

Grief Orchid
or
How I Learned to Forgive Milton Munn

by

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Prologue

The story goes that my distinguished ex-Professor Milton Munn faked his own death in the parking lot of *Moonrise Movies*, a fire-rutted cinema on the outskirts of Wissahickon, Wisconsin, at approx. 10:15 p.m. on April 16, 2011. Leave it to the Year of the Horse to fuck shit up. A bucketful of ketchup and a closed casket funeral and you're dead in the eyes of the ever-living world, apparently. Milton dead? Ridiculous notion. The *Mer-People Living Among Us* special on the Discovery Channel was more convincing. You can't pull the wool over my eyes. So I lingered around and kept my ear to the ground, listening for gossip of Milton's ghost. Mostly I'd hear nothing, static. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Draw a circle round me, cause I had nothing. Well, if I'm being honest, that's not all true; now and then tips would come trickling in from unseemly sorts. Ambulance-chasing psychics and confidence men, mostly. Some other professional noses. All in all: a whole lotta noise. Still I kept on with the chase; Milton was my golden goose.

I spotted Milton in disguise reffing a high school girls' basketball game last July. When the game was over I pursued him past the locker rooms. A thick steam emanated from the open door; a mob of bobbed cheerleaders in jumpers emerged cackling. I weaved to navigate their pom-poms, but it was too late: Milton turned a corner and disappeared into a puff of smoke. In January of the next year Baba Yaga, an ancient Russian witch who slings hotdogs on the corner of Lake and Miles and does impressions of 18th century steam ships to concerned passersby, told me that her friend saw him buying a Polish sausage with extra sauerkraut in Times Square on New Years' Eve.

Then there was the matter of the Lithuanian circus troop in Moscow's Fire District, and the remarkably familiar-looking contortionist who jumped in a box that was thrown in the river. And there was the Polaroid from Jakarta, of all places, delivered in a nondescript manila envelope, of a VW motorcycle ridden by a hooded man who, after some investigation, turned out to be a tall midget in a bald cap after all.

And then: what do we have here? Along comes Duke Finley, out of the baby blue, just about a year ago, who says he's spotted Milton hiking Mt. Pine right here, no less, in Wissahickon, not ten miles away from my doorstep. But let's get one thing straight: Finley's a drunk. He said he saw Milton when he was at work, but that would've been at nothing short of a thousand feet up a steel pole wasted on bathtub gin. See, Finley repairs cables in radio masts. He's the only one in town who knows how. Turns out mortal peril lands you great job security. But I figured a thousand feet up a steel pole in a cloud, what does he know? and ignored it.

If all these scattered half-stories have scrambled you up - my sincerest apologies. Allow me to tease out the thread of the narrative. Keep in mind I'm writing with one arm tied behind my back. Because, for once, it turns out I was wrong. Finley was right. Milton Munn *was* on the mountain. For the record I'll state here that as of the mid afternoon hours of July 24th 2015, I'm reasonably sure that Milton Munn, 67, a brilliant and disgraced ex-professor of Botany at Northampton University, is asleep in a sunpool in the last vacant room of the Marriot in Wissahickon, Wisconsin.

I'll elaborate. Allow me to rewind the tapes. A Terrible Incident occurred in March of 2011 of which Milton was wrongfully accused. The jist of it is: someone kicked the bucket and Milton was the fall guy. Someone's got to eat it, I guess. But Milton and I, we were on the cusp of a miraculous something, about to make history, toiling long hours for the Apollinaire Prize,

the award given to “(s)he who Zealously Endeavors to break down the Wall between the Natural and the Supernatural, and thereby Loosen the Fetters of a Collectively-Hallucinated Reality.” Due to the sensitive nature of our research I dare not speak at this juncture to what we were working on, but know that by the advent of the Terrible Incident we had long since been entangled in a dark snare from which we might not have extracted ourselves had Milton not faked his own death a month before the project was to be finished. And just like that: he was on the lam and off the grid, *kazoom*, way out in outer space, No Man’s Land, whatever you call it. Now being incommunicado with my professor, I decided to stay in Wissahickon and continue our work without him - seeing as I was quite capable to complete the work on my own - with the hopes of one day publishing it with a memorial nod to my undead dead mentor. The whole thing had been my idea in the first place, after all. I was the one who wrestled Professor Munn out of the clouds.

So here I was in Wissahickon, working away on a future breakthrough. It was nice, for once, to take a step out of Milton’s enormous shadow. But then I hit the Great Snag of 2013. My calculations were insufficient; there was one equation I couldn’t quite seem to solve, a gap as problematic as a missing capstone in an arch. I knew that, should that final piece fall into place, I would be able to complete the work on which we had labored for years. I also knew I couldn’t do it without him. So, I was reduced to having to raise Milton Munn from the dead.

Thus the goose chase, bear hunt, etc. It was a challenge. I like challenges. But then after two years of wayfaring the ocean blue, as it were, cutting my teeth as an amateur detective and getting nothing in return in search of the elusive professor-savant, Milton revealed himself not a half-mile from my doorstep. And what the hell were you up to on that mountain, Milton Munn? Were you continuing your work for the Apollinaire prize without me? This homecoming had got me wary. If he were this careless then it had to be an

emergency; he must have desperate. But at this point, I can't confront him yet. He might be dangerous. The time will come. Until then, I'll watch and wait. I'll keep this journal. So here I am, Timofey Oleander, making a solemn vow to diligently bird-dog Milton Munn, if not for my own sake then for Milton's, and actually, now that I think about it, the Good of All Humanity.

Let these notes humbly serve as my field guide to Milton Munn. I'm going to be the one to put that capstone into place and solve the riddle. Ready or not, here I come.



This story begins and ends at Barb's Café, like many do.

I heard a rumor that Milton was back in town from someone more reliable than Duke Finley this time. A man matching his description - neither big nor small, round like an egg and bald on top - was spotted on the side of the road mile out of town receiving roadside assistance from an aquamarine pickup truck. There was still a good chance it wasn't actually him. People say they see Milton all the time. I call it wishful thinking. He used to be the toast of the town.

I'd been looking for the brilliant orchid savant Milton Munn for approximately two years and three months and out of the blue he shows up on his own accord. He was my botany professor and mentor at Northampton University in Wassahickon for the two years I spent there serving as his humble understudy and lab assistant, although I was accomplished enough to have an understudy of my own. During the two years leading up to Professor Munn's bogus death he and I worked on bringing an ancient myth to life: the Grief Orchid. This rare orchid's nectar was believed to have the power to cure any disease. It was also supposed to be bogus. Pure fantasy. I convinced Professor Munn to work with me to make it a reality. It was a tough

code to crack, but we were making headway. Then he “died,” and left me hanging. I tried to finish the orchid by myself but – no matter how much it pains me to admit it - I couldn’t do it without my brilliant fake-dead ex-professor Milton Munn.

And now he was back in town, supposedly. But I didn’t want to approach him just yet. I needed some time to think first. You think I should’ve been ecstatic that he was back, right? Just when I need his help, Milton triumphantly returns? Not quite. See, he didn’t exactly leave on the best of terms with me. And now that he was back I wasn’t sure how to go about asking him for help. To be honest I was nervous to see him again. And to be *completely* honest, I wasn’t exactly thrilled with the idea of asking for his help.

So where do I go when I need to stew and think things through? Get a view of thing from the moon, so to speak? Barb’s Café. It’s a quiet place. People sit and eat with their thoughts on their plates. I figured some fried cauliflower, a cup of coffee and a vanilla cone would do me good. Maybe Barb would know about Milton. If he was here, really, and if so, why? She was always up to date on the newest Wissahickon gossip.

I eased myself into the usual spot at the bar and scoped out the place. The atmosphere in Barb’s was cool and dim. The lights were turned down low. A fan spun lazy circles on the ceiling. It gets hot up here in the summers. A few patrons sat and chewed silently. Outside, a plume of white exhaust rose from a ChemoDyne cooling tower a mile away.

ChemoDyne Company is a publicly traded American multinational agrochemical and agricultural aerotechnology corporation headquartered right here in Wissahickon. They’re the biggest industrial manufacturer of neonicotinoidal pesticides and crop-dusters in the united tri-state area.

In addition to the sun and the moon the Wissahickon sky sports a third perennial planet: hovering in the distance, always in sight, the ChemoDyne Manufacturing complex, a tangle of pipe and angle, imperious and grey, commands the sky all day and dissolves at night.

In the complex there are smokestacks, warehouses, office buildings, single level structures and buildings that tower upwards of one hundred feet, terrorizing the clouds. A plume of exhaust trails from each of the nine smoke stacks, amassing in the sky, often obscuring the sun, so that on some days the weather is the weather and some days it's a ChemoDyne grey, as the locals refer to it.

I looked around for Barb herself. I needed to tell her Milton was back. She'd have an idea of what to do. As if on cue Barb appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishtowel slung over her shoulder.

Barb is a tiny woman, five foot even, but the antlers she wears almost double her height. That year in Wissahickon all the ladies were wearing antlers; it was convention. Real ones too, straight from the buck, the bigger, the better. Hunters made a mint by supergluing the antlers they harvested to heavy-duty metal headbands and selling them to local retailers. In Wissahickon wearing deer antlers on your head told the world you were of good stock. That summer the men in the county had begun to wear them too. It was a county-wide phenomenon of bona-fide hysteria.

Barb's LaLoup's chin barely reached the top of the bar. She had to carry a step stool with her everywhere she went. When she walked behind the bar all I could see of the tiny French woman was her head wreathed in antlers. Her black hair, cut short for the season, swept in an untidy mess across her leathery forehead.

On her way over to my spot at the bar she knocked over a stack of dishes with her antlers and pretended not to notice. Judy, a blond runaway with doleful eyes, trailed behind her silently, sweeping up the mess. Barb stopped in front of me and got on her stepstool to take my order.

“What’s up tohday, Teemofey? Ze uuzsh?” Whenever she wore them Barb’s dentures transformed her thick French accent into quasi-franco-germanic slurry.

“Yes please Barb, thank you.” She nodded her head and shattered a hanging lamp above my stool. Frosted glass rained down. Barb smiled sheepishly. “I’m sztill geeting used to zhem.” She disappeared behind a corner into the kitchen. Another crescendo of glass. Judy sighed and followed her.

I’d grown fond of Barb during my time in Wissahickon. She was a tough old crone. And since I’d been putting so much of myself into my quest to reincarnate of the Grief Orchid, I hadn’t had time to make any other friends in Wissahickon. But I had time to be friends with Barb; I ate all of my meals at her restaurant, so we had plenty of time to talk. She did most of the talking and didn’t mind silence for company, so we get along well. I’m not a big talker these days. Too much on the mind.

Barb returned with an unremarkable plate of fried yellow cauliflower and a cup of lukewarm coffee, managing not to break anything on the way.

“Wahaht’s wrong, Teemofey? You ahlways look a leetle bloo, but not dees bloo. Wahaht geeves?” If I was blue then Barb could relate. Like many in Wissahickon she moved here on the premise of escaping a too-big world. Before Wissahickon she worked in L.A. as the Chief Executive Tastemaker for Yummiez Brand Potato Chips, the pioneer of the corporate snack chip’s esteemed mid-2000s “Flavorama Renaissance”. The Cottage Cheese and Tomato flavored pretzels were her brainchild, but the Borscht-flavored kettle chips- those were her magnum

opus. In 2002 she claimed to have discovered a sixth type of taste: blorp, a yeasty flavor. When it was critically panned she went off the deep-end and fled north.

“Barb, he’s back,” I said, “Milton is back. Davenport says so.” Davenport was the town’s only mailman. Apparently he’d seen him on the side of the road about a mile outside of town just that morning.

“O noh, eez eet reely tru? I thaught he wuld nevarh show hees face here again, aftehr vhat happened weeth that student of hees, Leelee.” I stiffened. To this day any mention of Lily’s name forces a single pin, thin as spiders’ silk, into my heart. I guess you’d call that grief. Four years had passed since the day that she died; I never stopped loving her. Milton was widely regarded as the man responsible for the Tragedy that Befell Lily. That’s why he faked his death and fled Wissahickon. But I knew that he was innocent. He didn’t kill my love. Barb was under the impression that he did. I wasn’t ready to tell her the truth just yet. So in order to avoid saying anything I casually changed the subject, hoping that she wouldn’t notice.

What’s new these days in the ficitinary, Barb?” I asked.

Barb spends her weekends in the Wissahickon Public Library researching the newest slang of American youth. She keeps meticulous notes in a red notebook she’s lovingly christened “the fictionary.” She tells me it’s for when she eventually and triumphantly returns to L.A., “zhe cuhrrehntehst plahce on eahrth,” she says. Barb’s been keeping the fictionary for years; I wonder when she’ll finally get to use it.

Barb rightened her antlers on her head cleared her throat. “Today it ees ambitchous, zhat meens...” she paused, glancing into the notebook at the bar, and lookinh back up. “Zyou ahre strhiveeng to be ah bee-yahtch more zhan zhe avehfrage bee-yotch!”

Lately Barb’s been getting a lot of her talk from a girl named Maxie. Maxie, Barb tells me, is a 14-year-old girl from East Peoria, Illinois. The two have struck up a virtual friendship.

They meet in chat rooms every weekend to kibbutz via the WWW. This way Barb stays up to date with today's jargon, at least as far as 14 year-old girls from Illinois go. But the thing about Barb I've noticed is she's a little vain and self-conscious about her age. Online, she's been pretending to be a 14-year-old boy from Ohio named Chad Footballs. Chad likes fast running and sports and laser beams. Barb feels guilty about inventing an imaginary friend for her virtual friend, but she also loves talking to Maxie because "she eez fun and flihrtee and full of life." So she hasn't stopped yet. She says she will soon, though. I don't judge her for it; I envy her. Barb is harmless; all she's trying to do is fit into the universe.

Barb tells me Maxine has repeatedly asked her to come and visit her in East Peoria for a "peelow fiyght and geeve eech uhther oil rub and drink her mahthers vine coolehers," so I wonder if Maxine's actually a 40-something burned-out detective impersonating a teenage girl in order to sniff out online predators. Barb remains blissfully oblivious.

"Ambitchous, I like that, that's a good one Barb," I said.

Barb smiled. "Thank you Teemofey, I veesh everyone vas as dee-tee-eff about ze fectionahry as you are." She lobbed an accusatory glance down the bar to my left where Marie-Louise, a thirtysomething collector of Beanie Babies stood behind the register, listening.

"Barb, how many times do I have to say 'I'm sorry'?" she asked.

"What'd she do?" I asked Barb. I didn't actually care that much, but I was nervous to bring up Milton again, lest Lily's name be mentioned and that delicate pin pierce my heart again.

Marie-Louise spoke up. "I was just telling her that the customers already find it difficult to understanding what she says behind her accent and her dentures, without, without throwing all that nonsense in the way!"

Barb shot up on her footstool and lurched towards me across the bar, the tips of her antlers tinkling against the light fixture. With a crooked grin plastered on her face, she whispered, “She haz a bonehr for Marrhiam’s Wwebstehr.” She tipped her head and cackled at her joke. Her antlers crashed into a shelf behind her, sending dishware flying. Judy sighed and went to retrieve the dustbin.

“I do not have a boner for Merriam’s Webster!” said blushing Marie-Louise. “I just think it’d be a little easier on everyone if you maybe thought about easing up on it a little. Right?” She looked at me for support.

“Shots fiyarhd!” Barb exclaimed. “Don’t throw shade, Mahree-Luieese, beetches gotta eat. Turn down for what?” Barb did a raise the roof motion with her short arms.

“What?”

“Eexzactlee. Meester Avvahrro ahgrees with me, eesn’t that right?”

“That’s right, Barb” said a voice from behind me. It sounded like a man speaking in falsetto. I felt a strange chill knife down my spine. What’s this, another character for our little drama? I turned around. Tall and thin as a whip, with limbs like a stick bug’s, a bald man in a tight black suit rose nimbly from his booth and walked over to the bar, a book in one hand. It was impossible to say how old he was.

“In fact, I was just reading about how language is a game,” he said. He brandished the book, a pink hardcover copy of Philosophical Investigations by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

“Wittgenstein wrote, and I quote,” he said, licking the tip of his forefinger and scrolling through the book with theatrical flair. When he got to the page he wanted, he stopped and read: “‘my aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.’ So, the point is, Barb, words don’t have to make sense. A lot of the time they don’t. Words can mean whatever you want, no one’s agreed on a universal standard. Heck,

anything can mean whatever you want, the way I see it.” He smiled at me. “You have to make your own meaning, isn’t that right?”

The man stood a little too close to my seat. He smelled like he’d slept in his suit for many days, but the suit was immaculate. He seemed, for all intents and purposes, harmless. But that itself made me uneasy. A man who presents himself clean and anesthetized like that is usually anything but. And not to mention that each time he put his arms in the air his cuffs slid down exposing bite marks and scratches up and down his arms. They looked like dog bites to me. In my head I started to refer to him as the Dognapper.

Even though he made me uneasy the Dognapper’s line about making your own meaning really resonated with me that day. Back then I felt that my life was a whole lot of nonsense that I couldn’t sort out. Between the fallout with Milton, the Tragedy that Befell Lily and then the Great Snag of 2013 I’d lost a friend, a lover and faith in myself, all in four years. Every day was a free fall.

“If you ask me,” said the Dognapper, “you’re a bit of a philosopher yourself, Barb.” Barb beamed. “It’s all nonsense anyways.” He winked and looked down at me, extending a hand. “Abraham Avarro.” I shook his hand and gave him my name. “Nice to meet you, Timofey Oleander. Here, you keep this.” He put the book on the counter. “I’ve got a million copies at home.” He winked, moved to the register, paid with cash, and left without a sound. When the door closed behind him Barb turned to Marie-Louise.

“Heahr that, Mahree-Looeese? Lahnguage is ah game, bee-yahtch!” She cackled again, her antlers narrowly avoiding the neon Pepsi-Cola sign behind her. Marie-Louise sighed and disappeared around the corner.

All of a sudden the TV showed static. Barb smacked the side of the box and the static abated, replaced by color bars. Those cut out too, replaced by black. I checked the clock above the door. Noon on the dot.

An electrostatic bar swept across the screen, revealing a grainy image in its wake. A massive blank canvas stretched across a wall, fitting the screen perfectly. “What iz dees?” Barb asked. I remained silent, intent on the screen, unsure of what would happen next. For a few moments all that could be seen was the canvas. It was unclear if it was a still image or a video. Then, a figure in dark robes walked slowly across the screen from the left. The face wasn’t visible. The figure stopped in the center and slowly turned to the camera. The air in the room dropped out entirely. Once again I felt the needle thin as spiders’ silk pierce an atrium of my heart. Because the figure’s eyes, a woman’s, were grey-green, just like Lily’s.

Lily and I both studied botany at Northampton. She was two years younger than me but twice as smart. She had long, red hair, fair skin and those eyes, grey-green, could electrocute you from across the room, they were so bright. God, she was beautiful. She worked as the understudy for a different botany professor at Northampton. That semester we spent hours in the library together researching orchids. I fell in love with her swiftly, without regret. But I was shy, and never told her. I’ll always regret that; I never got the chance to ask her if she loved me back.

The woman with Lily’s eyes spoke to us in the assembled room:

“For too long the people of Wissahickon have stood by as a parasite destroys our town. ChemoDyne is a blight on the land. They are chemical witches cursing us with deathlessness. But they will answer to us. For we are witches of the wilderness. We are the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness.”

ChemoDyne gets a lot of grief for what they do, but I've never seen a protest video like this one before. Something about the monotone of the woman's voice put me on edge. Her voice was very even and steady and her words sounded lifeless, like they'd been programmed. There was something uncanny about the way she made demands with a passive voice. I got the impression that at one point something terrible had happened to this woman, something that made her soul one day just pick up and fly away.

A familiar crackling sound seeped through the television speakers. I noticed a flickering glow in the bottom corners of the screen. Soon it was clear: the canvas was on fire. It spread from the bottom-two corners and traveled across the bottom of the screen. She opened her mouth and began to speak.

The Witch's Broadcast:

"ChemoDyne, if you want to leave Wissahickon in peace, you must blow up Warehouse 77 before the moment of absolute solar eclipse in two days' time. We will take it as a sign that you concede and will leave town. However, if you do not blow up the warehouse, we will drop a seed bomb on Wissahickon containing an orchid that's not only a natural pesticide but also a mass hysteric and a potent hallucinogenic. You have two days."

When she finished talking the woman pulled the hood over her face, doubled in on herself and crumpled to the floor in one fluid motion. She was gone. All that remained of her was a discarded robe on the floor. During the broadcast the fire had spread, consuming the

lower half of the canvas. The video continued playing for another minute as the canvas was eaten in whole by fire. When there was nothing left but ashes, the image faded to black.

In the ensuing quiet that overcame the café, I heard an indistinct voice behind me say, “Yikes.” I turned; it was Judy. That was the first time I’d ever heard her speak. Yikes was right, Judy. That broadcast threw me through a loop. That flower that that woman was describing, that’s the Grief Orchid. It’s a wonderful flower. Its nectar is supposedly a cure-all, yes, but the real reason we kept our work secret was because its perfume was rumored to be a natural pesticide as well. Can you imagine the hoopla that’d break out if ChemoDyne got wind of that? Milton and I developing a cheap and natural alternative to their entire product line? And not only was the perfume supposed to be a pesticide but it was also supposedly hallucinogenic, and quite strong. We were trying to breed that out before Milton faked his death but we weren’t having much success. And so, knowing the possible backlash that’d come if the nature of our research got out, Milton and I swore we wouldn’t tell a single soul. Lily eventually found out, however, but that’s a story for a different time.

So how, then, did this ecological terrorist know about the Grief Orchid? Was she in cahoots with Milton? Is that what he was doing up on Mt. Pine? A wave of fear and paranoia washed over me. This happening on the same day Milton supposedly rose from the dead of his own accord? It couldn’t be a coincidence. I needed to find Milton now more than ever. If he was working with a terrorist group, I needed to know. But if he wasn’t – as I suspected – and had instead just gotten himself inadvertently mixed up in something bigger than him, well, I needed to find him then too. Just to keep tabs on him, to make sure he didn’t get even more wound up in this than he already was.

I turned to Barb, who'd taken her antlers off during the video. She clutched them around her body tight; they were almost as big as she was.

"Barb," I said. "I need to find Milton. Do you have any idea where he could have gone?" She turned to me with frightened eyes. Her pupils were dilated all the way, jet-black, wide as the iris. She trembled.

"Why? Zhat maahn always made u feel bloo, Teemofey. Vhen yuu two wurhked together youhd alwahys come een here so upset." She looked at me with a reproachful eye and replaced the antlers on her head. She had a point. Milton and I, we had a complicated relationship. I had come to Wissahickon so excited to work with the man. After all, he was supposed the best. But when I got to Northampton I was sorely disappointed. In the lab, Milton lacked focus. He was spacey and undisciplined. He cared for the orchids like they were his children. His emotion often got in the way of science. I'd come to Barb's after eight hours of working closely with the man in his basement greenhouse and just bitch and moan to the poor woman - the only person who'd listen, god bless her - about Milton, how he'd always make me take all the measurements and fill out all the tedious paperwork while he just sat there *singing* to them, the hippy freak, all because I was his understudy, even though - truth be told - I believed us to be of similar intelligence.

"I think he's in trouble, Barb. He's my friend. I need to find him."

"Yuu told me thaht man is noht your friend, Teemofey."

"Yes, I know, but I still need to find him, and she knows where he is."

"You should ask the Praying Mantis, she knows everyone in this town." Marie-Louise leaned against the wall near the kitchen, fiddling nervously with the straps of her apron.

"Godd dammit Maree-Loueese who ahsked yuu?" Barb turned to Marie-Louise and knocked over a stack of saucers on a shelf. Crestfallen, she took off the antlers again.

“Where can I find her?”

“At the flower shop down the street behind the Trading Post. Can’t miss it.” Judy materialized from under the bar where she’d been sweeping up Barb’s mess. Barb just glared. I’d heard about the Praying Mantis; she was supposed to be the town seer, a makeshift shaman. Sounded like a crock if you asked me. I thanked them all, paid my dues and exited the café.

Outside, the sun crashed onto the pavement. It reflected up into my face and doubled the blow of the mid-July humidity. I started panting. The day was hot and airless and I was struggling to breathe. Milton coming back, this terrorist threat using *my* research as a weapon, the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness... How could this be happening to me? I never wanted to get caught up in something like this. I’m just a humble, or not-so-humble, researcher. I felt a pit in my gut; the same you get when you’re falling and you can’t stop yourself. I resolved then and there that I’d gain back control in my life by any means necessary. This Society of the Woman in the Wilderness business may have been forcing me to confront Milton, but at least by doing so I’d gain back control in my life. It was about time.

So in order to find Milton I’d have to go talk to the Praying Mantis at the flower shop behind the Trading Post. Then that’s what I was going to do. I was going to take it one step at a time. I started walking in the direction of the Trading Post, and it was then that I noticed something in my hand. I looked down. I was still holding the book in my hand that the Dognapper character Abraham Avarro had quoted from in Barb’s. I didn’t even realize I’d taken it from the Café. I opened it up to see if I could find out anything else about the guy. But there was nothing written inside the book. Nothing at all. It was totally blank.



Allow me to present, for your momentary pleasure, the township of Wissahickon, Wisconsin. In the second-least populous county in Wisconsin, Wissahickon's spread (2149) is first-rate. The unincorporated communities of Hermitage, Alexandria, Tipler and Commonwealth boast less than 1000 inhabitants combined. All this on 450 square miles of genuine northwoods Antigo silt loam. But don't let that fool you; Wissahickon is a wilderness. As you move north through the cornshucked bulk of Middle-Wisconsin, the buxom crop fields, thick over low hills, little by little begin to shrink, and pine and hardwood spring up from the earth like toothpicks, cluttering the wide, flat expanses. The pines grow taller, radio towers sparse, civilization thins, and what remains are remains of communities, logging villages and boomtowns, a constellation of little nowhere mining towns posed at the lip of the Wisconsin/Upper Peninsula border, balanced on the knife-edge of the Nicolet National Forest's 700,000 acres, flung out against the end of the world like lighthouses on the cliffs of a vast, wild ocean.

Wissahickon is a quiet thing. Straight as an arrow, Main Street pierces the heart of the heartland, the bubbling burb lined with light poles and cement-potted birch with white, incandescent bark. Brick buildings spring up from the earth as if to direct it's unwinding in an orderly fashion. A green neon BP on your right-hand side constructed in cool, clean lines, with gas prices illuminated in electric LED above advertises for discount bait and Kool cigarettes. Further on down the road The State Wissahickon Bank in tall white columnar majesty, the red brick power-washed, glistening. Across the street from the bank is Barb's like your old friend with the chipped tooth, a booth-and-jukebox dinery that serves the best goddamn vanilla custard for miles around. Next to Barb's, further on down the line is squat Wissahickon elementary, a glum construction with a violent purple jungle gym in the adjoining yardlet. The

next block down across Pine Street you've got your Kroeger's Grocery, a family affair with a concrete storage room in the back that the Ladies' Association uses for Bingo Night, Bible Circle, cribbage, knitting clubs, and, on some occasions, witchcraft. Let's put a pin in that. And then you've got the umbrella cover museum, your slightly-bigger-but-still-glum high school/prison complex, your combination police/fire station with the bright yellow engine polished out front, the Lutheran church, and then, just as the woods reclaim the land, the Trading Post, a green wooden building with PBR neon in the window conspires with the church to lubricate your confessional. And then US-2 runs off into the sunset, as it were.

I walked the road towards the Trading Post in search of the Praying Mantis with the hope that she'd be able to help me find Milton. It was urgent. Judy said she'd be able to lead me straight to him. Here's to hoping Judy was right, that she wasn't just sending me on a wild goose chase.

I ghosted around the side of the Trading Post along what appeared to be a deer path; the building ran up close to the line of birch that bordered the town. The trees leaned over the roof of the Trading Post and made for a narrow, shoulder-wide avenue.

When I came around back, lo and behold a brick cottage sat on a small plot of parched and enchanted grass. The birch and balsam fir, white spruce and cedar grew thick on my right, fashioning an impenetrable wall. A tall, green wooden fence ran along the western boundary and behind the cottage. The fence made an immediate horizon for the sky with nothing beyond but a bright bluish haze.

I looked up. The sun had risen weightlessly through the tall, photic hours of morning, evaporating the cloudwall, painting the buttercream sky a New Blue, and as I stood beneath it, sweat beading from the open pores of my forehead while a troupe of downy woodpeckers

swooped and dove above and fey, arboreal flowers peeped in at me, I felt heavy and hollow, as if I were falling to the bottom of a bottomless well. If they knew about our research, what else did they know? I looked all around for anyone who might've been watching and realized that I'd been holding my breath ever since I entered the garden. I exhaled, allowing the paranoia to leave with my breath. Here, at least, with the Praying Mantis, I hoped I'd be able to get some answers. I'd take any lead or clue that she could give me if it'd lead me one step closer to Milton. Even if it meant indulging in her hocus-pocus divination stuff, I was ready to try anything.

The cottage was pleasantly cubic, made from brick, and other cottagey materials, but what stood out most was the pointed turret leaning in front that'd seemingly fallen from a castle in the sky and landed in front of the cottage, acting as its entrance. The turret leaned a little left of center, tilted like a tooth. The tower was brick and the roof was bronze and pointed. The patina of the bronze had significantly weathered over the years and faded to verdigris, a grayish green, the color of Lily's eyes. I felt the pin again, just by seeing the color.

A piece of what looked to be driftwood hung from the top of the turret. Written in red paint with a child's hand was: "Horns n' Antlers, Tails n' Ears." Two simple red kites trailed from the apostrophes. It seemed that the second word had previously read "Anthers" and someone had painted over the "h" to make an "l". As I walked to the door I spied a red can of paint with a brush balanced over its mouth, placed there like an afterthought. I walked into the flower shop, hoping for some real answers on where I could find Milton.

Inside the flower shop I strolled between scores of arranged bouquets glowing trimly amongst their kind- roses, star lilies, zinnias, impatiens, moth orchids, daisies, sunflowers, aster, bird of paradise- in bright torches of blue, blue-black, red, reddish-yellow, purple, orange, pink, all sunning in the dusty light, each growing a tidy brilliance of their own.

The rightmost wall was lined with mannequin heads. They sported a panoply of antler styles and sizes to suit any festivity. There must have been thirty pairs up on the wall, bucks of all ages, lined up in three symmetrical rows of ten. I couldn't help but wonder if they'd known each other.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" A little black girl, four, maybe five, in a blue dress with red butterflies and braids darted from behind a bouquet of Arethusa, her hands raised like claws, teeth bared. She dropped her arms to her sides. "Oh, you're not Lewis."

"Sydney," said a voice made of beeswax floating over from behind a gossip of White Magnolia.

"Sorry, mister. I was trying to surprise my brother Lewis. It's my birthday today. I'm five. I'm Sydney."

"Hi Sydney. Isn't happy birthday something people are supposed to say to you today? Happy birthday, by the way."

"No, I want to say happy birthday! It's my birthday! Happy birthday!" She shouted.

"Sydney, come here please." The voice again. Was it the Praying Mantis? Abigail said, "You smell like oatmeal. I like oatmeal!" and took off through the rows of flowers. During my stint as an amateur detective I learned to make pursuit an instinct, rather than a reaction. So as the tail of Sydney's blue dress flew around a pillowy corner of blue hydrangeas to the back-most portion of the store, where a tiny red shoe disappeared through a closing door, I wasn't too far behind. I wasn't sure where she was leading, but I hoped it was to the Praying Mantis and therefore, by extension, Milton. I pursued down a long corridor with a shimmering curtain of psychedelic beads at the end still swinging with Sydney's ghost. I sliced through the curtain-

-and found myself in a playroom. Someone had taken a machete to the color wheel; I was up to my eyeballs in primary colors. Under my feet a puzzle piece carpet of microfoam was

barely visible beneath a heap of Lincoln logs, tinker toys, Legos, puzzles, blankets, stuffed animals, books, crayons, a microscope, markers: the stuff of play. A mobile of red kites circumambulated the ceiling. Sydney had decorated the walls herself, it seemed, with bright, lancinating scribbles of crayon, drawing murals of stick figures holding hands and levitating above zigzaggy grass, an ark's-worth of animals- mostly dogs - with too few or too many limbs running in an enormous green circle that took up the whole eastern wall, and above it all the moon in sunglasses smiling above a poster that read: "Child Scientist!" Sydney was all knees and elbows on the ground building a house out of glossy magnetic tiles. She turned to a puzzle of a smiling dog in a fireman's hat while whispering quietly to herself.

In the back corner of the nursery a young, obese black woman in a wedding dress sat atop an unmade cot with a book in her lap. Her hair was done up in thin braids, piled in a bun atop her head. Her skin was dark and her wedding dress very white and the contrast between them caused the colors to vibrate off one another. It made it so there was something akin to an aura about her. Was this the Praying Mantis? It had to be. She had to know where Milton went. I couldn't afford a dead end. With every minute that passed this was getting more urgent. I cleared my throat. Without looking up, she rattled off:

"Alomancy ten dollars. Alphetomancy fifteen, barley not included. Bibliomancy fifteen, provided you brought a bible. Daphnomancy's normally fifteen but I'm out of laurel branches today, sorry. Gastromancy ten, cleromancy ten, with beans, no stones. Hippomancy's thirty provided you brought a white horse." She looked up and smiled, closing the book in her lap. And when I saw her face, it was something else entirely. I felt a sensation of phantom sunlight wash over me. My heartbeat slowed down. I looked into her eyes, a remarkably bright shade of brown, full of light like the sun streaming through a thicket of branches. I was held there, by her eyes, for I don't know how long. It's like they had a gravity all their own. In her irises twin

weather systems gathered in a ring around the pupils as if someone had taken the horizon and bent it in a circle. At the center of it all two black, polished stones gleamed. Sydney glanced up from her puzzle and giggled.

“Step into my office, baby.” The Praying Mantis motioned to a purple beanbag. I plopped into the cushy plastic, knees to my chest, feeling remarkably settled in this strange land of flowers, divination, Tonka trucks. I felt like I was reconnecting with an old friend. The sun climbed silently into the window.

“But you’re not here for any of that, are you?”

“Any of what?”

“My divinations.” She pointed to a sign on the wall.

The Praying Mantis’ Sign:

MY DIVINATIONS

Alomancy: ten dollars

Alphitomancy: fifteen, barley *not* included

Bibliomancy fifteen: provided you brought a bible

Daphnomancy’s normally fifteen but I’m out of laurel branches today, sorry

Gastromancy: ten

Cleromancy: ten, with beans, no stones.

Hippomancy’s thirty provided you brought a white horse.

ABSOLUTELY NO

Causimomancy

Crystalomancy

“I’m the town divinator, neuromancer, horse whisperer, dog psychologist. I do some actuary work on the side too. Some people call me the Praying Mantis because I’m a *mantis*, or Greek for seer, but I also believe in the Lord, and also because I told them to call me that. You can call me Nikki though. How can I help you today?”

“Hello Nikki. Are you getting married today?”

“I might be.”

“How can that be?”

“Well, Timofey, you never know who’ll walk through that door. Besides, this dress is *comfy*.”

“How do you know my name?” I asked.

“Well, there’s probably a perfectly reasonable explanation. I mean, this *is* a small town, and I *am* the mayor-”

“Hold on, you’re the mayor?”

“Please don’t interrupt. Anyways, it wouldn’t be hard to know who you are. A lot of people here know your name.” I felt a wave of paranoia wash over me, but fell at ease again immediately when I looked into Nikki’s eyes. “But let me tell you a little secret.” She leaned in. “The truth is most of the things I tell people here can be explained away by any skeptic who tries hard enough to prove himself right. So in a way, you’re right. Ta da!”

“But what if it’s all bogus?” I said. Nikki looked at me for a long time. Then, without warning she tipped her head back and roared with laughter.

“Honey, believe me,” she said when she’d settled down, “it’s not bogus if you believe in it.”

I was about to cut to the chase and ask her if she'd seen Milton around that day when Nikki suddenly jolted forward, her eyes two vivid orbs, enormous and wide. She held me still with them for a moment. Then she said, "I've got an idea. Before you ask me whatever you're about to ask let's try something, huh? Ok sweetie?" She cracked her knuckles. I just nodded. "Ok, here we go now." The lights dimmed; I turned. Abigail stood the switch. She smiled. Nikki continued.

"Here's what I want you to do: imagine that you are Nowhere. That's right dumpling, Nowhere. Nowhere is a special place. Nowhere is all your own. Everyone's got their own Nowhere; it's a room in your head can go into as you please. But right now your Nowhere is a tiny, bare room about as big as a broom closet. The ceiling's broke and the rain gets in but that's ok for now. So you're standing in the middle of your Nowhere, with your arms at your sides and your feet in your shoes. Are you there? Ok, good. Now dear, if you can, look at the walls. They're bare and white, a little dirty, plain, right? Now what I want you to do is I want you to lift your arms and push the walls, and I mean really push, until Nowhere starts to grow a little. I mean actually lift your arms and- ah, there you go. Now honey, keep pushing. Push until the room's as big as a gymnasium, see? Walk around a lil. It's big and empty and you're the only thing in there, baby. Now, here comes the hardest part: I want you to make one final push until Nowhere's as big as Wissahickon. One big effort, push, push, yes now, puuuushhhh there you go, you got it! Great job. But have you noticed Nowhere's empty? Massive, dead quiet, and empty. And that's not so much fun, is it? So now here's the best part: I want you to start adding stuff. Anything that comes to mind. Start small, like electrons. A coupla kajillion handfuls of those and you should be good to go. Then protons and neutrons, light waves, oxygen, nitrogen, helium, water, carbonite, rock, trees, plants, flowers, birds, buildings, oceans, lakes. And people, don't forget people. They're the most important part. Now, keep

going until the Nowhere in your head is electron-for-electron the same as the Wissahickon out here. And when you're done, open your eyes."

I waited. I opened my eyes. "How do you feel?" Nikki asked.

"I think I was there for a moment," I lied. "I'm still not sure what point you're making."

"You liar!" She roared, laughing. "I don't believe you. There's no way it's electron-for-electron the same in Nowhere," she gestured to my head, "as it is out here. It's Nowhere; that's the point I'm trying to make. Everything happening out there, once it gets out of the reach of in here," she tapped her head, "then you get to decide what happened for yourself. Forget objectivity; you get to reorder the electrons anyway you like. That deciding, that's called believing."

"Believing?"

"Yes! You'll never make it to the end if you don't believe – and I mean really, truly believe - in the world. Because there's so much out there that escapes the grasp of this," she pointed to her head again, "so you're gonna have to believe at some point, if you want to feel like you know what's going on. And all you need to do to that is decide what to believe in. Once you do that, you're already on your way. I'm not trying to scare you, I'm just trying to boost you up for the adventure ahead of you." She reached out and took my hand in both of hers. "Can I tell you a secret?" she said.

"Sure."

She leaned in. "Abigail's the one that's psychic, not me." I looked at Abigail. She sat cross-legged on the bed next to her mother with her chin in her right palm, hazel eyes gleaming at me.

“I believe you,” I said, wishing I meant it. Nikki broke out laughing again. I felt like I’d let her down. She was the first person who’d treated me kindly- besides Barb- in many years. The disappointment showed on my face. I tried to cover it up but it was no use; you can see right through me. I shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s quite alright,” said Nikki, smiling, “no one gets in on their first try. Now, what can I help you with?”

“What?”

“What can I help you with? You certainly didn’t come in here to get a lecture from me about belief.”

“O yeah, sorry.” I’d totally lost my train of thought in the playroom. There was an enchanting air about Nikki that made you forget everything else but her. “I’m looking for a man named Milton. He’s short and bald and German-looking. Have you seen him?”

“That one’s easier. I heard Father Quaid drove an out-of-towner matching that description to the Cave of Kelpius earlier today. The Father should be wrapping up just about now, if you wanna run to the church and catch him. That cave, that’s the one where the priest from the Society of the Something stayed, right? Think it’s got something to do with that terrorist on the teevee today?” The Cave of Kelpius is the nerve center of the terrorist group that stole our research and Milton was there *willingly*? It was like he was trying to waltz right into their trap. He *had* to be involved, one way or another. He wasn’t guiltless in this, no way. Then I got to thinking: I wondered what Milton was like in the car ride over to the cave? Maybe I could learn more about Milton’s position in this Grief Orchid mess from Father Quaid. After all, he was the only person I was able to find to have spoken with Milton after he returned. I resolved to get to the church as soon as I could in the hopes that I’d be able to

confront Milton at the Cave of Kelpius before he stepped even further into a trap of his own making.

“Thank you.” I rose from the beanbag.

“Timofey.” I turned around. Her eyes fixed onto mine and held me there, suspended in space. Tiny hazel nebulae swirled in her eyes. “It’s not gonna make the pain go away, you know. Telling him the truth; what happened with Lily. But still, you need to tell him. Sometimes the thing you’re looking for, the thing you’re running away from, they’re the same thing.”

After Nikki said those words precisely two things happened: I stood completely still, and I got very hot. Then my forehead started to sweat. The sun started spinning faster and faster in the window and I nearly fainted right there in the playroom. How did she know the truth about Lily? What with everything I’d done to distance myself from it - I was at a loss. But before I could think about if further my relentless guilt came flooding back to me, overwhelming any trace of paranoia I might’ve felt in the moment. I felt that pin again, the one I call grief, thin as spiders’ silk, take another stab at my heart. I felt blood rushing out from a new hole. Soon all that’d be left of my heart would be an empty cavity. I was falling in space again, that tired old endless freefall. Had it all been my fault? Milton was to blame too, wasn’t he? After all, he’d gotten involved with Lily willingly, knowing how much I cared about her.

“Why?” I said, but barely heard it over the roar of my blood falling in circles through my body.

“Stop asking why,” said Nikki, smiling with her lips, her eyes, her aura. “When the heart offers, take it.” I stood in place for a few beats, wavering slightly. I managed a weak smile back and turned to leave. “Oh, and Timofey?”

“Yes?”

“Give my regards to Broadway.” She winked.

Late-noon sunlight sifted through the arms of the white pine, crashing upon the face of the cottage, and I was in shock. Or maybe it was the jolt I needed. I traipsed through the high-waisted grass behind the Trading Post with the sense that somewhere an irrevocable bell had just been rung. I noticed a small honeysuckle tree I hadn't seen before on the other side of the yard. It wore a pink mantle of blossoms, charming the eye so as to allow its thin, forked trunk to dissolve beneath it, infusing the bloom with an atmosphere of weightlessness, as if the tree were a pink cloud, tethered by a cord to a spike in the ground, levitating, drifting idly, bobbing against the fence. A single sunflower grew beneath the tree. Its bright yellow petals reverberated against the dark trunk of the honeysuckle. I looked around with a blank mind, still in shock: frothy goldenrod, lily-whiskered white clover, droopy trumpets of Virginia bluebell, white aster, and garden burnet grew in the plot. Everything was humming and green.



On my way to church I ran into a marching band. The marching players scrolled past in syncopated goose-step, wearing tall, feathery hats. Next, the saxophoners bugled like geese. The flautists and the piccolos came next- champagne pipettes. At one point a flautist's hat fell off his head, a beefy guy who looked like he used to play violent sports for a living. When he bent down to pick it up he flashed a kite-shaped bald patch in the middle of his head. We made eye contact and his eyes bugged out of his head. He scurried bank into rank. After that I noticed that most of the players were male- big and beefy types sweating profusely, like athletes just

beyond their heyday. After the flutes came a red banner bearing a mysterious insignia: three yellow honeycomb in a row with the letter 'A' inside each of the outer hexagons.

The banner marched on. I was left scratching my head at what it could possibly mean. Last in line were the snares and the base drums strapped to the players like axillary hearts. And after them, a curious thing: the drum major was walking *behind* the group. I looked around. Everything was normal for Monday afternoon. There were a few people out running errands, walking their dogs, picking up their children from school; everything was normal. But the more I looked around, the more I realized that everyone had their cellphones out, eyes glued to the screen. They were so engrossed by talking, texting, and playing games that they didn't even look up to watching the marching band go by. In fact, I don't think they even realized a marching band had passed by in the first place. The players were invisible to them.

I turned and watched the parade disappear around a side street. The revenant of their song floated away on an invisible thermal. I walked the rest of the way to church trying to figure out what I'd do when I found Milton. Would I talk to him, confront him about this Society business? Or would I watch and wait and see what he's up to? But something about the players that I kept remembering distracted me from making a decision at all: all of them had been weeping. Why were they weeping?

I wasn't too keen on seeing Father Quaid. I'd never met the man, but apparently he says whatever's on his mind. Rubs a lot of people the wrong way. So when I got to the parking lot of Trinity Lutheran and saw a large crowd had gathered around the father I was surprised. I moved closer to see what was transfixing them. Up into the sky, storm clouds were gathering. It looked like rain would come to break the humidity at any moment.

Father Dennis Quaid stood in the center of his congregation like a crooked tooth. Not the Dennis Quaid you're thinking of. This Dennis Quaid wore snakeskin boots and mirrored aviators, black denim jeans and a black button down ringed with a white collar. His clothing damn near matched the sky. He had a baby face, a receding hairline and long, stringy black hair that almost touched his shoulders. He sucked a Pall Mall out the side of his mouth and sat on his haunches, potbelly resting between his knees, concentrating on the body of a slain buck in front of him. He looked at the crowd, stood up, started to roll up a sleeve, and addressed them. "Today," he said, "I'll end the service by demonstrating how to properly field dress a white-tailed deer." He might not have been all that much to look at but he had a voice like a Stradivarius: antique and luxurious, textured with smoke. He leaned back down to his haunches. A gut hook suddenly appeared in his right hand. "First thing ya have to do is cut out the anus. Now ya wanna make sure the butt is pointing downhill, to drain the blood." A few members of the congregation nodded. Father Quaid smiled, exposing yellow teeth. He proceeded to cut out the anus with alarming ease. A sickly-sweet copper smell filled the air, coating the back of my throat. I gagged. Father Quaid finished the circular incision, reached in and pulled out a fist-sized hunk of red. He threw it to the side, wiped his hand on his jeans and took a drag. After every moment I felt like I was about to vomit but the bile never came. He placed his bloodied cigarette in the nook between the buck's cloven hoof. "Next," he said, "what ya wanna do is cut into the pelvis area and into the belly fat, butcha better well make damn sure you don't cut the guts." I couldn't watch, but I couldn't miss it either. He put the cigarette back in his mouth and cut up into the belly of the deer. "Next up ya gotta spread the legs and break the pelvis." He put a boot on each of the buck's legs, spreading them wide. A distinctive snapping sound could be heard. Again, I almost vomited. I was praying for someone would come and stop this horror. No one ever came. At one point it occurred to me that I

could try and stop it myself. I entertained the idea for a second before I realized he'd see right through me. I'd never have the guts to stop him. So I kept on watching.

Father Quaid smiled, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He leaned down and looked up at the crowd. "Ok, now here comes the easiest part. Using two fingers, hold the skin away from the entrails, and then slide your gut hook up towards the rib cage, like this." He hooked the blade in the top of the exposed cavity and pulled up towards the ribcage, unzipping the belly in one fluid motion. The stomach and intestines, flabby and grey, bulged in the newly formed cavity. Father Quaid took a drag put the cigarette in the hoof again. "Now," he said, "ya gotta free the guts from the body." He rooted around the cavity with his knife, cutting the guts free from the inside walls. He rolled up one sleeve to the elbow, crouched over the body and reached in towards the rib cage. His body tensed and suddenly he was stumbling back with a greyish sac of entrails in his arms the size of sack of flour. He set these with the rest of the refuse, wiped his knife on the asphalt and took off his shades, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his other sleeve. Blood smudged his temples. There was a red smear on his starched collar. He picked up the cigarette and took one last soulful drag before dropping it on the ground and crushing under the toe of his cowboy boot. "Ladies and gentlemen, there ya have it," he said. "Jesus' flesh might be true food, and His blood true drink, but my Lord does a good venison stew come close." The congregation roared; he infatuated them. "That's how you field dress a deer in five minutes flat, the Father Quaid way. Have a blessed day now. Amen." "Amen," said the congregation with zeal.

The crowd dispersed, following the example of the blood trickling the pavement. I waited back while Father Quaid spoke to a few lingerers they all split, and it was just me and Father Dennis Quaid in the empty parking lot. Lightning lanced the horizon behind the church. The sky threatened rain. No thunder came.

“Aloha over there,” said Father Quaid, walking towards me. He moved nimbly, with mincing, precise steps, like a gymnast. . I stayed put; my reflection hovered in his sunglasses.

“Did you enjoy the service today?”

“I only caught the end, with the deer,” I said, coughing, “But that was really something. I actually need your help, I-”

“I’d love to help, thing is I need to run and get gas real quick, think we could talk in the car?”

“Sure,” I said, a little taken aback. “I’m Timofey.”

“Pleasure to meetcha Team-o-fay.” The clouds gathered above us.

I belted myself into the front seat of Father Quaid’s aquamarine pick-up. He fiddled with the gearstick for a moment, jammed the accelerator and we really took off. I looked out the front of the windshield. The car ate pavement. The clouds were purpling. In the middle of the front console a plastic black and red box with a walkie talkie collected dust. The few times it sounded off the voice seemed to come from far away. In the background a Soviet satellite hummed sullenly. *passing...just a...kite...there, now...don’t...* I wonder now what the box was connected to.

We sped on with Father Quaid hunched over the wheel, elbows bent madly, hands shuffling on the wheel between 1 and 7, 12 and 12, 10 and 4. As he drove he ran his mouth like an auctioneer. “So, what can I do ya for? Exorcism? Confession? Baptism? Funeral? Need me to bless your house? Bless your cat? Tryna get hitched? I can do that too; I’m a jack-of-all-trades, the protean pastor, a factotum for your faith! Hell, you could get hitched to the moon if you want. She’s gotta be a Mormon by now, I’ve married her off to half a dozen people this year, one more won’t hurt. So what’ll it be?”

My brain struggled to keep up with his mouth. Why was everyone trying to sell me something? “No, I don’t need any of that, I just- wait. Why did you lead off with exorcism? Do I look like I need an exorcism?”

Father Quaid pitched his head back and hacked a ragged, barking laugh from his throat. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, “it’s just that I’ve been getting a lot of those lately. Seems like Joan Rivers refuses to stay dead. Rumor has it she survived her first embalming.” He turned, lips curled in a smile. I studied his face. His lips were greasy and his cheekbones were sharp. There was something Neanderthal about his jawline. Something about him made me uneasy. I felt uneasy in his car, too. It seemed too workaday a conveyance for a mouthpiece of the Lord.

“I’m just pulling yer leg!” He punched me good-naturedly on the arm, hard. I winced. “Anyways, how *can* I help you, my son? You look troubled, like you’ve gone and goofed up and now you need me help.” There was a hint of humor in his voice that I resented. He was taking this clergy thing rather lightly.

“I heard you gave my friend a ride to the Cave of Kelpius. I was hoping you could give me a ride there too.”

“I did indeed. Your friend had a flat. Good thing I was driving out thereaways; he could have been stuck out there for a while. I called a truck, got his car towed to Midas and dropped him off at the cave about an hour ago. Mind if I ask why you’re looking for him?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

“Your friend, I see. Ok, then tell me Team-o-fay: what kind of car does your friend drive?” I didn’t know what to say. Honestly, I had no idea. He’d caught me red-handed. When I didn’t respond he said, “He’s not your friend, is he?”

“No,” I said quietly, staring out the window. A light rain began to patter against the glass.

“I only ask because he seemed jumpy, all skittish like, kept looking over his shoulder like someone was after him. I just wanna make sure you aren’t that someone.” He took his eyes from the rode to look at me.

“I’m not. I’m trying to help him,” I said. That much was true. Father Quaid turned the windshield wipers on.

“He’s in danger then?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What kind of danger?”

“I’d rather not go into it.”

“That’s fine, I understand. We all got things to hide. Hell, we all got skeletons. Ya know, it’s funny: me and you, we’re not so different. Let me ask you another personal question: did you see the soul in the deer earlier, when we were gutting it in the parking lot?”

“Well, no.”

“And did you see it fly out of the deer at any point, maybe out of its mouth and up into the sky?”

“No I didn’t.” What was he getting at?

“Yeah, me neither.” He paused, chewing at the filter in his mouth. He took a drag, exhaling nothing. The cigarette still wasn’t lit. “Me and some of the church’s thinkin, well, we don’t get along. The way I see it, a soul isn’t individual, some helium ghost of yours floating pie-high in the sky when you do. A soul is better than that. A soul is social. It exists outside of us, like an aura. I’m talking soul in sense of real human interconnection, you know? Tell me, dyou think a man would have a soul if he lived in a vacuum all his life with no human interaction of any kind? Hell no! A soul is born when two people meet, easy as that. It’s like with a match: it needs two things, the sulfur and the heat. Those two, that’s all. There has to be

heat. So really a soul is made up of potential. Pure, crystal-clear potential. It's all around us in the open air. Just by talking we pull it down and give it fire." He waved his hands in the air; the car drifted onto a roadside rumble strip, rattling the car. He swerved back onto the road and took a drag from his cigarette. Again, it wasn't lit. The rain grew heavier; Father Quaid adjusted the wipers accordingly.

"Are you this candid with your congregation?"

He gave a barking laugh. "Hell no! They'd probably up and have a fit. I'm supposed to be the mouthpiece of God, I can't go saying anything I damn please. But c'mon, let's not fool ourselves, we're two adults here. God's never spoken to *anyone*, dontcha think? Don't get me wrong, I think he exists, or It, or *something*, but It sure as hell don't have a tongue. *That's* the elephant in the cathedral, ain't it. *We* decided what God does and does not command." He looked at me. I asked him to keep his eyes on the road. He kept his eyes on me. "God's *our* mouthpiece. Not the other way around. Remember that," he said, turning his eyes back to the road.

Father Quaid punctuated the beginning of each sentence by bobbing his head like a rooster, unlit cigarette wagging in the corner of his mouth. And to that end I wasn't sure how much of him was poppycock and how much was just cock. One thing was for certain: he could ruffle your feathers, but he knew exactly how to smooth them out after.

And what had he said about Milton? That he was jumpy and skittish? Maybe Milton really *wasn't* wrapped up in this after all. Maybe the Society was coming after him. The more I thought about it the more scared that made me. If Milton was spooked then that must mean something was after him, and if something was after him then it was probably after *me* too. When we pulled onto an unmarked dirt road and passed a sign that read "Cave of Kelpius: ¼ mile," I was relieved. I needed to see Milton with my own eyes. It was about time.



Above the parking lot of the Cave of Kelpius the sun had microwaved the clouds away, heavying the air with moisture. The moon was out early, a white bird of the midafternoon, slimming a crescent on the backdrop of the vacant blue, and I had to find Milton Munn and figure out what was going on once and for all.

With the flick of a cigarette butt, a sudden burst of static, a curt wave in the rearview and a cloud of dust, Father Quaid split. I found myself in an empty parking lot surrounded by 4x4s and pine trees. It was midafternoon, nearly 4. A thick fog rolled in from the woods. With Father Quaid's instructions in mind I picked a direction at random and set off for the tree line. I stepped into the line of scraggly pine and trudged through ravines, up and down hillsides, embankments and rotten logs. All along the way the atmosphere of taut heat gave like invisible spider webs. I fumbled stickily through the net, slapping mosquitos, cursing humidity. At that moment in the woods, above all else, I was ready to believe in something again. I was ready to find Milton and talk to him. But not about finishing the Grief Orchid, or getting to the bottom of the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. I needed to talk to him about the Tragedy that Befell Lilly, about what actually happened to Lily. Nikki was right. It'd been eating at me these four years, reducing me to a broken shell of a man.

I broke through the brush and stumbled upon a small road dug into the side of a hill. On the other side of the road a gaggle of tourists loitered beneath a blue cast-iron sign. I scanned the crowd: parents wrangling children, baseball hats, antlers, Texas, a Camelback or two and- Milton! In the flesh at last! I could hardly believe my eyes. He'd gone to pains to camouflage himself, hiding his face behind an exceptionally-large pair of Jackie O sunglasses

and covering his chrome dome with a toupee that looked like a ferret had died on top of his head. But it was him, that's for sure; if anything he stood out even more than usual. And then, to my surprise and consternation, not five feet away from Milton stood the peculiar Abraham Avarro, possible Dognapper, giver of the prop book, generous tipper and unequivocal proponent of the air quote. What was he doing here? Was he working for the Society? Was he wrapped up in this as well? He was in disguise as well, for reasons unknown, wearing a false mustache curled at the ends and a stovepipe hat on his bald head. In that dark suit of his he looked like a character out of a turn of the century world's fair, uncannily tall, thin as a boning knife. I ducked back into the woods for a moment and fixed myself up with the bald cap I'd brought along to blend in better. I broke through the brush and walked as casually as I could manage for someone appearing out of nowhere. I moseyed over and mixed into the group, keeping an eye on Milton and the Dognapper. I couldn't accost Milton outright, not now, not with him here. If he was in disguise than he had to be up to something. His appearance here with Milton had to more than just coincidence. I resigned to watch and wait for a moment to speak to Milton alone. I looked up at the cast iron sign above us.

Kelpius Community Sign:

In 1694, German mystic Johannes Kelpius and his followers established a community near here in response to America's offer of religious freedom. Members of the "Hermits of Wissahickon" or "The Society of the Woman in the Wilderness" produced poetry and music, practiced astronomy and botany, and even made an early pipe organ as they awaited the end of the millennium, and the world. They welcomed all ethnic groups, even Native Americans. The community gradually dissolved after Kelpius died in 1708.

Just then a park ranger peeled off from the group and turned to address us. He wore a neon orange hunting vest and a wide-brimmed forester's hat. There was a fat black rifle slung over his shoulder. He had a dopey Barney Fife-ness about him; something to do with his milk-dud eyes and the gooseneck above his narrow shoulders that looked like it couldn't fit the man's oversized Adam's apple in its mouth. "Good morning ladies and gentlemen, my name is Alfons Fronf. I am a park ranger here in the beautiful Nicolet National Forest. I want to welcome you to the Tour of the Hermits Glen!" He clasped his hands together and flashed a tight-lipped smile, Adam's apple rocking back and forth in its wattle. "I'm glad to see so many of you've shown up today, no doubt because the Cave of Kelpius has never been more relevant in our sleepy town than today, given this morning's television broadcast. I'd like to officially say that the Kelpius Society has no affiliation with the most recent resurrection of the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. We at the Society deplore the use of the Society's name for hallucinogenic terrorism and subterfuge, and that is all I would like to say on that matter. Now, back to the matter at hand: the rich, fascinating history of a group of Transylvanian immigrants that fled religious persecution and escaped to the verdant northern woods of Wisconsin, a group oft forgotten, lost to time! Now, I'm sure many of you are wondering why I'm carrying a rifle." He chuckled. "Well, I'll tell you. It's because of this beautiful lady here." He gestured to a plump brunette in a visor and a tie-dye shirt at the front of the group. She raised a sheepish hand, blushing. "That's my wife Margaret. It's our tenth anniversary next week, and given the popularity of antler headdresses this season- and I see a few of you are wearing yours today- I figured I'd try and rustle up a pair for my wife. So I hope you'll excuse the occasional interruption," he padded the rifle, "but I intend on shooting my wife an anniversary present today." The crowd went *aww*; Margaret blushed even more.

“Once upon a time,” Alfons began, leading the tour group into the woods. I tuned him out immediately, focusing my attention on falling into the back of the line. I was three heads behind Milton and five behind the Dognapper. We entered the woods. The trees and thickets grew so close on either side of the path that it was if they were all the same organism, connected by a web of underground roots extending for miles below the earth. I started to sweat so I took a deep breath and looked around. Emerald health effused from every leaf and bud in kind. Milton was just ahead. My heart raced with the thrill of the chase. He was in my sights! But I was anxious. What was the Dognapper *doing* here? I took a deep breath, and another, and another. Milton was within my reach; my forgiveness was within reach. I had to remember that. I kept on.

As we walked to the cave Alfons Fronf talked over his shoulder. “The Society was named after a woman in the *Book of Revelations* who took refuge from the apocalypse in the wilderness. Johannes and the monks believed they needed to follow her example, and hold on.” He stopped and put his hand in the air, leering into the woods. Slowly he brought his rifle to his shoulder, the scope to his eye and pointed the barrel somewhere eastabout. There was a terrible, still moment where all the birds went quiet and all the strings in the air pulled taut. CRACK he fired and my heart leap. Alfons rocked back a few steps with the recoil. He lowered the smoking barrel, crestfallen. “Damn it all, I missed. Sorry honey.” Margaret smiled thinly.

Turns out Johannes Kelpius has quite the history. He was a 26-year-old mystic from Transylvania, born in the same town as Vlad the Impaler. One day he convinced a whole lotta persecuted Transylvanian mystics to sail to America and settle down as a tribe of hermits under the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. Kelpius picked the Wissahickon wilderness for their new homestead. They apparently did well at first, befriending the local Menominee

Indians and bartering their knowledge for instructions on how to till the soil. The Society was made up of teachers, musicians, doctors, botanists, chemists, astronomers, and engineers and they helped the locals out in these capacities when they could. The Menominee Indians in turn taught them how to cultivate the land, and the Society thanked them by accidentally infecting them with Transylvanian tuberculosis, promptly killing them off entirely. After that the Society didn't last too long. Without the Menominee Indians to help them prepare for winter they succumbed to the cold, starving to death in the woods.

The group went by many names. The neighboring Dutch reportedly called them *hexmeisters*, meaning wizards and spell-casters. They called themselves the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness, or the Society for short. To the Society and Kelpius in particular, astronomy was the highest of the sciences. They charted the stars by night, consulted astrolabes, poured over ephemerides. Some even say they invented the telescope. What we know for sure is they constructed the first observatory in America right here in Wissahickon. They built it atop a building called the Tabernacle where every night they would pray and scan the stars for God. It was their belief the Second Coming would take place five years after they arrived in Wissahickon. By that time they were already dead.

The monks slept in tiny wooden cabins dotted throughout the ravine, on beds of planks without mattresses. Kelpius himself lived and meditated close to the Wissahickon stream a little ways away from the Tabernacle. He lived in a natural cave built into the hillside. After ten minutes of walking single-file over washed-out banks and hillsides and through the humid web of the afternoon, we turned up at the cave.

I was thoroughly unimpressed. The cave was wasn't much more than a rectangular hole cut out of a hillside with a tall granite obelisk marking the entrance. Was I a fool to expect

an adventure of caves and passageways played out in a web of underground tunnels? Maybe. It was mazelike in other ways, however. Not the cave itself, but what lay inside of it.

I watched the Dognapper and Milton approach the granite marker in turn and waited for them to move on before I approached it myself.

Granite Marker:

Johannes Kelpius. Ph.D. A.D. 1673-1708

“The Contented of the God-loving Soul”

Magister of the first Rosicrucian AMORC colony in America which arrived in Wisconsin June 24, 1694, then known as the Monks of the Ridge. Fra Kelpius used this cave as a shelter and as a sanctum for his meditations. Lovingly erected to his memory by Grand Lodge Rosicrucians A.D. 1941. In cooperation with the Supreme Grand Lodge AMORC

Teenagers had come in the night and tagged the stone with graffiti'd runes and lines. I waited until the entire group had explored the cave before venturing in. From outside no light penetrated the interior of the cave, as if a Vantablack curtain had been laid over the entrance. I stepped inside, straight through a spider web. I wiped it off my face and took a look around. The cave simple, bare, with all the charm of a tomb, a cellar-like room about the size of a broom closet. The walls were lichened brick, stone cold, dripping with condensation, gently arched at the ceiling. The floor was bare. Inside there was nothing remarkable save a few empty bottles of malt liquor, broken glass, and a large swath of graffiti on the back wall. It was a strange insignia of three hexagons lined up vertically, touching at the bases, with two “A”s in the first and last hexagon. A kite was transposed inside of the hexagons. It looked like this:

I stood in the cave for what felt like an aeon, studying the symbol, trying to remember why it was familiar. Then I remembered. The banner in the parade. What was going on? I couldn't decipher it. The insignia looked chemical and vaguely sinister, like the marking on a forbidden gate. The only thing that rang a bell was Anthony Avarro, the tall, slender Dognapper from Barb's Café. "A.A." Had he done this? I wonder now, in a cave of my own, if I realized then that in that barren room, despite its vacancy, lied the entrance to the labyrinth that I would soon find myself twisting in, lost and paralyzed, alone and drifting, a dark creature hunting at my back ten steps behind, always out of sight behind a bend in the maze. And had Theseus' sticky thread led him not to the exit, not to safety and the end of human sacrifice, but straight to mouth of the Minotaur like this insignia led- a line tied taut to the tooth of the beast- his fate would have been sealed. Once I'd seen the insignia a second time, let me tell you: my fate was sealed too.

In the cave Nikki stood beside me whispering, "follow" into my ear. I turned to catch a glimpse of her but she evaporated instantly as a beam of sunlight lanced into the cave and crashed against the back wall. The sun's orange rind began to peek from under the top of the entrance. Minutes passed; more and more sunlight entered the cave, casting a pool on the wall that slowly engulfed the symbol in a gold pool. I left with head full of spider webs and humidity, wondering how they'd caught Milton, wondering if I'd been caught too.

Lover's Leap, an unassuming cliff's edge strewn with moss, loomed above a hundred-foot drop onto a jagged granite shelf below. Beyond the rocks the Godwin Basin extended, a flat, green plate of considerable size, about the length and width of two football fields side by side. Standing before the enormous, sunny expanse I felt akin to a swimmer on the surface of

water unfathomably deep, nothing beneath him save an impenetrable haze of blue gaping up at him, mouth open, swallowing sunlight.

Beyond the meadowy stretch of grass the purpling trees made a faint line of the horizon about eye level with our perch on the peak. And beyond the trees- as always- was the ChemoDyne manufacturing complex, the actual structure obscured by the forest but nonetheless still there, as always, made visible by the long, furling plumes of exhaust forming clouds in the sky, coalescing for a moment in the empty blue before gradually vanishing into thin air.

Alfons told us legend had it that the daughter of an Indian chief and her lover plunged to their deaths from this very cliff side, jumping hand-in-hand in a suicide pact, after she was promised to another man. Alfons turned from surveying the drop, wiped a crocodile tear from the pouch beneath his right eye, spouted something about the Power of Love, and vocally, vociferously beseeched the Lord to bless him with half as much passion in his marriage to his beautiful, lovely, gorgeous, stunning, ravishing and intelligent wife Margaret, whom he loved to the moon and back and then some. This time I blushed.

Alfons finished stitching his heart to the sleeve of his uniform and got down to business. He was elbows-deep in a breakdown of the finer nuances of soil composition, when he turned, ears pricked, to a spot in the valley below. For a beat there appeared to be nothing to attract his attention in the basin, and then a lone buck slowly ambled into the meadow from the left, stopping some thirty feet away from the tree line, looking up at us and then back to the trees. As if endowed with psychic hearing Alfons put his hand up to silence the silent group. He calmly raised his rifle. Just as he brought the scope to his eye a flurry of bodies emerged from the trees where the buck had originally entered the basin. A doe and three of her baby calves trotted out one by one on tenuous, wobbly knees to meet the buck. The family began walking

across the basin, stopping here and there to chew a patch of grass. Alfons followed them with his gun. They stopped in the middle of the basin and the herd fanned out, nosing for food in the tall grasses, the young bumbling around the legs of their mother. And then, for a long, horrifying, excruciating moment, the buck looked up towards the peak and seemed to meet our eyes. In a snap the air turned to liquid cement; I couldn't breathe. Maybe what he met was the eye of the gun. I wonder if he saw me there standing away from the group at the edge of the cliff, silently imploring him to run. CRACK! The rifle rang out, echoing in the basin. The doe and her calves took off for the tree line. The buck crumpled.

“Yeehaw!” yelled Alfons as he dropped the gun, whipped his hat off and fist pumped into the empty air, gesturing to no one. I looked at Milton; his head was on his chest, eyes closed, hands folded, mouth moving slightly. I knew that this would really affect him. In the lab Milton was always especially tender towards the flowers. He glowed with a sort of kind, calm enthusiasm for all things living. Any time one of Grief Orchids failed to mature, he wrote a poem- bless his heart- that he'd recite, without fail, in front of the trash bin that we dumped them in. I'd scoff and watch him from off to the side, checking my watch, making it obvious I was displeased with the time we were wasting, but I never actually admitted to Milton that I always secretly admired him for his funeral rites. Maybe “envied” is the more appropriate term. I envied his ability to believe so whole-heartedly in something. My heart had always felt empty in comparison to his, that had our hearts been ships on the water, mine would have gone down quick, seawater pouring easy through the many holes in hull; But Milton's heart was always buoyant, never took on water, never sank.

The Dognapper just stood there, gawking at the lifeless body of the buck. Alfons turned to face the group. “Margaret my love, looks like you'll have a pair of antlers to wear to

Uncle Sid's funeral after all!" Margaret blushed, bowed her head and touched the pale nape of her neck, a quiet gesture of gratitude that spoke more of her than antlers off a dead buck ever could.



Alfons guaranteed us we'd have a boatload of fun on the historic Henry Avenue Bridge. I have no doubt we would've had my ears not picked out a strange tune from the air on the way over. It wasn't a birdcall; someone behind me was singing. *Mention my name ev'ry place you go, as 'round the town you roam*; It was coming from behind me a ways, soft and sanded at the edges, a little lilting, pitched up in falsetto like it'd been wound up with a crank. *Wish you'd call on my gal, now remember, old pal, when you get back home*; A memory flashed and extinguished immediately; I felt a small pressure at my temples, as if a large hand palmed the back of my head. The voice was humming now, trailing off into the distance. From what I could see of Milton he was a few steps ahead, plodding over roots, toupee and sunglasses bobbing. I looked for the Dognapper but he'd suddenly vanished. How had I lost him? I turned to look behind me. A figure, tall and gaunt, was walking away from the group. The Dognapper. His voice floated over to me: *Give my regards to Broadway, remember me to Herald Square, Tell all the gang at Forty-Second Street, that I will soon be there*. Nikki. What had Nikki said to me again as I left? The memory flashed again, this time for a millisecond. *Give my regards to Broadway*, she'd said. Was it a sign? A hint? Was she really psychic? I wanted to stay with Milton and finally confront him now that the Dognapper was out of the way, but part of me couldn't resist following the song. It was such a delectable sign to follow. I was caught by the stickiness of the golden thread, the

allure of a mystery to solve, I admit it. I told myself that I'd meet up with Milton after the tour was over and turned to follow the Dognapper. It'd grown late, and as the stars held court behind the curtain of a setting sky, the white moon fell away from the earth like an archangel.

I chased the dreamlike voice through the half-light and into a clearing the size of an Olympic swimming pool encircled by pine trees. The Nicolet National Forest has many isolated glades like this: tiny, scattered lakes of grass connected by tributary deer paths. Some are only big enough for a single person to enter; looking up at the circumference of sky from these glades, you feel like a baby at the bottom of a well. There are the few stadium-sized glades as well- like the Godwin Basin- that get mowed every once in a while for popup festivals and town-wide events. Most are untouched during most of the year by anything except rain, snow, shade and sun. The trails that connect these glades, untended, serpentine and varying. Some are as wide as a four-lane highway; some are skinnier than a tenement corridor. Some lead in circles right back to where they started, eating their tails, as it were, driving hapless hikers mad. Some have canopies that lean overhead, fashioning archways and emerald tunnels. Some are so overgrown you wouldn't even know they used to be trails. Some lead to dead ends.

This particular glen was, in fact, inhabited. A tall, rectangular house built with rough-hewn logs boosted four stories into the trees. There was a small observatory poking out from the top of the roof. The Tabernacle. Ages ago a sonic boom had blown all of the windows out. The paint on the logs was peeling; it was a deep barn-red, the color of the tail of a comet.

I took one good look at the Tabernacle and headed inside. Would the Dognapper be waiting for me? Was this a trap? I began to have second thoughts about leaving Milton behind. But I walked in nonetheless, lead on by a morbid curiosity. The ground floor was abandoned.

There were four rooms on the ground floor, all of which were the same: square, dark and empty. Not dusty, not dirty, not cobwebby, just empty. It went on this way for three floors. Some rooms had cots in them, unmade, but little else. In one room I found a rack of hanging brown robes. That seemed to me to tie the Dognapper together with the Society. That made sense to me, especially considering all this cloak-and-dagger maneuvering he's been pulling on me.

The fourth floor turned out to be a loft-type space with one room taking up the entire floor plan. There was a ladder in the middle of the room leading up to the observatory. More pink insulation fissured out from between rotting wall studs. I turned to the opposite end of the room where a wall of floor-to-ceiling bookcases sat packed with books. Suspicious, I moseyed on over, picked a vellum-bound hardcover copy of "Compendium of Odd Animal Husbandries" from the shelf at random and opened it up. It was blank, just as I expected.

I ditched the bookcase and fixed my attention on the ladder. It reached up into the ceiling, where a tiny hole just big enough to fit one person waited. Would the Dognapper be waiting up there as well? What revelation would come to pass? The hole was draped across with a black curtain. I had to push it aside and squeeze in between the cloth and the ladder to get into the observatory. When I stood up I looked around; I was floating fifty feet above Wissahickon.

I looked down and realized that the hole I'd climbed out of wasn't a circle; it was a hexagon. Two other hexagons sandwiched the hole so that the one I climbed out of was the middle in a progression of three hexagons. The honeycomb insignia, the same one I'd seen on the banner and in the cave. That meant that I was on the right track, that I was one step closer to unraveling this bed of thorns. I didn't realize then that every further step took me deeper into the tangled web.

There Dognapper wasn't there. He'd left his insignia behind. By now I was sure that it was his, given that it'd turned up in the last two places I'd seen him. What did that tell me? Somehow, he was affiliated with a marching band. That's all I had. Well. If he wasn't there to lead me to the next clue, then what was? I inspected the honeycomb more closely and noticed a small piece of paper blending into the cement floor in the hexagon behind me. I picked it up. It felt thin and delicate in my hands, like rice paper. It was about the size of a dinner plate, rounded, shaped like a wing, semi-translucent and colored a deep dull red, same as the Tabernacle. I flipped it over and found some writing.

Mysterious Wing-Note:

SYZYGY PARTY

The Godwin Basin

July 28, 2014 @ 3 p.m.

Please join ChemoDyne

in welcoming the dark moon to Earth

My first impulse was to throw it away. It smelled like a trap that the Dognapper had set for me. He was going to ambush me in the Godwin Basin, maybe with Milton too. But I remembered what Nikki had said about believing and since her advice had done me right so far, so I decided to choose to believe in the authenticity of the note. Besides, I wanted to believe. It felt better than being cynical. The note was authentic. There, it was done.

There was a lot to consider with this new piece of evidence. Before I thought that the Dognapper, aka Abraham Avarro, was affiliated with the Society of the Woman in the

Wilderness. But now I wasn't sure what to think. Had he planted it there to invite me to his party? In that case he was a ChemoDyne man, perhaps keeping an eye on Milton and me to make sure our Grief Orchid doesn't fall into the hands of the Society. Or maybe he *was* affiliated with the Society and wanted to give me a front-row ticket to the seedbombing? A town-wide festival would provide a pretty good occasion for a terrorist attack.

Beyond the observatory, the forest had succumbed to night. Darkness had marbled the trees in various shades of black: crude oil, midnight, Vantablack, raven, slate. About a mile away, floodlights were jacklighting the Godwin Basin, illuminating a series of circus-like tents in various stages of construction. The light was white and eerie, unnaturally bright. Despite the construction, the basin seemed to be abandoned.

What I did know for sure was that the Godwin Basin was to be the location of the final showdown. A syzygy party. Regardless of whether or not the Dognapper was involved, that seemed to me like a middle finger aimed right at the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. ChemoDyne wasn't going to leave town. They weren't going to blow up Warehouse 77. They were throwing a big glittering party to rub it in the cult's face, flower be damned. I'll be damned, too, because this party significantly raised the stakes. It provided an arena for disaster, and practically begged the Society to attack them. Now it was even more crucial that I find Milton before the cult got to him first. There was no way of knowing what could happen if our research got into the wrong hands. The fate of Wissahickon- nay, dare I say it- The Fate of All Mankind was at stake.

But it was late, and Milton had probably hitched a ride back to town by now. Scurrying off into the night, I resolved to find him in the morning.



I found him in the morning. On the morning of the second day of Milton's return I went to the Midas repair shop just off of Main Street. The temperate sun, coupled with a slight breeze, was so pleasant that I wondered if the weather was making promises it couldn't keep. Next door to the Midas a Hotel Marriot rose imperiously into the sky. I gave the front desk my name: Manyard Munn, Milton's son, and slipped up to his room with a spare key. I unlocked the door and held my breath. I had to be sure it was actually Milton. I wasn't going to let him slip away. I'd been lost without Milton; now I'd found him.

Spread-eagle on the rented bed in a pair of faded yellow boxers, one Christmas-red stocking, one athletic tube sock and a pair of Vortex-brand Velcro garters, Milton Munn was taking a snooze. While he was incapacitated I tiptoed into a hiding spot in the shower, making sure I could observe Milton in the mirror on the back of the bathroom door while hiding most of myself behind the shower curtain. It wasn't a great spot but it did in a pinch.

I wanted to watch Milton for a while, to see what he did today. The morning had brought with it fresh reservations about Milton's intentions. Perhaps he was affiliated with this terrorist group. If so, I didn't want to face him. Not yet. Not until I knew everything there was to know about it. I was wary of confrontation with a madman. He *did* seem jumpy at the cave the other day; maybe it was because he'd agreed to work with a violent band of eco-terrorists and gotten in way over his head. If that was the case, I would be there to save Milton.

Milton was asleep in a single room above the covers of a double bed amidst various items of discarded clothing strewn everywhere. He was sweating in the heat like a gator on a rock. His untanned belly rose and fell to the cadence of the clock on the nightstand. His eyelids

fluttered; he smiled and turned on his side facing me. Good. All was well in the land of dreams. It'd been a long time since I'd been able to see him this close up. A grand reunion this was turning out to be.

Milton reminded me of a lemon that rolled underneath the bed. He was pale as bleach and so pristinely bald on top that he seemed to be wearing a bowl of ceramic on his head at all times. This, his chrome dome, thanks in part to the algebra of its curvature, possessed an extraordinary ability to reflect light.

A pair of resting caterpillars slept on Milton's face. That is to say that his two bushy-white eyebrows looked like quiet, nesting creatures sleeping there above his eyes, animated by the invisible strings behind his face.

At Northampton Milton was a celebrity. He buzzed from class to class and greeted people in the hallways with mud underneath his fingernails. He was always hopped up on Venezuelan medium roast and maybe a little something extra on the side. He may not have been a genius with the laboratory research, strictly speaking, but he was a genius with people. He exuded an undeniable magnetism. People just drifted to him, drifted into working with him, drifted into friendships with him, drifted into bed with him. He often said the right thing, and he usually meant it, too. He was brilliant like that.

Milton's always had a touch of alchemy in him. He could change metals; he could bend essence; he was reckless; he was hot, hot, hot. Even before he got famous he always seemed to me a man of extraordinary capacity. The medals he received gained electrons from the air, increased in atomic weight and transmuted from bronze to silver to gold. He was a golden boy with a silver tongue, a silver fox with a golden thumb. I, too, was devoted.

When I met Milton after my first class at Northampton, he reminded me of those cherubic, egoless Zen monks in Japanese woodblocks: posed high on the lip of some Asiatic precipice, their eyes opened wide to the clouds floating around them like rudderless ships.

I got to know him as we spent more time together, got to know the ins and outs of his erratic genius. I told myself that there was something *different* about him that made him who he was. Something magic. He had certain tics- for example: he liked his heels scratched at night, and always stomped his feet on the doormat, even if his feet were clean. And he could really blow his nose when he wanted to.

And he was a genius writer, too. He wrote many well-received books. He was lightning in a bottle. Whenever he found out another of his books was to be published Milton smiled, his bean-shaped eyes crinkling in delight. They were a True Blue, the color of an undiscovered bird of paradise alighting on all sorts of bright things. And as his books became well-known in certain circles, his notoriety increasing tenfold, twentyfold, over the years, that smile in his eyes just kept on getting brighter on every new podium he stood behind, accepting prizes. I always watched these ceremonies from afar just in case I felt the need to slip away. A few months before Milton “died” I watched Milton’s eyes light up for the millionth time as some nofaced lackey put a medal around his neck, and just then it suddenly hit me that my first impression of Milton was wrong. He was never egoless. Milton loved the attention. And never did I hate myself more- me, Timofey Oleander- than when I envied Milton.

Look now as his nose blows a tremendous snore. That shnoz is just like I remember it: a perfect isosceles triangle in the middle of his head. I remember how sometimes during bad weather it would catch high winds and spin Milton like a music box ballerina. But it wasn’t all

bad. Whenever he entered a building from the cold, the tip of his nose ruby-red, Milton loved to blow it as loud as he could, like a bugle.

Did I mention the woman lying on the bed next to Milton? Milton was sound asleep. The woman- raven-haired, a dark Vanessa- was awake, staring at the ceiling, silent. She wore black lace thigh-highs, a Lycra top, no bottom, eyelash extensions, sunburst makeup and coke bottle glasses, and I wondered if it was reasonable to infer her presence in Milton's hotel room was negotiated beneath an interstate underpass.

Long, long ago, in my more greenhorn years, all spic and span, fresh out of the oven as they say, I would be at home working on a project on Sunday afternoons, seeing as I was shy and new in town. Milton would go out of his way to call me on the telephone and ask to bring me around saying something like, "Come on now, you gotta get out there. You haven't left your basement for two days. The sun will be good for your heart." For Milton, everything was good for your heart, except basements. And since Milton's didn't have a car back then- didn't believe in them- every Sunday I'd hop on the back of his celeste green VW motorcycle and we'd pummel into the heart of the metro city downtown, dodging traffic like lunatics in matching bicycle helmets and John Lennon sunglasses.

On several occasions we stopped at the apartment of a student of his. Milton would go in, telling me he needed to drop off some papers or something to that effect, and I'd walk to the nearest grocery store and buy a can of Pepsi and drink it next to the motorcycle, waiting for Milton to come back. He wouldn't be gone for long, but he always came back smiling. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to realize what Milton was actually doing.

But I didn't mind, at first. Drinking Pepsi on the sidewalk, waiting for Milton, smiling like a fool, it didn't seem so bad to me then. I had a world-class mentor and a friend. So what if

he was a bit of a Lothario? But with time I grew sick of the soda, sick of being left outside like a dog. It didn't take long for those weekend excursions to diminish in frequency and then die out completely. Soda water strikes me now as eloquent descriptor of a friendship without substance. Me and Milton, our friendship was like a teaspoon sugar dissolving on my tongue.

Milton was, is and always will be a leonine man. He awoke with a jolt, jumped out of bed and arched his spine with gymnastic verve. Vertebrae clicked and snapped, shuddering their synapses up to the brain. A muted groan escaped Milton's lips. When he blew his nose in a white linen handkerchief the sun came in the window again.

Milton potted to the window side desk where a bouquet of white daffodils perspired in a crystal vase. *Narcissus poeticus*, showing yellow corona. Nectary ringed with a reddish edge. The flower's fragrance resembles a mix of jasmine and hyacinth and is toxic if kept in an unventilated room like this one, for example. Milton should know that too, after all, he's quite the botanist have you heard? He admired the flowers with a knowing smile, jostling their heads and blowing that goddamn triangle nose again.

He bowed his head to the desk and I thought he was going to smell the flowers, but instead he bent over an oversized glass bong. He took a big hit of sweet-smelling pot and exhaled smoke like a ChemoDyne cooling tower. Sixty-seven years old and still going at it. Jetting back upright he hacked up a lung; a dry staccato cough like the bark of a machine gun. He sounded sick. But I can't say I'm surprised that Milton's still a drug addict.

One night two years into working with Milton - my honeymoon period with the man long over, barely even a spec in the rearview by then - I came back late to the lab to collect some instruments I'd left behind. As I was reaching for the knob I noticed a thin sliver of

yellow light issuing from the bottom of the door. No one was supposed to be there. Only Milton and I had the keys. I feared the worst: a burglar mid-ransack. Slowly, quietly, I opened the door-

-and walked in on my worst nightmare. In the dark and cavernous greenhouse, amidst hundreds of species of exotic orchids that we'd grown *together*, Milton stood with his back to me wearing nothing but yellow Tweety Bird boxers. He stood beside a younger girl with long, red hair unfurling down the pale skin of her naked back. She wore panties and nothing else. They turned at the sound of the door; it was Lily. When our eyes met she shrieked and ran off to find something to cover herself with. I never saw her again. Milton held the stem of a *Psychopsis mariposa* in his right hand. He stared over my shoulder, nervously tapping the fingers on his other hand. Beneath the heat lamps' orange glare the keen-edged flower looked wickedly cartoonish. I was humiliated; I was furious.

I had long-since accepted Milton's sanctimonious disregard for the rigors of scientific procedure, so to find him with a woman in the lab was no surprise. But Lily. How could he do that to me? He and I had never spoken outright about my attraction to her, sure, but it must have been fairly obvious, even to him. She was around the lab a lot, and we were often seen working together. The more I thought about it the more furious I got. Milton had everything he ever wanted: girls, money, fame, flowers. But still he managed to take from me the only thing I thought I'd never lose. Not Lily, but my love for Lily. How could I ever love her again, after I'd seen her like that, with *him*. He robbed me of my ability to love. He stomped on my heart. Want to know what he did next? He held the stalk of the mariposa beneath my nose, dumped a small line of white powder along it, and said, "Want a bump?"

Milton fiddled with his flowers, spacey, adjusting their faces to the sun. He followed their gaze for a few moments, looking out the window... and then, in a sudden bright moment, he spun sharply on his right heel and performed a little courtsey to the painted lady on the bed. She'd propped herself up on her forearm to follow the man's movements.

"Wha was that for?"

"Dunno." Milton, five foot four, smiled impishly. "Just felt like the right thing to do, I guess."

"Aint you sweet," she said.

Milton walked to a chair with a white linen robe slung over its back and covered his lemon body. He walked to the bed, humming an unplaceable tune, dancing a half step. He kissed the woman on the top of her head and sat down next to her.

"Didja bring any more pot?" He asked. She shook her head. "Come live with me," he said.

"What?"

"I mean it."

The woman twirled a lock of her mahogany hair around her left index finger and looked out the window. After a few moments of silence Milton asked, "Have you ever heard of the Aristophanes speech about love, the one in the Symposium?" She shook her head. "So the myth says that people used to be spherical. They had two bodies attached back to back, so that these round people had four arms, four legs, two faces and one round body. They cartwheeled around like miniature planets, happy as can be. There were three sexes: the male-male people who came from the sun, the female-female people who came from the earth, and the male-female people who came from the moon." Milton paused as if he were sipping tea. The woman smiled. He continued.

“Then one day Zeus started to fear the planet-people, so he split them all in two. It was like cutting an egg in half with a hair,” said Milton. “So he split em and turned their junk around, and, well, they became the half-planet-people. Well, these half-planet-people were devastated by the loss of their partners, as you can imagine. So what did they do? Every night they met in vast, empty fields, thousands of them, and threw their arms around each other and tried to go back to how they were before. Sometimes when I can’t sleep I imagine of one of those fields where they met. I imagine millions and millions of these half-planet-people rushing towards each other in the middle of the field, making huge, crushing, relentless crowds, trying to make two into one, and, well, I imagine it starts to work. Eight become four; four become two; two become one. People pop like champagne bubbles in bright, luminous, electrostatic bursts. And then finally, when the crowd has fully absorbed itself, become one massive ocean floating down there...” He trailed off.

In the ensuing silence the sun came out from behind a cloud, and the contents of the hotel room suspended in glass. Diagonal sunlight fluttered through their eyelashes. Microscopic dust motes hovered in a sunbeam like stars in space. The sound of glass filled the room, if such a sound existed. There was a solitary, bright moment where neither Milton nor the woman knew what to say. Then, surely, bit-by-bit, time resumed its normal course. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I totally lost my train of thought.”

The woman smiled, taking Milton’s hands in her own. For a tender moment they embraced, ensconced by the sun’s ray, holding onto each other before dissolving in a sunbeam.



Milton- robe, garters, mismatched socks, poorly concealed genitalia and all- strolled out the sliding glass doors of the Hotel Marriot absentmindedly scratching at his netherregions. Sunlight slid down the slanted roof and leapt off Milton's bald, bright head. The sun was making an oven of the pavement. Standing beneath a large marquee Milton pulled a Black n' Mild from his pocket and lit it between his teeth. He snapped open the lid of a zippo lighter and cupped the flame with his hand, bringing it close to his face. But when he lowered his hand a black rose was poking out between his teeth. Milton put away the lighter, pulled the flower from his mouth and crumpled it into a ball in one fist. He paused there, first clenched, for some time. Then, suddenly opening his hand, the cigarillo reappeared in his palm. Milton put it back in his mouth, lit it for real, took a drag, and bowed to the parking lot.



Satyr-like Milton pranced over the grassy border of the Marriot parking lot and strolled -hands in pockets- into the Midas repair next door. A rust-belted panel of three aluminum rectangles on the wall above the register displayed a trilogy of Miltons. Heads turned at the little man save mine. I was hiding behind a newspaper and pretending to read, sneaking glances over the top. Milton paused in the door. A bright spur of white-gold glinted from his forehead.

Sneaking hash oil hits and blowing them into his robe, Milton was waiting for someone to tell him how much money he owed when all of a sudden *she* walked in. She was liquid and lanky in a blue summer dress, with silver hair down to her shoulders, a galaxy of freckles across the bridge of her nose, wearing no jewelry of any kind. She was wearing a nametag that said "Hi! I'm Mona." She approached the desk like she was walking through a waterfall. There was something familiar about her that I couldn't place. She was like a bridge to nowhere.

Her car had a flat, she fluted to the clerk. Her voice was melodic and glossy, the marriage of champagne and titanium. She sounded like she might have just taken something. She told the clerk was on her way to Lake Geneva for a SlamBall benefit for quadriplegic children when a doe in a red cape skittled out from the sidegrowth and collapsed on the highway. Mona swerved; an orange vest vanished into the trees.

When Mona settled into a vinyl chair Milton shot up from his seat and approached Susy.

“When will my car be ready?” he asked.

Susy gave Milton the eye. “Which one’s yours?”

“The Corolla. Oil change. Just trying to get on my way before sundown.” Father Quaid was right: Milton *was* jumpy. On his way before sundown? Why? Where was he headed? He kept looking over his shoulder; I was worried he’d catch me spying on him, but I made sure that our eyes never met.

“One moment.” The woman stepped through a glass door behind the desk and into the garage, consulting a man with a Mr. Potato Head body in clear plastic specs. She came back through the glass.

“Your car’s not gonna be ready till tomorrow.” Susy saw the dismay on Milton’s face. “We’ve been real backed up today,” she said apologetically, “seein’ as it’s the syzygy in two days and people are tryna get out of town.”

Just for the record a syzygy is another word for an eclipse. It’s what happens when three celestial bodies line up in a row. The sun, the moon and the earth in our case, in that order. When the orbits of all three bodies match up, the moon eclipses the light from the sun, darkening the day. Strange things are said to happen during syzygies. On that moment of

astronomical alignment no light will reach the side of the moon facing us on earth. And so the moon will transform, if only for a minute, from a white, chalk rock into a dark, polished stone.

The syzygy. I had forgotten about the Syzygy Party. If Milton was trying to leave before the Syzygy party then he couldn't be involved at all. Or maybe he was *too* involved. A man trying to leave before sundown, that sounded like the decision of a man in danger. I confess that I could have approached him in the Midas repair shop waiting room if I wanted to, but I wasn't eager to spring myself upon my ex-professor and then discuss the topic of Lily. These wounds ran deep.

Milton was crestfallen. "Well, what can I do? I don't have anywhere to stay."

"But you're staying next door at the Marriot, aren't you?"

"No, I *was* staying at the Marriot."

Milton was met by a confused silence on Susy's end. He seemed flustered and jumpy, like he was expecting something bad to happen. I noticed that Mona's ear was tuned like a satellite. She had been listening to this entire exchange. Suddenly she piped up from her seat, "If you need a place to stay for the night, you can stay with me, once my car's fixed. I run a little bed-and-breakfast just a few miles away from here. I'm Mona by the way," she added with a molten smile, rising, offering her hand. I finally got a good look at her eyes: grey-green.

I was overwhelmed with emotion. Her eyes were the same color as Lily's. I don't see eyes like that every day, so it was enough to set me on edge. I've never been one for reincarnation stuff but damn if her eyes weren't a compelling case... I felt the spider web pin pierce my heart again. It never dulled, never blunted. It was a clean pain; it felt like punishment. But hadn't I just seen grey-green eyes before... Yes! In the broadcast. But that meant. This was the witch of the wilderness, the spokeswoman of the Society of the Woman in

the Wilderness. The Society knew that Milton was alive. They knew where to find him and how to find him. Luckily they hadn't found me yet. Milton was in deep, deep trouble.

Because soon they were off, the door swinging in the wind behind them.



After Midas repair finished changing Mona's tire, I followed her red Scion towards Out of Town. After several minutes all signs of life began to stretch out. The land opened up, revealing sleeping cornfields. Here and there the silhouette of a silo. The ticking by of light poles marked a somnolent cadence, with burrs of light appearing and brimming the mirrors before zooming off into space. Vast, impassive fields of soil reached their tilled fingers over the horizon. Land and sky merged. The night sky spread thick and gloopy like frozen honey, a blue crop embedded with cold, white stars.

The Mothlight Inn, it said in monarch-orange script on a small wooden sign beneath a pulpy, appropriately moth-fetted bulb. I ditched my car near the driveway and pursued on foot.

The first thing I noticed about the five-story building was that it was leaning perilously to the left. Yet even with its perilous tilt, the roof is somehow even to the ground, as if the builder anticipated the slow decomposition of its posture.

Milton trailed Mona to the red door. She wrestled her keys from her purse, and after a moment's negotiation with the lock, they were in. I wonder if Milton noticed, amidst his infatuation-throes, that all of the windows were dark and shuttered. It was a trap, no doubt about it. Then why was I following him, you ask? I felt like I owed it to Milton to look out for him. Also, it didn't seem like he knew the true identity of this woman. He was defenseless; I

had to help him. I resolved to continue to watch and wait and intervene if anything got hairy. But I was hopeful that Mona might reveal her hand a little and give us more information about why we'd gotten caught up in a turf war between ChemoDyne and the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. At least I would find out definitively if Milton was on my side or hers. I crept to the window beside the door, but before I could go in something grabbed my attention.

A low rumbling sound - at first indistinguishable from the sound of the nighttime creatures scuttling - rose from the garden-bed beneath my feet. The noise cranked up with an accelerating verve and translated to a tremendous vibrational force that rattled my teeth and traveled down the length of my spine like the L train. I quivered like a tuning fork, the roar of a thousand Triassic oceans in the porches of my ears. With my vision blurry I wasn't sure if it was me shaking or the earth shaking me. But the brick dust frittering down from the sky and the window glass rattling in the pane were enough to tell me that this was not a purely mental phenomenon. I dropped to a crouching position, grabbed my head in my hands and prayed for relief. Shatter his earth and you'll make any man pious. The noise was everywhere, the apocalypse raining down in all directions, pummeling me delirious. I damn near fainted right there in the ivy bed. Then, as quickly as it came, it was gone. Strange red lights slunk away into the trees. It was a train. We'd passed tracks beside the inn. This was where the Poltergeist 99 ran, Northern Wisconsin's longest-running rail car. Coal, mostly. A jet-black set up with 10 cars, never more. Called the Poltergeist because it blends into the night. The Poltergeist isn't the only train that runs this line. More will come.

I climbed through the unlocked window. I was in; Mona and Milton had moved into the other room. A tiny tiled atrium with a score of discarded shoes and a single empty umbrella rack made for a meek welcome. The shoes were every size, gender, and color of the spectrum.

A furred boot nestled with an open-toed platform shoe. Two child-sized sandals pigeon-toed next to single stiletto, Montezuma-blue. But something was off. It took me a minute to realize they were only left shoes. I spied Mona's matte black pumps next to the radiator, where Milton's Velcro garters draped.

The room beyond was a parlor-type setup, arranged with several pieces of stuffed furniture, an oval coffee table supporting a bouquet of Arethusa in a crystal vase, and a kitchenette off in one corner. I peeked behind the atrium door as Mona floated towards the kitchenette.

“Drink?”

“Sure. Jack and coke.”

Mona turned her slender back and Milton took the opportunity to sneak a prescription pill bottle from another hidden pocket in his robe. He downed a few suspect somethings and hurriedly stuffed the bottle in his pocket just as Mona turned with two drinks in hand. Oh boy, was Milton in for a surprise. This night would not go the way he was planning it would go. She drifted to Milton and gave him a drink.

“Thank you again for this, letting me stay. Very kind of you,” Milton mumbled into his drink.

“It's nothing, I'm happy to help, Professor Munn. I have to say, you look pretty good for a dead man.”

Milton, mid-drink, spluttered Jack and Coke all over himself. “How the hell do you know who I am?”

“I went to Northampton, Professor. I took your seminar. Botany and the Occult in Renaissance Europe. You don't remember me?”

Milton shook his head and placed his drink down.

“I was in your last class. You know, the one with Lily,” Mona raised an eyebrow meaningfully. Milton stiffened like he’d been electrocuted. Why was Mona bringing up Lily? Why throw pot shots like that?

“If you’ve brought me here to interrogate me about- about the... affair,” he choked out, “then I’m leaving.” Milton’s nostrils bristled indignantly. “I didn’t do it. And that’s all I need to say. Now, if we could just get back into your car and drive back to town, maybe to a *new* hotel, then I’ll be on my way and-”

A bolt of red flashed behind Mona’s eyes, but by the time Milton would’ve noticed it was gone, replaced by a droop of the eyelashes and chewing of the lower lip- calculated, if you ask me. “No, no Milton, don’t get mad,” Mona cooed. She drifted closer to Milton, clucking her tongue. “It’s OK, we don’t have to talk about it, we can just be happy you’re back, OK?” They were a hand’s-length away. “Take a drink,” she said, “relax. There you go.” She touched the lapel of his robe and looked at him with doe eyes.

Milton was stymied. Mona displayed her beauty somewhat sinisterly, towering above Milton like a skyscraper. He was overpowered. He picked up his drink and took a sip. Mona continued.

“I see you really don’t remember me, do you, huh? You’re not just playing, Professor? We had some good times you, and me, O, but I see it in your eyes, you really *don’t* remember...”

She pouted and moved away. She was playing the seductress if you ask me, trying to put Milton at ease by flattering him. She must know Milton. Milton stayed rooted to the spot. When Mona disappeared behind a door at the other end of the room Milton shook from his enchantment and followed. I pursued.

And just like that Milton Munn found himself in an impossibly tall library, taller than any I've ever seen, as tall as the house, five stories, outfitted with the usual library fare- two leather armchairs facing a dark wood fireplace in the north wall, a scotch decanter on a wooden table within armchair's arm reach, a spiral staircase that reached up, up, up, and tall bookcases that lined three walls and extended all the way up to the ceiling where a yellow crystal chandelier hung, casting the room in a warm, gauzy glow. The room served as the central common room area of the inn. A single hallway cinched around every floor of the inn, with landings appearing on every floor's eastern wall going all the way up to the fifth floor. The bookshelves teemed with books. Some curios and ikons: a glass-blown gun, a bust of a bodiless deer, antlers and all, carved from dark stone, a long feather the size of a child's arm the color of verdigris, Lily's eyes. Mona's too now.

I found a secondary stairwell in the southeast wing of the house and was able to climb to the second story. I haven't mentioned the most notably thing about the library: the butterflies. Hundreds decorated the shelves between books, kaleidoscopic and dazzling, assuming the shape of restlessness and light, the paper specimens frozen mid-flight, pinned under glass in plastic display cases. Mona stood in the middle of the room smiling the smile of someone who's about to say well, whaddya think? All the butterflies aimed their flight to the chandelier, as if seeking escape in the light.

"My grandfather raised me here, in this house," she said. "He fled Russia during the Bolshevik revolution. Managed to sneak out his wife and two sisters too. His sisters went to the coast, one to Boston and the other San Francisco. My grandfather picked Wisconsin. I think he was pleased with the symmetry."

With his sun-polished nose an inch away from the glass of a large brown specimen, Milton asked, "Were these his?"

“They were. Once he settled here and started this bed and breakfast, I think he met someone. Not my grandmother, a different woman. He’d disappear into the woods every day. Then he’d come back with a few different types of butterflies, and he’d say they were for me, *paper tokens*, he’d say *of my love*.” She affected a stodgy, oldmannish air. “But I think that was just a cover to fool my grandmother. She didn’t seem to notice, or mind, I guess.” Mona strutted over to Milton who’d taken up station next to a large blue butterfly the size of a plate.

“This is the *Morpho peleides*,” Mona said, “the Blue Morpho Butterfly. One of the largest in the world. He caught it in Ecuador. Did you know most animals can’t make the color blue on their own?” She turned to Milton. “Even those animals that seem really, really, blue, like a peacock, or a blue jay. The blue is a trick of structure. For this guy,” gesturing to the Morpho, “the wing is made up of thousands of tiny reflectors that bend the visible light spectrum to reflect blue. You know it’s the real deal when you grind up the wings. The powder turns grey, not blue, because you’ve broken all those tiny mirrors. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Before Milton could reply Mona flipped the case holding the Morpho over to reveal a score of tiny mauve eyespots ringed with concentric circles. “On the other hand, the underside is a lackluster brown,” she said, “but studded with eyelets to fool predators. It’s a trip to watch these guys fly. When their wings open and close it’s like they’re winking. And when they land on a branch and fold their wings up they turn into a leaf, just like that.” Mona snapped her fingers.

“That’s really something.” And then, after a beat. “You must love your grandfather.”

“My grandfather’s dead.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be, he was a drunk.” She laughed bitterly. “One day when he was blitzed off his ass and he took all the display boxes down, the entire collection, and piled them up in the lawn and poured gasoline all over them, but when he tried to light it his lighter wouldn’t work.” She tittered again. “So he dried them off and put them back. Died of a heart attack two years later.”

A moment of awkward silence ensued.

Mona stirred from her memory, looked at Milton and giggled. “What are you wearing?”

“Not bad, right?” A well-feathered fool.

“You look absurd.” A crystal laugh. “And what was that you were inhaling in the repair shop? And the pills you snuck earlier. Professor, professor...” The tongue-clucking again, discerning the enchantment in Milton’s eyes, “What are we going to do with you? Gone a little off the rails since Northampton? No, no, you’ve always been like that. A real *troublemaker*.” Then, with impressive tact, biting her lower lip ever-so-lightly, “There’s something about you, Milton Munn...”

Milton, flattered, laughed, took a drink, looked Mona in the eye and down at his feet again.

“It’s the city. Just got back. Not used to it.” A man of economy.

Mona saw her chance. “Oh, so new in town, huh? Just got in from the graveyard?”

Both hands to his robe lapels, gently pulling Milton closer, closer. “Where’ve you been all this time? You weren’t dead, obviously. I’ve missed you, Professor Munn...”

Milton broke away. “Look, I’m not dumb, I know what you’re trying at.” Yes Milton!

“You do?” Mona’s grey-green eyes wide. Finally Milton was showing his upper hand.

“Yeah, yeah I do. You thought you had me, playing me like this, well... it *almost* worked.” Was that a wink? “But lemme tell you- you reporters always come on too strong. I’ll

tell you what I told the other one: the Grief Orchid is real, we just can't find it anymore." O no.

"What's the Grief Orchid?" Mona asked, cocking an eyebrow. O Milton, you flirtatious idiot. You big, stupid, horny dolt.

Milton, suddenly cherry-red, asked, "You're not a reporter?" Mona shook her head. "O my," he said. O my is right Milton. He started to speak again. I could hardly watch. He was practically flailing into the trap. "So you haven't heard?" Mona didn't bat an eye. "There's this group of people, like a cult, called Society of the Wild Woman or something-

"Society of the Woman in the Wilderness?"

"Oh yeah, that's it, you've heard of them?"

"Yeah, they're the ones who've been protesting ChemoDyne."

"Yeah that's right. They've got beef with ChemoDyne because of their... because of their..."

"Neonicotinoidal insecticides," Desdemona interjected, a businesslike authority in the bottom register of her champagne voice. Milton frowned. Did he realize what was going on yet? No, he was too spacey and unfocused and horny to realize that he was in danger.

"Yeah, that. Wow, I'm surprised you haven't heard about this. Well, anyway, yeah, so, enter the Grief Orchid." Milton brought his hands together as if he was holding the base of the plant. I silently implored Milton not to reveal too much. "*Dolorous orchideae*. A verdigris calyx, the outermost whorl," he points to the invisible flower in his hand, "of three sepals, pointed-

"Professor, it's been five years since I've taken your class."

Milton looked slightly put out, a rose in each cheek. He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, the jist of it is, it's basically this single flower, this tear-shaped baby blue with three grey-green

petals around it.” O yes, did I mention that the flower I devoted my life to had the same color petals as my deceased lover’s eyes? “Let’s see, it emits a hallucinogenic perfume that also acts as a natural pesticide. And the Society is threatening to drop a massive seed bomb - basically an enormous dirt clod - of Grief Orchid seeds on Wissahickon unless ChemoDyne agrees to move out. The hallucinogenic perfume is wind-borne, and these things, at least from what I’ve read, are supposed to be pretty fast-growing, attaching to anything, like, say, corn stalks. You’d have to firebomb all the crops and woods around here just to exterminate them. And meanwhile the whole town would be tripping balls.” Milton laughed. Mona stayed silent. “Well, that’s if it existed, anyway. It doesn’t anymore, far as I’ve seen. Got harvested out of existence a long time ago. That’s what I told the reporter who came asking me about the Grief Orchid, since I’m pretty well versed in orchids. And that’s why I figured you were a reporter too. Sorry,” he added, biting his lower lip.

“Milton, you’re supposed to be dead. Didn’t you worry when the reporter came calling?” In an instant all of the color had drained from Milton’s face. Milton, you idiot. I swear the man switches back and forth between genius and idiocy on a daily basis.

“To be honest, I didn’t really think of that.” Milton rubbed his head. “Hard to remember you’re dead sometimes, ya know?” He laughed weakly.

“What did he look like?”

“Well, he was very tall, bald and thin, like a cattail in a black suit. He had full credentials so I didn’t think too much of it. He wanted more info on the Grief Orchid, whether or not it’s real, a viable threat, et cetera. I think his name was Alex, or Allen. Andy maybe? Abraham? The Dognapper? It could be, and it’d explain why he dressed in disguise at the cave. But it doesn’t tell us any more about his motivations. He could be working for the Society or ChemoDyne or neither.

Mona's gaze was steely. She ground her teeth and clicked her jaw.

"You know him?" Milton asked timidly.

"No." The word was terse and guttural, like cutting cloth with a dull knife. If she's this big of enemies with the guy then I've gotta think that he works for ChemoDyne. It makes sense that they'd know each other, he and Mona, both being important to the other's group. Mona regained her composure "Why's it called the Grief Orchid?"

"When the flowers bloom in the trees, they look like tiny people falling, suspended in free fall. Their "legs" are actually their lower sepals, thin and spear-like. And they're covered in these microscopic bristles, millions of them. When a breeze picks up the legs rub against each other and the friction of the bristles rubbing together makes this lovely and haunting high-pitched howl. Looks like someone falling and sounds like someone mourning, so they called it the Grief Orchid."

Mona turned and ascended the metal spiral staircase in the western corner of the room. At about a flight and a half up she stopped and leaned over the railing.

"See that orange specimen there, above the Urania Rhiphaeus?"

Milton looked to where she was pointing and blinked.

"The multi-colored one, all psychedelic looking, next to the Nefertiti bookend."

"Oh right, yeah I think I see what you mean, that small orange guy there."

"That small orange guy is a Mormon Fritillary, first one I ever caught. Found him sunning on a rock in Utah, Zion National Park. I'd snuck off from my church choir group. They made us wear fanny packs." Mona made a face.

"You sing?"

"Only when no one's listening. Well anyways, you reminded me of him with all your talk about orchids. Have you ever heard of the Butterfly Orchid?"

Milton's eyes lit up like morning sky. Careful Milton. Don't reveal too much.

Remember: a good magician never reveals his secrets. He put his drink down and moved towards the staircase, clutching the railings at Mona's feet with both hands. A modern Romeo.

"I *love* the Butterfly Orchid," Milton enthused, all sunny and wide-eyed. He nodded voraciously as if to back up the surefire truth of that statement. He closed his eyes and began to rattle off, "The Butterfly Psychopsis. A medium sized epiphytic species typically found in South America carrying a single, apical, oblong-elliptic, orange-red flower. I find that they prefer—"

"Milton, Milton," Mona chided from the stairs, her chin in her hand, elbow on the railing. "What's with all this scientific hoo-haa? Bring us out of the clouds, Milton, let's skip to the part where you put it in laymen's terms. Tell me without all those long, boring words in the way."

Milton with the rose again. "Well," said Milton, choosing his words carefully, "I happen to think those long, boring words are beautiful in a way, and have a kind of magic all their own, like speaking in an ancient language."

Mona tipped her head back and tittered that crystal laugh. Milton smiled, then frowned. "What's so funny?"

"Milton, come up here please." Milton didn't need much convincing. He scooted up the stairs and stopped on the step below Mona. The tip of his nose stared Mona's navel square in the eye. He cranes his neck to meet her eyes.

"Now turn around, yes, there you go." Milton turned and looked at the Fritillary, and for a moment, almost, did he just? No, he can't have noticed me. Still, I padded around the circumference of the hall and out of their line of sight, just in case. Can't be reckless.

"Now," Mona said whispering in Milton's ear, "Tell me about the Butterfly Orchid." She was trying to loosen him up, definitely. Was Mona going to ask for Milton's help? Is that

the reason behind all this flirtation? From my new position above and behind them I couldn't see Milton at all, small as he was, eclipsed by Desdemona, but I imagine he was grinning ear-to-ear, eyes crinkled and bright.

“Well, well, the Butterfly Orchid,” spoke Milton's disembodied voice. “The Butterfly Orchid, at least the one I'm familiar with, from South-and-Central America, the Psychopsis, is special, because he's a great example how all of this - ” He gestured wildly at the room's rainbow contents; Mona suddenly sprouted two new, ropey arms - “is connected.” Mona giggled.

“There's an idea going around that there can be many bodies in one single organism. That one organism doesn't have to be narrowly defined as “having only one individual body.” An organism with many different bodies is called a superorganism. Bees are superorganisms. Termites, coral. I would argue the Butterfly Orchid and its pollinator, a butterfly, are superorganisms too. Neither the butterfly nor the flower would survive without the other; they depend on each other. Now I imagine you showed me this Fritillary because you think it pollinates the Butterfly Orchid, right? Hmm...” Milton put his chin in his palm, rubbing the smooth nub. Mona checked her watch. “It certainly matches the coloring of some of the orchids I've seen in South America, so it'd make sense that they'd be attracted.”

“Actually, no. Remember how I caught this one in Utah? That's too far north for the Butterfly Orchid. No, no,” Mona turned and took a few steps up the metal spiral staircase, clicking her tongue absentmindedly. Milton, startled, turned and set off after her. She stopped one flight up and scanned the wall for something. I snuck up the side-stairwell in the western side of the building and got a level view. Just as I settled into my new perch Mona pointed to a specimen.

“There. *Marpesia petrius*. The Ruddy Daggerwing. Hind-wing daggerlike, upperside orangish, underside mottled, like a dead leaf. I think this one’s in the running for pollinators in the Butterfly Orchid two-man show. Caught him in Brazil, and the proboscis is long enough to reach the nectary.” Milton looked up at Mona. Somewhere beneath our feet a thrumming from a far-off place began to sound. Another train. As it approached the inn the rumbling became more and more noticeable. Trinkets began to shake on their shelves. A book cascaded down from the fifth floor and fell open on to the carpet below. *The Hound of Baskervilles*. Milton, already informed, I assume, as to the origin of the clockwork earthquake, ignored the disruption and spoke louder.

“I’m impressed, you know a lot about the Butterfly Orchid,” he half-shouted.

More books began to fall. Old leather-bound tomes from the highest, dustiest expanses of the library. *Frankenstein*. *A History of the Peloponnesian War*. *Dead Souls*. The shaking picked up force, emanating from every vibrational pore and molecule. It began to thunder in the library, the furious sound reaching everywhere at once. Mona shouted over the gale-force roar, and I was only able to pick out a few words of what she said, but judging from the sudden pallor in Milton’s face, I knew the jig was up.

“I know, and ---- that --- you too. You ----- hybridize, right?” That was enough. She knows. All the research in pursuit of the Apollinaire prize, our miracle growing in the basement, ruined. She knows we make Grief Orchids. What was she going to do to Milton? Force him to make her one? As the thunder accelerated to avalanche speed, ceiling damn near caving in by the looks of it, the waterfall of books clattering the floor, ice tinkling in Milton’s glass, the sky falling, I could only pick up a single word coming out of Milton’s mouth. “How?”

“I have my ways Professor, my --- are out there.” Mona, immaculately calm amidst the chaos, gestured to the open air like something was about to reveal itself from behind a curtain.

“You’ve ---- hybridize Psychopsis with ---- the bee orchid. Which means ---- you’re ---- to create a hybrid ---- desperate, because no one’s been able----”

Desdemona pulled a rabbit from her hat. The train’s apocalyptic echo was ricocheting off the shelves, causing a continuous flood of books to tumble from above.

Milton, bleached of color, stuttered, “y-yo-you’re *spying* on me?” He spit out the word and globules of saliva caught the light for a moment before firework-spattering onto Desdemona. Did that mean-? Had Milton actually continued working on our project on Mt. Pine *without me*? Simply impossible. The logistics required would- but maybe... Three steps above Milton and double his height, Desdemona’s aspect was suddenly severe. Somewhere in the musculature of her face a cord was drawn.

“I know what --- Apoll---, Milton. ---- Very noble. And if you think ---- the Benzene ring --- dead wrong.” Is she going to *steal* our research from us? She was threatening to undo everything I’d been working towards, all the steps I’d taken to ensure my success in the wake of Milton’s flight, the hours spent, my languishing. This was my ticket out of this hellhole corn nut town, my victory over all the naysayers who said I couldn’t pull it off without Milton, the *botanist savant*, they said. Well, without him I was on well on my way, I was going to pull it off all by myself, I was going to be famous! How could Milton continue without me, his star pupil? How could he?

Milton’s hand flew to his chest like a baby bird. He gripped it with his other hand so I couldn’t quite make out what he was cradling. The Benzene ring? Could it be something to do with our hybridization? The train’s scream began to wane. Soon the roaring was replaced by a rumbling, and then a low murmur, and then a silence more impenetrable than the thunder.

“Milton, relax, I’m not going to hurt you.” Mona spoke carefully. “I want to show you something. But I want you to keep what we’ve been talking about in mind. This you-scratch-

my-back-I-scratch-yours agenda that the flowers and the butterflies've got going on. We can help each other out. Would you like that?" The cord slackened; Desdemona was liquid again, inescapably charming. Milton quivered like a hardboiled egg.

"I need your help, and you need mine. We can help each other, Milton." She turned and started climbing the stairs.

"Wh-who are you?" Milton managed to get out.

"You already know who I am." And with that, Mona disappeared in the spiral.



At the top of the spiral stairwell stood a red door. Mona mounted the stairs with a ballerina's aplomb and unlocked the door with a key around her neck, a small silver medallion glinting yellow. From the vantage on the landing opposite a few details of the room stuck out. First of all, it was enormous, covering the entire floor-length of the house. The floor was a rich lacquered hardwood, mahogany-red, extending to a glassed-in sun porch in the rear. The roof was vaulted, an A-frame style pyramid with exposed beams, a network of catwalks that could conceal any lurker. A tidy twin bed was made up in one corner: one white pillow, perfectly undented, smoothed over, like milk. A compact sink/stove/mini fridge operation hulked in the opposite corner closest to the door. The wall between them was off-white and bare and brave for it, exposing its belly to the fluorescent fly-catcher light installation. Untidy piles of books and papers dotted the room like paper cairns, some top-heavy and teetering on the brink, some already collapsed, splayed on the ground in windblown scatters. Besides this, the room was unremarkable, save one wall.

The wall opposite the proper living side was hung with a large canvas, at least twenty feet across and ten feet high. A small foldout table sat like an island amongst the cairns, bearing a wealth of painting supplies. Contents: a medley of paints in plastic bottles, wiry paint brushes jammed into mugs, several wooden paint-scarred pallets, a nearly empty glass of red wine, a decanter of water, an enormous black stone mortar and pestle, a bowl of water floating with tea-lights.

In the painting, Wissahickon unpacked, bloomed, spread out against blue sky, a sprawling, green landscape, sprightly taut over rolling meadows against the dark shadow of woodland. A vividly realistic portrait painted with force perspective, a trompe l'oeil, a portal through which one might step and suddenly find out that the world you were living in before was the false one and *this*, this is the real one, or so it seemed to me as I watched Milton potter warily into the room and wondered what it all might mean. Mona bent over the table, working on some dark potion, I suspected. Milton's eyes moved back and forth between the painting and Mona.

The perspective was massive, taken from an elevated distance, impressively high. I'd say it was from on Mt. Pine but there, beyond the main street strip painted so tiny that it looks like the circuitry of a music box, beyond the Nicolet National Forest's rolling woodland, daubed with green treetops in wiry starburst strokes, stood the heretofore mentioned mountain, and the peak, or rather where the peak should be, having long since been lopped off for industrial mining purposes, was encircled with wispy whitish-blues, like a phantom limb extending from the rock, reaching endlessly up, edges fading into sky.

The sun and the moon were out in full, suspended in both top corners like two coins of a different metal. The painting gave the impression of an atlas or an almanac, the colors sturdy, lines sure. Most of the canvas was encompassed by seas of green and gold; valleys of tall grass swirled at the outskirts of town. Corn fields carved yellow geometricals out of the countryside. The air was filled with a murmuration of birds, starlings star-bound, tiny hyphens inked in black.

And then, in the largest valley just about an arm's length west of town, the Godwin Basin by the look of it, painted as an oblong bowl the length of Milton, a green lake, I could barely make out a jumble of color; tiny, scattered, rainbow dots filled the empty clearing. What's more, those golden geometricals, the cornfields, shimmered a psychedelic waxy purple-blue, refracting the gold like the underside of a shell.

Milton peered around the room, wary, on the look out for hidden assassins. He checked the corners, checked them twice. When he was sufficiently satisfied the room was empty, save Mona, he turned to her. They couldn't have been more than twenty feet from each other but they might as well have been on opposite sides of the Grand Canyon.

"Who are you?" Milton squawked.

"I'm Mona, silly." Mona turned from the painting and looked at Milton, and I had to dive behind a plaster reconstruction of William Henry Harrison's death mask because for a moment it looked like Mona was staring at me, not Milton.

"How do you know where I've been? How do you know about the hybridizing, about the ring?" Milton holds his hand to his chest like he'd flown into a window.

"Come here, Milton," Mona said, returning her attention to the painting. She moseyed over to the foldout table, humming a tune, picked up a hair-wire brush, dipped it in an iridule

of purple paint, and poked at a cornfield in the northwest quadrant of the painting. Milton didn't move.

"I'll tell you all that in a second. First, what do you think?" she asked, attending to the painting.

"It's beautiful."

"Would you like to know how I made it?"

"With paint and paintbrush, I imagine. I *would* like to know how you know so much about me." An adder's bite crept into Milton's voice. He moved to the painting and the two stood side by side, admiring the wall.

Mona snapped from her reverie. "Wait here."

She hotfooted it out of the room. In the trail of perfume that followed I was able to catch a whiff of her ghost, a pink shadow: cigarettes second hand, apple skins. She disappeared down the spiral, footsteps clamoring in the tall, empty vault. In the meantime Milton pulled a vape pen from an inner pocket of his robe, raised it to his lips, thought twice about it, and put it away. Mona returned.

In her hands were two plastic cases displaying four butterflies each. One case was all Sedona orange, the other a rainbow on black like the visible light spectrum floating on an oil spill, a loose-script scattering of ROYGBIV. She placed the black rainbows on the ground by the foldout and opened the oranges. For a moment she stood above them with a gentle smile, biting the bottom portion of her lip ever-so-lightly.

"Appias nero. From Malaysia. My grandfather took me when I was nine, it was a Christmas present. My first Nero. Happiest summer of my life." Mona stroked a paper wing. Then, in one fell swoop, she picked up the case and dumped all of the butterflies into the black

stone mortar. She picked up the carafe of water and poured it over the butterflies' mangled bodies. Milton Munn's moon-round eyes bulged.

'What are you doing?'

'Exactly what I said I would. Showing you how I made the painting.' Mona picked up the pestle and began to grind the butterfly concoction, not without certain relish. The contents of the mortar liquefied; an orange paste grew in volume, consuming black abdomens, the paper-thin scintilla of a stray broken wing. She paused, bent down to the black rainbow display case, opened the lid, mused over its contents, bit the nail of her right pointer finger absentmindedly, and plucked a maroon baby butterfly from its nesting-place. A mix of disgust and awe passed over Milton's features. At several moments he looked as if he was about to say something but thought better of it.

Finally, as Mona added a liquid amber thickening agent to the mix, Milton asked, clearly horrified, "You make paint with your grandfathers' butterflies?"

"I'm correcting his wrongs," said Mona like it was nothing, hard at work, grinding the pestle furiously, her elbow crooked, her body gaunt and angular above the table, focusing her attention on the emergingly-orange paint.

"What do you mean? I thought you loved the butterflies."

Mona stopped what she was doing and looked up, envenomated, the musculature of her face severe again. "Professor Munn, you should know better than most that nature isn't metaphor. Despite the venom in her words, her voice was like a dial tone. All the champagne and titanium was gone. It seemed to me like we were getting a better glimpse for who this Desdemona really was. "My grandfather thought that with these 'lil tokens' he was demonstrating love, love, when he was killing thousands and thousands of living, breathing beings. He was a second-rate father and a second-rate man up until the day he died and when I

inherited the house my first thought was to light the goddamn thing on fire and collect the insurance money but...”

Like a switch had been flipped, Mona snapped out of it. She sighed, then offered a levitating smile. “But I decided to try and undue his shit. I could make something of it, something good, something to try to restore the- I decided that if my grandfather spent his whole life materializing living beings then I would do my best to do the opposite and preserve what good we've got left.”

Silence, the kind imparted by the exit of a summer storm, graced the only occupied bedroom of the Mothlight Inn. It was well past midnight. Outside, a curtain had fallen. Milton wondered at the floor, eyes on his slippers, unable to meet the gaze trained on him like a crystal drill bit.

“By turning them into goo?” He offered finally, mouth dusty, eyes shoe-ward.

Mona shrugged her shoulders. “Call it an art of apology.” She placed the paint-speckled pestle onto the table, picked up the mortar in one hand and the paintbrush in the other and drifted towards the painted simulacrum as if pulled on invisible strings. She drifted to the green lake, bent down, bowing, worshipper of paint, approaching it with the brush. As she dotted at the basin, Milton padded up behind her.

“What are you painting?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes, who else?” She turned to him without standing up, spine still arched, wound up in Levis, a piston, primed, with her thumb put up to the side of her face and one eye squinted. She turned back to the painting.

“I've painted everyone else in this godforsaken town.”

“You have?”

“Yes.” A clipped huff through the nostrils.

“Why?”

Mona turned from her Milton in miniature, an orangey blob the size of a fruit fly.

“Well Milton, some people fish for their whole lives, some people farm, some people make collages, some collect butterflies, some write novels about their town, some paint it, it’s all the same. Just something to fill the time. I’ve gotta use this paint somehow.” She eyed Milton for a moment, expecting something. After a beat she turned back to her blob.

“XRaid, ChemoDyne’s top selling herbicide, ever heard of it?” she asked.

“Sure. They just developed it this year right? Supposed to be non-toxic. A pioneer in the pesticide industry.”

Mona shook her head. “A total crock. XRaid is no less harmful than YAlive, that herbicide that infected all the birds around here, remember?”

“Oh that’s right, I remember that, that made national news. Flocks of starlings and sparrows committed mass suicide right?”

She looked up from her painting. “They dove into the lake, no hesitation. Thousands and thousands of them. I was there. A fungus had been growing in the brains of all the avian life around here, causing them to cliff-dive like that. And what caused the fungus? YAlive, that’s what.”

“That’s very sad.”

“It’s criminal. Now they say XRaid is safe, XRaid is the future, but what else has to die for the sake of vegetables bigger than your head? They’re decimating the land, fostering monocultures that drive local wildlife away or else starve it out. For the sake of profits. And no

one around here gives a shit because they're spoonfeeding us presents to keep us quiet and complacent. Did you hear about the EtherNet they installed in January?"

"Supposed to be the cutting-edge of wireless technology, way I heard it, some super-high-tech nanotubes strung between telephone towers of something, invisible to the naked eye.

"Well that's all well and good, and I'm very glad the Wissahickon populace can download its banana bread recipes and tentacle porn faster, but really it's just to keep us quiet after all the dogs went missing last November."

"I didn't hear about that."

"You wouldn't've. I think it was around October that it started happening. Dogs disappearing, no trace, no clue as to where they ran off. Leashes laying discarded in yards, the dog park by the forest abandoned. By November there wasn't a single dog in Wissahickon. Over 145 confirmed missing. Corgies, Pugs, black and yellow labs, German Retrievers, Rottweilers, even a Burmese Mountain dog. You should've seen the fliers taped to every telephone pole, mailbox, window in town. Like letters for the lost. Then in January ChemoDyne announces they're installing the EtherNet, and the next day all the fliers were down. Just like that."

"Did they ever find the dogs?"

"Nope. Far as I can see Wissahickon has been dog-less for five months and everyone's forgotten about it." Mona backed away from the painting and admired her handiwork.

"There. Now I've painted everyone in Wissahickon. Even the dead ones." She glanced at Milton out the corner of her eye. She walked back to the table and placed the paintbrush and the mortar down. Her movements, it occurred to me, were bizarrely mechanical, automaton-like, like the wind-up ballerina on the top of a music box, well oiled and glossy, as if deep inside Mona a dark engine thrummed, keeping her alert. She turned to Milton peering at

the Basin and hoping that a picture might coalesce from the dots if you looked in just the right way at just the right angle, a trick of the light with a lithe slight of hand that signifies everything one way and all the others, nothing.

“Milton.” Milton snapped back to life. “It’s time to get to the thick of it. Why you’re here.”

“I thought I was here because you were offering me a place to stay.”

“No, why you’re *here*, in Wissahickon.”

“Oh. Well.” Here it comes. The grand reveal. If she asks Milton to help the Society, will he say no?

“Okay, allow me to take a guess. After Lily’s death,” Milton winced, “you faked your own death and fled, tail between your legs, to Mt. Pine. My informants tell me you found something up there that -”

“Ok, that’s enough. I’ve had enough of you narrating my life for me, thank you. I think it’s time I asked *you* some questions. Who are you, and what do you want from me?”

“Can I show you something?” Without waiting for Milton to respond Mona walked to the back of the room where a glassed-in sun porch projected from the building. Milton followed and I crept into the bedroom, watching from a shadowy beam where I was just able to make out the scene unfolding.

The sun porch was decorated like a window shop display. The outer wall was all window through which – at first - nothing could be seen. Amidst a score of delicate tea lights floating throughout the room, an assortment of glass chimes, fragments of stained glass, miniature phials, pendants, jars, amethyst and quartz, half-filled cups of water, crystal decanters, colored sea glass and green and blue bottles of every shape and size- from a vial the size of my pinky nail to a beveled gallon jug as plump as a housecat- refracted the glimmering

candles a thousandfold, so that in every piece of glass a bright pool cast Tiffany light, conjuring upside-down reflections, bottling the world in miniature. Shadows conspired with light. In the middle of the room a small, white plinth held an indiscernible flower. Milton joined Mona next to it. Before she could speak, he gasped and leaned in to inspect the flower. His nose touched a petal.

“Is this-?”

“Not, it’s not real. It’s a paper facsimile. Luckily, this one isn’t hallucinogenic.”

“Why in the world did you make a paper reconstruction of the Grief Orchid?”

Mona lifted her eyes from the crafted flower. They flickered in the candlelight.

“Milton, I’m the leader of the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness. Well, me and a few others. It’s us who’ve been trying to drive ChemoDyne out of town. We need your help.”

For the first time in many years I watched Milton laugh. His pupils widened in their blue orbit; he took a big huff of air and tipped his chin to his chest. There was that moment of expectation that I remember, the quiet foretelling impending release. And then the laugh itself, the music of which has always brought back to life an antique baby piano I used to play with in childhood, a toy my father found on the side of the road and brought back home for me one day. The hammers were rusty and some keys didn’t work, but I kept it for some time before I sold it, along with everything I owned, before coming to Northampton.

Mona wasn’t having any of it. “I’m serious,” she said. Milton looked up and detected the atmosphere of the room: static and cold, like all the air had been sucked out. Milton backed away from Mona without a word, edging into the bedroom. Mona closed in on him with deliberate, spiderlike steps, seizing the lapel of his robe in her fist.

“Listen to me Milton. Do you really want to live in a world decimated by ChemoDyne? Capitalism carves its way through Middle America and it’s business as usual and you’re ok with that?”

Milton pulled on Mona’s wrist to get her to let him go. She didn’t. He kept his hand on her wrist. “Bu-But what you’re doing, it’s wrong, it’s-”

She pulled him closer and Milton’s eyes shot open even wider. “What’s so wrong about blowing up a couple of old buildings? No one’s getting hurt.”

“Ok, but, but this is crazy, you can’t possibly believe-”

“What, that ChemoDyne will listen to us? Sure, maybe ChemoDyne won’t listen, maybe we’re just a few fringe crazies threatening to drop a big clod of dirt on a middle-of-nowhere Podunk town, but guess what? Now we’ve got you Milton, and like it or not, you better believe that ChemoDyne knows you’re back. They’ve got eyes everywhere. Nothing in this town goes unseen.” For a moment I thought Mona might’ve glanced up at me, but there’s definitely no way she could’ve seen me in all the shadow in the rafters. “And if they know you’re in town, they know that we’re a threat. You were close to successfully hybridizing the Psychopsis with the Ophiris apifera before that stunt you pulled at the *Moonrise*. You were this close to bringing your own myth to life, you were *creating* your own Grief Orchid. Think of the glory.”

For the record: it’s not that easy to *make* a flower. When the two species of orchids cross-pollinate the resulting seed is delicate, lined with a semitransparent, diaphanous skin, a creation of nature that almost shouldn’t be, requiring around-the-clock care in our basement-turned greenhouse nursery. We failed countless times. The seed always refused to germinate and the chromosome cocktail we’d inject to catalyze the hybridization did nothing to bring about a successful flowering. Milton was convinced the problem lied in the cocktail, that if we

engineered the correct molecular structure to bridge the genera gap that it could be done. He “died” before we found it. This correct configuration, this one-in-a-billion shot, is the riddle I’ve been working so long on, the one that Milton’s about to give up.

“Milton, you can help us. You said yourself that you don’t agree with ChemoDyne’s tactics. So prove it. Help us make the Grief Orchid. We won’t drop a seed bomb on the town right away; we’ll just scare them a little. Show ‘em we could if we wanted to. With you back in town, we’ll see if they take us seriously. No one has to get hurt.”

Milton pulled his hand free. “I don’t want to get roped into anything illegal, Mona. What I was doing with the orchids was my business, not for some resurrected German doomsday cult to wave around like a glass gun.” *His* business? Not the first time I’ve caught Milton red-handed pulling the rug out from under me.

“Milton, listen. Give me five minutes to explain. Five minutes is all I ask.”

Milton hesitated. They locked eyes. His body wavered for a moment like a buoy in a strange current. He was under her spell; he sighed. “Alright. Five minutes, then I’m outta here.” Mona smiled, all teeth.

“Lovely. Come here please.”

Mona motioned him closer to the window. With their backs turned I nimbled from my hiding place and stashed myself beneath the bed. I was afforded a brand new scene.

Mona moved to a small writing desk in the northeast corner. “Dandelion wine?”

“No thank you.”

“I made it myself.” A pout.

“Oh, alright then.” She poured two glasses and gave Milton one. She watched him over the rim of the glass as she took a drink, then turned back to the window.

“You know, I don’t think anyone knows what space is until they come to Wissahickon. I mean, *really* know. Not like this.” The night sky unfolded beyond the window big, transparent, black, a bowl of obsidian illuminated by its contents: congregations of silver, moon rime and stellified calcium, circles, rockets, whole systems of planets and wreaths of clouds of rock and ice, floating, suspended, like dust in a sunbeam, like women in a swimming pool.

“It really is something.” Milton took a polite sip.

“Lily was named after the moon.” Milton’s head swiveled to Mona, who was looking at the moon.

“But not this moon. The other moon,” Mona said.

“How do you know what Lily was named after? What other moon?”

“We were... friends. She told me about this astrologer from the 1900’s, I think his name was Dr. Old, but he went by Sepharial. He wrote a lot of books about Lillith. The moon, not the Lily we knew. He claims to have seen a black, glossy body orbiting beyond the moon. A black moon half the size of our moon, moving so fast that it’s impossible to see. This he named Lillith. In Hebrew mythology Lillith was intended to be Adam's first wife, but when he tried to dominate her in bed she refused and left the Garden of Eden of her own accord. God sicked three angels after her but she refused again, so she was demonized as an evil woman who gave birth to demons and stole babies from their beds and ate them for breakfast. A strange woman, existing beyond the grasp of man. That was Lillith.”

” Milton took a bigger sip of wine.

A strained silence. Then, “What’s this got to do with ChemoDyne?” he asked.

“I’m getting there. In three days time there will be another black moon. The moon we know will darken. It’s a syzygy; they happen every few months, when everything matches up

perfectly. It will look like a hole has been cut out of the sky, like we are trapped at the bottom of a very, very tall well. The dark moon will open up a door to the past.” Milton finished his wine, sniffed the glass and put it down. I noticed his hand was trembling. “The dark of the moon is a powerful time, psychically speaking. The air is charged, primitive, rich. Wiccans consider it a special time for occult magic. Banishing rituals and binding spells. The moon will be new, a time for personal growth, healing and blessing of new ventures. Old systems breaking down, new seeds planted. It’s a call to arms. We’re living in a black moon phase, Milton. The earth is dying and ChemoDyne is the culprit. It’s funny, they’re pumping out these chemicals to stave off ruin, fearing the dark, making an anathema of natural death, but at the end of the day all they’re doing is hastening the void. And you hold the key to end it all, to run this unnatural, deathless life support machine out of town and restore the cycles to the earth. Redeem her of her powers of regeneration, Milton, you’ve got the chance to make a difference. You hold the key. You’re wearing it right there, on your finger.” Milton looked down, and for the first time I was afforded a glimpse of the Benzene ring.

On the ring finger of Milton’s left hand three gold hexagons laid out flat in a line, fused to one another at their bases, occupying the entire length of the finger. It was the honeycomb insignia again. The Cave of Kelpius, the parade, the Tabernacle. It was everywhere. *He* was everywhere. Anthony Avarro. I couldn’t help feeling he was my sinister master of ceremonies.

The gold on the ring was waxy, as if the ring had been left out in the sun for some time. Four rubies sat in a diamond formation, one at the center of the furthest hexagon just beneath the nail, two on either side of the middle hexagon, and another in the middle of the first.

Milton pulled it off his finger and held it below his nose to examine. He blinked several times, as if to clear away a fog, and slipped it back on. “Mona,” he said, “I’m afraid I’m not the man for the job. This is work for the hotblooded, someone such as yourself. I’d rather not get mixed up in any turf wars today. But if you let me leave, I’ll offer you a name.”

“What name?” Mona’s words flicked off her reptilian tongue like acid.

“Timofey Oleander.” Just like that Milton threw me under the bus. Right into the arms of a dangerous cult. Thanks a heap, Milton. “He’s the, uh, the guy you’re looking for. My student. We worked together on, on-” His voice faltered; it seemed heavy, like molasses, like his tongue had been numbed. He swayed a little, took a halting step back and threw his hand to the wall to steady himself. He put his other hand on his knee and bent over. His breathing was labored; his chest heaved. This was the first episode of its kind I’ve seen. Mona stayed where she was.

“Are you alright? Can I offer you some water?” Her voice was singsong, sharp as glass.

“No, I’m fine. This happens sometimes. I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Nothing a little Grief Orchid nectar won’t cure, huh Professor? A taste of your own medicine?”

What was going on? I began to notice a certain peculiar ringing in my ears, like I was picking up satellite static. The train again? I looked around for any fortelling signs: paper cairns trembling, ice tinkling in glass, and it was then that I first noticed something strange about the mural. Mona had turned off the lights in her bedroom as she swept Milton into the sun-room, but she didn’t turn off all of the lights. At first the glare of the overhead fluorescent in the bedroom made sure we never saw it, but Mona didn’t anticipate a second guest. My eyes had been so fixed on the scene at hand that I never noticed the light leaking from behind the painting. It wavered, as if cast on water, more liquid than normal light is supposed to be. But,

regardless, aha! Sermonizing away in her room of swimming candlelight, Mona had forgotten the most important candle of all: the one she left burning in her secret room behind the mural.

The mural covered a small, doorless offshoot of the loft no bigger than a broom closet, from what I could spy through the semitransparent canvas. As quietly as I could I moved from my position under the bed and crawled hands and knees. But something was off. My limbs were sluggish. I glanced over towards Milton and Mona. Mona stood over Milton; there was something haunted about rigidity of her spine. Something mechanical. It was taut, like a bowstring. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Milton sat on the floor with his knees to his chest, wide-eyed, shaking violently. When I looked in his eyes I thought I saw straight down the pupil to the bottom of the man. He looked like he was in terrible pain. His features began to change. His face was warping like putty, like someone had their fingers behind his skin and was pushing outward. I was suddenly acutely aware of many different intersecting lines of symmetry carving up Milton's face. His eyes, nose, and mouth all bent at odd angles, forming a mosaic of geometric shapes that interlocked and unlocked, spinning around each other in a whirling motion, revolving into fitted places then falling out of alignment again. This continued for I don't know how long. Two horns materialized- short, twisted ones, like a toad's- on either temple. He was all corners, odds and ends.

And then, as if summoned by Milton's meek trembling, taking its cue, the ten-gallon horn of a train sounded somewhere in the dark, miles away. I tore myself away from the frightening scene, still unsure as to what was happening to me. The horn sounded again, much closer this time. Had Mona drugged us? Was it in the Grief Orchid? But that would mean... I crawled to the canvas and scuttled beneath it, looking for a place to hide. Sensing the hardwood vibrating beneath my hands, I picked them up: my fingerprints were growing from out of my hand. All of the lines and ridges swirled, peaking into blossoming points on each of my

fingertips. What was it that Mona said about Grief Orchid nectar healing Milton? I ransacked my brain for any memory or clue pointing to Milton being sick, but my thoughts began to spiral out of control. Finally I remembered where I was and looked up.

A single desk with a wooden chair. That was it, the only furniture in the room. The desk was a flat wooden beam supported by four legs, nothing more. A single candle burned in the center of the desk. The flame was animated, flickering in an invisible breeze, even though the air was stifling in the closed-off room. There was an envelope, open, next to the candle, with a thick sheath of papers stuffed inside. I reached for them, my limbs feeling phantom, alien to me, sweat rolling down my back, the roar of the train growing from the floor, reverberating off the walls, shaking my legs. I picked up the top sheet. The page was covered in tiny, typed script; it took me a few moments to realize they were medical records. For Milton. I only registered a single word in all that ink: Meningioma. I rubbed my eyes and looked up to find all the letters had fallen from their places into an unintelligible heap at the bottom of the page. Milton had a brain tumor? The train screamed closer. How did these records get here? I turned over the envelope. They were mailed to a Desdemona Glass. Glass. Mona Glass. Glass. Like Lillith Glass. The grey-green eyes. Lillith's too. Desdemona is sisters with Lily, the woman who died, the woman I loved. And it was my fault she died! O, forgive me Mona, forgive me Milton, forgive me Lily. The train was on top of us now; it felt like it had broken through a wall of the house, tearing furiously through the library below us. The desk and candle juddered violently. I looked down between the slats of the hardwood and saw something moving down there, polished and dark. The whistle sounded again, piercing bone; I thought my head would come clean off my body. I cried out, by my words were lost. Then, as I dropped to my knees, I listened in horror as the pitch of the whistle began to warp, dipping from operatic soprano to basso profundo, until it sounded like a furious bellow. I clutched my ears and looked up for any

way to escape. There was a shadow of a man in the bedroom, right beside the mural, staring in at me. His edges rippled with fire. I staggered back; he moved in. His silhouette grew with every backwards step I took. By the time the back of my legs slammed against the desk his hulk consumed the entirety of the opening, casting it in shadow, my only escape.

Have you ever had a moment where you look at an old photograph and don't recognize one of the people in it, only to realize that it's you from an angle you don't normally see in the mirror? How strange is it that we only recognize ourselves when we're staring straight into our own eyes? This was one of those moments. The man in the shadow was me. My form was thrown upon the canvas by the candlelight behind me acting like a makeshift projector. Suddenly glass shattered at my feet and he, me, disappeared. The candle. I'd knocked it off the table. I looked back up at the canvas and lurched back; another outline had replaced the first. A woman in a short bob, stock-still, cast in shadow. Mona. She was standing on the other side of the canvas. It was impossible to know where she was in the room; the candle projecting her outline could have been anywhere. But she looked as if she was pressed up right against the fabric. I panicked. Fight or flight kicked in. I bolted for the canvas and fled through it. The train whistled again, still somehow beneath us, wailing like an apocalypse siren.

The ceiling was raining dust and debris. The cairns had toppled over, scattering paper all over the floor. No sign of Milton. I looked back into the sun-room and saw Mona rush over to the Grief Orchid facsimile. She grabbed the paper orchid's planter and looked up at me. Our eyes met. Her eyes were boiling. The jelly of her eyes swirled around her pupils, seething as the viscera churned. She opened her mouth and an inhuman scream consumed the room. Then, in one fluid motion, she threw the orchid at me. It shattered against the wall beside my head and fell to the floor. A thin metal tube attached to a small canister caught the light amid the rubble. I wanted to investigate but everything else was telling me it was time to split. I sprinted

out, slamming the door to Mona's bedroom behind me, hoping it would in some part delay her pursuit. I don't know why I knew she would follow but I knew and that was enough to keep me running.

I tore down the spiraling staircase and emerged on the ground floor of the library. It'd seen better days. All of the butterflies had fallen from their shelves. They lay in ruined heaps on the ground, some still intact, but most of them had spilled from their protective cases and littered the floor. They were so mangled and torn that you wouldn't've known they were real butterflies in the first place. They crunched beneath my feet as I fled to a door on the opposite wall. But I opened it and there was nothing but a brick wall blocking my way. The bricks looked ancient. I glanced around the room and saw another door on the right-hand wall. I waded through the butterflies again, eyeing the staircase for any sign of Mona, but she didn't show. Every time I lifted my foot some butterflies would get kicked up into the air and drift slowly back down. In the middle of the room it occurred to me to pick one up. I picked up a broken-off wing about the size of my palm near my feet and brought it up to the light. Pulp. Papier maché, without a doubt. You could see the pulp in the paper clear as day. What was this place? What was real and what was staged? I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck again. I looked up to the red door, Mona's bedroom. The knob was turning. I dropped the wing and rushed to the door in front of me. Locked. I was all turned around, cornered like an animal. There was one last door to try. I sprinted to it and scores of tattered butterfly wings flew up, dizzying the air. When I reached the door, the knob turned. Sweet salvation. I took one last look at the library and the red door and saw that it was slowly opening. That was all I needed. I whipped back around and tore through the living room, out past the atrium and into the open, free air, safe and sound. The feeling returned to my arms and legs, and after taking a few breaths, my head cleared. I walked down the driveway of the Mothlight Inn and into the night.

When I was home, safe in bed, I remembered something I never got to process in my rush out of the Mothlight: as soon as I closed the door to Mona's bedroom, the earsplitting howl of the Poltergeist vanished.



The star of the morning rose above Wissahickon like a fever. I fell awake up all at once, diving headlong out the Void. My head was thick and cooked to slurry; my eyes stuck with rheum. I'd fallen asleep above the covers with my clothes and shoes on and I wondered if I'd even slept at all. I was late, but I didn't know what for. Today was the day of the Syzygy Party. I leapt out of bed.

I woke up to the sun backlighting the clouds like a blood orange rolled in gauze. The sky, clouded over with thick slabs, was seamless. A ChemoDyne grey. I went into the kitchen and made myself coffee. The light refracting from the cheap linoleum tiling made my head spin. I kept my eyes on the coffee mug, steam rising from the oily surface, curling off into the air in thin, wispy tracers. I was drugged last night. Had to've been. Anxiety medication doesn't make you see horns or boiling eyes. That canister with the metal tube? Mona must've drugged Milton. Because she's Lillith's sister? Oh god, Mona is Lillith's sister. And Mona must think Milton killed Lillith. I cradled my head in my hands to stop the memories from coming, but it wasn't even worth the effort. I felt the single pin, thin as spiders' silk, pierce my aortic valve; I had to find Milton. It was my fault, not his. I had to save him. I had to tell him the truth.

Music spilled from the valley up ahead. I crept through a sunny tunnel of arching pine, head full of nervous questions. Did Milton have a brain tumor? Was that why he came back, to

fashion the Grief Orchid in order to cure himself? Would Mona use Milton's ring to make a Grief Orchid of her own? Had she already? Why was she doing this? It felt more personal than ChemoDyne. It must be about Lily. Did she engineer this whole plot just to bring Milton down off the mountain? What was she planning on doing with him? Was he even still alive?

As I neared the entrance to the Basin I pricked my ears and slowed my pace, senses heightened, looking for booby traps or lurking ambushes. After last night I couldn't be too careful. The sensation of being followed hadn't abated; in fact it'd gotten worse. Everywhere I went I felt the eyes on my back. I kept seeing dark shapes out of the corner of my eye that would dart away when I turned to them. In that emerald tunnel with not a soul to be seen, the branches sifting patches of sun-glass onto the forest floor, my heart was moving a mile a minute; I felt the kind of eager anxiety one gets when approaching a party they're not supposed to know about. From what I could hear- a tumult of brass and carnival gaiety- it was already in full swing. The plan was to walk around the Basin and look for Mona or the Dognapper. One of them would bring me to Milton.

I came around a bend in the tunnel. A wall of lichened brick extending from both sides of the forest met at an archway in the middle of the path. The archway was circular, rounding into the ground on either side, as if a tiny moon had rolled through the tunnel and careened through the brick. A moon door. Some ten feet beyond the moon door was another moon door, this one staggered a little to the right of the first one. And beyond that moon door was another, and another, and another, each staggered a little to the right of the previous, the effect of which was one of infinite extension, as if the path might curve on forever, the end just always out of sight. It was a neat little garden effect.

I passed slowly through the moon doors, looking both ways and following my ears. I wasn't going to get attacked like Milton did last night. I had to keep my wits about me. See

Mona or the Dognapper before they saw me. The din grew louder with every step. In between arches the sky was blue and blemishless; the sun followed dutifully above. The new moon inched closer, invisible in the glare. First contact was imminent.

I rounded the final bend and stepped into the deafening sunlight. Part daytime carnival and part World's Fair, the pageantry of the Syzygy Party roared with colored lights and banners and yowling. The whole town had been invited. Men, women and children in baseball caps and antlers stunted between festival tents, swirled in eddies, collecting and evaporating, waltzing beneath ribbons and banners and lights, pooling in groups that swelled and laughed and chattered and ebbed and emptied and then formed anew. Circus tents scattered throughout the entirety of the basin- host of innumerable sights and sideshows- spread their striped awnings against the sky like wings. Heat pooled in the valley, lending a shimmering aura to the scene at hand. The dissonant cries of carnival barkers rang out in the torrid air.

The midway that unrolled at my feet was wider than Main Street, carpeted with red velvet. Flagpoles that lined the length of the walkway flew the official Wissahickon colors: red and white. The flags were motionless, wilting in the wet, still heat. Waiting at the end of the midway sat the moon, glorious, basking at the center of it all. Or rather a scale model of the moon, crafted from plaster and roughcast, towering four stories into the air, scored with lunar maria, casting prodigious shadows at its base where Wissahickons stood with cheesy grins and posed for photos. Some fifty feet in front of the plaster moon stood a small-scale model of the earth about the height of a man. The sun was falling behind the plaster moon; like a sundial the moon cast a lengthening shadow. It was set up in such a way that that the moment that its shadow reached the model earth, the real moon would begin its transition across the face of the sun. The shadow was a man's-length away from the model earth.

I gatored down the midway and took it all in, floating in and out of the crowd, keeping an eye out for Mona, Milton and the Dognapper. This was a ChemoDyne-sponsored party yet the attractions were curiously mystical in nature, angling for the more superstitious in Wissahickon. There was your prototypical sideshow fare: mermaids, human oddities, OJ Simpson's white Bronco, sword swallowers, an Indian magii on a bed of nails, snake charmers, the Wolf Man, etc; and then there were some booths that claimed to be conduits to the divine.

I passed the black muslin booth of a fortune-teller, a sign for a witch doctor written in bone, palm readers on milk crates smacking gum between their teeth, voodoo practitioners ushering shadowy figures into tents, a tribe of neuromancers from Iron Mountain in Bermuda shorts, a hypnotist holding a troupe of Boy Scouts captive, bickering astrologers, astral projection pods, exorcism booths, you name it. It was a hodgepodge of fantasy and superstition, a pastiche of self-conscious, crystal clear nonsense so flippantly spiritual it was almost comical. My question was: did it have WiFi?

I wove through the antlered crowd on high alert for my golden goose. Someone had given out glow sticks in anticipation of the blackout; the trend was to hang them from your antlers, giving the wearer the look of a Christmas tree. Hundreds of these neon candelabras levitated throughout the crowd, some prematurely radiating, most lying dormant. I passed street performers bewitching bystanders with a spectacle. They pulled endless rainbow scarves from their mouths, breathed fire, performed riveting acrobatics and walked on stilts, each with little circle of spectators ringed around them, spellbound.

In one such crowd a man in antique diving helmet stood totally still. The dark glass shrouded his face. When a sizable amount of people had gather he began slowly lifting his arm, moving his hand towards the latch to open the window of his mask. His hand lingered on the latch; the crowd took a collective breath. With a flourish he threw open the window. A

miraculous flight of doves flew from where his head should have been and escaped into the sky. I watched them fly off, washed out by the blue. The moon had begun its passage across the face of the sun, taking a tiny bite out of the yellow orb. First contact. The crowd gasped and clapped, their eyes on the man in the mask. How strange it is.

Beyond the man was a purple Crystalomancy booth. Lo, there was Nikki. And what was she wearing? Not her usual wedding dress, but a purple cape and feathers in her hair. She sat behind a crystal ball, looking glum. When she saw me she perked up.

“Nikki,” I said, “I thought you didn’t do crystal balls.”

“I know,” she said, “but honey, this is Nowhere, and Nowhere pays well. What can I say?”

“But I thought you told me to follow the heart and what *it* offers, or something.”

She leaned forward. “Listen to me sweetheart: screw the heart. When the Man offers you money, take it.” I was about to respond when a silvery glint of light flashed in the air. It came from over near the model of the moon. I turned to look and saw a bob of silver hair disappear in the crowd. Mona. I took off running, afraid I’d lose her in the throng.

I caught up with her slicing through a crowd around a falconer. I decided to tail her at a distance and see where she led me. A flash of gold, and Harold’s ring, the waxen honeycomb, showed on her ring finger. This was it; Mona would either lead me to Milton or else I’d get ring off her somehow and foil her seed bomb plan. I tailed her through the crowd, more focused on camouflaging myself than where we were headed. So when the crowd thinned and the booths tapered off I didn’t notice the pines until they were right upon me, fifty feet overhead. Mona stepped into a deer path and evaporated into its shadowy mouth. I looked up; the moon had eaten half of the sun.

I trailed Mona through the deer path, matching my footsteps to hers. All around us daylight muted, growing darker, lowering a blanket of grey upon the landscape. Of course I suspected this might be a trap, but my curiosity got the best of me. Would she lead me to Milton, Warehouse 77, a Grief Orchid? Above all I needed to find Milton.

Imagine my lack of surprise when we showed up at the Tabernacle. Was this the hub of Society activity? It seemed likely. Mona had already disappeared inside. The clearing was still. The birds were silent, preparing for dusk. I mentally prepared myself for whatever ambush lay inside and stepped up to the front door. I tried the knob; the door opened upon an empty room. Cautiously I tiptoed inside and checked behind the door before closing it as quietly as I could. I searched every floor. Nothing. The room that previously held the robes now stood empty. Even before I searched each room I knew she wouldn't be there. She was waiting for me in the observatory.

And so, when I climbed through that black curtain and emerged in the observatory, the daylight rapidly greying, I was surprised not to find her. But I whipped around and lo, there she was, facing the basin, the sun, the moon, the party.

"Mona," I said. "Give me the ring. It belongs to me." She turned around, and to my horror I realized that Mona was not Mona but Abe in a silver wig and a cotton blouse, a string of pearls, black slacks, black pumps, smiling. Fresh scabs dotted his forearms. I was suddenly very aware of my altitude, the fifty feet of open air that extended to the ground below. It was a trap. Did he lead me here to kill me? Did I know too much? The honeycomb ring glinted on his finger. He saw me looking at it.

"Belongs to you? I'm not so sure about that. This is our pal Milton's ring, isn't it? And now that it's served its purpose and you're out of the picture, we plan on giving it back to him, provided he's compliant."

“Milton’s alive? You’ve done it? You’ve made a Grief Orchid? Are you going to drop it on town?”

Abraham laughed, pearls jiggling on his neck. “Oh no, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not in the Society. I work for ChemoDyne. In fact, I *am* ChemoDyne. Abraham Avarro, CEO. Pleased to meet you again, Timofey.” Well, I figured he was ChemoDyne’s ilk, given Mona’s reaction when Milton mentioned him as his first reporter. Had he foiled her plan? What was he doing at Barb’s, the Cave, the Tabernacle – frankly *everywhere* I go? And that insignia of his? It was all a mess.

“So you’ve stopped her,” I said, “ And you’re not going to leave town?”

“No, we don’t plan on leaving,” said Abraham with a twinkle in his eye, “but we don’t plan on stopping her either.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to blow up the house.”

“What?”

“When everything falls to pieces, sometimes all you’ve got left is to blow up the house.” He looked into my eyes. I saw into his for the first time. They were the most unremarkable eyes I’d seen in Wissahickon yet. Not black, or muted, just – plain.

“What pieces? What house?”

He began to pace. “When this Society business first started, our Corporate Morality Action Center was in a tizzy. No one knew what to do. What’s that they say, all press is good press? Not as far as a chemical manufacturing company goes. People eat the stuff we make; that’ll never do. And there’s no way we’re leaving Wissahickon, not when we’re plum in the heart of this agricultural metropolis, no siree. So I got to thinking. How could we use this stunt to our benefit? Instead of going against the wind, how could we play it to our advantage? That’s

when I decided to pay Desdemona Glass a visit. Didn't take long to realize she was behind this, she's made her opinion known about this company long before this whole business with the Society started. So we got to talking, and we realized we both wanted the same thing."

"What?"

He stopped and faced me, a wicked glint in his eye. "Professor Munn. Or should I say ex-Professor. See, that whole misadventure with Lily really shook Mona up. You understand. He killed her, didn't he? He had an affair with her, as he's had with many students, or so I'm told, but then there was some trouble and she threatened to go to the school board, isn't that right? And so to save his hide Professor Milton Munn cut the brakes in his car, sent her away to pick up some milk from the grocery store, and the rest is history. Am I getting that right?"

The moon covered almost the entirety of the sun's disk. Only a thin sliver remained. Long, shimmering bands of shadow moved across the face of the valley. I had to think fast.

"What do you want with Milton?"

"Well, quite frankly he's a danger to us. If you two managed to pull off the Grief Orchid, well, that wouldn't be good for us, no." He chuckled. "So I promised I'd deliver her Milton Munn, in exchange for this ring, the key to solving the Grief Orchid equation. The reason you followed me here, I imagine." Slowly he removed the ring from his finger, held it in both hands, and then snapped it in half.

"No!" I yelled, but it was too late. He threw the pieces over the railing.

"There. Now that that mess is over we can get on to *my* business. See, when I was thinking about this opportunity, I realized that we could really use this to our advantage. Bring advertising and political opinion stunts to the next level. My idea was pretty good, want to hear it? Well, if you're not going to say anything I'll just say it. My idea was to make an enemy that's threatening, but one we can ultimately beat. A paper tiger, if you will. Rile up the town

a little, shake things up, get people scared, so that then, when we eventually come out on top, we restore the town- and the country's- faith in us. And given the stake of the games- explosions, dirt dropped from airplanes, kidnappings- we're guaranteed airtime around the globe. Whaddya think?"

"So you engineered this entire thing? The invitation in the observatory, the shakeup with Mona, everything?"

"You got it, bucko. Not bad, right? Now, let's keep this engine running. Boy, do I have a show for you. You're not going to want to miss this, no siree. He moved over towards the railing and motioned for me to join him. "Watch this," he said. And handed me a pair of eclipse sunglasses. I put them on and he put on a pair as well. Just then an enormous roar floated up from the valley. I looked up at the sky; the moon almost totally eclipsed the sun. There was a beautiful white halo shimmering around the moon, a diamond ring, and then suddenly- absolute eclipse. Third contact. Shooting out like a white fountain, like an iris, a brilliant lancing corona emanated from the poles of the dark orb. The blackness of the eclipse had not been exaggerated. The moon was absolutely black, impossibly black, the negation of sky, a perfect void. Diaphanous crimson jets emanated from the corona in looping fluxes, giving texture and shape to the sun's magnetic field. It was like staring into the eye of God. I felt like the air had been sucked from the atmosphere.

Abe pointed to the valley. The sky was as dark as midnight, but the sun's corona was brighter than a full moon, giving off enough light to illuminate the scene below. I looked down. Ten thousand heads were turned up at the spectacle. It looked like they were watching fireworks. Their eyes were shrouded with a thousand pairs of eclipse sunglasses, the eclipse refracting in every single lens. In addition, all of the antler wearers had cracked their glow sticks. Their faces were washed out, bathed in a sea of colored lights- blue, green, red, a few

gold. The gold glow sticks, though, they really stuck out. I didn't realize at first, but after a few seconds of staring at the crowd, unfocusing my eyes... They made a pattern. Unbelievable.

Two hexagons, one around the model of the moon, the other around the earth. The honeycomb sign...how did he... I looked at Abe. He stared at me with a grin strung from ear to ear.

"What's the deal with that insignia?" I asked him. "The honeycomb with the kite and the two "A"s, I see it everywhere."

"You should ask your friend Milton. You'll see him in a minute," said Abe, pulling a tiny tinkling box out of his pocket. I wasn't sure if that was a threat or a promise of Milton's safety. "Ready?" he said, before I could ask, pushing a tiny green button on the side of the machine. There was an immense rumbling some miles off. The Poltergeist? Abe put his index finger up as if to say, wait a minute. And then a massive mushroom cloud of fire and smoke grew from the earth about a mile away towards town. A second later a sonic boom thundered throughout the valley. People turned from the eclipse, looking back towards town. A single scream picked up in the air. More screams joined in. Just then a shadowy figure emerged from a path leading from town. He stopped and yelled something to the crowd, and that's when everything went to pieces. The screaming picked up, and everyone began running in a different direction. Then the looting started. The car fires. It was anarchy. A high-pitched, metallic whine picked up in the air. Sirens? Or something else? It sounded a little different than sirens. What had Abe done?

"I blew up Barb's."

"What!? Why?"

The Dognapper watched the basin with faraway eyes. "The truth is we are constantly under attack from the unknown. Life is mysterious and much, much bigger than us. All sorts of

organizations, cities, societies and individuals claim mastery over the machine, but the truth is: there's no one at the wheel. Control is an illusion that we can only maintain for a few moments before it flickers out, like a matchstick. Remember what I said a few days ago at Barb's, about patent nonsense? If you want to make an omelet you have to crack a few eggs. That's why we left room for navigation with that Warehouse 77 clause. There's no Warehouse 77.

ChemoDyne used to own a lot of the buildings in Wissahickon before we sold them back to the county so we can just say Barb's was Warehouse 77 and that the Society got mad that we didn't leave and retaliated. What better way to rile up town than destroy the most beloved institution around? Still, I have faith we'll pull through this. Wissahickons are ChemoDyne Strong."

Another giggle. In the valley below the crowd had become a lunatic mob. In their dash to flee the valley many unfortunate antler-wearing folk had gotten their antlers tangled up in one another's. There were clusters of ten, twenty, even fifty. They grappled, paralyzed, locked in place, screaming. The light from the glowsticks illuminated the snarled antlers. They were dripping with blood. Was it coming from the people or the antlers themselves? Had the velvet on the antlers been ripped in the scuffle, spilling blood from the vessels still trapped inside? I didn't want to think of the alternative.

Abraham watched the scene play out with an expression of detached delight. The moon inched out of its perfect eclipse. The lancing corona waned, replaced by a growing rind that spiked out from behind the escaping moon. The air was dusky; in the valley the half-light was growing. The silvery orbs of stars and planets shone in the sky. The horizon glowed with shimmering bands of red and yellow and orange.

Abraham turned to me, still smiling. "Have you ever heard of a moonquake? It's like it sounds: an earthquake on the moon. Since the moon's basically a big chunk of stone floating up there in space, seismic activity sets it vibrating like a tuning fork. Think about it: pulled by the

earth on one side, the sun on the other, it's gonna crack and quiver a *little*, right? Well, I thought that a moonquake would be quite the sight to behold. Goes along with our symphony of chaos, doesn't it? But since I don't have much say up there in space, I thought I'd bring the moonquake here to Wissahickon."

He pushed another button on the side of the metal box. An earsplitting crack echoed over the din. I searched for the source of the noise and my eyes settled on the scale model of the moon. A black line had appeared down the center... No. Not a line. A crack. The moon was cracked like an egg. A dark, jagged line cut straight down the middle, opening wide at the base. Inside, I could only make out blackness. And then another noise joined the pandemonium. It was low and throaty, and at first I couldn't make heads or tails of it. But then they appeared. Dogs. The missing dogs. Hundreds of them spilled from the fissure. They made a beeline for the woods, barking like mad. So that was why the dogs had suddenly disappeared a year ago; it was just another phase in the plan of this lunatic master of ceremonies. I reeled at the magnitude of his arrangement. So much had been orchestrated for the sake of striking fear and faith in the heart of Wissahickons. How would they ever recover from this? In the days to come they would take time to heal, but after long they would band around the staple of the town, the institution that had been tested by the errant arm of chaos and come out triumphant, the organization that had staved off catastrophe...ChemoDyne. It was a brilliant plan.

And then I noticed a disturbance in the crowd below. A bouquet of people walked around a figure with a black bag over its head. In the front a silver bob weaving through the crowd...Mona and Avarro's cronies, no doubt. The real deal this time. Then that must be Milton she's got. Abraham's fulfilling his side of the bargain. Where were they taking him? They moved glacially through the crowd. Everyone left in the basin was so distracted by their own interlocked antler misery that they didn't even notice the kidnapping. The group was

headed for a break in the tree line in the northwest quadrant of the basin. But that was the opposite way of town. I looked out into the wilderness for their possible destination and saw the scorched ruin of Moonrise Movies half a mile away. Why were they taking him there? Did they have transportation waiting? So this would end where it all began, where Milton faked his death four years ago. I had to save him. It was up to me.

I looked at Abraham, wondering if he'd try and stop me. He was licking his thumb and smoothing his blouse of wrinkles with it. He looked up and smiled. "Don't worry sport, go after them! I'm not going to stop you. This was my last big gig, my coup de grace, if you will. I think we've done something today that the whole town will remember for a long, long time. And it's only fair that, now that I've played my part, it's time for you to play yours! I believe my work here is done." He went back to smoothing out his blouse for wrinkles. I stood there, expecting something more, but he kept smoothing out his blouse for wrinkles, not even looking up. So, I left, a little troubled by how easy everything was going.

By the time I reached the basin it was deserted. The sun was back out in full like nothing had ever happened. I moved for the deer path that'd take me to *Moonrise*, crossing the vast, empty bulk of the recently-abandoned basin. I was mid-way through the glade when that high-pitched, metallic whine picked up in the air again. It seemed to be coming from all around me, from the woods. What was that? Was it a siren? An airplane? I looked up.

A tiny red airplane trailed low across the sky, below the clouds, leaving a plume of black smoke in its wake. It wasn't the airplane that was making the noise, it was what the airplane was *dropping*. Just as it passed directly overhead of me something got tossed out the window, and suddenly the sky bloomed with hundreds of tiny white parachutes. I was more concerned with what the parachutes were holding. They were falling and gaining on the basin.

EEEEEEE went that high-pitched, metallic whine. It got louder the closer the parachutes got. I started running, terrified by the unknown in the parachutes, the machinelike whine of the descending howl – hold on now. Mona, Milton, falling, the Grief Orchid’s howl. Since we’ve never successfully made one I’ve never heard the sound, and Milton’s only read apocryphal texts that describe it, so. I looked up; the parachutes were nearly upon me. I thought I saw little tendril-like arms waving beneath the white circles but I decided not to stick around to find out.

The Moonrise looked abandoned, but then again, it always looked abandoned. In its heyday, the cinema had 8 screens running 24/7. Now all it’s got is a couple raccoon families and a busted roof that lets in the sky. I approached the front doors, ears pricked, confident I was walking into a trap. I knew that and they knew that and they knew I knew and I knew they knew. But what else could I do? Leave Milton? The poor sap had been lured back here and terrorized by an unstable woman who got the wrong man. My plan was to sneak around as quietly as I could and then find Milton. That was all I had. As I pulled open the door the afterthought of the Dognapper letting me go was almost enough to fill me with new fear and paranoia. But I made myself pass into the netherworldly light. I owed Milton.

The lobby had been stripped of anything and everything not nailed down. The siding had been pulled of the walls, the lobby chairs smashed to kindling, there was dust and debris everywhere. I scanned the far wall and noticed the doors to Theater 3 were wide open. I thought I saw a light flicker inside but I wasn’t sure.

I walked into the theater and instantly recognized the movie: *Wissahickon* directed by Desdemona Glass. Her 20X10ft mural of the town was hung where the screen used to be. Above the canvas the purpling sky shone through an enormous gash in the ceiling. The stars were just starting to come out; they were tiny white pinpricks against the violet.

There was someone sitting in the middle of the front row, motionless, watching the screen like it was a moving picture. “Milton?” I called out but the figure showed no signs of stirring. I inched carefully down the aisle, turned at the first row and - everything went black.

I woke up in a tiny blue room the size of a broom closet with a terrific gash on my head. I tried to get up off the ground but I couldn’t move. I was hogtied. OK. It took me a minute to get my bearings but I got them, eventually. I had been in the Moonrise just before I was attacked. I was now in a tiny room, maybe still in the theater. I face a corner, with my hands and legs tied behind me, so it took some effort but I was able to flip onto my other side and survey the room.

I realized two things right away. One, that I had *not* left the moonrise, because I was in the projector room in one of the theaters, evident by the tiny window on the northern wall. And two, that Milton was in here with me. He was hogtied on the floor facing away from me at the opposite wall. Blood oozed from a gash on the back of his head. He was still breathing; he was still alive. I took an inward sigh of relief and did my best to scoot over towards him. After a moment, he began to stir.

“Milton,” I said as he came to, “Milton, listen to me. It’s Timofey. Are you ok?”

“Timofey?” he groaned quietly. After a few unsuccessful tries, Milton was able to flip himself over on his other side as well. For the first time in four years I looked my old mentor Milton Munn in the eye. The electrostatic blue had faded some, and some of the blood from his head pooled in the socket below, but I’ve never been happier to see him alive.

“Milton, listen. We have to get out of here. We have to find some-”

“Timofey, it’s no use. I scoured this room for something to cut the rope when they first dumped me in here. There’s nothing, it’s-” and he launched into a massive coughing fit that didn’t subside for a some time. I stayed silent, waiting for him to finish.

“Milton,” I said, “you’re sick, when-”

“No, no I’m not sick, I’m fine, just getting a cough, nothing to worry about.” He shot me a wan smile. Cheerful in the face of danger, he really was an extraordinary man.

“I saw your medical records. You have a brain tumor.” I said, not sure of what that would resolve. Milton was silent for a few moments.

“How’d you find out?” he asked weakly. In a snap all of his magnetism sapped into the ground. He was the scared, puny, crumpled-up figure I saw cowering beneath Mona. He was a boy scared of the monsters underneath his bed. I wanted to comfort him, make up for the four wasted years in a snap, to apologize.

“I was following you at Mona’s inn. I heard you were back in town. I’ve been looking for you for a while, Milton. At first I thought it was because I needed your help on the Grief Orchid, but that wasn’t it. I need to apologize. I let my jealousy get in the way of becoming your friend, and let it get worse and worse from there. I felt like I was living in your shadow and I resented you for it, but the truth is I used my resentment and cynicism as a crutch, as a means to shut out the world. I started to believe less and less in myself as you got more famous. Our relationship never had to be anything more than pleasant, but I made it toxic almost immediately because of my bullheadishness, so - ” I didn’t know what else to say. That’s not true, I knew *exactly* what I should say, but I couldn’t think of anything else besides *it*, and *it* was catching in my throat. Luckily Milton saved me from having to say anything else.

“Timofey, I’m so grateful that you feel that way.” He had a fond sort of mistiness to his blue eyes. “But I think that I owe *you* an apology. I made a half-assed effort to get to know you,

and ended up treating you like an errand boy, which I never intended, because I respect your diligence and your determination very much. You are an excellent scientist and an excellent man, and I am sincerely sorry for my half of the fouled relationship we found ourselves in.”

This was more than we’ve ever spoken to each other in a single day, let alone five minutes. I was always cold and Milton was always spacey and I let it happen that way. For a few minutes we remained silent, straining our ears for any hint of Mona or Abraham. It was dead silent.

“Listen,” said Milton hesitatingly, looking anywhere but my eyes, “I want you to know that I wasn’t continuing our work on the Grief Orchid without you. I had to leave but that doesn’t mean-”

“I killed Lily,” I said. And it was the first time I’d ever spoken those words aloud. Milton looked at me, and his eyes got bigger and bigger, wider and wider, more and more blue, like he’d finally realized something. “I didn’t mean to. I was- I- I was trying to kill you.” A concrete silence descended upon us. I was expecting for all of my grief and guilt to abate once I said those magic words, but I still felt the pin in my heart, even more so. I’d finally reached my destination. I felt like I had been moving towards this moment for many years, that the Society and ChemoDyne scuffle only acted as a catalyst to get me here. Now that I was here, I wasn’t sure what to do. Then, out of the silence between us, Milton said, “I know.”

I looked up at him and met his eyes. He was crying. I’d never seen Milton cry. I wasn’t sure how to feel. I hadn’t prepared for what I’d say after my confession, so I just blurted out whatever came to my mouth quickest. “I was in such an angry, miserable place back then Milton, and I felt like I had no one to go to, I was so lonely. And then I found Lily. And I fell in love with her.”

“I know,” said Milton, his eyes two blue saline swimming pools.

“And you took her away from me. And I don’t even think that that was what made me angriest. I just felt...abandoned. Worthless. I tried so hard.” Another pause. There was one thing I needed to ask him. Something that’d been on my mind for a while. “If you knew I did it, why’d you run?”

Milton sighed. “I ask myself that every day. Would pointing the finger at you have made the situation any better? I’m honestly not sure. That was around the time that I first got diagnosed. I thought I didn’t have much time. And I was so scared after Lily died. It really made me think about all the people I’d used get a leg up. Like you. And I got to a place where I could understand your anger with me. I started to feel it too. I was appalled with myself. Don’t get me wrong, I was appalled with you too, but I think I just needed to get out of Wissahickon for a while.”

“I understand. Thank you. I’m sorry,” was all I could manage. We laid on the ground in our hog ties for a little while longer. I watched a small black ant crawl across the concrete floor. He scabbled over the hard terrain, head pointed forward, nose to the earth, keeping a straight line. I blew on him with the tiniest breath, barely a trickle of air from between my lips, but it was enough to lift him up in the air and blow him across the room. I lost sight of him beneath an old stack of movie reels. I looked up at Milton; he was still crying silently. What do we do now? I was about to ask him what it was he was doing up on that mountain when I heard a siren off in the distance. The Grief Orchids were falling on Wissahickon again. Barb’s blown up, countless injured, maybe dead, the town damn near spooked to death and 150 domesticated dogs roaming free through the woods, it sounded like something out of the Book of Revelation. But the Grief Orchid howls picked up and got louder. Were they falling right above us? Then, through that tiny projector-room window, blue light and red light cast upon the ceiling like moonlight on water.

I don't think I knew what was going on even as the sirens got louder and the lights got brighter. Even as Milton began to cry harder and then look at me with watery, sad eyes. Even as a troupe of men in blue uniforms came crashing through the door, picked Milton up and put a silver bracelet on my wrists. Even as Milton mouthed over and over, 'I'm sorry.'

Epilogue

The first thing I learned to do in prison was share my food. I'd always have an extra apple or a piece of bread on me, just to offer. Usually the other inmates wouldn't take me up on my offer, but I like to think they appreciate it nonetheless.

As you may have guessed, Milton set me up. It hadn't been his idea at all, but he went along with it. Mona knew it was me who cut the brakes to Milton's car, not him. She engineered this entire turf war in tandem with Abraham Avarro in order to drag me out of the woodwork and nail me to the wall. It was a perverse little goose chase she sent me on, pursuing my own tail and not even knowing it. I don't blame her one bit.

Milton sent me a letter. Turns out that on Mt. Pine he worked as a gardener in a bee sanctuary on the top of the decapitated mountain. The apiary is called Apollo's Apiary and it's run by an American pro-wrestler from the 1980s named, you guessed it, Apollo, who started the apiary as a Buddhist outfit secreted on the mountain specifically for pro-wrestling stars whose television personalities had "died." Any time a wrestler on TV is scripted to ship off for the "Great Beyond" or gets older than thirty-five, well, he goes there. Apollo's Apiary. "A.A." They also have quite the marching band, apparently, although members of Apollo's are so

moved by the brass music – music of the brass bee – that they often start weeping when they hear it.

Mona found out where Milton was, found out that the bees he was keeping were dying, that he was dying, and made him a deal: come back to town to finish the Grief Orchid, take its nectar for you and the bees, and I will keep the police away, she said. Turns out her grandfather, the drunk, was the Wissahickon Sheriff for thirty years.

Am I angry about what happened? No. I had this coming for me from a long ways away. Besides, prison isn't all bad, at least for me. I get fresh air, spend less time in basements than I did as a free man, and work in the prison library shelving books. I make ten cents an hour, but the library is cool and quiet, and I like it there.

I got a letter from Milton the other day. He said it was the last letter I was liable to receive from him. See, he'd only been given enough Grief Orchid nectar to cure himself *or* the bees, but not both. And Milton chose the bees. He doesn't have long. He told me that he planned on spending his last few days taking snoozes in different places in the sanctuary. After I finished his letter I put it down and took a look around my cell. Four walls, white, a ceiling, a cot, a toilet, a dresser, a door. All of the lines are clean and orderly.

It starts out small; no need to be ambitious. A peek of green from the cement floor. One blade of grass pushes up, signaling more to raise their heads from the floor. Soon I'm standing on a green carpet of dewy grass. Next come the goldenrod and the honeysuckle cloud from outside the flower shop, the white magnolia and blue hydrangea from inside the shop, Arethusa from the Mothlight, the Narcissus from the Marriot. Now that we've got things thrumming and green I take the birds from the woods outside the Cave of Kelpius, the nighttime creatures from outside the Mothlight, the widowed family of deer in the basin, and I throw them all in too. The sun and the moon come next. Easy. Next I fill in with birch and

balsam fir, a put a conflower-blue hat on the entire operation and call it sky. Finally, I throw in tens of thousands of bumblebees, the orchids they love, a Buddhist outfit run by off-the-grid pro wrestlers, and finally, one extraordinary man whom I happy to once again call my friend. And just like that, I'm on Mt. Pine with Milton, sleeping in the sun. That's the way the story goes.