

Silent Sounds

*“...The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.”*

Something feels different. Thank God we did it on a Saturday so that I'd have today to chew it all over – It would have been a serious psychological struggle if I'd had to work at the call center the day after that. Hell, it would've been tough just trying to drive back into Argot. I needed to get out of town like a billygoat needs his balance, and I don't think I could have gotten any farther away with a 30-minute drive.

In the dim morning light, everything begins to look a little brighter as it's filtered through the yellow needles of the turning tamarack pines. Of course it all looked much grander as a kid, camping here with my pop. This whole section of the Bitterroots burned awhile back. Back then, more than one of these blackened trunks bore the name 'Paul,' clandestinely carved with dad's pocket-knife so that he wouldn't get all worked up about me dulling it. The fire came straight through Argot; burned a couple casinos and houses on the edge of town, but went right around us for the most part. It's amazing how quickly these pines can come back though, growing all-the-faster for the bedlam that came before. Five years on and they're head-tall, five more and they'll have caught up to whatever husks are still here.

While Tommy and Pete are out cold in the tent, I'm starting to see the skinny strings of early-morning light streaming through the banana-yellow tamarack needles and wrapping around the charred-black trunks of a generation past. I always wake up first. Being the only one awake under the deep pinks and blues of the rising sun is great on a summer morning, but fall is coming quick and the beauty of the sunrise is already qualified by this damn morning chill. The other two will be asleep for a

while longer, so I crawl out to mark the territory around our tent and smoke my last spliff before those harpies have a chance to bum it off me. I'm hoping the pot might help me clear up this hazy feeling that yesterday left me with. Almost a hangover, except a hangover would almost be preferable. A hangover, at least, is unambiguous; that sort of tempest in the temples gives you something to point your finger at. This one, on the other hand, is more like an intellectual indigestion; everything a little off, but a subtle enough sensation that it can't be traced back to its source.

Scrumching down by the pit, I try bend my body around last night's embers. The soft pinks and blues of sunrise have begun giving way to the light of day, and it'll take some skillful stirring to see if I can't coax one more meal from last night's coals. I start emptying out my drawstring bag in search of a granola bar I could have sworn I packed, but all it offers is a Nalgene with no water, my iPhone with no juice, and this journal that I'd bought just for the occasion, foolishly thinking this would be the trip that I finally write my great novel. I s'pose we can't all be a Kesey.

I'd bought this pack of paper on our way out yesterday morning, thinking I'd end the day with a notebook-full of insightful scribblings. In actuality, I managed a mis-remembered rendition of Abbot & Costello's 'Who's On First,' an asymmetrical yin-yang symbol with the inscription 'apply directly to forehead,' and a couple sentences that must be English, but may as well have been Mayan as I try to decipher them. This whole journal idea might have gone somewhere, but the stuff Pete got us wasn't gonna let me sit around. I'd been hoping to talk with those two more, and when I'd suggested that we head up to that ridgeline, Tommy countered that there just *must* be aliens, and I turned tail before I could get caught up in a rerun of their well-worn 'Area 51' argument.

Had we all hiked up, I wonder if they'd have seen what I saw or heard whatever I'd heard. It doesn't sound so absurd that, had we all braved that scree field and peered over that mountaintop perch together, we'd have been psychedelically-synched by the time we stumbled upon that cave on the

way down. Looking back, I can't understand how I missed the huge hole-in-the-wall on my way up. I guess I do have trouble remembering my route when I'm stone-cold sober, so I probably shouldn't have expected anything else yesterday, but this thing was massive – the bullet-hole Paul Bunyon would've left if he'd had a score to settle with this particular pile of earth. This horizontal crater had fauna 40, 50 feet back, lodgepoles that had once stamped out a living in this semi-subterranean cavern and the spidery remains of bushes that somehow once found sustenance from the cave's shaded floor. They'd all been caught up in the fire, of course, but even the lingering shadows were magnificent. It wasn't the trees themselves that were so mind-blowing; I've seen lodgepoles twice blown-over and still eeking out an existence on a windy mountaintop. Rather, it was how clearly visible these dead pillars of pulp appeared 40, 50 feet back, like they were illuminated from within the tunnel inasmuch as from the light lurking at the entrance.

More striking than the light, though, was that noise. Sitting at the crest of the ridge, it had felt like I'd stumbled into a wind tunnel, but as soon as I'd left that whirlwind and my sense of sound started to return, I could hear it. It was barely there at first, like a stream so far and faint that you take it for the wind. As I descended further, the noise grew; an echo bouncing from the cavern interior to the walls of my skull, or maybe vice versa. Whatever that noise was, I remember it clear as a catchy radio tune whose beat alone clings to your consciousness well after the station breaks for commercials. It sounded like the noise of an entire forest growing, burning, birthing dying... all recorded and condensed into a kind of auditory time-lapse. The sort of sound I'd imagine life here once had, before some white man took a liking to the particular variety of minerals in this valley, before he brought with him men to mine and bars to keep them occupied, women to bear children and children to keep them busy, children to grow up in the city of Argot and work in the Verizon Wireless call center, where they tell customers their name is 'Sunjay' instead of Paul and take up smoking cigarettes just for the extra breaks.

As I walked deeper into the cave, that something I had heard began to grow in intensity, though not in volume. Something like a shouted whisper, conveying instructions that I could hear but not understand. I stood there a few minutes, or maybe it was a few hours, struggling to break a trail through the tangled bramble of my own thoughts. It was like I'd stumbled upon a deep voice that I could feel as much as hear, the way it might feel to stand beside the speakers at a Nine Inch Nails concert with lead earplugs as they approach the peak of a song. And I could feel the song. And then it was gone, and I looked down to find myself drenched in sweat and cloaked in darkness, save for the circle of light shining some 50 feet to my rear. The sun was setting and suddenly it wasn't all so bright. I walked back out confused, as much by what had just happened as by how I'd explain it to my comrades at camp. Plenty to pick over during the long scramble down.

I returned to find Pete fiddling with the stove, gritting his teeth while Tommy told him he didn't think it would work.

"The Hell have you been?" Asked Pete. The tone in his voice reminded me that it may have been uncool to wander off for so long.

"I checked out the view. Very Strange." Strange sounded right, or like a good lead-in, at least. "How long was I gone?"

"Not sure, an hour or three. But hey since you're here now, how bout ya sub in on this stove before I sock Tommy in the teeth?"

Tommy scowled, holding up a pot of water with one hand and a lone finger with the other. He seemed less perturbed by Pete's threat of violence than by the prospect of dry macaroni. Suddenly seeming to recall Pete's 30 pound advantage, Tommy turned to me with a toothy, off-kilter smile. "How was *your* trip, Paul? See anything trippy?"

“Well...” I paused to weigh my words and ensure they didn’t come out sounding crazy “I actually found this cave a ways up that went crazy deep. Like, 40, 50 feet. And when I went in I heard this –”

“Damn, 50 feet!?! How far up?”

“Bout a mile, maybe more. But I hear this–”

“Fuck that,” contributed Pete.

“–This noise in there. It was like a voice, but it wasn’t! It sorta–”

“A voice?” Pete interjected with a hint of alarm. “Weird, we were all visuals.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t really a voice. It was more of a vibration, like –”

“Oh, I see!” Tommy looked at me knowingly. “Don’t even get me started on the vibes.”

“– Step aside, crazy man.” Pete pulled over the stove that I’d just lit, put the pot on, and proceeded to pour in our 4-box stash of Kraft. “For the record, we’re not liable if this stuff turned you wacko.” Pete grinned, and I slapped his hand away as he reached over to poke me in the ribs.

“Fuck off”

I felt like I’d just tried drawing landscape with crayons and printer paper, and I was almost as tired as I was hungry. Seeing that this was going anywhere, I held my tongue, leaned back, and listened to the strangely soothing sound of stirring mac & cheese. We didn’t talk much more that evening. A few minutes later, the only sound was the intensive chewing and scooping of an unspoken no holds barred mac-eating competition. We didn’t say a whole lot more that night. I was preoccupied, and we were all exhausted. After a long stretch of silence, Tommy tested his luck by asking if I’d heard the good word about the Alpha Centaurians the CIA housed in Southern Nevada, and I told him he must be thinking of

Vegas. Soon thereafter we all crawled into the tent, and I was quickly carried off into a rest I badly needed with dreams I immediately forgot.

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We returned to Argot that afternoon. A night away made it feel better to be back in my one-bedroom apartment with a soft bed rather than a hard sleeping pad, a whole twin-sized mattress rather than the middle-slot of a cramped two-person tent, the safe selection of my Netflix library again at my feet rather than the treacherous terrain of a Bitterroot mountainside. The three of us hashed back over the whole day on our drive back to Argot, but it seemed like our languages were ever-so-slightly out of synch. We all agreed that the Tamarack's were beautiful and that the cloud action was absolutely spectacular, but beyond that we didn't seem to have brought much back. I took a couple more runs at summing up my solo expedition to that cave, but nothing I said made much sense, and Tommy and Pete were still a little salty that I'd smoked that last spliff. Tommy told me a story about his schizophrenic uncle Floyd, who'd went crazy after his first Grateful Dead concert and hadn't been the same since. I don't like those stories, and Pete told Tommy not to be such a damn downer. After that the conversation kind of sputtered out, so I brought it to a definitive close by plugging in my iPod for a full-volume, digitally-remastered rendering of "Mr. Tambourine Man," and I let Bob Dylan's moaning take us all the way home.

I spent the rest of Sunday afternoon decompressing on my couch to the soothing sights and sounds of *Breaking Bad*, season 4, but however stellar Bryan Cranston's performance, or suspenseful Walter White's predicament, the episodes seemed staler than they should for my third run-through of the series. *Food*. Somewhere between Hector shooting Max and Walt's trip to El Pollo Loco, I realized how incredibly hungry I'd become and decided to walk over to the Main Street Wok. I've generally tried to avoid this place after eating their mediocre carry-out on a near-weekly basis growing up in Argot, but

the lack variety in this town means that they're the lesser of only 5 or 6 evils. I popped in my earbuds, threw on a shirt that seemed to match my pajama bottoms, and soon found myself standing behind the Main Street counter, flipping through a menu that I've seen a million times, full of items that I could recite from memory.

Standing across the counter is Gus Greeley, his dull grey eyes peering out from under a veil of overgrown black hair that I presume to be some kinda compensation for male-pattern baldness. My feigned examination of the menu was mostly a way to kill time while I thought of how to subtly slip in a snide comment while I placed my order. Though it might seem petty, I like to think of every sardonic sneer across this counter as a token of justice ever since this man macked with my girlfriend Junior year of high school. In the interest of clean food, I opted to wait until Gus brought out my order to launch a "you should really tuck in that shirt" over the bow. Finally, Gus returned with the food, *Tip* but something told me that my sarcasm was better saved for another time, and I decided instead to show off my magnanimity with a \$10 tip, telling him to keep the change.

"Thanks, Paul!" Gus parries, "Say, I saw Hannah at the pharmacy yesterday. How're you two doing?"

Seeing as I haven't been here since Hannah and I split, this one might've been an accidental affront, but gossip tends to travel faster than fire in this town, so it's hard to know. Either way, I decide to deflect rather than give Gus the satisfaction.

"We've been better. How's everything with your old lady?"

Gus glanced at his feet before looking back up and over my shoulder. "Meh, we're bout the same," he mumbled. This kid would never make it in Hold'em.

"Tough all over, huh," I offered.

“Yeah, yeah. Women, lemme tell you.”

“You’re tellin’ me.”

Fresh out of clichés, Gus and I had to share a few more moments in silence while I perused my phone and he punched buttons on the register; either a time-killing tactic or some sorta maniacal message to his fellow Wok-workers. Again, I assumed the worst just to be on the safe side. After a few minutes I my polyethylene bowl of broccoli beef is brought up and I grab it with a wave and turn tail. I notice Jerry from the hardware store and his wife Tila celebrating the Sabbath with some General Tso’s and Mongolian Beef.

Victorious for the moment, I walk to a table in the far corner giving Jerry & Tila a nod as I pass that says ‘it’s great to see you again but I’m going to enjoy my wok in peace,’ and start in on my Pad Thai with the efficiency that only 23 years of training can bring. *Walk outside* I was actually making some great headway toward my record of 4 minutes 32 seconds, but it seemed stuffier than usual in there, and I couldn’t help but notice the sideways glances Jerry and Tila kept throwing my way as they rehashed whatever piece of gossip they probably picked up at the supermarket earlier today, so I packed up the Pad Thai and headed for the door, trying not to lose my noodles over that goofy smile Gus was pointing at me.

Listen I take out my earphones as I start toward my house, feeling more in the mood for silence than Nine Inch Nails. Even on people’s day off, Main Street in Argot rarely gets much louder than a load of laundry, but as I tune in to the quiet hum of small-town activity, something sounds out of place – a cruel combination of whimpering and laughter that isn’t foreign enough after growing up in a class of 22 without much to keep them busy. I jog back a half-block and turn into the alley to find four slingshot-clad kids suppressing giggles. They’re sitting beside an old white paint bucket with a pile of leftover beef yakisoba sitting at their feet. As a matted grey-black mutt stalks up to them, I see them cock back the

slingshots. Suddenly the poor tramp decides to make a run for it and is met halfway with a high-speed volley of white and orange golf balls that send him into a retreat back behind to the dumpster to whimper, pace, and think about where he went wrong. *Stop them!* Those pitiful moans from the other end of the alley shake me into action and I start hollering at these little punks at full-volume that I know exactly who their parents are and how I've got half a mind to come back with a helluva lot more than a slingshot. The unexpected display of grown-up rage from behind them sends them scattering, and they sprint off with the bucket, making a couple poorly-aimed throws over their shoulders as they run off. That bit about knowing their parents was only a half-lie. I recognized the two redheads as my buddy Eric's kid brothers, and I've met Eric's parents just enough times to gauge a hearty sense of disapproval.

I'm not halfway to the dumpster before the mutt makes one last halting dash for the box of leftovers, licking them up so quickly that they're gone by the time I make it to him. Amazingly, this dumb dog doesn't run away but walks right up to me, generously sharing the stench of wet dog and rotten Chinese food as some kind of repulsive recompense for my intervention. I've never been much for dogs, and this mutt's stench isn't swaying me much. "I could be as bad as them," I tell him, but he disregards the warning and keeps on circling me and sniffing my feet. I stoop down to check his tattered red collar, for a nametag that isn't there and notice that his eyes are closed and crusty. *Feed him.* This stench is really getting to me, so I set down my leftovers to give the poor pooch a second course and turn towards home.

I pop in my iPod and start back, thinking about whether the whole incident's worth mentioning to Eric. His response would probably be to ask why I give a damn about some lame stray from the reservation up the valley, and I honestly wouldn't know what to tell him. Come 3pm tomorrow, I'll probably be at work, those adolescent brutes will be out of school, and that dumb dog will be back in the alley, still learning it's lesson about little boys with golf balls.

My damn iPod dies as I turn down my street and I ball up the earphones into a tangle that will take a good ten minutes to unfurl. Suddenly I feel something right behind me and spin around fist-cocked and adrenaline pumping, feeling like a fool when I find that it's just the mutt. Frustrated and not wanting to touch the thing, I give him a kick and yell "git!" My apartment has enough weird smells in it and I'm not looking to add 'stray dog' to the list. *Bathe him, bring him inside.* He brushes off my kicks like a dog who's seen worse, and after a minute or so the faded brown bundle of fur wins me over. I unlock the door and lead him straight back to the tub. I fill the tub with water and a half-bottle of hand soap, meeting surprisingly little resistance as I plop him in and set about scrubbing him clean. The whole ordeal takes about an hour, leaving me with a knee-high bundle of fuzz. It's getting late, and I decide that I may as well let him sleep on the floor for the night. The bath wasn't so bad, and I remind myself that I'm nowhere near responsible enough to take care of a myself, let alone some stray dog. "You're heading to the Humane Society tomorrow, Lizzie," I say, a clarification for the both of us.

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Work today was just about the same as last Monday at the call center. Pretty similar to last Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday as well. I come in at 9:05, realize I've forgotten my lunch, and pop out my earbuds, exchanging the melodies of Kendrick Lamar for the cacophony of customers that lay in wait on the other side of the Verizon hands-free headset. Four years reading Shakespeare and \$30,000 that I didn't have got me here, and I'm pretty sure Anthony in the next cubicle over forged his GED certificate. Today, Anderson from Rhode Island decides that his spotty cell service really is the last straw, and treats me to an expletive-filled rant explaining the egregious incompetence of myself and "all the other shitbrains you've got over there." I share an hour of my life with Carrol from Arizona, who hangs up without as much as a goodbye when, exasperated, I suggest that she double-check her modem to see if it's plugged into the wall. Monday. The day when weekend's accumulation of spiteful

frustration and dejection begins pouring back through the regularly-leaking levy. The kind of animosity that only two whole days to oneself could create.

Get up, go outside. Typically, I have no problem waiting until my allotted 1:15 lunch break, but suddenly the call-room seems so small, the cubicle crushing; I must have spoiled myself on Saturday with all that mountain air. I can see Ken, my supervisor, pacing three rows over from me. I yell “hey Ken, I’m gonna step out back for a smoke!” He nods and points to his wristwatch, indicating that this’ll come out of my lunch break, and I stifle the urge to hurl my finely sharpened pencil right at his carefully-groomed brown goatee and hightail out the back door. It’s drizzling outside, *Get in your car, head North* and I head towards my. I walk around the parking lot for a while, trying to pick out my clunky sedan from a sea of trucks and suburbans. Finding it, I curl out the lot and onto I-93. With the speed of a Sunday morning, a question begins to meander across my mind out of nowhere: ‘why?’ And as if from nowhere followed the realization that I have no idea where I was going. I mean, in the immediate sense, I know. I’m heading North, on I-93, maybe 5 minutes outside of Walker, but those facts fail to fix my disorientation and I suddenly realize that I’ve been gone far too long for a smoke break. *Why? Pick up the hitchhiker.* Wait! I heard that. What the hell was that? Is the radio on? What hitchhiker? I need to take the next exit and get back to my cubicle before Ken gives it to someone else!

I make a jump up to 95mph and peel off at the exit, only to find myself stuck behind some dunce waiting at the stoplight before the onramp as if there is another for a mile in any direction. I honk and begin rolling down my window to holler at him when my frenzy is halted by a figure ahead. A squat figure with a black mass of hair looms to the right of the on-ramp, looking as ratty and almost as shaggy as the dog I picked up yesterday. I can see that his thumb is facing upward, but I could swear it’s pointed straight at me. Fuck this. *Pick him up.* “Why!?” The light turns green and the Chevy ahead of me turns onto the Interstate, but I’m sitting here. Who did I just yell at? Who is that? This is insane. I should be at

work. He's looking at me. Damn. Damn! This putrid pilgrim has a fix on me and he's walking over, right into the road? Does he think that's why I'm stopped? Should I go? Does he know?

He knocks on my passenger-side window, and I role it down.

"Hey, man! Thank you so much! That rain was really pickin' up! The name's Jonathan." Jonathan offers me his hand and I give him a blank stare, aware that seems strange but too confused for conversation. He cocks his head at me, his hair dripping water on my seat as if from some hidden cranial reservoir, but seems to make the calculation that my quiet, dry car is better than a cold, wet on-ramp. He shuts the door and rolls up his window and it's silent, Jonathan friendly smile matching my befuddled gaze. I break the silence in the only manner I can, stepping on the gas and we pull onto the highway. Am I dreaming? Is this some sort of prank? Could this 'Jonathan' fellow be Ashton Kutcher in disguise? No. He seems normal, for a vagabond. I can't ask him; that would sound crazy.

"How's Monday treatin' ya?"

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"Not great, eh? Sounds about right."

"Yeah, about right."

"Well buddy, I was having some sorta Monday too before you came along. Been on the road since Calgary and it was startin' to look like I'd be spendin' the night in a mud puddle. You oughta be canonized for this ride!"

I tell Jonathan that I'm headed South Anyways. On down to Argot. I tell him we've got a hotel that's not too pricey, and he tells me that he's bound for the airport in Salt Lake, says he was a doctor in Calgary, private practice. Says he sold everything and bought a plane ticket, that he's heading south with

the clothes on his back, his wallet and his insulin, “on account of the diabetes.” Jonathan claims he’ll be on a plane to Occaroo in three weeks, where he intends to start a clinic. Says he’s never felt so alive.

Where’s Occaroo?

“Where’s Occaroo?”

“Island off the West coast of Namibia, my friend! Beautiful scenery, comfortable climate, dreadful healthcare and no industry. Wanna tag along? It’s looking like I’ll be without a second set of hands when I land and I’ll need to hire somebody”

Say yes! Go with him.

I’m ignoring that. “I’ve never been to Utah, and I don’t think I’d much like Okedoo.”

Jonathan takes my decline in stride and starts into spewing a monologue about ‘how much good’ he could do down in Occaroo with his medical knowledge and modest savings, but I’m only listening with one ear while I keep the other cocked for someone else and my mind races about what to tell Ken, what he’ll say. While I listen too intently to talk Jonathan wears himself out and all you can hear is the haggard humming of my engine as it wheezes up to 100.

Finally, after what seemed like centuries of silence, we pull into Argot. *Give him the car.* I drop him off at the hotel and he hands me a bright blue business card, saying that number will work for another few weeks. I put the piece of cardstuck in my pocket and step on the gas. It’s already been an hour, Ken’s going to have my ass, maybe if I slip in through the back door—*Go through the front.* “STOP!” I look around to make sure nobody heard that and walk in. I open the front door and find myself face-to-face with him. He’s walking right up to me and I’ve got no excuse. I could tell that mustache-waxer Ken where I went, but I couldn’t tell him why; that’s my question. But Ken needs an answer or he’s gonna give me the same speech I’ve listened in on a hundred times, the speech about how the Northwest

Regional Call Center is a team, and a team only works when everybody shows up. He'll scratch the back of his head like he's uncomfortable, like he hasn't canned six poor teenagers in the past two months alone.

"Howdy, Paul. Where'd you run to? Musta been one helluva cigarette!"

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My brain races for an excuse, but something's blocking me up. "Yeah, sorry bout that..."

"Ya see, Paul," crows Ken beneath raised eyebrows, "the Northwest Regional Call Center is a team, and a team only works..."

My eyes glazed over as I saw my fate reflected in Ken's smug face, mouth opening and closing catfish-style as he rattled off his own internal script for termination. What I saw looked something like a dark, dilapidated plush couch in the basement of my parents' place, like ramen rather than stir fry, 60 Minutes in place of Netflix, chores in place of pride.

"... when all the teammates show up."

My focus returns to show Ken's raised brow and the smirk lying a centimeter below his sternly pursed lips. He's looking at me intently, waiting for me to read my contrite lines so that he can place me on probation and go on to the next part of his play.

"Ken, I really don't have much of an excuse," *Pack up your things and head home* "but I can promise you it won't happen again."

With his lips still purse, that smirk-beneath-the-surface lit up his peanut-sized gray eyes with every word I spoke.

"I drove over to the 7-11 for some smokes and..." *Quit!* "And for some foolish reason I picked up a hitchhiker. I don't even know why I picked him up." *Stop this, Paul. Go home.* Ken's somewhat surprised nodding and the overt presence of his sadistic smirk told me that I was on the right track, albeit this 'hitchhiker' bit was a clear deviation from the typical script.

I don't know if it was the face, or the voice, or Anderson's 11am rant, but suddenly something snapped.

"Honestly Ken, I fuckin' hate this place. I'm gonna be grabbing my things and heading... Heading somewhere far, far, away from here." Ken swiftly squeezed the smirk from his eyes as they narrowed to gray slits, and the smirk sank down deeper than as he pursed his lips in indignant surprise, his eyebrows vainly trying to climb higher all the while. Tony just beside us, my now-former colleague with the home-spun GED certificate, had picked up on our conversation, and a crowd of Call Center serfs began accumulating on the periphery of Ken and I.

"You should go a little easier on these folks Ken. Maybe if you eased up, they might not silently despise this job and every single person calling in. A little more humanity might make it so we – or *they*, now, aren't fixated on Frogger or Tetris while talking to Cathy from Arizona. Care about these peons like they really are people and they just might do the same over the phone."

It was suddenly silent for a few seconds, and I could hear the husks around us shuffling uncomfortably while Ken's indignation sped through stages of horror, confusion, and as he finally furrowed his brow in rage. I turn around to clear out my cubicle and speed away just as Ken bursts into shouting about how I had no concept of running a business and how poor my performance was anyway. Everyone else sped back to their cubicles as well, and I decide it's best to expedite this whole thing, only grabbing a jar with two years' worth of change and the copy of *Terrapin Station* that I've been playing beneath calls these past couple weeks. Ken's own enraged rant followed me all the way to the door, and

as I exit I resignedly realize that I left my earphones on the desk. Meh, no way I'm going back for those now.

In a split second, the cacophony suddenly stops as the door swings shut behind me, and I revel in that reprieve all the way to my car. As I close the car door behind me, however, that satisfaction gives way to distress as my sudden status of 'unemployed' hits me. Oh God, I am going crazy. Who the hell quits a job without something else lined up? *Drive back home. Pick up the dog.* I put in the CD that's still in my hand and start up my car, trying not to think too hard about what I've just done while "Estimated Prophet" pours through my car speakers.

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Walking through my front door, I kneel down to pet Lazzie. He'll most definitely need to go to the shelter after that. Tossing my keys on the counter, I notice Jonathan's bright blue business card. *Call him.* I've got nothing better to do, so I punch his number into my phone, and one ring in he picks up the phone.

"Jonathan here! How can I be of service?"

"Hey Jonathan, it's Paul. From earlier today?" *Tell him you want to go.* "I'm calling to see if that offer for Ocarroo still stands."

"Paul, what a surprise! Sure does, I was just typing up a 'Wanted' ad, but I'd sure love to spend that ad-money elsewhere. You should head over to the hotel and we can hammer out if you really want to do this."

Surprised at myself and still a little disoriented from earlier, the line goes silent for a moment as I think of what to say, or even why I'd even run this fool's errand. *Tell him you'll be there soon.* "I s'pose that sounds good to me. I'll see you soon."

“See you soon, Paul!”

Now I’m listening to this thing! What I should have done just now is call a doctor, a real doctor, not this wayward fool I met an hour or two ago. Not feeling up to either the psych ward or the job search for the moment, I grab a granola bar from the kitchen and pick my keys right back up. Before my front door is more than a few inches open, Lazzie shoots the gap at full speed, plopping down 60 feet ahead of me in front of the off-white hunk of steel that I call my car. Too tired to object, I lock the door behind me and get into the car. Lazzie takes the opening again, leaping over my lap and into the passenger seat. I watch him paw around in two semi-circles, already embedding traces of dark brown fur into the seat-cushion as he does it. I start the car and turn up Terrapin Station to drown up his excited panting. “Fuck it.”

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Jonathan’s plan for setting up a clinic in Ocarroo was surprisingly sound, and he confirmed that he was, in fact, a doctor with a degree from McGill University that looked to me like the genuine article. We spent the past three weeks going over his plan for the clinic: permits, visas, expenses, etcetera, all at his expense, amazingly. This damn voice has yet to subside, but I’m hoping that a permanent change in scenery might have some salutary effect. We’ve just been herded into the 747 that’ll take us to Cape Town for our connecting flight, and we’ve finally begun taxiing toward the runway. I’m just trying to focus on the opening scenes of “Red Eye,” but this pale, bald fellow in front of me is fidgeting so much that I’m motion sick before we’ve even taken off. Without too much hassle, I managed to get a ticket for Lazzie too, and he’s below-deck in with the cargo. I might be stressed about leaving a dog down there, but something tells me Lazzie’s seen worse.

“This is going to be great!” says Jonathan, glancing up at me from his copy of *Starting a Clinic in the Third World for Dummies*.

“I’m excited, Jon.” It’s a little tough to keep up with this crazy Canadian’s enthusiasm sometimes, though that remark was genuine.

Jonathan goes back to his book, and I thank my stars for the few minutes of stillness I’m about to have with my movie as the man in front of me gets up from his seat. As the pale, bald can lumbers into the aisle, his six-and-a-half foot frame almost explains to me how he’s managed to interrupt my movie so effectively. He heads back toward the lavatory, and I settle in. I make it about 20 minutes into the movie before take-off, and slip into sleep before cruising altitude

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I’m wrenched into consciousness by the sound of a scream to my rear. Unbuckling my seatbelt, I lean into the aisle to look, horrified to see this skin-headed giant standing 20 feet back, one swastika-laden arm wrapped around a middle-aged Asian flight attendant in hysterics, while his other holds a handgun the size of my head to the poor woman’s skull. The man’s tiny black eyes looked emotionless. Two colorless peas that said to me he wasn’t messing around. Others start to scream, but he cuts them short with a low-pitched yell:

“Everyone pipe the fuck down!”

My heart stops.

“Angie here doesn’t need to die, and neither do you dumb fuckin’ Jews. If any of you makes a move, I blast her first and the wall second. Now I’m sure you all don’t wanna lose cabin pressure over the Atlantic, so one of you’s gonna need to go up front and inform the pilots of our situation, and tell one of them that I’m going off if they’re not back here in three minutes.”

The plan is silent. Some fucking luck that this skinhead is on my plane. *Get up and get the pilot.* I look around the rest of the plane, and seeing no signs of life, I stand up with my hands raised.

“I’m heading up now, buddy. Be cool. Please.”

“Hurry it the fuck up and zip it!”

I take a tremulous step into the aisle and speed-walk to the front. I pound on the felt door of the pilot’s cabin, and tell them what they probably already know, that there’s a batshit-crazy skinhead with a hostage in the back, and he wants one of them back there. A man’s muffled voice comes back, explaining that there’s a policy for situations like this, the gist of which is we’re all shit-outta-luck, and they’re not coming out. I try to quietly plead with them for about 30 seconds before I hear the skinhead’s deep voice yelling out:

“What is the fucking problem!?”

Walk back. Explain it to him. My brain practically unfunctional with fear, and amazed that I haven’t soiled myself yet, I start slowly walking back with my hands raised, right into this skin-headed mammoth’s death stare. I get about even with my seat before he says anything.

“You better have some good news, freak.”

I stand for a moment, paralyzed apart from my uncontrollable shaking. *Sprint at him, now!* Fuck that! This guys got a gun and a foot on me. The only difference I could make is ensuring that I’m the first one out!

Go! Now! They will help.

“I swear to God if—“

My mind clearly still off, I break into an all-out sprint. I see his small black eyes widen a little as he turns the hand cannon my way, and then nothing.

I open my eyes, and everything is bright, out of focus. I can hear an angelic sound coming from somewhere. Am I dead? I lay here quietly for a second, but my the pain in my forehead hints that this isn't Heaven, and I recognize the noise as The Beatles' "Because," so this can't be Hell.

"Paul! You're back! Oh thank God!"

Jonathan sticks his head into my field of vision, and I wince at the pain of smiling.

"Jon! Where are we? What happened?"

Just the utterance hurt, and my words are so slurred that I can barely make them out.

"We're back in New York. Providence Hospital. You've been out for three days, which is remarkably fast for an injury like this. We were on a plane; you received a shot to the head, the gut, and to one of your hands – don't worry! Just the left one. Amazingly, the man's gun jammed after that, and the other passengers apprehended him. No one else was hurt." Jonathan goes on to explain that the bullet is still lodged in my brain, but that it somehow missed all vital nerves. Says I'm some sort of anomaly, and that the doctors even expect you to regain full function before long.

I lay for a while and let it all sink in. I'm pleased to find that I can lift my left arm with just a little more effort than usual, and I see that the hand is wrapped in thick, white gauze. Jonathan tells me my parents are outside, and tells me he'll give me a moment before sending them in.

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It's been a month since the aborted flight to Ocarroo, and I'm back to my apartment in Argot. The apartment is as it was, the only difference being the bouquets littering the living room floor from other passengers on the plane and the piles of letters from friends and family strewn across my kitchen counter. The things people said in those letters, my family, friends, were unlike anything I've heard from them, ever. Tommy and Pete came over two weeks back, just after I returned, and they actually cried,

said they loved me. I called them both pansies, of course, but I told them that I loved them too. This bullet in the brain must be making me a little sentimental, but since being back, I've spoken with my friends and family in a manner I never had before, like it took me dying to go beyond whatever barricade kept us talking about the news and the office. It's not so bad.

Turns out I may have some luck after all, because I'm just about fully recovered, though an all-out sprint is pretty painful. I even considered going with Jonathan when he made a second attempt for Ocaroo a few days back – he made it. I'm just about back to how I was before we left. The voice is gone though.

Jonathan came by just before flying out, and he asked what I'm going to do. I've thought about that question a lot since then. I'm still working on an answer, but for whatever reason, I feel optimistic. Whatever I do, I think I'll be staying in Argot for a while. I can't live off gift baskets and generosity forever, so I've started looking for another job, and Jonathan covered the next couple months' rent before he left. Those last few days before the plane, I'd sort of let the voice answer that 'what to do' question for me, and crazy as it sounds, it seems like it led me pretty well. Strange as it feels to think you're going insane, what's strange now is the silence.