

Darryl Benjamin
P.O. Box 493
Hyde Park VT 05655
802.585.5855
darryl@kafkaturtle.com
Word count: 7,392

In the Woods Without an iAnything
by Darryl Benjamin

The job at the post office was a means to an end, and that end was art. Although my passion was painting, it was by choice I had abdicated my social and economic status – at least in my parents’ eyes – to the drudgery of civil servitude.

As usual, they were right: it was drudgery. But I chose it and maybe because of that I didn’t mind sorting, carrying, delivering, just minding the mail in general. I felt as if I was contributing to something much larger than myself; I provided a service humanity found useful, a species defined by its gregarious, voyeuristic and avaricious compulsions, a formula that keeps on giving like the golden goose.

I kept my head down, the wheels greased, and didn’t complain. I liked the flow and the orderliness, the undulating, rhythmic currents. The decision to work at the post office had been made in the interest of establishing a reliable income while I painted great works of art. That was supposed to be the consolation prize that took the drudgery from it.

Regardless of my reasoning, my parents were convinced I had gone down with the Titanic, despite the occasional artistic recognition: no less than *The New York Times* trumpeted a show of my paintings in one resounding sentence: “Thomas Beckersfield embodies the

disembodiable; he captures the aggregate vision of womanhood with confident, surrealistic yellows, oranges, and reds; his masterful flourishes of bold, lusty strokes are a tribute to feminine timelessness, courage, beauty and, of course, libido.”

Of course.

I have yet to understand the half of it.

I sold a few paintings because of the publicity, but when things settled down, as they inevitably did, I was back at square one.

Ironically and seemingly in tacit complicity with my parents who compulsively felt they had to be right all the time, my job at the post office faded. The post office itself assumed an ominous, translucent glow, a jaundiced patina of decay and under-use.

The handwriting was on the wall, sallow and still, unable to compete with the backlit parcels of colorful light shot directly into the eyes. The new wall had metamorphasized into Facebook, dubbed itself a proper pronoun and then decreed:

To all friends, family, co-workers and selected acquaintances: I am here to stay. To follow you only need sign onto me, The Wall. Post your heart out. Dare to share all. Cast your judgments here. Dream your dreams, have your say. There is no lapse, no time delay. Write conveniently on The Wall all day, every day, 24/7, round-the-clock, except maybe when you're in the shower, asleep or feeding the dog. We will possibly grow to love you, maybe hate you, because you are so goddamn endlessly fascinating.

The golden goose stopped laying her eggs. How could a whispered letter with a delicately inscribed address compete with the endless shout of news from even a single day spent at the frontiers of a person's life? How The Wall promised and then delivered delicious micro-adventures, continuous soap-operas and dramas, moanings and pleadings, the celebrations and perpetually-spinning P.R. wheels that clatter out the message of how enthralling you are *now! Instantly! In Real Time!* I wondered for a moment if there was a place for me in that world and

knew the answer was no before I finished asking the question. The earth had parted beneath my feet and I fell through the rabbit hole.

What a shock to discover it was me who had been living in Fantasy Time! The tectonic plate labeled ‘technology’ had crashed headlong into my sense of security; I was India ink bowing to the ball point pen, a Dodo bird heading down the chute labeled extinct.

Ladies and gentlemen, on the left we have a dull, workaday Joe delivering mail, mostly bills, credit card offers and legal requests, sometimes dodging growling, biting dogs. On the right, we have an artist working nights and weekends, praying for the day his ship will come in!

As the steady river of letters choked to a crawl, it left the slimy stench of snail-mail suspended in fluorescent, flickering, pale light – overwhelming and stomach-grippingly fetid. The sanctuary I had sought was gone forever. The Great Recession and the Digital Revolution sang a harmonious dirge: *you’re washed up and as abandoned as a wind-up watch*. I felt old.

Day after day inside the sullen and heat-swollen walls of sorting machinery we chugged on, sweating and cursing under constant threat of losing our jobs. We teased each other with gallows humor about touting a shotgun. Jarvey, my best friend, said it was better than going numb and sinking into oblivion.

Jarvey’s goal was similar to mine: work at the post office while he would write the Great American Novel. And so he wrote feverishly and obsessively in the style of Hysterical Realism, a Post-Modern hiccup consisting of multiple universes colliding in an orgiastic dance of discovery, thwarted dreams, conspiracies and unrequited love. Frequently he was lost in thought and I had to repeat myself before his eyes registered my presence.

He liked to joke around. “You and me, we’re artifacts,” he said. “We are Untouchables. I sincerely hope you can paint nostalgia.”

Despite our attempts to ward off the inevitable, depression set in like a fast-creeping vine, penetrating tissue and sapping our strength.

We took lots of coffee breaks. We yammered and laughed and wondered if now would be a good time to go postal. We felt neglected and hurt, as if a loyal friend had deserted us – no less than the citizens of the United States of America. We felt a class action kind of kinship that despised the faces we saw bent feverishly over their devices on busses, in cars, and passing us on the street. They were the Guilty. We were The Unrecognized, The Martyred. And for what? Uncle Sam himself had responded by situating his spreading ass over a park bench, removing his tall hat, and setting his long, slender fingers ablaze texting pink slips.

My parents worried about me. I accepted the loss of credibility: a civil servant is considerably lower than the bar they'd set for me. My father's contracting and building business was interesting, but not fascinating. Few were building during the Great Recession. He had too much time to sit on his hands and contradict my decisions. "I'm not getting any younger," he said. He was in his seventies.

I felt angry when Jarvey committed suicide. I knew I couldn't blame him and I shouldn't blame myself for failing to prevent it. I didn't see it coming. I thought we were in the same sinking boat and had each other to guarantee our survival. I was adrift, alone and frustrated. We were the dying dinosaurs after a digital blast had obliterated our world.

The week after Jarvey died I received the pink slip along with 7,499 post office employees.

The shock of losing one's job, I heard, is equivalent to the stress of the marriage ceremony, divorce proceedings, or moving from one town to another. The waters were rising and

I determined to keep my head above it. I had no savings to speak of. I would have to move and find a cheaper place. And forget painting, at least for a while. I could also forget about getting a dog. I had to worry about myself. Food and Shelter, the very bottom of Maslow's hierarchy.

The night I lost my job I strolled along the long, narrow, desolate strip that divided the highway from the sandy beach by the ocean. The wind blew my hair into a corkscrew haystack. It felt wonderful. I had been unable to sleep, my mind racing.

There is a curious thing that occurs when one walks out a problem. The motion of the body, the sensation of cool air rippling against your skin; the gentle, seductive, arias sung by lapping waves, combine into a glorious contemplative cocktail, free from hangover, free of cost, and free, at least temporarily, from whatever mountain you're climbing.

The world would have to wait for my masterpiece. I saw myself going from painting art to painting walls: the family business would always take me in. They'd be delighted I'd finally come around. They'd no longer be ashamed of me. I would have to console myself with being grateful I had a safety net until I could get back on my feet.

The Post Office hired some kind of Employment Consultant to cheer us on. She came dressed to the nines and offered this bit of information: "It is not uncommon that it could take a year or two before you find a job." She delivered this with a smile. I wanted to punch her in the kisser. The bitch had a job. How about giving us some news we could dress up for?

But I knew she was right; for every job there were hundreds of applicants, and my feeble business skills were far from unique.

The only splash I was going to make was the narrow stream of piddle I aimed into the ocean. I looked up. The night sky was a velvety, saturated black with pinpricks of dazzling white light woven like silk strands into mysterious, unknowable patterns.

A cloud drifted across the incandescent waxing moon, temporarily obscuring it. Simultaneously, a cool breeze blew across my shoulders and I shivered, the little hairs on my arms standing at attention like prairie dogs.

What time was it? I glanced at my watch. Just past one in the morning. The road was empty of cars and the beach empty of people. I felt very alone.

I was thinking about something Jarvey had said. I hadn't fully understood it until now: "We're headed for a constellation of trouble," he said, as expressionless and poker-faced as a platypus, "Fasten your seatbelt, cowboy."

I looked up in time to see laser-like headlights slicing toward me. The car had bounded off the road and over a hill at high speed and silently zigzagged toward me. I realized with sickening certainty I was out of their line of sight; they hadn't seen me and they weren't slowing down.

Adrenaline screamed through my body issuing lightning-fast Paul Revere warnings, SOS's, and neon fireworks. Time slowed. The car floated lazily toward me in a liquid, molten-graceful palm-waving arc, surrealistically slow but then unimaginably fast as the headlights bore down. "Oh, shit," I said and turned to run.

The last thought I had was of a bowling pin struck with cracking force as the car knocked my legs out from under and flipped me into a backwards somersault that propelled me head-first and upside down through the windshield. Fade to black.

Jamie Salerno was aware that she was the by far the prettiest, sexiest girl in the club. She was Queen of the Club, Star of the Show. She was used to thinking that way. She was aware, too, that the way she dressed, moved and spoke, the way her hips moved – came naturally and

effortlessly. She never had to work too hard to get a guy or even the guy she wanted. That, she reckoned, was what separated her from the hoards of girls that surrounded her at the club and on campus of the community college she attended.

The downside, of course, was the Legions of Losers. They came in droves. She had learned the hard way to be selective: she had trusted, loved and lost in a dizzying and devastating series of relationship and one abortion.

She was through with losers and positive thinking. She felt the weight of the false turns heavy in her belly; as if she had spent too much of her vitality, as if something delicate and birdlike had flown from her for good.

Jamie and her girlfriend Hannah, a trim, tall brunette with shoulder-length hair, were giggling in the bathroom of Club Vanquish. The club was a trendy newcomer with loud music and several floors – or shelves, Jamie had said, because it reminded her of a chicken coop. Great big, noisy, busy shelves of guys and gals mixing it up.

“You think I should let him under the bigtop?” Jamie asked giddily.

Hannah faced her foursquare and probed into her eyes. Jamie’s eyes were malachite green, a deep forest of splintered fire. “You still talking that bigtop nonsense?” she asked.

As neighbors they had grown up together, often spending sleepovers not sleeping but playing circus, setting up an elaborate two-ring tent stitched from an old sheet by Jamie’s mother into the semblance of a circus bigtop tent. The wooden dowels that served as posts were happily donated by Hannah’s father from his basement workshop.

Jamie was Master of Ceremonies. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” she drawled into her portable Karaoke microphone, her voice blooming and fragrant as it permeated the house, commanding and hypnotizing. “Welcome to Jamhan’s Bigtop!” Her mother smiled from the kitchen as she

washed the dishes. The intended audience was their accumulated American Girl Dolls – Samantha, Kirsten, Molly, Felicity, Josefina, Elizabeth, Emily, Ivy and Rebecca, who sat patient as stones, but attentive.

They had fought about the name of the circus. Hannah wanted Hanjam's, putting her name first. And why not? Hadn't her father help build it?

Jamie resolved the problem by ignoring it. If she was going to be Master of Ceremonies, by gosh, she would call it whatever she wanted. And so she did, wordlessly squashing Hannah, who burned under the injustice.

Now that they were older, the bigtop had mutated into something else: the warmth of the receptive boudoir, the inner sanctum of her heart, the depth of her body's hunger, the feel of her lover's arms, the one who would fulfill her dreams and make her life turn out right. Her notions were the stuff of packaged, processed media; she had been reared on the glass teat of TV, the world explained by movies, music, advertising and the Internet. She accepted these messages as effortlessly as Sponge Bob absorbed sea water.

Above all the bigtop meant sanctuary, a private and safe place where she could withdraw and stop worrying what would become of her.

"If he's another loser I'll kill myself," Jamie said.

The guy she had met earlier that evening had possibilities. He was tall, blue-eyed, clean-shaven. That was a plus. He drove a recent-year BMW. That, too, was a plus. He seemed different from the rest because of some indefinable mysteriousness, as if he was showing only the tip of something much larger. What, she couldn't say. But she wanted to find out. He was attentive. She knew he had come from money; of that she was sure. He was well-spoken and had success written over him as if it was ordained from On High. The pluses added up.

“He’s gay,” Hannah said.

“What?” Jamie swayed in her seat. “You think so? You really think so?”

Hannah took her time replying.

“I’ll kill myself if he is,” Jamie said.

Hannah shrugged. She had a different philosophy about men. She was sure it was a better plan than Jamie’s, which obviously wasn’t working. Hannah believed that when the time was right her man would pop up like candy from a Pez dispenser. They would instantly know they were each other’s soul-mates and it would be right and forever — holistic, organic, and especially — without drama.

“He’s probably not,” Hannah finally said, “he’s probably just one of those metrosexuals.”

Before Jamie could reply, her phone bleated *eh eh eh eh*. She remembered she had wanted to change the ringtone, purchased in honor of her Latest Loser, the infamous Kurt McCray, boy wonder, who introduced her to poker, beer and TV sports. She hadn’t minded the beer or the poker. What bothered her was his addiction to sports TV. She tried unsuccessfully to lure him away. Either her wiles were not enough or the pull of sweaty athletes was too strong. She guessed he would end up selling insurance or Google ads for a living.

He had called her so many times after she broke it off that she installed an audio clip of Lady Gaga’s notorious telephone kiss-off:

eh eh eh eh
K-kinda busy
K-kinda busy
Sorry, I cannot hear you, I’m kinda busy.

“It’s him!” Jamie squealed.

“Who?”

“The guy-who’s-not-gay, else why would be calling?” Jamie said.

“Don’t answer. Text him!” Hannah said. “Keep him hanging. Don’t make it easy. That was your problem last time, remember? You made it too easy. In fact, we should go. Let’s go. I’ve had enough of this chicken coop for tonight and I know you have.”

Jamie didn’t care for beer but she loved vodka in all its incarnations. Hannah loved margaritas. The floor was lolling under them as they left the bathroom stalls, washed their hands, and combed their hair in the mirror one last time. Jamie oscillated as if she was standing on the deck of a ship in a storm. “I think I’m getting a zit,” she said. She wrinkled her nose. “Right here,” she pointed, moving in close to the mirror. She tried to touch the tip of her nose and missed by an inch. “Like a witch with a wart.”

Hannah was used to such comments. “Your shkin is perfect, dear,” she said.

Jamie giggled. “Did you say ‘shkin’?”

They broke into gales of laughter and made their way to the car, arm in arm, flushed and exhilarated in the cool night air, the drugs they’d taken earlier kicking in.

Inside the car Jamie received a text message from the boy: why do u think I’m gay?

“Because u said u had to pwder yur nose.”

“That’s me exuberant.”

“I didn’t mean to offend, but if I’m gonna let u in, you gotta come clean.”

“I’m clean.”

“What do you think he means by ‘I’m clean’?” Jamie asked Hannah.

Hannah had reclined her seat, snuggled her back down as if she was settling into a lounge chair, and crossed her long legs. “No AIDS,” she said.

And then, sitting up, “Is that what he said? That he has no AIDS? Well! Let the buyer beware,” she said, and lay down again.

“What do you mean?” Jamie asked as she corrected the steering wheel.

“Ask him if he’s been tested.”

“Hannah!”

“No, I’m serious. Ask him.”

“Yeah sure, like you’re going to ask Mr. Right the moment he pops up on your doorstep.”

“Bet I will.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jamie said. She decided to ask anyway.

Thumbing the mini-chicklit-sized keys of her cell phone as she drove, she was about to add the final question mark when she looked up and gasped. The road was gone. For an instant she expected the car to splash into the ocean. That changed when she saw a suddenly-illuminated figure running directly in front of the car. He was on the narrow beach that followed the coast down to the Atlantic.

The car struck the man with a blasphemous crackling roar that swept his legs out from under. He somersaulted backwards as his legs jackknifed over his head. His head penetrated the windshield facing up, inches from Hannah’s face, and lodged there, his arms pinned to his hips, his legs useless and limp on the roof of the car.

The horrifying thing — in addition to his head having gone through the windshield — was that he was upside down; the back of his head was suspended inches from Hannah’s face. Fortunately she had been reclined, and was now screaming heartily at the head that dangled before her eyes.

Jamie slammed the brakes and the car skidded to a stop. She was too dazed to speak. Hannah loosed a long, deep-throated sonic blast, a howl of raw, naked shock until she sputtered and gulped for air like a misfiring engine, her eyes fastened on the intruding head.

His eyes fluttered open and his lips quavered. This brought the girls to attention as if their butts had been electrified. They sat erect and opened their eyes wide. A gurgling issued from his throat. They strained to hear. They glanced at each other and then back at him.

“Help me,” he croaked, “I can’t move my arms. Everything’s upside down.” He spoke slowly, his voice slurring. It took him thirty seconds to say it.

“You’re the one who’s upside down. You’re stuck in the windshield,” Jamie said.

He thought he detected an accusatory quiver in her voice. Had it been his fault? He passed out.

Hannah drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Shouldn’t we call somebody?”

Jamie fired back without hesitation. “Who? My mother? I don’t think so. The cops? No way. I’ll figure something out.”

“He’s in the windshield!” Hannah cried.

“I can see that,” Jamie said, starting the car.

“What’re you doing? Shouldn’t we wait for a cop? Maybe we should call the hospital. Is that what you’re doing? Driving to the hospital?”

Jamie flashed an opaque look. The car scrambled onto the road, the body rocking but firmly wedged. It wasn’t going anywhere.

Hannah pressed her back down into the reclined car seat, still in her seatbelt, her hands clasped over her mouth, arms akimbo, eyes white as ping pong balls and almost as large. She squirmed to avoid the head which bobbed gently as Jamie drove.

“His eyes are open again!” Hannah shouted. Jamie glanced. She was carefully reading and obeying each sign. If she paid attention now she might be able to make it home without

getting stopped. “Listen, I’ll figure something out. Hannah, help me figure something out,” she said. *I have to stay calm*, she thought. *I have to stay above the horror*, she told herself.

“The hell you say!” Hannah said.

“Calm down, Hannah,” Jamie said in a reasonable voice, “Keep your head.”

“Keep my head!” Hannah cried, “Look at *his* head!”

“Calm down. We’ll be home soon,” Jamie said, “It’ll be all right. We’ll figure something out if we just stay calm.”

“You’re taking him to your house? Now I know you’re crazy. Can’t you see he’s gonna die if we don’t help him now!”

A slow-rising mournful wail, imperceptible at first, rose from the man’s throat until it filled the compartment of the car like a marshy odor that threatened to shatter the windows.

“Where the fuck did he come from?” Jamie asked Hannah. “Did you see him?”

“What the fuck does it matter? He’s in the windshield!”

“But what was he doing in the dark?” Jamie asked. Then she turned to the man and repeated the question. He was limp, his ghostly head still.

Hannah whispered, “It was *you* who weren’t on the road. You were texting gay guy. . .”

And then, inexplicably, the man’s head animated and he began to laugh. He laughed as hard as his position allowed. Low choking tremors exploded into salvos of blood-spewing hiccupping coughs.

“He’s delirious,” Hannah said, “He’s in shock. He’s gonna choke to death. We need to get him straight to a hospital.”

“A postman,” the man said, “Post. Man.” His voice was raspy yet the words were deliberate and clear.

“He’s babbling,” Jamie said.

“A postman,” the man repeated, and then, clarifying, “a carrier.”

“You see,” Jamie said. “He talks. He’s not so bad. We’ll fix him up at home.”

“Not me. You,” Hannah barked.

“Am I going to die?” the man asked. He began to cry. “Oh Sweet Jesus, I’m going to die. Fifty-one years old and I’m going to die.”

Jamie didn’t feel drunk now. All her senses were set to maximum. She saw he had a deep gash in his forehead from contact with the windshield. Bright red blood pulsed slowly from it, sending tributaries into the thickets of his hair that dripped slowly from the back of his head. Blood pooled onto her upholstery. For a moment she wondered how the hell she was going to get the stains out.

The house was empty. Her mother was visiting Jamie’s grandmother in Florida. Jamie pulled the car into the garage and closed the door with a push of a button. She glanced at the dash clock before shutting the car off. 1:30 am. They hadn’t passed anyone; they hadn’t been seen by a soul.

Hannah swung her door open and wiggled herself out of her seat to avoid even minimum contact with the jogging head, whose eyes were, for the moment, blessedly closed. “I’m outta here,” she said, sounding half-way outtathere already, “he’s your problem! He popped up in your life, not mine! You should call the police. That’s my advice, call the police, I’m done!”

“You know, Hannah, you’re a real bitch,” Jamie called after her.

“I may be a bitch,” Hannah shouted, “but look what you got under the bigtop!” And then she was gone.

Half an hour passes. He is saying something now, so low Jamie cannot hear. She places her ear beside his mouth. “Water,” he whispers, “bring me water.”

Wordlessly, she goes to the kitchen through the garage side-door, fills a glass and brings it to the man.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

“Water,” he replies.

Since he is upside down she is forced to dribble the water from the glass into the roof of his mouth. He drinks what he can. The water that spills out is pink with blood.

“Tom,” he says.

“I’m so sorry I hit you with my car, Tom,” Jamie says tearfully.

“Can you get me out?” he asks.

“Are you in pain?”

He doesn’t reply. *Of course he’s in pain, you ninny*, Jamie reprimands herself.

“Can you get me out?” he mumbles.

She hesitates but then goes into the house and comes out after a few minutes with a hammer. “I think I can crack the glass with this,” she says.

“I can’t feel my arms,” he says, and then his eyes roll up and he’s out again.

Jamie takes the hammer back to the kitchen and returns to the car empty-handed.

He’s awake again. His head swims as he speaks. “You’re not going to get me out, are you?” he asks. “I’m bleeding to death. I must have a dozen cracked bones. What’s wrong with you? My body feels like shredded wheat.” He delivers this in a harsh, raspy voice laboring to pronounce each syllable, his breath rapid and shallow, each word measured and carefully delivered.

Jamie slides into the driver's seat and cries. "Why were you there? Do you realize you've ruined my life? I'm only twenty-three and my life is over." She cries into a pink handkerchief almost the color of blood.

eh eh eh eh her telephone interrupts.

"Hello?" She doesn't recognize the caller ID.

"It's me, your gay-but-not-really-gay-friend from last night."

She had almost forgotten about him.

Jamie looks at her watch. 2:15 am. "It's a little late," she says.

"I know," he says. "Look, I really think I like you. I don't want you to think I'm calling just because I'm drunk."

"Are you drunk?"

"Well, yeah, maybe a little. I'm calling because I like you and want to see you."

Maybe he's the one.

"I can't see you now. I'm busy."

"Oh? Are you with someone?"

She is about to say, "Sort of," but changes her mind.

"Just busy," she says. "Besides, it's late and I need to get my beauty sleep."

"You don't need to sleep to be beautiful."

"Are you sure you're not gay?"

And then she looks up and sees Tom's head. It is shaking and dripping blood. Bubbles are issuing from his mouth.

"Call me later," Jamie says, and disconnects.

She is drifting, and after a while she speaks. “Behind bars. That’s where I’ll end up. Maybe it’s the best thing. Maybe I need the rest, maybe there’s a silver lining,” she says. She hadn’t intended to speak out loud, but the words escape her lips softly, like a ribbon, and flutter to the floor. His breathing slows. His eyes open and she is sure he heard her.

“I haven’t eaten in two days. AARP says eating less extends your life,” he says.

She can’t tell if he is serious, crazy, or just plain stupid. He simply says the words, offering them up like cough drops. “Do you think I could get some water?” he croaks. He seems more awake. His voice is still raspy, like a thousand bees are caught in it, but she understands him and quickly brings a glass of water. He spits blood and water that leaves tiny pink droplets on her skin.

“Jesus!” she screams.

He can’t turn his head to look at her. It feels stiff or wedged, he can’t tell which. “Can you try to get me out?” he pleads.

“I already did,” she says. “I tried pushing and pulling but you’re wedged tight. You woke up a few times but then passed out again. Don’t you remember?”

He shakes his head.

“You want to spend the rest of your life behind bars?” he asks. “Are you nuts? Get me out of here!”

He corkscrews his head in a vain attempt to meet her eyes. It is too painful to turn. She makes no effort to move into his line of sight. “Can you hear me? Are you there?” he cries.

“I’m here,” she says, sitting back, letting her head relax against the padding. She watches him. “You wouldn’t understand,” she says.

“Do I look like I’m in a position to not understand?” he asks. “If you don’t get help I’ll bleed to death. I’m already so weak I can barely stay conscious.”

She turns her head away from him and begins to speak. “Maybe I am better off behind bars. It’s horrible to wake up and realize I’m the only one who can stand my company. All those techniques to find guys, what clothes to wear, rules to follow, what to say and what not to say, the waiting and the guessing. It used to be fun, but I’m out of fun, I’m not having fun anymore. I’m tired of keeping up. I’m already in prison,” she says miserably. She opens her hand and her phone slides to the floor.

“You want sympathy? Are you joking?” he asks, and then nods off, muttering about how it’s too soon for him to die. She strains to hear all of his words. His eyes are slits; his breathing regular. She wonders if she should call Kurt McCray. Even if he is a jerk, at least he’d come running as eager as a jack rabbit. The challenge of extricating the body from the windshield would give him a chance to show what a man he is.

“Ah,” Tom says. He springs awake and is speaking feverishly in a supplicating, plaintive voice. “Jarvey, can you hear me?” His eyes dart as he repeats the question three times, each time more desperately. *He’s delirious*, Jamie thinks.

The dam breaks and a raft of words wash downstream. “Jesus fucking Christ, Jarvey, wake up! Hello, Emergency? My friend’s passed out. He’s got a bunch of empty pill containers. He won’t wake up. I’m not sure if he’s breathing.” Tom pauses to gasp for air. Then he continues, more annoyed than angry, more mystified than confused.

“Where are the letters? The letters are gone, you stupidsunnavabitch, they’ve gone to e-mail, every one. Do you think you can stop technology? It’s a fucking tsunami, is what it is. It uses you, not the other way ’round. You held out for a backlash, Jarvey. *The Letter Renaissance*,

you called it. You wanted to start the Church of Letter Day Renaissance. Jarvey, you dumbsunnavabitch, you held your breath longer than anyone I know can hold his breath. You made it look so natural no one suspected how much pain you were in. It must have felt good to finally let go.” Tom shakes his head violently. “Fucking pink slip,” he mutters and is out again.

The pills Jamie had taken in the kitchen go to work. She blinks her eyes rapidly and then closes them, allowing herself to sink into a pleasurable well, a sugarcoated endorphin-rush spreading from her abdomen outwards to her limbs, *almost like a star*, she thinks dreamily. Her eyes glaze and she raises one hand to trace the cobwebby spider cracks that’s transformed her windshield into an intricate mosaic. “Octopus star,” she says, feeling the tentacles invade every corner of her being.

She reclines beside him in the driver’s seat and lets the movie behind her eyes unfold. She is in the woods. There are trees everywhere, dozens of intense shades of green towering against an absurdly deep-blue sky. The air is fragrant with intoxicating aromas; a symphony of flora embraces her. She is happy. She feels peaceful. It’s an alien sensation, but exactly as she imagined. So this is what everyone is talking about!

But it wasn’t to last. The path turns wet and mushy and she sinks down. It isn’t summer any more, it is fall, and the earth pulls at her feet. “If the mud is thick enough it will suck the boots off any one, no matter how proud,” she says. She squats to examine a log. “The crumbling trunk is teeming with ants,” she announces to the trees. Her eyes follow insects with fascination.

“Where are you?” Tom asks. He can see her face in a corner of the rear view mirror. She is older than he first thought. Nice looking, not too badly put together. He’s surprised when she answers. “In the woods without an iAnything,” she says.

There is a moment of silence and then Tom is bucking as if he's riding a bull. "You were texting when you hit me," he says. "That's why you drove off the road." He issues a single bark of pain or laughter, as jagged and sharp as a broken tooth, before passing out again.

She wakes at 4:30 am. She's been out forty-five minutes. He looks worse. There is dark foam erupting from his mouth. His eyes are open and bloodshot. Although she feels she must act quickly if she is to save him, she knows he is already gone. But really, she thinks, I should call Kurt McCray. He'll have the guy popped out like a champagne cork in no time. But she doesn't move: she cannot move. She feels as if shackles are on her wrists. Some internal guidance system has ordered her to stand down. She can't believe the events of the last few hours are real. Maybe she's hallucinating? She realizes Tom is awake and watching her.

"Just maybe," he says mournfully, "this is better than death by slowly falling apart." With a great effort he turns a little from her toward the passenger window. His eyeballs swivel upwards. "Can you hear me Jarvey? You did it your way and I did it hers! What's the difference? We're both done in by e-mail. The whole damn country left us to die on the vine."

His head jerks from side to side like a fish on a hook. "Maybe you did me a favor, girl. I haven't been honest. My parents were right: I would never make it as an artist. My time has come and gone. I'm just another post-office-old-man ready to die."

Jamie stares at him. She attempts to wipe his oozing mouth with a napkin left over from MacDonald's. He turns away, but the river of words keep flowing. "Yeah, that's right, my skeleton is breaking down, turning into cottage cheese. 'Degenerative bone disease' is what the muthufuckas calls it. Don't bother beating yourself up, you did me a favor."

"You're acting nuts," she tells him.

He ignores her and begins to sing.

*I sing the body breakdown!
I'm turning into Walter Matthau
the grumpiest of old men
—confound the vowels in his name!*

*My bowels are never excreted enough
My hemorrhoids are itching insane
My prostate is enlarged but the rest of me is shrinking!
And now my body's smashed to smithereens*

“It’s the chorus,” he yells, “join in!”

*To smithereens, to smithereens
To smithereens, to smithereens
And now my body's smashed to smithereens*

He quivers and wilts again, his eyes closing. She blinks several times rapidly and wonders if he’s dangerous. Maybe he’s one of those homeless people that can be found by highway ramps and intersections holding signs begging for money or work?

She cries. It is a soft and sobbing cry, a cry of helplessness and despair.

“My side hurt,” he says, his eyes still closed.

She jumps. “Stop doing that! Every time I think you’re out you wake up.”

“I can’t feel my legs,” he says, opening his eyes.

“I guess you’re dying,” she says. She looks through the window at the side of the garage where her mother keeps white-wire shelving stacked with garden tools.

“No, I mean it. What’s your name? Jamie? Jamie, it’s been downhill since I hit forty. I didn’t see it coming just like you didn’t see me.” He’s wheezing now but she can’t tell from anxiety or his broken body. “Prison doesn’t scare you?” he asks.

She swallows her last oxy and stares at the hand claw on the shelf. If only she could bring the claw into her dream. She would claw the earth into order. She closes her eyes.

He wonders if she's asleep, but then she begins to speak, her voice barely audible. "I am exhausted wood pulp . . . silver curling birch . . . sitting by the cut logs there's always an empty red plastic gasoline jug, hollow and useless. . ." She jerks into an upright position, her back straight, her eyes open.

"What?" he asks.

"There must be a way to get you out and fix you up besides calling my dumbass ex-boyfriend. But I can't do it myself. I thought I could count on Hannah but she's so jealous of me she can't see straight."

Then she slumps, deflated. "I bet she called the cops." She flashes a graveyard grin. He slides into pain. "It's getting darker," he says.

They drift off.

She is no longer in the forest. "My boots are walking though elephant shit," she says. "Look at the beautiful arched backs of the trapeze artists! They dangle like Christmas ornaments under the bigtop! I want to fly."

He is moaning now.

"The whip and chair is all you need for lions," she says. "All eyes are on me. How did I get on this tightrope? I can't remember climbing. Everyone is holding their breath. Will I fall? Will I hurt myself? Half the crowd is afraid I will and the other half hopes I will. I can't decide who to please!" She curls into a fetal position and whimpers.

Now he is talking, his voice quiet and steady, his eyes fluttering. "At lunch I like to sit in my car, turn on the AC and read the paper while I eat. One day I notice an old lady, she's anywhere from seventy-five to eight-five, with cotton-candy white hair, bent of neck and walking purposely like a cruising locomotive. She wears a loose pink sweater and chugs right by

my window without noticing me and then she extends her right hand and attempts to pry a shopping cart from between the pipe-like rails it had been rammed into. Because she is pushing it backwards, it bucks and stubbornly checks her forward momentum. She is annoyed she has to stop, if only for a moment. But rather than go around and into the narrow path between the rails where she could easily back up the shopping cart with two hands, she chooses instead to strong-arm the cart with one hand as she doggedly walks on. The cart rears and struggles to tear itself away from her grasp until, fed up with pulling, she gives a furious yank. There is frustration and defeat in that yank, but it does the trick and the cart scuttles into compliance.

I think a lot about that woman. I don't think we're that different. I've been trying to force the cart backwards my whole life. Maybe the pink slip was the yank I needed to return to compliance. It would have been much easier had I worked for my father."

Jamie says nothing. She is mute, vacant, an empty vessel.

"I'm dying," he says quietly. His eyes roll to half-mast as he rests from the exertion of talking.

After a minute Jamie speaks, shyly at first. "I've never been better than mediocre at school. I relied on my looks. People are willing to bend over backwards for a pretty girl."

"Shit," he mutters.

She is not surprised he is awake. But she hates the unexpected fright of it. They drift in and out, unspeaking.

The overhead light in the garage winks out. Jamie is instantly awake. "It's on a timer," she says absently. They sit in the dark for a few minutes before Jamie speaks.

"I'm getting older too. Maybe I'm not as fresh and pretty as I used to be. I suppose I could become a cosmetologist. A hair stylist. Or maybe I'll stay home and do medical billing. I

hear third-party billing is all the rage. But who could bear being stuck indoors all day, every day?"

He coughs and keeps on coughing. Occasionally he comes up for air. Once he chokes out, "Maybe you should buy a broom."

Jamie isn't sure she heard right with all that choking.

"So you can sweep yourself off your own feet," he says.

Her voice becomes little-girl like, sweeter. "I have this dream that I'm walking in the woods. It's always the same: it's rainy and green and the air smells beautiful, if beautiful is a smell. But when I look at my feet they're stuck in mud. Suddenly I'm in a tent, a huge tent, a bigtop circus tent and I'm walking in poop, not mud."

She pauses and looks at his injured head. "Don't you think that's strange? What do you think that means? I've never told anyone, not even Hannah."

"What kind of poop?" he asks.

She shrugs. "I don't know. Elephant. What's the difference?"

She slumps into the seat. "Now look at me! The bigtop has shrunk to the size of a Ford Fiesta. I've got a human cannonball lodged in my windshield. I'm pouring out my life's troubles to a stranger. The police are probably outside right now. All I wanted was somebody to love. Like the song. *I just want somebody to love*. I admit it. I was texting this guy from the club when I hit you. I don't even really like him. He's probably gay anyway. I'm really, really sorry."

"Yeah. Me too." It is the last thing he says. His head relaxes lower than she'd seen it before, the coil released, weightlessly dangling like fruit until it comes to rest on the passenger seat, his neck bare and vulnerable.

Jamie holds a compact mirror to his nose and mouth. It does not fog. She steels herself and thrusts her hand onto his chest. No heartbeat. She recoils and stares disbelievingly, occasionally burying her face in her hands. She finds she can't tear her eyes from his inert body.

eh eh eh eh her cell phone rings. She jerks it open. *What the fuck, who's texting at 5:00 am? Hannah. It's Hannah. Maybe she changed her mind and wants to help.*

Jamie, I've always been a good girl I don't want to spoil my future. Accessory to murder! Hit and run! Leaving scene! Etc. Sorry I called the cops.

A hard rapping sound startles Jamie. Someone is pounding something heavy on her garage door. A rough male voice calls out. "Jamie? Jamie Miller? Open up, Jamie. We know you're in there."

She looks around the small cabin of the Ford Fiesta, realizing these are the last few seconds of freedom she will ever have. *From here on out, things will be different, and not for the better.* She leans forward and kisses the postman's lifeless lips, still warm, and whispers, not for the last time, how very, very sorry she is. Even if she isn't feeling sorry for him just yet, she is certain she will be in the very, very near future.