altered

sign lingers past the deafening crash, the letters burning sooty self-replicas into Chris' retinas.]

[The lantern lights itself.]

2 Coral

CHRIS: *[Peering into the darkness.]* Mom, Dad?

[Silence. A scurrying of bats.]

CHRIS: They're still riding alphas through the night. That's fine, I guess—dawn's meant for silence. For collective prayers beseeching an eschatological postponement. Sunrise has never seemed. . . certain.

[Face pressed against a window, gazing out.]

Nothing to see. No photons, at least; occult-charged glowing things shine in other ways. Unseen red eyes. Weasel-fur darkness. Black bats and ravens on a sable field.

Starlight off the rails, leading away.

[She brushes her hair, straightens her sleep-rumpled clothes, readies herself for the new day's possible arrival.]

Another day like any other. A bit longer than most, perhaps, due to that aternal pre-dawn manifestation—Elvis willing, pre-dawn—but the hours'll pass. Sun or no.

PETE: *[Groggy, from inside the men's room.]* Chris!

CHRIS: *[Ignoring him.]* No change, no mail from the night-train, no dreams to cherish in the dawn. *[Checks herself.]* Tobo consenting, the dawn.

[The men's room toilet flushes. We hear water running.]

PETE: *[As before.]* Is it here yet, Chris? Did it come in the night?

CHRIS: No, it didn't, and maybe never will. Just the Dream Express and a thunderstorm. No mail, no message, no nothing. Today the same as the day before, as far as mind can reach.

PETE: *[The running water stops. He hasn't heard.]* Don't keep me waiting, Chris. Answer your father. *[He crosses near the rest-room door.]* Chris!

CHRIS: *[Shouting.]* No! Not now never!

PETE: You don't have to wake your mother. Just a kind word to your father, just telling him when it arrives, warning him maybe, like a good daughter to her old dad. *[Yelling.]* Meg!

[Bumping and stirring from the ladies' room. Water running. An electric razor.]

Meg!

[It stops, abruptly.]

You don't, uh, take after your mother, do you, Chris?

[More indistinct mumble and clatter from the ladies' room.]

Chris!

[No response. Chris is sitting, staring vacantly, in the sleepy-catatonic relaxation of the early morning.]

Chris!

CHRIS: *[Rousing herself, slightly.]* Yeah, dad?

PETE: Oh. Um. Remind me to get my razor back from your mother, won't you? *[Yelling.]* Meg!

CHRIS: I don't see why I have to do it.

PETE: I'm busy.

CHRIS: Why can't you get out of the bathroom for once and get it from her yourself?

PETE: Just let what happened last night be our little secret, okay? *[Yells.]* Meg!

MEG: *[From inside the ladies' room.]* What is it, already?

PETE: Oh. *[Sheepishly.]* Good morning, Meg.

MEG: Don't you give me that. What were you yelling about? What do you want, waking me up before the sun, even?

CHRIS: What happened last night? What secret?

PETE: Well, you gotta get up sometime. You can't sit there waiting for the sun the whole day long.

MEG: [*Sharply.*] I know you didn't wake me up to lecture on solar astronomy.

PETE: No, er...

MEG: Are you doing it again?

CHRIS: Your razor, Dad. You wanted your razor.

PETE: Doing what again?

MEG: You know what I mean. Chris, is he doing it again?

PETE: Don't answer that, Chris.

MEG: Is he doing it again, Chris?

PETE: Not a word, Chris.

MEG: She doesn't need to say anything. I know.

PETE: No you don't, you don't at all.

MEG: I knew then, too! Your "working late at the egg farm" didn't fool me. I knew it was lipstick and not chicken's blood on your collar. I can't believe that you'd do that to me again, after 25 months, no years, of happy marriage. You're doing it again, I know it.

CHRIS: Doing what?

PETE: Not again. Not again. I messed up once—once, Chris!—and she's never let me forget it. Any little thing I do you bring it up: "Well at least I'm not a cheater, at least I hold the marriage vow sacred, at least *I'm* not the cause of cuckold's horns sprouting from the balding forehead of *my* spouse."* You never let me forget that I made a mistake, no forgiveness, ever.

MEG: I wasn't was I? Never once in all those years. Sure, there were rough times, but I was faithful, wasn't I? Just like I was telling the ladies at Women's Ministry just last week, ...

CHRIS: Month.

MEG: *[Continuing without pause.]* . . . I said, Marge, these crumpets are delicious, and your husband's just the soul of loyalty. Not like my good-for-nothing,* philandering [egg-farmer-excuse for a spouse]. . .

PETE: *[Yelling over her.]* Stop it, Meg! In front of the kids,* too. I ought to really do something, I'll show you.

MEG: Kid, Pete. We only have one now. The other was never born, did never exist.

PETE: No forgiveness. None at all. I know that Bible of yours says something about forgiveness, and you're certainly not listening to it. If Jesus were to come across a truly repentant man,* who screwed up *once*, and never again. . .

MEG: You're not a truly repentant man. I've forgiven you my seven times, that's plenty enough. Every time I turn my back on you, you've got another floozy over there,* where you find them I surely don't know. Some cheap dump on the info-tracker, no doubt, for people as low and degraded as you.

PETE: There is no one over here. I'm not doing anything. Tell her, Chris. Tell her.

[A spark of quiet and a shimmer of sound. Chris is captivated by something she sees out the window of the station, in the far distance: a tiny spot of light. A beat.]

PETE: *[Louder.]* Chris!

MEG: *[Nervously, sensing some mystic disturbance.]* Chris, answer your father. He's got some wire-head slut over there now, doesn't he?

[No reply.]

[A metallic hum and click as a relay energizes, and a sign on the wall of the station begins to flash silently: "Train Approaching, Stand Back."]

MEG: Chris? What was that, Chris?

PETE: Answer your mother.

CHRIS: *[Softly, begins to recite under her breath.]*

Looking over a midnight city,
watching Nature burn;
Yellow roses from Sumatra,
ravens in the train.

[The destinations sign starts to whirl audibly; the letters which will spell out the train's origin begin to spin. Bats flutter from the rafters. The ravens outside stir. The rails begin to hum and the fence to shake, announcing the train.]

MEG: Oh my God, it's coming. It's coming, I know it's coming. Pete!

PETE: Chris, speak to your old dad. What's happening, sweetheart?

CHRIS: *[In a loud voice, sibylline.]*

Pin-pricks driven to resolution by time's advance.
Vast engines behind the light
propelling ceaselessly on
bringing with them. . .

[Chris is frozen in terror.]

MEG: *Do something, Pete! Get out of the bathroom and do something!*

[The lights of the train approach, building in intensity. Power and light surge inside the station. The roof creaks in anticipation. The sound of the train can be heard.]

[Chris breaks from her trance and rushes to find a refuge from the coming unknown.]

PETE: *[Banging from the men's room as Pete begins to look for something.]* I will. I will. I just need to find. . .

MEG: What are you waiting for? It's coming, it's going to get in.

PETE: *[The metallic clanks continue, as if Pete were looking for a stove-pipe in a pile of pots and pans.]* Just a second, Meg.* *[With increasing desperation.]* Give the ol' Yankee ingenuity a chance to work. . .

MEG: Chris! Chris! Find the ticket-master. Tell him the train must not stop here!
Chris!

CHRIS: What ticket-master, Mom? I haven't seen...

MEG: The ticket-master, the key-holder, the encoder of paper-bound magnetite strips! The train mustn't stop!

[Chris bangs on the bell at the ticket-booth, but fails to summon the ticket-master or his wife. The train approaches.]

MEG: Louder! Maybe he can't hear. Maybe he's asleep. Louder! Ticket-master! Schedule-holder!

CHRIS: Ticket-master! Station-keeper! It's not working, Mom!

MEG: John! *[No reply. Tries other possible names.]* Fred! Bill, Harry, Julian!*
George, Jeff, Hank, Henry!

CHRIS: *[Catching on.]* Mac, Mike, Jake, John—she said John—Jack, Russell, Will... oops. *[Meg sticks her head out the door and glares at Chris.]*

[The clanking sounds continue from the men's room.]

[The lights are insanely bright through the windows. We feel like the station is to be run down by the approaching train. Light bursts through cracks in the walls. The train roars.]

MEG: Are the windows shut? Shut the windows! Don't let it...

CHRIS: *[Fumbling with the latch.]* I can't, Mom.

[Meg rushes out from the ladies' room, in a tattered bathrobe, hair a mess, and slams down each of the windows and shades to keep out the threat. The noise of the approaching train is deafening.]

MEG: *[Muttering, as she tears about.]* Tobo forgive us, we know not what we did or had to do or wanted to perhaps would have done, Tobo have mercy, Tobo we beseech...

[The clattering finally stops in the men's room, and Pete steps out with a shotgun.]

PETE: Elvis damn your Tobo!

CHRIS: The rat-gun! *[The subject of childhood tales.]*

[He discharges both barrels in the direction of the train, through a closed window. The weakened glass implodes from exterior pressure, letting garish light pour into the room. The train continues to approach unabated.]

MEG: You fool!

[Chris rushes to cover the window with newsprint. Meg slaps Pete, hard. He punches her back. She leaps at him, wrestling him to the ground. They fist-fight center stage. Pete raises the butt of the shotgun, and is poised to smash Meg over the head. . .]

CHRIS: Mom! Dad!

[Chris grabs the shotgun. Meg takes advantage of the opportunity to sucker-punch Pete, hard. Pete stumbles back, and mumbles something about “that cheating wench.” His hand reaches for the pistol in his pocket, but he doesn’t have time to draw it before. . .]

[The whirring destinations sign stops. It has spelled out: SUMATRA. A terrible squealing of brakes.]

[Pete and Meg take one glance at the sign and scurry back to their rooms, slamming the doors: bang! bang! Chris is left unprotected in the center of the room, turns from the restroom doors towards the approaching train, and. . .]

[With a huge hiss of steam the train stops. Blinding light fills the station as the door from the platforms opens. A figure (WILL) and a man-sized burlap bag are in the opening. Steam pours in.]

[Will looks over his shoulder as a great weight is lifted from the station’s roof. A sudden inrush of air pushes Will inside and to the ground and the station door closed. A huge Whomp. The train lights disappear. A curl of black smoke under the now-closed door. The train has been consumed.]

3 Azure

[A moment of shocked silence. A man-sized burlap bag is lying on the ground just inside the (now closed) station door. Will is lying where he fell, on the ground. Chris is crouched in fear. Pete and Meg are in their rooms, their doors closed.]

CHRIS: *[Under her breath, in fear.]* The rat. . .

[Will's beeper goes off: a pleasant female voice announces, "You have new mail." A hiss of static. He is startled, then quickly tears the backpack off his back to get at the miniature antenna-laden terminal inside. The backpack begins pulsing with barely concealed heat and light as Will makes connections to the terminal. Thick cables now lead to the terminal from his backpack. He cracks open the terminal's case, and green light from the display pours onto his face in the semi-darkness. He starts to read the display, but is evidently bothered by extremely poor reception—he can't sustain a connection.]

WILL: *[Cursing.]* Low-rent son of a switched bit.

[Chris watches with timid curiosity.]

[Will goes to one of the windows, opens it for better reception, thinking to stick one of the antennae out. Immediately the bats overhead go wild and red steam pours in from the grey. A growing growl. Will quickly slams the window shut again and normalcy returns. He looks for a power outlet instead.]

WILL: *[Unable to find an outlet.]* Are there any Edison jacks in this place?

CHRIS: If you mean your common household power outlet, no. That is, none working. Our supply of 120-volt sinusoidal power seems to be. . . defunct. *[She flips a wall switch in illustration. Nothing happens.]* Unpaid bills. Or grid disturbances. Maybe a simple occultic exclusion principle at work. Solar flares? The year two thousand?

WILL: That's not what I asked. I asked if there was an Edison jack, not because I need 60 Hertz 117-volt root-mean-square amplitude alternating current, necessarily, but to tap into the metallic cable grid solar-particle antenna you call "power lines."

CHRIS: Well, why didn't you say that in the first place. [*She is examining his backpack closely.*] Not *everyone* carries a generator on their back.

WILL: Don't touch that! It's not a generator.

CHRIS: [*Surprised by what she's seen.*] Hey, I've seen those things before. That symbol, with the yellow and black triangles. That's...

WILL: No it's not. You've never seen one of these before.

CHRIS: Yes, I have. Back of town, inside the hyperboloid concrete, buried deep, surrounded by water.

WILL: No, you haven't. This is one of a kind. Unique.

CHRIS: Where'd you get it?

WILL: I stole it. I borrowed it. I found it, in a cheese warehouse marked 137-B. It was secreted there to prevent the world from finding it, so having found it I took it with me, to keep the secret safe.

CHRIS: Is it an N-ray detector? A Ronald Reagan Mark I Audio-Animatron? The Heart of Gold? An Infinite Improbability machine?

WILL: It's a portable fusion energy device. A small prototype, fed sea water semi-annually [*Confused.*] — or bimonthly. [*Recovers.*] My own stellar engine, the hottest point in the universe. A glowing ring kept captive by invisible force. [*Beat.*] They're not supposed to exist.

CHRIS: And you carry that on your *back*?

WILL: I've been around the world with it. I've seen the whole it has to offer. I've seen things that made what was on my back look like birdsong, like pre-Newtonian physics or ring-theory algebra. I've visited the place where magnetic monopoles are mined, and chatted with the monkey who wrote Macbeth. I've flown over the desert in a purple rhinoceros, and seen the sets for the Apollo moon landings and Elvis' funeral. I've roller-bladed inside Area 51 and played gin-rummy with the Caldwell aliens. In exchange for my silence, JFK's true killer taught me the operating procedure for Stonehenge and [*Indicating his shoes.*] gave me this pair of shoes found near Abbey Road. I've materialized in labs, I've seen the macabre results of

Crest Test #57 and the Holy Hand Grenade. I mastered interspecies telepathic communication, and gabbed with gators selling tupperware. I carefully cultured a taste for roller derby and named a hundred of the closest million stars.

CHRIS: But what good is any of that?

WILL: What good is it? Do you realize that in this machine, I have Beethoven's 11th symphony and the *complete* text of Kubla Khan? I have a digitized copy of Fermat's lost notebook, in which he concisely proved his last theorem and made mention of several more interesting. In a hundred twenty-eight bytes I have the location of Noah's Ark, Atlantis, God's lost dice and Gilligan's Island. I can fold proteins like origami. I can prove the travelling salesman problem in polynomial time, I can break any iterative encryption algorithm, I can factor thousand-digit numbers in my head. For this I have travelled, these things I have sought—I have found! I have returned.

CHRIS: From Sumatra?

WILL: In Sumatra I met a little man not-quite-human who lived in the wind-chest of the first manual of a bamboo organ in the dense jungle temple that Amelia Earhart founded after her crash. He revealed to me that Fluoridation and Daylight Savings Time really *were* communist plots, and provided the supporting documentation. He showed me a copy of the blackmail note British Petroleum sent Pons and Fleischmann. It was impossible to determine whether his cat was living or dead, but in the room where it was kept I found proof that professional wrestling is legit, and a short solution to the halting problem. Before I left, I was given a thick folder: a report on an MI5 operation involving a poisoned apple, a known homosexual, and an infinite tape. These are the things I have travelled the world to discover and learn. Now I am complete; now I am whole. I can score the accuracy of the Weekly World News, and send the appropriate threats when they approach the truth too nearly. I can use Einstein's unpublished Unified Field Theory to explain the mysterious non-presence of dozens of sent red roses. To silence any doubters, I have these!

[He produces two items from his bag, which he hands reverently to Chris]

CHRIS: A book and a rock?

WILL: A petrified pellet from one of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse—last sighted in Arizona, creating a swath of destruction a mile wide!—and a tome that was miraculously out on loan when the library at Alexandria burnt.

CHRIS: [*Handing them back.*] I'd rather have one of the moon lander props.

WILL: These are mere toys. The secret to my success is this: I have thrown off convention, discarded authority, set off on my own to create new predicates upon which my world-view is built. I've discarded the postulates of both Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry. My knowledge is mine alone; I tap the technological state-of-the-art to ride the information wave. There is nothing I do not or can not know. I laugh at nuclear dynamics—this [*Gesturing towards the fusion reactor.*] is Pong compared to the potential of the information age; the software I used to install is buggier than last week's roadkill—compared to the adrenaline rush of pure information! I can make up my own mind, choose my own facts, avoid preconceived notions of scientific method and right or wrong. Electrons transcend locality. Wired spatial constructs decompose. The old superstitions of Tobo and Elvis and the Sumatran Rat are outdated, obsolete.

CHRIS: That sounds mighty familiar.

WILL: What is the Giant Rat of Sumatra other than simple *rattus rattus*, a ship rat grown large? Or maybe a *Cricetomys gambianus*, the African giant rat, which I personally consider a delicacy when topped with its parasitic companion, a crunchy wingless cockroach? Perhaps the Rat is nothing but an Indian giant squirrel, *Ratufa indica*, a rodent, sure, but not the Rat of childhood fears. Perchance what we consider the giant rat is in fact the curious and ill-known animal known as *Echinosorex gymnurus*, the "Moon Rat" native to Indonesia, closely related in fact to the hedgehog, and secreting a musky substance which gives it a highly characteristic smell. . .

[*Chris and Will sniff in union. There is definitely something odd in the air.*]

Perhaps you have not heard the tale of the Matilda Briggs?

CHRIS: I invented the tale as a girl.

WILL: So this *is* the Smith family.

CHRIS: [*Suspiciously.*] How do you know about the Matilda Briggs?

WILL: I must have heard it in my travels. The story's well told.

CHRIS: No, you didn't. I smell a rat, and it's not travelling with roaches. You didn't hear that story from a stranger; the world is not yet ready for the truth of that tale: only me and my brother Will know it.

WILL: Perhaps it was your brother who told it to me.

CHRIS: *[Realizing that the stranger is her brother Will.]* I can put two and two together to make five as well as anyone, William Smith.

[Will freezes. Brother and sister stare each other down.]

Mom! Dad!

4 Payne's Gray

WILL: *[Under his breath.]* Don't do this, Chris. Don't tell them. I've tamed my urges and reformed. I've ascended to a digital existence plane; they lurk below in the mud and ditches. If they met Christ on the road, they'd ask for a bone. I'd lift his watch! I'll share my knowledge, I'll teach you the Freemasons' Ultimate Secret and the true pattern of Lotto numbers.

CHRIS: *[Hissed.]* Why'd you have to come back here, Will? We'd almost forgotten.

PETE: What's the racket?

MEG: The train's gone?

WILL: *[Whispering.]* Just tell them I'm a salesman. A technology trader.

[Pete and Meg emerge slowly from their restrooms, keeping distant from each other, and warily checking the room for train-borne supernaturalism.]

PETE: Who's this?

MEG: *[Attracted.]* Who is this nice young man?

[Will pleads to Chris with his eyes.]

CHRIS: He's... a salesman. A trader.

PETE: A free-trader, I hope? Democratic and sound?

MEG: *[Sugar.]* I've got things to trade...

PETE: *[Eyes flashing fire.]* Meg!

MEG: Oh, sure, get on *my* case. You know *I* have never even been *suspected* of anything improper. Fine person you are to shout about flirtation.

PETE: You have to bring it up, don't you? *[Pulls Will away from Meg.]* Come over here, son. What kind of trader are you?

WILL: Information, technology, the industrial fruit of the West. Cell phones. Network terminals. Universal panaceae. Arms and intelligence for rebels. *[Pete looks surprised. Quickly:]* Democratic rebels, of course. Fighting for... free trade.

PETE: Our son was into your line of work. *[He spits.]*

MEG: We don't have a son, Pete.

PETE: *[Continuing, approvingly.]* I hear it's quite profitable, if you can shed a few scruples.

MEG: Just a daughter. One child, Chris. No son, ever.

WILL: I've travelled the world, selling cell phones and satellite links, installing antennas and the means to collect revenue. I sold pagers to the monks ringing the sacred Lake Tobo, and laptops to a band of intelligent apes.

PETE: What did you say your name was?

CHRIS: *[Spitefully.]* His name is Will. William Smith. Your son, my brother. You can't just come in here, Will, and pretend everything's okay and we won't recognize you and we'll accept you like the Biblical prodigal. It's not okay. You wrecked my life and ruined my career. You hurt the people who loved you most. You don't deserve to be treated well in this place. You just don't deserve it.

[Pete has dropped his arms from around Will's shoulders, and Meg's flirtatious attitude has completely vanished. Will is not a welcome name here.]

MEG: *[Neutral.]* What are you doing back?

WILL: *[Can't find anything to say that's not going to make the situation worse.]*
I...

PETE: *[Unfriendly.]* Answer your mother when she asks you a question, boy.
Where's your tongue?

[Silence.]

You still got no respect for authority? Answer her! *[He hits Will on the mouth, hard. Will is knocked a couple steps back. His mouth starts to bleed.]*

WILL: I just... *[Disappointed and upset.]* I don't know what I expected... I just...

PETE: You thought you'd come home and all would be forgiven and we'd welcome you with open arms, huh? That you'd get off scot-free for *[Wallop.]* stealing our money, *[Whop.]* filling our house with dope, *[Whack.]* torching our bedroom, and *[Thwack.]* running off, huh? *[Will has had enough, flails at Pete, who easily blocks the punches and throws the kid into the corner.]* Thought eight days would fix all that, huh?

CHRIS: *[Correcting.]* Years.

MEG: *[Correcting.]* Weeks.

WILL: *[Soft.]* Hours. Months.

[An anguished pause.] This is my home. There is no other.

MEG: *[A verbal, rather than physical, beating. No less severe.]* It just doesn't work like that, W... *[She avoids using his name, gropes for a replacement.]* —you. You ruin my bed-covers, burn my Sunday dresses, and come back here and start hitting your father. You were an embarrassment to the family, William Smith. The ladies in the church *[Pete spits.]* are still giving me handbooks on child-rearing, and you know what you did to your sister. It pains me through my mother's heart to say this, but you're zilch, William Smith. A cipher, zero. A good-for-nothing who never made anything of himself and never will.

WILL: *[Moaning.]* Mom.

MEG: Don't call me mother. You are not my son. I never bore you. I wish you had never set foot near me again. *[She spins on her heel, and turns her back to her son, then self-consciously primps her hair.]*

CHRIS: Mother!

WILL: I'm not a stranger. I'm kith, kin...

PETE: You're an evolutionary mistake. You should be helping your Dad, encouraging the spread of our DNA, ensuring the survival of our fittest genes. We are Americans: hybridized, cross-bred, carefully superior. We do not pour gasoline on the floor and play with matches.

MEG: After all we did for you. All we bought for you.

WILL: But...

PETE: You couldn't even wait a decent amount of time before waltzing back in here, expecting everything to be forgive-and-forgotten. It's not that easy, Willy boy.

WILL: I...

MEG: You're not supposed to leave your mother. You're supposed to help her—respect her, like Tobo says. Especially when I've got to deal with your father's shenanigans and filips on top of everything else.

PETE: Will you stop bringing that up!

MEG: It's not like people don't know, Pete. Everyone down at the egg farm is talking, laughing behind my back at the Olympics Pete's staging. I know. I can tell.

PETE: I'm not doing anything. Nothing. I screwed up once!

MEG: I only caught you once.

CHRIS: I don't believe you guys.

WILL: Shut up! Shut up! Will you just listen to me?

PETE: *[Turning on him.]* Little Willie runs away with all my egg money, just so someone will listen to him. To Indonesia! Where the Elvis is that? I had to tell the boys down at the egg farm you ran to Mahogany. Good American sounding place. Instead of admitting my son was cavorting in some unpronounceable foreign republic. Don't you know what xenophobia is, son?

WILL: I know xerography. I have dark replicas there, innately self-same.

MEG: Why come back?

PETE: Can't you read? I spent money on those signs. Phosphorescent paint, night lighting, 5 foot letters. Didn't you see one?

WILL: I didn't see nothing!

PETE: Not the sign of the flaming hippopotamus?

WILL: I saw black night, red eyes, a wind. A counterfeit promise. Another home.

PETE: Your fancy computer gear, and you saw nothing? Cell-phone, info-tracker, nothing?

MEG: I said you should've hired more space on the info-tracker. I told you.

PETE: *[To Meg.]* It's worthless. I told you it can't be trusted. *[To Will.]* You didn't see the signs outside here, on the walls, in the lawn, on the roof? The one with glitter and naked ladies?

WILL: I saw nothing.

PETE: They all say one thing, Will. Go away.

WILL: I'm here now. I saw no signs. I'm staying.

PETE: *[Beginning to chase Will.]* Not in my station you're not.

CHRIS: Your station?

WILL: I've circled the world to end at my beginning.

MEG: Help your father, Chris.

PETE: Not with my family you're not.

WILL: I've unveiled all mystery and am still empty.

PETE: *[Chris has caught Will.]* Not under the same roof as my daughter.

CHRIS: *[She lets him go in involuntary repulsion.]* He's my *brother*, Dad.

[Pete and Will on opposite ends of the room now, facing off.]

WILL: I need a place to stay and so I'm here.

MEG: You're not staying *here*? In this room?

CHRIS: This is my room.

PETE: You're leaving, all right.

WILL: No, I'm not.

PETE: You're leaving now.

CHRIS: You can't stay, Will.

WILL: I've abandoned my knowledge, lost my family...

CHRIS: It's not the same.

WILL: I've no place left.

PETE: You're going to listen to your father, Will.

WILL: Why should I listen to him?

PETE: I'm your father.

MEG: No, you're not. You have no son.

WILL: I never listened to him before.

PETE: You will this time.

CHRIS: There's no train.

WILL: What's going to make me?

PETE: I'll make you. *[He lunges for Will.]*

WILL: I have no father. I'm above authority. I left you all long ago.

[Pete catches Will. Holds him by the collar.]

PETE: Above authority, huh? *[Hits him in the stomach.]*

[Will just looks at Pete. Pete punches again.] Go on. Get out of here. *[Pete shoves Will, who refuses to move his feet, crumpling to the ground.]*

WILL: *[Defiantly.]* I'm staying.

[Pete hauls Will to his feet, throws him towards the door.]

PETE: You're not staying here. Not with us. You're leaving.

WILL: You can't make me.

PETE: *[Pulling a pistol.]* I can. *[Beat.]* I was saving this for Meg. It works on wire-heads, too.

WILL: You wouldn't use it. You couldn't. I'm your son.* What would your egg-farm buddies say?

MEG: He has no son!

PETE: They've seen me strangle chickens. Twist their heads off. They've helped me do it. For the good of the farm. They'd be proud of me for fixing my son.

MEG: He's not our son!

WILL: Do it then. Dad. Blow me away.

PETE: I will if you don't leave.

WILL: Take me out of this hell I call family.

PETE: Now.

WILL: *[Glaring defiantly.]* There's no train.

PETE: You're not taking a train. *[Beat.]*

The door, Will. Open the door.

WILL: I'm not leaving.

PETE: I'll shoot.

WILL: Do it.

PETE: You know I will.

WILL: I don't want to live with this family. I don't want this life.

PETE: Leave, Will.

WILL: Do it!

Come on, do it! Shoot me!

I left here empty, returned vacant, there's nothing left. Do it!

[Pete is impotent.] Do I have to do it myself?

[Will grabs the gun, puts it to his head. Smiles at his family.]

MEG: Not inside!

CHRIS: Will!

[He fires. A bang, but nothing happens. A few pieces of confetti drizzle from the muzzle, perhaps.]

WILL: Nothing. *[Beat.]* What's wrong. Why didn't it work?

PETE: *[Defeated.]* They're blanks. From my days as the bearded lady with the Kielly-Zee. *[A sad pause.]* I've got crates of them in my room.

Bullets are hard to come by in the outer dark.

[The bats flutter overhead. The roof creaks.]

CHRIS: *[Quietly.]* But—the rat-gun...

PETE: Salt. Dust and pebbles. Small feathers.

[A moment of indecision.]

WILL: I guess I'm staying, then. I don't have a choice.

MEG: *[Coming to life.]* No, you're not. No he's not, Pete.

[She drags him towards the door, but shies short, unable to draw nearer to the door.]

You do it, Pete. You're the father. Throw him out. Open the door.

PETE: I can't.

WILL: None of you can. You're scared of the outside. Scared of the Rat. I've come from Sumatra! I know the Rat. *[Not triumphant. Will can't open the door, either.]*

MEG: Pete, *do* something!

[A powerless pause.]

CHRIS: Dad?

Dad, did you do that? *[Pointing to the "Call Will" sign, by the ticket-booth.]*

PETE: *[An idea.]* The ticket-booth.

MEG: The ticket-booth!

PETE: We'll leave him for the ticket-master.

MEG: Chris, help your father.

[Pete and Meg attempt to drag a surprised Will to the ticket-booth. He struggles, Pete knocks him out with a blow to the head. They lift Will and lock him in the ticket-booth. Chris watches it passively, as an inevitability. Unfortunate, but necessary.]

MEG: *[Scolding.]* You should have helped your father, Chris. A woman's work is with the family, that's what I've always said.

[Pete pockets his pistol, preoccupied.]

Relations are so wearisome. *[Catches herself.]* Strangers are more bother still. I feel faint. *[She disappears into her restroom.]*

5 Strawberry

[Chris and Pete are alone on stage. Pete (mal)lingers.]

PETE: *[Glances to be sure Meg's gone. Sotto voce.]* Chris, honey.

[Chris looks up, but doesn't answer. She's still in some shock over her parent's actions and Will's return.]

Chris, honey, you won't tell, will you?

CHRIS: Tell what?

PETE: *[Pleased.]* Thatta girl.

[Uncertain.] Last night.

CHRIS: Is it day?

PETE: Maybe last week. At night.

CHRIS: What?

PETE: You're not going to... *[Meaningful pause.]*

CHRIS: What?

PETE: Maybe it was last month.

CHRIS: What was last month?

PETE: At night.

CHRIS: *[Getting worried.]* What happened at night?

PETE: *[A bit confused.]* You won't tell will you?

[A tense pause.] It'll be our secret.

CHRIS: What was it that happened? What did you do?

PETE: That's right. That's okay.

CHRIS: *[Truly frightened. She can't remember anything.]* No, it's not okay. What was it that happened? What did I...

PETE: Nothing. Our secret.

CHRIS: What did you do? . . . with me? What did we do?

PETE: I don't remember.

CHRIS: It's not okay! What happened?

[A hairdryer turns on. In the men's room. Pete and Chris turn in unison to stare at the (closed) door.]

CHRIS: What's going on in there? Who's . . .
What happened last night?

PETE: Maybe last week.

[Magil (in the men's room) turns off the hair-dryer, stomps. Pete isn't getting her hint.]

MAGIL: Pete!

CHRIS: Who . . .

PETE: Shhh!

MEG: *[From inside the women's room.]* Pete?

MAGIL: *[Sticking her head out the door.]* Pete!

[Pete tries (in vain) to stand between the restroom door and Chris, to keep her from seeing. He gestures silently and frantically at Magil to go back inside.]

MAGIL: Not unless you come with me, Petey.

PETE: *[Tense whisper.]* Will you get inside!

MEG: Pete!

MAGIL: *[Crossing to Pete. Flirting.]* I'm scared, sweetheart. I don't want to be in there by myself.

MEG: Who's out there, Pete?

- CHRIS: *[With immediate comprehension.]* Dad!
- MAGIL: *[Caressing Pete, who's still trying to stop her, trying to play the good father to Chris.]* And where's that stranger guy you were yelling at before? *[Cutesy-pie and insincere.]* I'm frightened, Pete.
- PETE: Will you get back in that room?
- MAGIL: *[Enjoying the thought.]* You never know what that stranger might do to a poor, defenseless girl.
- CHRIS: No apology? No excuse?
- PETE: *[To Chris.]* This is Nancy. A... childhood friend. *[Trying to shake her off him.]*
- MAGIL: *[Cold. Perhaps Chris is a rival?]* The name's Lil.
- PETE: She's my daughter, for Elvis' sake!
- MAGIL: *[Warm.]* Oh. *[Beams.]*
- MEG: *[Coming out of her restroom. Buttoning her blouse.]* That most certainly is *not* your daughter, Peter Gilbert.
- PETE: *[Shaking Magil off, again.]* She's not. She's Nancy. She's my childhood friend. That's what I said. That's what I was just telling Chris.
- MEG: You can't fool me, Peter Smith. I know her when I see her. That's the Magil woman.
- PETE: She just got here. On the train. Didn't you hear a train, Chris?
- CHRIS: No.
- MAGIL: I'm Lil. Not Magil. Lil.
- MEG: Don't you try that with me. Magil. I've heard your name at the egg-farm plenty enough.
- CHRIS: Who is she, Mom?
- PETE: She's... just... Nancy. *[At a loss for an excuse.]*

MEG: I knew it. I knew it from the beginning. That's what I said, that's what I'll keep saying. Peter Smith, you are a worthless human being, a disgrace as a father.

PETE: Tell her it's not so, Chris. You were here. Didn't you hear the train come in?

CHRIS: You lied to me, Dad. You lied.

MAGIL: Come on, honey. Let's go in. I don't like it here.

MEG: I was asking the ladies of the Church about just this, I said, Jane, what would you do if your husband were messing around? What would you do?

PETE: *[To Magil.]* Cool it a second, Nancy. Wait a second.

MAGIL: My name's Lil.

CHRIS: I can't believe you, Dad!

MEG: *[Grabbing hold of Pete's arm, pulling him towards the ladies' room.]* She said, this is what she said. Meg, dear, I'd take that man and lock him in my room, keep an eagle eye on him and never let him stray again. That's what she said. Take him back and keep him there. Watch him every second.

MAGIL: No. You can't have him. *[Taking his other arm, pulling him towards the men's room.]*

MEG: It's what you gotta do, she says. Example for the family and all that. Think of the kids. *[Catches herself.]* Kid.

[Magil is no match for Meg, nor is she persistent. Pete is pulled out of her hands; she gives up.]

MEG: *[Man-handling a struggling Pete towards the ladies' room.]* Come on, Pete. Petey. You can't say you're shooting blanks any more.

[Just at the threshold to the ladies' room, Pete breaks free (or Meg lets go) and Pete dashes into the men's room. The door slams.]

[Meg and Magil turn from the slammed door and glare at each other. A beat.]

MAGIL: Nice meeting you, Chris.

[Magil, ever-so-coolly and deliberately, walks into the men's room.]

[Meg turns, looks at Chris. Silence.]

CHRIS: Mom?

[Meg starts to cry, softly.]

What happened last night, Mom?

[Meg continues to cry. Perhaps her emotion is real.]

[Chris moves towards her mother to comfort her, but Meg retreats inside the ladies' room.]

[A beat. Meg blows her nose loudly from inside her room.]

[Chris is alone. She sinks down on her bench.]

6 Rose

[Chris sits alone on her bench, lost in thought. Time passes, interior lights change. Perhaps an intermission? The exterior remains static. Grey. A comet flashes through the sky, unnoticed. A cosmic crystalline whirl of sound. The jukebox comes silently to life, glowing softly. A wind-chime sounds.]

[The burlap bag against the wall rustles quietly. The head of the blue man appears. He then quietly rolls down the bag to reveal himself, dressed formally. A green handkerchief in his breast pocket. He steps out of the bag, leans over, and plucks his top hat from the bag. He puts it on his head, scratches, takes it off and examines it. It has no top. He looks through the hat at the audience. He puts it back on his head. Something is still wrong. He takes it off and pulls a dozen yellow roses from the hat, surprised. Pleased, he puts the hat back on, arranges the flowers in his hand, and coughs discretely. Chris doesn't notice. He walks back to the station door, opens it. A tritone is heard (diabolus in musica). Quiet wind and darkness outside. Desolation. The man leans into the room as if he'd just arrived and knocks. Chris looks up.]

CHRIS: Oh.

[The blue man looks striking with his yellow roses and tails. An urbane act.]

MAN: Hey, er... *[He gestures: "May I come in?"]*

CHRIS: Oh. *[Covering her emotions. Smiling.]* Certainly. Hello.

[He enters, closes the door. The wind stops. He offers Chris the flowers.]

MAN: *[Rehearsed.]* Yellow is the color of friendship, I'm told.

CHRIS: Oh, you keep them. I mean... hold them for a while. They look so striking with your... eyes. *[She gazes at him for a moment. He smiles.]* I'm sorry, I don't mean to... here, I'll... *[She takes the roses from him.]* Thank you very much. I'm sorry, it's just been a long time since... I'll have to find someplace to put them. *[He offers his hat as a vase.]* No, I'll...

[She looks for something in which to put the flowers. She looks under the bench and around, is about to go into her father's restroom to look but stops short of the entrance. A momentary confusion. She finds her drinking cup, with her toothbrush and hairbrush from earlier, and puts the flowers in that, on a windowsill. A searching glance at the blue man.]

CHRIS: You look familiar.

MAN: Do I?

CHRIS: Yes. *[She looks away.]* Thank you for the roses. They're beautiful.

MAN: Like you.

CHRIS: *[Flustered.]* It's been so long since there was anything bright in this place. The whole room seems lighter now, doesn't it?

[In response, the man only smiles. Indeed, the room is much brighter; but this is due at least in part to the gradual awakening the room has undergone since the man's arrival. Little neon signs and colored bulbs that had long been burnt-out and cobweb-covered have slowly begun returning to life, coloring the room with their light. Chris catches one flickering on out of the corner of her eye, and stares, surprised; but she is unsure of what she thinks she saw, and lets it go without comment.]

CHRIS: I'm sorry, but what did you say your name was?

MAN: Call me Jed.

CHRIS: Jed.

MAN: Or anything else if you'd prefer. Ishmael.

CHRIS: No, Jed's a nice name. It reminds me somehow of. . . [*She trails off, frowns briefly.*]

[*The man smiles softly. Chris finds herself staring at him, again.*]

[*Catching herself.*] So. . . what brings you this far outside the Metropolis, Jed?

MAN: [*Making up—perhaps reciting—a charming story, delivered straight despite the obvious sibilance.*] Exactly one year and three days ago, I fell asleep and the strangest, sweetest dream snapped into my skull. In it I was harvesting herbs, sweating, swinging a scythe under the sweltering sulfur sun in a never-ending saffron field. It was stifling, and my thirst was extreme, but whenever I stopped to rest or seek water, the soles of my feet were scorched with an electric shock, forcing me to continue. I knew that this had been going on for days without cessation, and I was about to succumb. I stooped down to seize the sickle, sought to stand, and almost swooned, smitten, when a cool shadow sheltered my brow. I raised my eyes, and a woman of unspeakable beauty stood over me, in a silver sarong. I tried to thank her for breaking the wrath of the smoldering sun on my back, but my parched mouth could not whisper a single sound. From beneath her sari's sheer folds, she withdrew a canteen. She placed the spout to my lips, and clear sweet water splashed down my throat. She removed my shoes, and I was able to put aside my sickle. I sat in her shimmering shadow, basking happily in her beauty, and then the dream abruptly vanished. My stunning savior disappeared, and my open eyes beheld again nothing but the pre-dawn dark. The dream was mine every night for a month, when I decided that it was a sign, a vision, and that I must search the world for this lady of my dreams. I circled the world seven times without success, when three days ago—a year precisely since my dreams began—I glanced in this station window as my train roared by to Khatsandu and saw you. The image from my night visions. In three days I settled my personal affairs, sold my worldly possessions, hired a dirigible, and floated here on the winds of

fortune, seeking happiness in the presence of the most beautiful woman on earth.

CHRIS: Well. *[Doesn't quite know how to respond.]* That's a lovely story. Quite sibilant. *[Beat.]* What's the bag for? *[And the blue man is indeed still holding in one hand the burlap bag he climbed out of.]*

MAN: I arrived with the luggage on the last train.

[This makes his previous story obviously false, but Chris doesn't care. We don't like to call the lie on pleasant flattery.]

CHRIS: You spin a fine tale. I suppose you've got others, as well?

MAN: Would you prefer the rags-to-riches story? Or the one with the kangaroo and the cormorant?

CHRIS: No, thank you. The tale of the mystery princess was quite nice.

MAN: The resemblance is real.

CHRIS: *[Blushes slightly.]* Thank you.

[The man takes off his hat and puts it on the bench. He takes Chris' hand, tenderly.]

MAN: It's been too long, Chris.

CHRIS: How do you know my name? I . . .

[The man smiles mysteriously, lifts his hat. A rabbit hops out from beneath it.]

CHRIS: I . . . I just don't know . . . what's happening . . . all these colors . . .

MAN: Shhh. *[He takes her in his arms. She holds him.]*

CHRIS: I am glad you've come. I was hoping someone would come. I've been so lonely here. So alone.

MAN: Shhh. *[A chanted emollient.]* Plurality, duplicity, togetherness is happiness.

[From thin air he produces a small picnic basket, draws out candles, wine glasses and bottles, delicacies, a cello: the complete setting for a romantic feast, but more stuff than could possibly fit in the basket.]

[With a flourish he lays out the picnic cloth in the center of the room. The candles light themselves. The jukebox plays soft music of its own accord.]

[Will has woken up, groggily. His head is seen through the ticket-booth window. He is about to bang on the glass, insist on his release, when he notices the blue man. He suddenly quiets, and watches the proceedings covertly with alarm.]

MAN: Shall we? *[Or perhaps he just gestures.]*

[They recline to the feast, Chris in the man's arms. They share a single place-setting.]

CHRIS: It feels so good to be held. *[A loving pause.]* It really has been a long time. Forever, maybe.

[Tenderly. The wine's made her talkative. She rattles on banally.] My family's grown more and more odd. Or maybe I just notice more. They're like my friend Fred. The circus fire-eater? He kept swallowing flame, more and more—it never seemed to fill him up, he said—until one day he burped. He burped up the fire from his belly in a bubble and just exploded. Flaming clown parts everywhere. *[A memorial pause.]*

[She looks up at him.] My brother Will arrived today. *[Will ducks down out of sight.]* He's over there, in the booth. He makes me so sad, he's never learned anything.

[A semi-maudlin pause.]

I'm so confused. *[A tear rolls down her cheek. He takes the handkerchief from his pocket, and it changes color from green to red. He wipes her tear away.]*

[They gaze into each other's eyes for a long time. She looks down. The jukebox stops. He lifts her chin, and kisses her.]

CHRIS: I... *[She can't say "I love you."]*

[He kisses her again, more passionately. She breaks off.]

I'm not certain. I don't know. Oh... *[She holds him tight.]* It feels so good to be unalone. Just someone near. It doesn't even matter if you listen, I guess.

[He kisses her again. Prolonged passion.]

Can't we talk for a while. This is so... I mean we're not even friends yet. *[Nervous laughter.]* Shouldn't we share our souls, whisper of dreams and lost hopes before... *[He is nuzzling her neck. Unconvincingly:]* Stop it. Oh... *[She loses faith in what she says, and gives in to her feelings, kissing and pressing close to him. A moment's abandon. Then she stops him, draws a little apart, looks at him intently. A short pause.]*

MAN: *[Not comprehending her reserve.]* An angel of silence has flown over us. *[He leans toward her.]*

CHRIS: *[Her lips brush his, then:]* No. *[Again she draws near, a kiss, then:]* No.

MAN: Come on, baby. Just like it used to be.

CHRIS: Used to be?

MAN: I've been drifting for days, no years, never been able to get you out of my head. We're meant to be, sweetheart.

CHRIS: Who are you?

MAN: Anyone you like. *[Draws near.]*

CHRIS: Not Jed?

MAN: No one you don't want me to be. *[Moves to kiss her.]*

CHRIS: No. *[Breaks free.]*

Don't. It hurts. You being here wakes all kinds of stuff I'd forgotten. It's not real. It's not real, but close enough that it makes me remember what love is like, how it hurts to be alone, to be unloved, not to love. I can't.

MAN: Take it easy, baby. I'm on Romance Standard Time. We've got all night.

CHRIS: Isn't it day?

[He approaches her again.]

- MAN: *[Gently.]* You know I wouldn't be doing this if I knew you didn't want me. You do. I can feel it. You couldn't kiss me like you did if you didn't feel for me. You can't fake that.
- CHRIS: *[Softly.]* It's not love, Jed. Just loneliness.
- MAN: *[Holding her.]* Loneliness doesn't hold me like you do. It's love, babe; it's... thaumaturgy.
- CHRIS: It's not real.
- MAN: Look around you. *[The room is alive with color.]* First love's magic.
- CHRIS: You're not even Jed.
- MAN: I am, babe. I'm Jed if you want me to be. I'm anyone you want. You want me.
[He turns her head.]
Come on. Just kiss me. It'll be clearer then.

[Chris closes her eyes and he kisses her. They work back into their passion.]
- CHRIS: *[Breaks off again.]* No. You don't understand. I don't want that.* I want love. You're ...
- MAN: Yes you do. You want me. I can feel it. I don't know what you're saying, but your body doesn't lie. You love me. What's wrong with that?
- CHRIS: Love isn't what my body does. I made that mistake, summertimes ago: clinging to another, unhappy, scared of solitude.
- MAN: You *were* happy. You can't say we weren't. I woke with you beside me and you were smiling. *[Grabbing her.]* Come on, baby, make it like it used to be.
- CHRIS: *[With realization.]* No. I know who you are. You're... *[The name escapes her.]* You're my date to the high school prom. The man I wrote love poetry for, who I dreamed would pay me attention, who finally did. You're a fraud.
- MAN: *[He reaches for her.]* I'm your first lover, high school sweetheart, man of your dreams.

CHRIS: *[Pulling away.]* You're the dream that was burst when I learned that love, no *feelings* deceive. I sent you away once.

MAN: *[Pulling her closer.]* And I'm back. I found you. Back from Vegas, from the dark places, where they purchase your body and don't leave your soul. But every time, I remembered you, thought of your body dancing before me.

CHRIS: I sent you away. It took all I had; I screwed up new-found wise pieces of my self, begged you never to come back, never to fool me again. I did it once. I knew I'd never have the strength to do it again.

MAN: That's what love is, Babe. Unbreakable. You and me, we're one flesh like the Bible says. Inseparable.

[Becoming impatient and rough.] Come on, babe. Stop this. I didn't track you way out here beyond the Metropolis so you could preach at me. I came for love. The work I've been doing days has drained my soul, but I know we were happy, then. I'm here to make that happen again.

CHRIS: Let go of me. I know your name. You're... *[Can't think of it.]*

MAN: I am nobody. I'm any *body*. Come on, baby. You'll like it.

CHRIS: No.

MAN: *[Seizing her tightly.]* I'm tired of your games.

CHRIS: I said no.

MAN: You're just not used to it. You'll like it. You did before.

[He presses himself against her. Tries to kiss her, forcefully. She struggles, rolls away. He is standing. Slowly unbuttons his shirt, a threat.]

CHRIS: I know who you are. You're...

[He strips off his shirt. Blue skin. Advances on Chris.]

[Frantic.] You're... *[Can't recall.]*

[He traps her against the wall. She punches at him; he catches her fists.]

Why can't I remember?

[He kisses her against her will, then pushes her to the ground, straddling her, holding her arms.]

You're Jake! Jacob Smith. *[He flinches as if hit. Chris rolls from under him.]* Love's facsimile. Not human, blue.

Jacob Smith. *[She stands easily. The man is prone on the floor.]*

You can't fool me anymore. You can't hurt me like you did. Your name is Blank. The unknown. Love's forgery. Elvis impersonated. Fake, fraud, unflappable certain beautiful wrong.

MAN: *[Angry.]* I love you, Chris. *[He tries to move toward her.]*

CHRIS: *[Fire. Prophecy. Stopping him.]* In a month your shoes will be found in the ash dump outside town. Perhaps still holding feet. Your body strewn, your soul consumed, regenerated into other dark flapping things of the soul. *[The bats rustle.]*

MAN: *[An existential utterance.]* I . . .

CHRIS: You'll be back, riding in again from my past. Loneliness stings sharp at temptation.

[A beat.]

Jacob Smith. Your train has arrived. The ticket-master is coming.

[A knock on the door.]

Answer it. You must go.

[He must open the door and step out into the darkness. Wind and desolation. The door closes. Silence.]

[A beat. The jukebox clicks off. Chris slumps, spent. The magic is gone. The roses have died. The bats rustle.]

Fie, bats. Away. I have discovered the meaning of things' names.

[Silence.]

7 Ash

[Cautiously, Will pokes his head up inside the ticket-booth to see whether the blue man is still present. Will doesn't see him, and is relieved. He rattles the locked ticket-booth door and bangs on the glass.]

WILL: Chris! Chris!

[But neither the audience or Chris can hear him through the glass.]

[Will fumbles around in desperation and discovers the ticket-seller's microphone. A sudden uncertainty about the blue man's absence. He musters courage to whisper into the mike:]

WILL: Chris.

[The scratchy sound is ghostly and locationless through the cheap amplifier. The sound takes Chris by surprise; she realizes it is Will and turns her back. Will's dialogue is via the ticket-booth microphone until noted otherwise.]

WILL: Chris.

Where's... Is the organ-player still here?

Chris?

It's good to be back, Chris.

CHRIS: No, it's not.

[Silence.]

WILL: I thought of you.

CHRIS: Why? *[Short laugh.]*

WILL: *[Beat.]* You're my sister.

[Pause.]

I...

I love you.

CHRIS: Not all that. It doesn't mean a thing.

WILL: I don't want you to make my mistakes.

CHRIS: I won't.

WILL: Where's the organ player? The blue relic-seller?

CHRIS: I haven't seen anyone.

WILL: The Javanese soul-stealer. The lounge-singer.

CHRIS: No one's been here.

WILL: I saw him.

CHRIS: He's gone.

WILL: He looked like Elvis. He lured me in with carnal secrets, magic tricks, exploitable physical singularities, promising to sell me relics, concrete proofs of spiritual postulates. But his icons twisted my soul, crashed my machine, yielded nothing.

CHRIS: You imagined it.

WILL: He's a shadow. A protean manifestation of the past. A reconfigurable network adapting to folly; synthesis masquerading as ineffable knowledge.

CHRIS: I know his name, Will.

WILL: He claimed he had relics. I thought he had proof.

CHRIS: You were foolish.

WILL: It's worth any sacrifice, Chris. Don't you see? It's the key to the occulted order; it's the plug fitting the cosmic bath-drain.

CHRIS: You're easily misled. He was obvious.

WILL: I've searched the world, Chris. I've looked everywhere. I understand wisdom. I've tried madness and folly. I bought a red nose and practiced underwater kitten-juggling. I undertook great projects. I made Guinness' book. I waited in line, bought my ticket, and became king for thirty seconds. But the Rat eludes the physical, he warps the material, he leaps away from technical grasp. . .

CHRIS: The Rat doesn't exist.

WILL: The world is not ready for the truth of that story.

CHRIS: I made up the story. I know its truth.

WILL: You didn't invent the Rat. He's been there from the beginning. Thrown down from high places like Gerber apple mush.

[Pause.]

He promised me the three true tears of Christ. The flames of Moses' burning bush. The infant and adult skulls of Columbus. He's not what he seems. He steals your past and regurgitates it.

[Pause.]

CHRIS: Do you know what happened last night, Will?

WILL: I slept. I dreamed.

CHRIS: You weren't here.

WILL: I came back for the holidays.

CHRIS: You wouldn't know, I guess.

WILL: Elvis' birthday.

[Silence.]

I thought things would be different.

CHRIS: They're not.

WILL: It's been years.

CHRIS: No, it hasn't.

WILL: It's the holidays.

CHRIS: A media invention.

WILL: Family. "It's a Wonderful Life?"

CHRIS: Media ignores us, actually.

WILL: Jimmy Stewart.

CHRIS: No marketing potential.

WILL: NONE OF IT'S TRUE!

CHRIS: Perhaps.

WILL: [*Banging the glass. Shouting.*] I mean it. The holiday season, love, peace, joy. Homecoming. Home. Happiness. It's not true. They're not happy. I'm not welcomed here by my own family. It's all a lie. I looked for answers and found ciphers. My family lives beneath the Rat. I've come to the end of the world, and nothing works. Communication's impossible. The info-tracker's dead. I had a dream last night. Or before. Often. I dreamed of... another home.

You've got to help me, Chris. I'm going to die.

Chris?

The answer's gotta be simple. The mystery will turn out to be in essence solely the solution to the Discrete Fourier Transform of the complex roots of the lesser Antilles. Something trivially obvious, proof left to the reader. You always did better in math, Chris. Help me.

CHRIS: I don't know what you're talking about.

WILL: Yes you do, Chris. I know you do.

CHRIS: I don't.

WILL: The weasel's under the cocktail cabinet. The eagle flies in Aunt Jack's pantry. You know what I mean. Help me out.

CHRIS: I can't.

WILL: You won't.

CHRIS: There aren't answers, Will.

WILL: I know there's a solution. The matrix is non-singular. The determinant's eight-hundred and forty-six. It's necessary.

CHRIS: But not possible.

WILL: It's necessarily possible. I dreamt it, Chris. I saw it.

CHRIS: It was just a dream.

WILL: It was a vision. Help me, Chris. I don't know where I am.

CHRIS: You're in the station.

WILL: Let me out of here. Let me out of the booth.

CHRIS: Why should I?

WILL: I'm caged. I've spent the last eight years* escaping the zoo.

CHRIS: Days. [*In response to "zoo."*] The menagerie.

WILL: I searched the world for the manager.

CHRIS: The menagerie manager.

WILL: I couldn't find him.

CHRIS: He's imaginary.

WILL: The menagerie?

CHRIS: Both. Imaginary.

WILL: An imaginary menagerie manager managing an imaginary menagerie?

CHRIS: I imagine.

WILL: Don't try to confuse me, Chris.

CHRIS: I don't play with the animals.

WILL: I'm not an animal. I don't belong in the menagerie. I'm the manager. Let me out!

CHRIS: You're not convincing.

WILL: I've ascended, reformed. I've escaped the manager's management, I manage myself. I'm not subject to anyone. I will not be caged. I CANNOT BE CAGED!

CHRIS: Thinking doesn't make it so.

WILL: My backpack. The fusion device. It needs fuel.

CHRIS: Semi-annually.

WILL: Bimonthly. Coolant twice daily. Today's the day. It needs both.

CHRIS: I don't believe you.

WILL: You don't have to. Look at it.

[Will's backpack is pulsing light and humming softly.]

CHRIS: So?

WILL: It doesn't shut down gently. Power loss affects active stabilization. It permits development of magnetohydrodynamic instability. The plasma bubbles from its containment field, swells and pops. It disrupts, dumping the toroidal current into the containment vessel. The resultant unit stress, coupled with ohmic heating and inductive effects from current collapse...

CHRIS: You can't scare me, Will; melt-downs are an artifact of fission power. The LOCA, Loss Of Coolant Accident, just doesn't happen with fusion.

WILL: I'm not talking about LOCA events. The model LM-2054 User's Guide calls what I'm talking about a LOSI event. A Loss Of Structural Integrity.

CHRIS: You're ignoring the effects of Landau damping.

WILL: It's irrelevant given the operant Lagrangian.

CHRIS: You're linearizing the Lagrangian.

WILL: I'm looking at low-I limiter operation.

CHRIS: You're trying to mislead me. I know Lenz's law. The Lorentz Force.

WILL: Low-T fusion? Muonic hydrogen?

CHRIS: I can derive the Lagrangian. Lighthill's relation. LSK Dispersion.

WILL: The fishbones linked to large plasma beta? The $m = 1$ kink modes?

CHRIS: I know of limiters. Of line-tying to reduce instability.

WILL: It's irrelevant! The dangers of gamma greater than one escape you. You're gambling your life on the fluid flow of a billion-degree plasma ring.

CHRIS: *[Trying to call his bluff.]* So?

WILL: I stole this thing, Chris. Its maintenance telemetry will betray its location if it runs red. They'll come for it. Let me shut it down.

CHRIS: They'll find you in the end, Will.

WILL: I've got a picture in my knapsack. In a pocket by the reactor.

CHRIS: What picture?

WILL: A photograph. You know which one.

CHRIS: No, I don't. You still have it?

WILL: Not if the reactor blows.

CHRIS: Don't give me that. Where is it? *[She's at the knapsack.]*

WILL: Don't touch it.

[It's too late. When Chris touches the knapsack, it buzzes and vents steam violently, forcing her back.]

CHRIS: What the...

WILL: I'll get it for you if you let me out.

CHRIS: Why would you give it to me?

WILL: I don't want it anymore.

CHRIS: Right.

WILL: I want to get out. I was going to tear it up.

CHRIS: Don't do that. Let me see it.

WILL: Open the booth.

CHRIS: How do I know you'll get it?

WILL: *[Beat.]* You can't remember, can you? What it was like?

CHRIS: *[A short pause.]* Let me see it. *[She opens the booth and releases Will. Will's subsequent lines are off mic.]*

Come on.

[Will crosses to the backpack, lays his hand on the reactor's security sensor, then punches in a code. The device goes dark and Will rummages through the bag, looking for his photograph. The photograph is tucked in the flyleaf of a battered yellow leather-bound pocket testament. He pulls the photograph from the testament, looks at the book and deliberately lets it fall. Immediately the device begins to emit a shrill alarm. Will freezes, clutching the photograph in his hand.]

CHRIS: *[Annoyed at the delay.]* Will!

WILL: *[This jolts Will from his shock. He hits a button, and the alarm stops. The unit's display confirms his fears.]* It's too late.

CHRIS: Let me see the picture.

WILL: The device was red-lined already. They're coming.

CHRIS: You promised, Will.

WILL: I can't run. The rat...

CHRIS: You said you had the picture. Our picture. Is that it?

WILL: You remember it.

CHRIS: No, I don't. *[She snatches it from his hand.]* I don't remember.

WILL: *[About the picture. Not looking at it.]* Jack's Wonderland Park. The four of us. Younger. Happy. Before Mom...

CHRIS: It wasn't Mom.

WILL: No. *[Not only.]*

CHRIS: It was Dad. I know. I found out.

WILL: Yes.

CHRIS: What do you mean?

WILL: It doesn't matter. It's too late. It's over.

CHRIS: It's not over, Will. Not for us. You ran away. We lived with it.

WILL: I came home. Look what good it did me. Nothing's changed at all.

CHRIS: What did you think, Will? That's we'd suddenly welcome you with open arms? That we'd forget everything you did?

You always were trying to weasel out, to escape the price. Shop-lifting, stealing, cheating; and at school the principal always looked the other way because he liked your... ties. Well, this time you're not getting out of it, Will. No little recess-time sessions with Headmaster Darby. Your mistakes aren't going away. I lost my job as a toothpaste model for RebelFresh Fluoride—the best job I ever had, my childhood dream, and you knew it!—when you got caught and they found out you were my brother. And then to top it off you had to go yelling about fluoridation and the communists. I don't care if it was true and millions were being poisoned, Will, it was my career you ruined. Ruined.

WILL: I was looking for Truth.

CHRIS: [*Chris bares her teeth.*] See these teeth, Will? All through elementary school I avoided candies, chocolates, popcorn, sugar, small rocks—to protect these teeth. Other girls had Barbies, but I took home plaster mouth casts from the orthodontist. I polished, I preened, I applied shoe polish thrice daily to these chompers, practiced hours perfecting my gleaming smile. I dreamed of the Ms. Oral Hygiene competitions, fantasized about a modeling job with RebelFresh, collected toothpaste in jars and researched competitive advertising strategies. My whole life I had prepared to pitch tooth-whitener, to stand in front of a television audience millions strong, wear J. Crew, and drive away in a BMW to illustrate the success which good Oral Hygiene can deliver to the faithful of Brand X. And you stood on street corners and prattled about the toxic bleaches used in RebelFresh and the mechanism of mind-control through government fluoridation. You claimed that access to toothpaste and soap were being controlled by the industrial aristocracy to suppress the working class. You plotted treasonous schemes to let every

unwashed migrant worker shower, bathe, groom: become indistinguishable from us, the true American Yankees, middle-class and clean.

WILL: You closed your eyes, Chris. You pretended it wasn't true just because you couldn't see.

CHRIS: So you set fire to your parents' bedroom and ran away to look for something you never found.

WILL: It's a conspiracy, Chris. They didn't want me to find it. The Bolsheviks wanted me to believe they were responsible. The black tricycles on the front lawn were no coincidence. Neither were the gummi bears nor the snuffle-upagus. TV news churches preach the Byzantine Domino Theory; the new tax zombies lose their jobs. IQ-8 and a wheel chair. The parasitical army of glazed donut song-writers are allying with the purple grasshoper-eating scallion-swearing ladle-carrying frogs who call themselves crustaceans to abolish carpet-weaving and devil dog desserts. I can't cut loose. Help me.

CHRIS: You're not making sense.

WILL: He had it all, Chris. Elvis. He had the looks, the talent, the moves. He was perfect. He was pretty. He could burp and get a standing ovation! It was easy for him. I tried. I tried, but I didn't find him. The name on his tombstone's wrong, Chris—he's not there. But I couldn't find him.

CHRIS: He's dead, Will. He's not some sequined savior.

WILL: He's alive. I can't do it myself. I can't go on.

CHRIS: We pulled ourselves out of the ocean. Nobody helped us. You've got to pull your bootstraps. You don't have a choice.

WILL: They're trying to turn me into dog-meat, Chris, into the horse's mouth, they'll torture me until I divulge their brother's cat. But I can't give in. I've got to be like a moose with bad credit, I've got to follow the badger's example with small children. Better death than submission. Eight hundred and ninety-seven is a sacred number, remember it, Chris. Memorize it. And one hundred seventy three. Twenty nine. Forty-six, eighty-six, one thousand thirty two. Help me, Chris.

CHRIS: You're dreaming, Will. You can't recreate the picture.

[Will makes the secret hand gestures. He performs the secret handshake.]

WILL: Eighty-seven thousand one hundred twenty-three. C' mon, Chris.

CHRIS: Stop it, Will. Admit it. You failed.

WILL: *[Frantic.]* It doesn't work, Chris. None of it's true. I've been around the world and the Rat's always there. Mysterious men in black suits want me and my device. I've lived in Sumatra, Chris. I know what it's like. They're coming for me now. I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE. I've got to get out. I need to—escape.

[He dashes in the ticket booth. He flips all the switches, runs to the destination board.]

CHRIS: What are you doing, Will?

WILL: GOODBYE, MOM. BYE, DAD. I've got it, Chris. THANKS FOR THE OL' GOOSE EGG.

[He bangs on the destination board until it starts spelling out a destination, succeeds in invoking a train, which begins to approach, rumbling and shaking the space as it does so.]

[Manic.] I thought I was stuck for a second, but I've got it now. I'll handle it. I can do it.

CHRIS: *[Worried. Frightened.]* What are you doing, Will?

[Feverish. Inspired. He grabs his backpack, straps it to his back. The train grows nearer. Light streams through the walls.]

WILL: I've got it. Elvis had it easy. I CAN DO IT TOO. I don't need the ticket-master. I CAN DO IT MYSELF.

[Will dashes to the door. Chris blocks the doorway.]

CHRIS: Stop it. It's not a game.

WILL: *[Insane laughter.]* It is. I've won.

[Will opens a window instead and flings himself out, into blinding light. The train passes and is gone.]

[Chris is stunned. She moves to the window, looks out to where Will and the train met. The shade is quickly drawn in fear.]

[The giant rat remains.]

8 Sienna

[Chris is still holding the family photo Will gave her.]

CHRIS: It's my fault.

PETE: *[From inside the mens' room.]* Chris!

CHRIS: I opened the booth. It's not my fault.

PETE: What was that noise?

MEG: *[From inside the ladies' room.]* Answer your father.

PETE: Is it here? Did it come?

CHRIS: No.

PETE: Oh. *[His head out the door.]* Chris. Come here.

[She doesn't move.]

Quick, before your mother comes.

[She nears by a single step.]

[Pete enters the room. Sotto voce.] Have you seen Nancy?

CHRIS: No.

PETE: She didn't come out?

CHRIS: I need to tell you something, Dad.

PETE: What?

CHRIS: *[Hesitating.]* Will...

MEG: Did you answer him, Chris? I didn't hear an answer. What did you say?

PETE: It was nothing.

MEG: Chris?

CHRIS: It was nothing.

MEG: *[Enters.]* Are you sure, Chris? It sounded like a train.

PETE: She said it was nothing.

MEG: It sounded like a train. I thought maybe someone left. I had something to tell him.

CHRIS: Who?

MEG: You didn't see anyone get on it, did you?

CHRIS: Dad's right here, Mom.

MEG: I know that. No one got on?

CHRIS: *[Blurting it out.]* Will's dead.

MEG: So there wasn't anyone?

CHRIS: Weren't you listening? Your son Will jumped in front of the train.

MEG: He's not my son. He died long ago. He was never born.

PETE: *[Insincerely.]* I'm sad.

CHRIS: You're disgusting.

MEG: I'm glad he had the decency to do it outside. Saves us some trouble.

CHRIS: You're sick. Both of you. He was your son!

MEG: Stop saying that!

CHRIS: Neither of you ever listened to him.

MEG: He ruined our family.

CHRIS: *[Vengeful.]* I know who you were looking for, Mom.

MEG: No one.

PETE: What do you mean?

CHRIS: *[Goes to ladies' room door. Banging on it.]* Hello. Hello?

MEG: Stop that!

CHRIS: *[Continuing.]* Anyone one in there? You can come out. . .

[The door opens quietly and DAN is in the opening. Close. He looks much like the blue man. He gently grabs Chris' wrists, raised in the act of hitting the door. Chris is rigid. Meg gasps.]

MEG: Where were you?

PETE: Who is that, Meg?

[Chris backs away from Dan, who releases her wrists.]

CHRIS: You. Will knew. . .

PETE: What in Tobo's name do you call that, Meg? After all the grief you gave me over my friends. . .

MEG: Just how many friends did you have?

PETE: Deviant HYPOCRITE.

[Dan vanishes; the door closes.]

Hey! *[Advancing towards the ladies' room.]* Come back here.

MEG: *[Blocking his way.]* No, don't. You can't go in.

PETE: *[Flings her aside.]* I'm your husband. What's yours is mine.

[Rushes forward. A brief moment of hesitation at the door. Meg rushes to block him again.]

MEG: No.

PETE: *[Grappling with Meg. Dragging her inside with him. Prologue to rape.]*
Come on, Meg. We'll go inside. I'm not shooting blanks.

[At the last moment before entrance, Meg breaks free. Pete halts a step inside Meg's room, peers about. He turns, incredulous.]

PETE: It's empty. No one. *[A curse.]* Son of a SUMATRAN RAT!

[The mens' room door opens, and Dan and Magil sidle quietly towards the train-station door, attempting to exit without being noticed. They are dressed in traveling clothes, carrying suitcases. They are holding hands.]

PETE: Stop right there. *[Scrambling for his pistol.]*

[The lovers halt by the exit. A stand-off.]

MEG: Frank!

PETE: Frank? Is that his name? Like Sinatra?

CHRIS: Like Sumatra.

MEG: Where are you going?

MAGIL: We're leaving.

MEG: You can't. *[Pleading.]* Frank.

MAGIL: His name's Dan. Smith. We're going to Vegas.

PETE: *[Brandishing his gun.]* I won't let you. You can't play Muster Mark with me, Nancy.

MAGIL: My name's Lil. Smith.

[They leave. Pete is powerless to stop them; his gun is impotent. The door yawns open into blackness outside. The gun drops.]

PETE: You can't trust anyone. Not your buddies, not your wife.

MEG: How did they do it? Our rooms were separate...

PETE: *[Angry. Betrayed.]* My own daughter let your son kill himself.

CHRIS: I didn't kill him.

MEG: He's not my son.

PETE: Was he *my* son?

CHRIS: Stop it, Dad.

PETE: Was he, Meg? Are you sure?

MEG: You started it, Pete. You and that Magil woman.

CHRIS: Don't do this.

PETE: [*Vicious.*] Reno was your idea. I never wanted it.

MEG: You got me pregnant.

CHRIS: What about me? You can't leave me.

PETE: You started all this, Chris. You've been strangling me since your birth.

CHRIS: We're family.

PETE: Not anymore.

CHRIS: You can't. Mom, tell him.

PETE: She's dead, Chris. I killed her. Long ago.

MEG: I don't hear a thing. I feel nothing.

PETE: I can't trust anyone. Don't tell them, Chris. Don't tell anyone.

CHRIS: Tell what?

[Pete has left. Through the door and gone forever.]

Dad! What did you do?

MEG: He's dead.

CHRIS: Mom. Tell me.

MEG: I need a rest. [*Moving towards ladies' room.*]

CHRIS: Tell me. What did Dad do?

MEG: Nothing.

CHRIS: Last night.

MEG: Last year. *[And she disappears into her room.]*

CHRIS: YOU CAN'T DO THIS!

[A very slow light change. Candles one by one ignite. The light fades. Ominous shadows. The corners become dark.]

You can't like this, can you? Self-immolation?

When you've slashed and torn and drank your fill, are you happy?

Why are you leaving me?

There's something out there. Something I expelled.

Mom, come back. I can feel him, Mom. Watching. He's out there.

His face is green. Floating.

I hear myself, Mom. Frightened.

It didn't happen. My family's happy. We love each other. Dad, come back. It's all a game, the game's over.

I feel him. He's there. I hear him. He's laughing.

Mom. Mom, come here. Mom, turn on the lights. Mom, I'm scared. It's dark.

I'm dying. STOP IT! Stop watching me. You can't have me. You can't devour me.

Mom!

[Meg returns, in traveling clothes. Carrying a suitcase. Packed to leave.]

[Despair. Relief.] Where were you? I was calling you.

MEG: It's too quiet around here.

CHRIS: *[Realizing.]* You can't leave. You're my mother. Don't. Don't you see him out there?

MEG: I'm lonely.

CHRIS: *[Hopeful.]* Run, Mom. If you run you can catch Dad. *[With picture.]* We'll make it like it was. You can stop him.

MEG: I hope I never see him.

CHRIS: You can't go out there. You'll be consumed. It's waiting.

MEG: I'll be fine. Stop blubbing.

CHRIS: You're not that type of person. He's laughing.

MEG: I'll visit the Metropolis. You're not making this easy on me.

CHRIS: There's nothing out there. Nothing but grey.

MEG: I'll be fine once I get there. Once I reach the lights.

CHRIS: Look out there. There's nothing. No, don't. Don't open the blinds. Close the door. He's right around the corner.

MEG: I've borne you for twenty years. That's long enough.

CHRIS: Don't leave me. We're all that's left.

MEG: If you ever see your father, his razor's on the washbasin inside.

[Meg leaves into the featureless grey, closing the door after her.]

9 Raven

[Chris still clutches the picture. Outside it is grey.]

CHRIS: They're all gone. They've all left me.

All alone.

I'm dead. *[To people in photo.]* You're dead. Look. A funeral. I'm holding a funeral in my hand. A dead history. A moment lost forever.

I can't feel anything. I can hear laughter. Outside. Pale vapours mocking me. Wreaths of smoke. I understand the languages of dead things.

I can see you. You're watching. Your spectral face. Dead. You never were alive. You pretended. You aped us living things. You were always too cold.

You don't exist. You're my imagination. Only I am. Only I. My hands. Pentadigital manipulators. I am a living breathing existing doubting homo sapien carbon-based sentient being. You are nothing.

STOP WATCHING ME! You don't exist! Stop whispering. Stop your tongue. Stop speaking. Ded sno fa way na chay kee ha la ba ma ta ra noh. Ba pa na. La ti ca tay, be re vee ta la ca ma na. STOP SPEAKING.

Turn on the lights! I want to go home. Home to my boat. Home before here. GO AWAY!

I want to eat breakfast cereal and watch the milk turn red. I want to slurp the milk and play with the bottom-box toy. I want my teddy bear. I want my daddy. No.

I want things to be different. I want my home! I want my family. I want to play loud music and bounce through my room. I want to play with my toes on the bottom of the upper bunk. I want to put my feet in the air. I want my brother to lie beside me in the dark and look at the glowing stars.

Do you remember that, Will? Laying together, hardly breathing? You kept looking at your hands, how empty they were.

Why did you have to jump, Will? They're laughing at you. I can hear them. Their voices, like metal pipes. There's nothing out there. THERE ISN'T ANYTHING. STOP IT!

What did you find out, Will? How do I make them stop? I can't do it, Will. I thought I could. I can't. What's out there, Will? What did you see? Where do I find Elvis? Where's Tobo? Who is the ticket-master and why isn't he here?

Why couldn't Mom and Dad continue? Why did they have to stop? Why couldn't they accept deceit and carry on? Nothing's happened. I don't believe anything has happened. I will wake up. Now.

STOP IT! Stop smiling. It's not true yet. You haven't won. Put your face back on. You can't fool me. I'm not listening. I don't hear your lispings whispers. I don't feel your tongue touch my ear. GO AWAY. STOP IT!

I want my family back. I want my destroyed homes. My boat in Moss Landing Harbor. I want to patch the fabric. I want my Dad to stop cuddling someone strange in the kitchen. I want things to stay the same.

NO! NOT FOREVER! I want things to change gradually. I want not to succumb. I want not to die unmoving. NO. I can feel your tongue. Ak nik no ma chee. A na the ma. Coor. A na te ma. NO! NOOOOOO!

[The blind rattles, and falls. The face of the blue man is in the window. Leering. Staring. Watching. Spectral.]

GO AWAY! I didn't summon you. Elvis, Tobo, ba ra me na. You can't fool me. Your gold lamé doesn't convince me. You don't come from Tobo. Not from the sacred waters. You came from Sumatra. Java. The jungle. The heat.

WHERE ARE THE LIGHTS! You don't exist. I killed you. I can hear you. Your hunger. The voices tell me. They say

ded sno fa way na chay kee. A la ba na ga. A la ba la ba a. A la
ba te. Ba li ka li ma tan su la we si ti mor. A la ba la ba la ba te.
A la ba la ba. A la ba la ba te.

I summon the ticket-master. I ask for his wife. I don't want you. Go away. Stop watching. Stop laughing. I know your name. Kyr ee la ba la ba ohs.

I'm scared. I'm scared. Go away. I'm scared.

[The phone rings. The blue man disappears. Chris jumps.]

No one is home. *[Ring.]* We're not here.

[The ringing stops.]

Who's out there? Who wants me? What do you want? Why do you want me?

GO AWAY AND LEAVE ME ALONE. I AM I. I EXIST. NOTHING ELSE DOES!

[The phone rings again.]

NO! *[Ring.]* WHO ARE YOU?

[The ringing stops.]

STOP MOCKING ME!

I can do it myself. I don't need anybody's help. Nothing's out there. Nothing exists but me.

[A single ring.]

OK. OKAY! I can't do it. Just trying. Just like Will. *[The photo.]* Just like my family. We can't. Look at us. LOOK! We've torn... our... family... to... SHREDS! *[She tears the picture as she says it.]*

What is it I'm looking for? What is it, Will? I can't do it myself.

[The phone rings. Chris snatches the receiver in defiance.]

[Into the phone.] WHAT?

What kind of preacher do you call yourself?

You're crazy. No. No. I don't have any. No.

[She hangs up the phone angrily, and...]

10 Pyrite

[The Preacher climbs into the station through the window Will jumped from. The lights glimmer eerily when he arrives, but the station does not brighten. The Preacher carries a bag on his shoulder.]

PREACHER: *[As he enters.]* Hey there.

CHRIS: Who are you?

PREACHER: I'll handle the introductions. *[His eyes scan the station quickly.]* You're Chris.

CHRIS: *[Slowly.]* You're the telephone preacher.

PREACHER: Right you are. Salvation in an hour, or hell-fire forever. Licensed in sixteen states.

[Again, his eyes dart, looking for something he doesn't find.]

CHRIS: What are you doing here?

PREACHER: You called.

CHRIS: I didn't.

PREACHER: You should have. I am your pass to eternal bliss. Your guarantee of recognition. Your guide on the path of good works and heterosexuality.

CHRIS: You're my Dad.

PREACHER: I'm the Reverend Wright.

[The Preacher starts to search in the room when he sees Will's yellow testament on the ground where it was dropped. He goes to grab it, but realizes Chris is watching him.]

CHRIS: You're Peter. Peter Smith.

PREACHER: Check the box next to "Request pastoral visit" on your welcome card; I'm sure we can clear this up. I'll get you a welcome card.

[He rummages through his bag for a card; gives it to Chris.]

Don't forget to fill out the "annual income" blank; we try not to spend time on the overly needy.

[As Chris bends to examine the card, the Preacher tries to stoop discreetly to recover the yellow testament. He is interrupted by Chris, and covers by re-tying his shoe.]

CHRIS: *[Pointing to the card.]* What's a "kyat"?

PREACHER: A Burmese currency unit. Don't worry if you don't know the exchange rate.

CHRIS: Don't step on Will's book.

PREACHER: *[As if he hadn't seen it.]* Oh. This? *[He picks up the book.]*

CHRIS: You look like my Dad.

PREACHER: Do you want this?

CHRIS: Mom says your razor's on the washbasin.

PREACHER: These things are awfully inconvenient. Never say what you want.

[He drops the testament in his bag with studied casualness.]

CHRIS: Where did you come from?

[The Preacher begins to move around the room, looking for things he can resell.]

PREACHER: Outside. I met a man yesterday just off the road. A blue man of means. I converted him. Twenty-seven minutes flat. I wonder where he is.

[The Preacher is standing by a closed windowshade.]

CHRIS: Don't open the window.

PREACHER: He was bringing the baggage. He should be here.

CHRIS: Someone's out there. Don't open it.

PREACHER: I've got boxes, see? Filled with holy relics. He should be bringing them.

CHRIS: Something's out there. I can feel it.

[The Preacher opens the windowshade to look for his lackey. Meg stares in. Unmoving. Pale. Chris stifles a scream.]

[The Preacher sees nothing. Turns from the window in disappointment.]

CHRIS: She looks like me.

PREACHER: He should be here.

CHRIS: I'm seeing myself.

PREACHER: He's got my boxes.

CHRIS: I'm just like her.

PREACHER: Not all of them, though. I've got the three true tears of Christ in my bag. In a vial.

CHRIS: She's not alone out there.

PREACHER: I've got the flames of Moses' burning bush. I've got the infant and adult skulls of Columbus.

CHRIS: Will said...

PREACHER: There's more, too. A Veronica. Books. All the answers. Everything your brother never found.

CHRIS: How...

PREACHER: He didn't know what he was looking for.

CHRIS: What do you mean?

PREACHER: He was looking for what he wanted. He thought a Veronica would look like a velvet Elvis. He wouldn't recognize what I've got in this sack if it came up to him and sang, "Don't be Cruel."

CHRIS: Do you really have those things in your bag?

[The Preacher lifts an object in his search for valuables and discovers a yellow testament. He looks in his bag, and fails to find the book he pocketed earlier. He slips the rediscovered testament back into his bag.]

Show me.

PREACHER: For a price.

CHRIS: How much?

PREACHER: Seven kyats.

CHRIS: I don't have any.

PREACHER: You must have some. How much do you have?

[He finds another testament, and again finds nothing in his bag. He puts the testament in his bag again.]

CHRIS: I don't believe you have any relics at all. I don't think you've got anything but newspaper and sawdust in your bag.

[A windowshade clatters and falls. The blue man stares in, joining Meg.]

PREACHER: You must have a few kyats somewhere.

CHRIS: The blue relic-seller.

PREACHER: *[Trying a different story.]* I'll let you in on a secret, honey.

CHRIS: Why are you watching me?

PREACHER: I'm a gay man. My lover died in December.

CHRIS: What do you want?

PREACHER: Of AIDS. My parents died in March.

CHRIS: You're a preacher.

PREACHER: In a car crash. It's hard to deal with.

CHRIS: I don't understand.

PREACHER: *[Leaning uncomfortably close to Chris.]* You know, this is the first time I've been here alone. Since my lover died.

[He finds another yellow testament behind Chris. He doesn't even need to check his bag this time: he knows it will be empty. He snatches the testament back into his bag without missing a beat.]

The first time I've made this trip alone.

I'm HIV-positive.

CHRIS: What do you want?

PREACHER: Are you Italian?

CHRIS: No. I'm not.

PREACHER: You look like a friend of mine. That's why I came over here. He was Italian. He was shot dead on the street.

On his way to confession.

[Magil joins the two at the window. Ghastly. She stares unmoving, like the others.]

CHRIS: What do you want?

PREACHER: You had baggage problems, didn't you?

CHRIS: Leave me alone.

PREACHER: At least it wasn't your car.

CHRIS: I thought you were a preacher.

PREACHER: *[Pressing his point.]* You had bad luck. But you had good luck, too.

CHRIS: What do you mean?

PREACHER: That's why I came to you. Why I'm talking to you. I knew you'd understand bad luck. My medicine was in the car. It was stolen.

CHRIS: I don't understand.

PREACHER: I need money to get home. Six kyats.

CHRIS: Kyats.

PREACHER: Burmese currency. Five will do. I need money to leave.

CHRIS: I don't have any money.

PREACHER: You know how it is. To buy a ticket.

CHRIS: I don't have any.

PREACHER: I'm on AZT. It was in my car. I woke up and it was gone. It was one of my lovers, I bet. It would figure. I need to get to a doctor.

CHRIS: What do you all want from me?

PREACHER: You owe me. I told you about my relics.

CHRIS: What?

PREACHER: I told you about my relics. That costs three kyats.

CHRIS: You took my brother's Bible. *You owe me.*

PREACHER: I need it.

CHRIS: Why?

PREACHER: I'm HIV-positive. I'm heading to the Outer Dark. I get scared. I've had bad luck, I get scared. That's why I wanted it. I thought I could carry it.

[A moment of pathos.]

CHRIS: I don't believe you.

PREACHER: They won't let me live without it.

[Chris finds she's sitting on something. She gets up. It's the yellow testament. The Preacher grabs it quickly, throws it in his bag.]

CHRIS: I know who you are.

PREACHER: I've got to go. I need my... medicine. I need money. For a ticket.

CHRIS: You're...

PREACHER: Your necklace. That will do.

[He pulls sharply at her necklace, breaking it cleanly. He pockets the necklace and moves quickly to the door before Chris can react. He has trouble getting his bag through the door, although it's small enough to fit easily: something holds it back. Suddenly it is released and the Preacher disappears into the outer dark. The door is ajar.]

11 Gold

[Chris is alone.]

CHRIS: I should have known.

[She quietly closes the door, and discovers the yellow testament on the floor nearby. It escaped the Preacher's bag as he was trying to leave. She picks it up.]

[She turns to look at the faces staring in at her. She clutches the testament as the Preacher's face joins the others.]

What do you want?

I can't do it myself. I know I can't. Look at you. You tried. You closed your eyes to the sky and strove to perfect yourselves, to evolve, to spread your DNA. Did it work? You've been swallowed. From death you watch the last survivor. You want to see me fail. You won't. I'm not going to let it happen to me.

Where's Will? Why are you mocking me? All of you! You can't fool me anymore. I know you. I know your names. You want to watch me fail. You won't.

Watch me, Will. Come here and watch me. I know what I need to do. Where are you? William. William Smith. William Joseph Henry McArthur Jefferson Smith.

I'm sorry, Will. I thought I knew better than you. I know what you were doing. I know why. You didn't have to kill yourself. Will. Why did you have to die? You were so close. So close. You just didn't recognize. You couldn't see.

Come on, Will. Come and watch me. I've found it.

Watch me, Will.

I'm finally dead.

I can live again.

[Dawn tinges the horizon as Chris clutches Will's testament.]

Acknowledgements

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| | |
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| Jesus Christ | My rescue from Sumatra |
| C. Scott Ananian | <i>Two Hops to Infinity</i> |
| C. Scott Ananian | <i>Hearts' Rebirth</i> |
| C. Scott Ananian | <i>Brushed Revolution</i> |
| The Beatles | <i>Rocky Raccoon</i> |
| The Beatles | <i>Strawberry Fields Forever</i> |
| Samuel Beckett | <i>End Game</i> |
| Samuel Beckett | <i>Waiting for Godot</i> |
| Marc B. Blake | <i>The Train</i> |
| Arthur Conan Doyle | <i>The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire</i> |
| Nina Fefferman | Rose help and first reading's salvation |
| Shannon Marie Foord | Crazy thespian inspiration |
| Len Jenkin | <i>Careless Love</i> |
| Elizabeth Anne McDonald | Draft discussion and story-sharing |
| John Osborne | <i>Luther</i> |
| Carl Perkins | Elvis quote |
| Harold Pinter | <i>Betrayal</i> |
| Harold Pinter | <i>The Birthday Party</i> |
| Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory | Fusion research and summer job |
| Sam Shepard | <i>Tooth of Crime</i> |
| Sam Shepard | <i>Tongues, Savage/Love</i> |
| Solomon | <i>Ecclesiastes</i> |
| Luis Valdez | <i>I Don't Have to Show You No Stinkin' Badges</i> |
| Merriam Webster | <i>Thesaurus</i> |
| The Weekly World News | "Circus fire-eater burps—and explodes!" |
| Micah Weinberg | THR205 |
| Mac Wellman | THR205 / <i>Second Hand Smoke</i> |
| Tennessee Williams | <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> |
| Abby Wright | Musical vocabulary |