

Yes. November was cold, and December was colder, but January – it is the coldest cruellest hardest yet.

Trapped in winter's descent, everything slows. The city hunkers down, all routes and fissures clotted. Huge bulwarks of dirty snow ridge sidewalks, rising out of collapses of greyish wetness. Branches waver with the clinging weight of ice, ready to splinter and fail.

This day is a blip of static, an echo, a point on the graph of fluttering time.

*Look:* David, our hero, gazes at and into the frozen city.

This day is nervous and shaky and skeptical, even before it begins. There is no forgiveness in the assault of sub-zero temperature, no mercy hurrying against the first stabs of the morning sun, no ecstasy in the sudden freeze of hair still shower-wet or in the noxious gulps of bus exhaust. And there is certainly no forgiveness in the elevator as David ascends the innards of Tower 2, up to the sixteenth floor like a gurgle rising in the building's swallowing throat, his only companion in this skyward venture the squat little woman who commands the coffee cart on its morning route through the duohexagonal floors of Tower 2 and its twin, Tower 1; there is no tenderness in her squiggled scowl as she sells him a varnished blueberry scone and a cup of coffee, no glory as she sniffs politely to the tinkle of change plopped in her palm, saying *have a good one*. She departs at the twelfth.

David continues elevating, then exits through parting doors, striding unquestioningly through the hallway's bending elbows to a large pine door. He enters; this is the reception area of the office where he works.

Naoko, the vigilant and birdish receptionist, headset framing her head's narrow point, looks up from her computer keyboard.

'Morning, David,' she says.

'Morning,' he says.

This is how they greet one another, with cheery formality. At the end of the day he will depart, and she will say to him in the same tonality *see ya tomorrow David*, and he will say *see ya tomorrow*.

He continues through reception, past Naoko's bunker of fax and computer and file cabinet, past the leather couches and the coffee table fanning *Newsweek* and *Digital Marketing Monthly* and *Advertising Age*, down the hall past the conference room. He casts a quick glance inside to find several of his co-workers seated around the large table, their faces in coffee mugs or hunched over binders, printouts, newspapers.

David nods. He is nodded to.

This corridor leads him to an adjoining corridor, which in turn brings him to an opening, an expanse of room compartmented by desks segregated at perpendicular angles by alleys of space and a long table armed with a paper cutter and a dry-mounter. The room is cast in stark light by an enormous window lining the opposite wall, gaping out at the city spread below.

David's desk is in the far corner. There it is: a fine desk, adequate in breadth, solid in mass and satisfactory in height. Atop it sit ready the necessities of his daily work: pens and Post-it pads and paper clips and floppies and labels, the three-hole punch and keyboard and mouse, today's shuffle of memos in hard copy. A large pad of yellow legal paper ravaged with absent squiggles and jottings. A photocopy of an ad the agency ran last week. A small day calendar, as of yet unflipped, still dreaming of yesterday. And there is the computer, its screen facing his empty chair, waiting to be roused from its slumbers.

Like David, the computer is slow in the morning.

David sits and sips at the rim of his steaming cup. He blinks. He nibbles scone.

Shannon, AKA the Shan-Man, lumbers into the room, his pocked face buried in an oversized printout. He droops into his chair, inspecting the print with displeased eyes. 'Hey,' he croaks.

'Hey,' David says.

At another desk sits Owen, he of shaved head and pimply neck and Discman, submerged in mouse manipulations, attentions fixed on screen, his morning litre of Mountain Dew at hand.

'Heyo,' Owen says.

'Hey,' David says.

David switches on his computer. Its re-entrance into life is the rising whirr of its hard drive and the electric spack of powering up, the perky assertion of its duties. Icons assemble on the screen.

A Post-it note affixed to his desk asks *are we communicatORS or communicatERS?*

Shannon calls across the room to Owen, inquiring about something technical, a hardware issue. The two production designers communicate primarily through sequences of sarcastic jibes and expletives, their enormous monitors hiding them away like fortress keeps.

David consults his inbox. Most mornings he avoids these memos and forms for as long as possible. Example: CR #00-3737 – its lined regions bear the hasty slashes of Helen's handwriting. Helen, Senior Account Manager: assertive and threatening. Helen, who decrees the fate of all the copy David produces. Her writing dictates a dissatisfaction with his offerings for the upcoming Children's Telethon; in clenched pen strokes, scrawled points: *place emphasis on the particularity special gala charitable event patrons encouraged to do their part*. She remarks on demographics, pinpoints the target. Accentuate: the client, the hotel management, has other special events and promotions yet to come. Associate associate *associate* – invigorate with bubbly bold-text screeches.

Lydia, the chirpy young Junior Accounts Manager, enters the room prying apart the lid of a mini-sized coffee, a stack of papers tucked under her arm.

'Morning, men,' she says, unloading the stack onto Shannon's desk – redos and rewrites and reconsiders. Shannon yeeeps at the height.

Lydia's unblemished bloneness lingers, fluorescent lights framing her golden dome, her careful coffee sips. This is her strategy: to hover, feigning casual interest in the backroom's goings-on, making idle chit-chat, when, as an envoy of the accounts department, she is actually concerned only with adherence to deadlines and the satisfaction of her Junior Managerial agenda.

She says to David, 'We have a thing we need to go over today. Maybe after lunch. It'll only take a sec.'

'Oh,' he says, 'right. Okay.'

'What's your schedule like today, is it hectic?'

'Moderately,' he lies.

'If you're swamped.'

'Not really. I could ... '

'Well. After lunch. If you could just come by before end of day.

Let's say one.'

'Okay. Sure.'

Exit Lydia. In her wake, only the incessant wheeze of the Canon printer persists.

David gets to work. Writing the words and rewriting the words. Making them fit.

There is a menu, or the emergent inklings of a menu's layout. This laser output presents a poorly scanned digital montage: a lobster atop a raft of romaine, a bucket of ribs, an overflowing pint of beer, shining breakfast platters, a toppling salad bar – all situated against the pixelated rendering of a sunset bleeding across some twinkling bay.

David draws unenthusiastic air into his lungs.

Shannon: 'Appalling.'

David peers over his monitor. 'This?'

'This photo. Look at the waffles, the stack of waffles. The whole thing.'

David shrugs.

'Look at it,' Shannon implores. 'Look at how shitty that is. I would not eat that buttery hunk of crud. Would you eat that? Based on that shot? I told them we needed to hire outside. Get a real photographer, with lights, with a modicum of know-how. Not just Jeff with the digital piling stuff on his desk and *zap*. Look at that. Did you see the clubhouse?'

'No.'

'Jeff just plopped the sandwich on his desk and shot it with the Fuji. I said to him, Jeff, the pros, they use lights and angles and glycerin and everything to make it look presentable. They fancy it up. You know ... they make it look at least edible. They don't just – *Agh*.'

David nods polite agreement. The Shan-Man thrives on complaints, complaints often valid but equally as often excessive. He savours the agency's idiocy, his sense of superiority feeding on malfunction, on technical glitches.

'How am I supposed to do anything with that?' Shannon moans. 'I can't do fuck all. All the Photoshopping in the world won't make that hunk of turd gleam. And when it goes for approval and the client kicks up a stink, who will get blamed?'

A pause, for effect.

'I will be blamed. Fucking *agh*.'

Owen hoists his emptied Mountain Dew and whips it across the room at the wastebasket by Shannon's feet. The plastic bottle careens off the corner of Shannon's desk and lands neatly in the trash.

'Heyo!' Owen cries triumphantly.

The list of food items for which David has been instructed to concoct a revised, more detailed menu is dishearteningly long. David reads about the Seafood Hoagie, the Pesto Chicken Basket, the Florentines and Benedicts, the Stouts and Pales and Bitters. The Skins and Melts.

*Seafood Hoagie.*

He grimaces as thoughts turn to lunch. He could hit the food court at Scotia Square, pursue falafel, the crunchy pickled turnip. Or the cabbage soup at the Hungarian restaurant. Or a Whopper at the Burger King where the secretaries from the phone company go. But that cabbage soup – that cabbage soup is unbelievable.

He pries open his thesaurus and locates a listing for *delicious*. Then, for exactly fourteen seconds, he thinks about the word *nectareous*. Then, for eighteen seconds, *ambrosial*.

After surrendering to the safety of *mouth-watering*, he checks his e-mail. For an instant the computer labours, then reveals three new messages: a memo from Naoko reminding everyone to have their new online time sheets filled out by 10:30 and no later, a billing statement from his bank that he quickly deletes, and:

Good Day Leo!

Here is your daily horoscope, courtesy of serious-horoscopes.net:

Leo (July 21–August 21): Times will be tough, but persevere and you'll get through it! Be ready for the unexpected, and lingering questions will become more clear. Meanwhile, try and get a good night's sleep!

David begins plugging account numbers and dates and hourly tallies into the online database. He types 00-1666 *Acker Motors Group* and the date, consults a time sheet messy with his own scribbled memos outlining the week's activities, performs some quick mental calculations, then in the column marked *Total Hours* he enters 4.5.

Compiling his hours makes him tense. Tense, yes, because it's all lies. It's sheer bullshit. He is hanging precariously on to this job, sustaining the illusion that he is doing good work, hard work, honest work, *any* work. Because he is not working. He is doing very little. He tightens the occasional sentence, corrects spelling, feigning the appearance of one engrossed in serious reflection and care. But he is not actually *doing* anything. He is a link in a futile, meandering chain. He fades, remains scarce. Flipping through pages, checking e-mail, toeing a meagre line. Allowing time to slip in lumbering compartments, like trucks over potholed overpasses, like cheeseburgers clumped in the stomach's pit – time moderating even as it hastens, passing in flickers of misaligned frames. Every day promptly at quarter to nine, he comes and pretends to work – and days roll on, weeks disappear, months filed into a database, and a year expires like a whim, until, in a brutal thump, he is here: circling figures, fixed in time yet slippery, lost but motionless.

David has learned to appear busy.

He enters into the database *Seaco Foods* and assigns a date. Again, he consults his notes and finds he has invented three hours of imaginary work on this account – he enters 2.75 to be thrifty. In actuality, the Seaco job probably took twenty minutes for him to write up, edit, rethink and print for his supervisor Deb's once-over and approval. Twenty minutes of semi-conscious activity, slicing and dicing text, following the established pattern, the artifice, the sleight of words.

Tightening things up.

His only cunning is maintenance of the charade. He's a faker, a diversionist, a fraud, a sham.

The thesaurus suggests *charlatan* or, pushing it, *mountebank*.

David turns to the window. From this elevated perch he can view all of Halifax's meagre downtown. The cluttered city below, just beyond the glass, down there. *Look*: the assumptive pokes of office towers infiltrating morning sky, spiralling concourses beneath; parkades like impossible concrete sandwiches; trucks tearing through traffic, bullying aside splatterings of pedestrians hurrying through slush; cars surging through congested streets, windshield wipers thwapping; the brilliant lights and unbrilliant lights and extinguished lights and dotted paths of lights. Morning's churn of motivations, its skirmish of quantities. His city, its citizens – today, here.

The end is nigh.

Perhaps, apocalypse: we will perish by fire, by suffocation, plague. Perhaps by grinding metal, starvation, pestilence of speed-wracked ambition. Perhaps a rain of brimstone and cinders will scour the earth and ravage the earth. Perhaps. Annihilation. The act of some rogue usurper, the wield of technology run amok. Biological warfare. Huge swooping end, past prophecies coming horribly true, the earth's death murmur, the winding down of the whole program. Frogs. Blight. Waste. War, famine, et cetera. Rain of slag. Perhaps.

Below, beneath him, it all fits so perfectly together, so seamlessly, this illusion. Beneath the veneer of order: ruin and devastation, hellfire, the end of everything. Doomsday. He is above it all, and of it all.

David cracks his knuckles. Then he rotates his forearms and finds a satisfying *crck* there too.

Lunch.

Moving down the pedway toward the mall with others temporarily freed from their offices, David pauses to again watch traffic swirling below. Rain batters down, rendering the accumulating snow an icy sludge. At bus stops, discouraged masses gather. Everything is bleak.

He presses a palm against the glass. The glass is temperatureless.

Then – he is in line at Ray’s Falafel with the lunching hordes, ordering Special #3, nodding as the smallish woman behind the counter informs him *no kibbi*, David opting instead for #2, chicken shish taouk with mechouia. Around him the mall and its inhabitants merge into incomprehensibility, burbling and gulping forked squiggles of pasta and fistfuls of molten brownies into its collective gullet, poking at palmed organizers, dabbing at lips with serviettes before hastening back to offices, to desks, to spreadsheets.

David takes his tray to a corner table and buries himself in food and a discarded *Sports Illustrated*. The chicken globs, the cayenne tingles. On the magazine’s cover, Tiger Woods smiles elfishly, winningly.

But David is thinking of other things.

He thinks: *try and get a good night’s sleep!*

Loneliness is a hard pinch, biting into the pit of the neck and the base of the skull. Time becomes a chasm: waves crashing in a dull roar, layers of force pushing down into the yawning throat of the drowned under-everything.

Here is the hand of hope. Grasp it as it beckons. Learn its contours. Define the range. Persuade elements. Mediate factors. Run a worn finger along the inner ridge of the hand of hope. Form strategies corresponding to the narrow slice of hope. Devise a systemized method for dampening your innermost pain.

Our hero, David, is searching for something but he does not know what it is. He is searching. He is perpetually uneasy. His scope is narrow. He seeks a way, something to which he can adhere. He longs. He waits, for *something*. This absence, which he knows as intimately as the slump of his own mirrored cheeks, is an ache amplified in daily trials. It is pain. It is longing. Scarcity, flailing. It is a force.

David wobbles amidst mirrored fountains in the mall’s khaki light. He waits in line at a bank machine, then checks his account balance. His heart sinks; the fettering freight of debt remains a losing battle. And armaments of retaliation are low in supply.

Sometimes you want to just admit defeat.

Then, out of the surrounding garble, he hears his name.

*David.* A girl's voice. He jolts as if stricken. The mall is a blur, a rodeo.

Wheeling around, he hears his name again: *Daviiid.*

It's Lisa. Suddenly. Of course. *Yes.* His young cousin Lisa, exploding from the bustle, draped in a baby-blue raincoat, brandishing an enormous green umbrella adorned with polka dots, her toothy smile jutting through the murk.

This Lisa, who is lovely. Lisa. Lustrous Lisa. Lisa. Dream of Lisa. You imagine a halo, a halo of oiled brass, or gold, or platinum – something gleaming, encircling her perfect dome.

Seventeen years old.

'Oh,' David says. 'Lisa. Hi.'

She approaches. Hair, hanging damp. Raincoat, slick.

'What're you up to, dude?' she says, grinning.

'Just, you know. Lunch. Ray's.'

He gestures feebly, indicating the tables, the counters, the scene. Lisa nods. She stares at him, head cocked to one side. Her eyes are glassy, narrowed into something resembling playfulness, or scorn. David realizes she is very stoned.

Lisa. David is helpless in her midst.

'What are you ... What's going on with you today?' he says.

'You know, farting around. I just bought this amazing umbrella. Do you like it?'

'Wow.'

'You like?'

'I do. It's tremendous.'

'I agree. *Tremendous.* I'd open it up and give you the whole show, but you know. Bad luck inside. I'm sure you understand.'

David nods. 'Yes.'

'But I really like it. I take pride in it. It makes a statement.'

'Definitely.'

'I'm not sure what kind of statement exactly. But you think it makes a statement?'

'It's pretty bold ... but in the end, you know, as long as it keeps you dry.'

Under her raincoat she wears a red V-neck sweater, exposing a generous peek of neck. In the cradle of her collarbone, David spies a glob of water, a sparkling pearl, trickling against skin. Skin creaseless, mellifluous, like butter left out to soften. Like cream cheese.

Perhaps we will perish in floods of sweet flooding floods.

'So, you have to go back to work,' Lisa says.

'Back to the office. Back to the grind.'

'Zut. I thought maybe we could play together this aft.'

They walk. The mall roils and echoes around them.

'Aren't you supposed to be in school?' David asks.

Lisa sputters laughter. 'I suppose I wasn't in the right *mind frame* for the relentless grind, not today. You know.'

'Sure. Not like I'm ...'

'I called the secretary and told her I had *crippling* PMS.'

Another round of giggles. Lisa: joyful, free.

'Where are you headed now?' David asks.

She wavers. 'I wish you could hang out. We could go shopping for sneakers. We could find you some hot new kicks. I told Dad I needed new soccer cleats.'

'Soccer. It's winter.'

'As if Dad would figure that far, dear comrade. But credit card he nonetheless allows. So fun for us to have. But I see you are committed to your work. No time to fool around with your poor dejected cousin. I can respect that.'

She wipes her nose.

'Sorry,' David says. 'Such is the way it is.'

'Okey-doke.'

They halt at the pedway's entrance. Lisa's hair hangs like unmarred wheat, its rain-wet ends tickling her shoulders. David fights an impulse to grasp these shoulders and draw them close, to hold her tightly in his reach and keep her, unsquirming, unexposed. Just to hold her, to hide her away. Keep her from being ruined by the terrible world beyond. To hold. To hide. Just that. If even if for a moment, screens will draw back to reveal glory hidden beyond. Columns of light will blow sky-high, strobing cities with sudden splendour, bleeding hope across asphalt, unclogging wild beauty and wonder.

Lydia said to see her by one. And the Acker Motors thirty-second radio spot is deadlined for 3:30. Jim said *urgent*. And when Jim says urgent, sometimes he actually means urgent.

'See you later,' David says.

'My parents are having one of their things this weekend.'

'Um.'

'You know. The thing Mom and Dad have every year around their anniversary, where all of their friends come to celebrate the everlasting glory of their love. It's totally abhorrent, but sometimes there can be laughs to be had. You've been before.'

He remembers. 'Right.'

'They'd be tickled if you came. It's been a while. They talk about you now and then.'

'They *talk* about me?'

Horrors. Jo-Beth and Gary, his mother's sister and her husband, are brutal. They'd run him down. His shiftlessness. His lack of motivation. His dishevelment. They'd tear him apart, even *in absentia*. The sneering. The pity.

Lisa: 'I'll tell them you're coming. Show up five-ish Saturday. There'll be gallons of booze and everything, you know. They go all out. Dad'll open up the wine cellar. He gets ripped and sings Elton John.'

'Elton. Really.'

She smiles. 'I had a dream about you two nights ago. I had a dream that you and I were sitting on our back deck. It was nighttime, in the winter, and there was snow on the ground. The pool cover was on. We were watching stars fall out of the sky. Like a meteor shower.'

She pauses. David feels his lungs heavy in his chest.

'Are you a vegetarian?' Lisa asks.

'No.'

'Then show up Saturday and we'll get the barbecue going and freak out on hot dogs. Screw winter. Do you like sauerkraut?'

'Love it.'

'Then we can make my dream come true. If you don't show up, I swear I'll be miserable. I'll be crushed. You'll crush my dreams.'

'Then I suppose I must.'

'Yes. You must.'

White overcast light beams through a glass section of roof, hyperactivating the freckles twinkling across her nose.

Lisa. His cousin, seventeen years old. She oozes peril.

They bid each other farewell with a flubbed high-five, and David returns to the office. The pedways issue him back into the awaiting monotony. He glides over the gun-grey city, streets crammed with cardboard hotels, plastic cafés, edifices of stone, glistening mortar. Look at this place, the city, where he lives and works. Gridded like a toaster waffle. This is his city, his turf, everything hidden and washed out and lonely.

He has lived here his whole life. But he doesn't recognize it at all.

This battle is to be waged in the gymnasium, in the weight room, in the pool. Four times a week, maybe three, David systematically suffers the treadmill, the Lifecycle, the AbRoller, the StepMill – an extensive arsenal of gruelling torture devices. He curls, executes reps, contracts and releases and lifts and pulls and shoves and strides. He feels fans waft coolness on his drenched skin. He sweats, and others around him sweat. Broad-chested ogres bench-pressing titanic weights, wide-thighed blondes fiddling with headphones on StairMasters.

David considers his own reflection in the gym's ubiquitous mirrors – sweaty and huffing and red-faced – and he is discouraged. The sag of pectorals. The stripe of cellulite. The pastiness. Discouragement.

The battle is in cardio and kilos and sick unrealistic aims – battle against the self, against other selves, the place of the self among other selves. They all strain. Sucking up and out. Battles rage, culminating in the drowsy recline of the post-workout ritual and the gratifying punishment of steam. Here, in the steam room.

David slouches on the wooden bench, a damp towel his only garb. His face gushes a steady flow of sweat. He needs to clip his toenails. He needs to trim his nose hair. He needs to do something about all this extra French toast softening his waist and stomach and butt. He needs to improve. Maintain. Shear. Chisel. Punish. Edit.

His head swims.

Thick atmospheres obscure the fuzzy figures surrounding, towelled men wearing flip-flops, smearing shaving gel across their chins, sighing. In exercise, in purpose, you find cessation of other concerns. No one laughs and no one weeps. The battle is to be waged against the self, within the self. The spoils of labour are retraction and release. Steam.

Time is stalled, freeze-framed. The moment is a VCR PAUSE. Men sit and bathe in close vapours. Heads swim.

Then, showered and shaven, he is on the sidewalk. His limbs ache stiff aches. Cars *sssh* over slushed streets. Streetlights ignite as the city curls into its nocturnal ebb. David passes the Public Gardens, seasonally closed, where behind wrought-iron gates ice obscures flowering shrubs and vines, pausing running streams.

The ducks converge in loose assembly near the fence, shivering against the cold. They have not flown south; their wings are clipped. When he approaches, leaning through a grate, they waddle close with curiosity and suspicion. Regardless of how often he visits the ducks, winter spring summer autumn, they never learn to trust him as a friend. They remain skeptical of his friendly approach, his plea. But he persists, pursuing their favour, their waddling whims. The grace of their black-bead eyes, the sleek arc of their proud heads. The ducks, with their pride, and their helplessness – they seem honest, but still suspicious and standoffish, even as they flock for handouts.

‘Hi, ducks,’ he says quietly, almost whispered.

A duck says *hey Davey*, or, perhaps, *quack*.

At the corner he encounters an unexpected commotion in progress: the street is flooded with a raucous mob, expanding out of shades and darkness. Waves of bodies, marching. David freezes. Among the swarm there is heated chanting, pickets hoisted. Voices hollering into bullhorns. Hands clapping. Feet stomping. Thumps thumping in time. Occasional whoops. A demonstration. The oncoming street, David sees, is closed off by emergency-orange barricades. Police cruisers, officers observing, speaking into walkie-talkies. A sign, held aloft by a beefy darkish kid, reads UNITED AGAINST THE CORPORATE STRANGLEHOLD. He spits and bellows, his glasses twinkling under scattered slices of light, his mouth tufting cold breath. From unseen amplification, a bullhorn squawks *enough is enough*. Voices vow resistance to an array of causes – to INJUSTICE, to IMPERIALIST AGGRESSION.

The sound of the mob is an indistinct rumble and squeal, machinery toiling in self-perpetuation. A triad of girls in heavy coats and mittens looms up behind David, chanting with arms

linked; he tries to skirt their advance, instead finding himself caught in the tide, into the relentless thicket of marching bodies.

Coming to the next intersection, the march reaches an impasse. Further barricades are in place, with a pair of police vans curtailing the march's progress. There are boos. A police siren bleeps sharply in warning. The shouting swells; the mood shifts from irked to irate. David tries to duck and circle around, to disentangle himself from the mob, but the crunch of bodies presses too closely. A bullhorn says *we won't let our future be thwarted by corporate profiteers*. Light from a restaurant's neon sign frames a policeman's broad-chested silhouette in eerie purple light. Someone screams *come on* in David's ear. Bodies mash together. The protester's voice in the bullhorn, louder: *these imprudent violations serve as admonitory* something something something. He is crammed immovably in. His lungs begin to seize, losing power, shrivelling. His throat gets tight. His vision becomes hazy.

A woman's voice: *defend the innocent*.

There is a push from the rear; several stumble. David feels a sharp blow to the small of his back, scarcely registering its force. His body grows cold and numb. The cops assert their blockade. His mind screams alarm. His head swims.

David pries apart fissures of bodies with his arms, then gradually manages to stumble left into a clearing. He leans against a brick wall for support, and gradually his breath begins to return. Struggling along the crowd's periphery, he tries to shirk the escalation by passing the police blockade, but there he finds another mob gathering, rabble from the demonstration pressing against the barricade, alarmed and outraged. More police vans arrive. More blooping sirens.

A shout: *fuck the poh-leece*.

David burrows desperately back in the direction he had come, finding refuge in the shelter of a pharmacy's doorway. Around him: a morass of activity, squeals and shouts ringing, engines revving. Squeezing up to a barricade, David is met by a bulky policeman.

'I need to get out of here,' he tries.

His plea goes unacknowledged.

More shrieks from within the mob. Strange laughter echoing through the street. More bullhorned outcry. David's heart hammers and his mind executes nonsensical patterns of panic.

The policeman says, 'Stand *back*.'

David stands back.

Then, look, over the crest of the surging crowd: a bottle thrown, sailing in a slow arc, pinwheeling over the heads of the demonstrators, labelled in bold yellow and orange, capped in red and gold: Fruitopia. Captured by gravity, it dangles defiant in air, catching a wisp of light as it plummets earthward.

Snared in David's vision, this bottle becomes something else entirely. The bottle is deliverance, weaponry. Fruitopia as first-strike initiative. The intermediate-range missile. The H-bomb, the Scud, its mortal freight unchambered unto an unsuspecting suburb. In slow frames, bombs drop in punishing trajectory, initiating fresh disaster. Glass and violence. The threat of something unretractable. Doomsday: the end is nigh.

As we accumulate, we simultaneously separate – chaff from wheat, lowly from high. Here are the patterns. Power invites tragedy, hardheadedness invites assimilation, or ruin. The fierce general bows to the agreeability of the times. The road bends to the tread of tanks. Desert denizens forsake livelihoods for the quashing of dictatorial rule. A king waves aside prophecy with pride's dismissal. We shake hands with our future killers and make merry with evil. The son reckons with his inheritance in stunted steps. He assumes the wreckage, the waste, the awkwardness, the haste, the limpness, the deceit. The progression. The dubious legacy. Son begets father. Patterns drenched in subjectivity. The time frame. The laziness. Son slays father, son begets son, son becomes father, son slays father.

The Father. *Yes*. Above all else, despite everything – The Father. The memories of The Father. The moustache, the trimness. The smell of The Father: Noxzema and tobacco and mouthwash. The musty sweatshirts of The Father; he wore sweatshirts while folding ties. Time with The Father, and time without The Father. And time with The Father, yet still *without* The Father. Phases of

having. Phantasmic proximity. The vacuum of his absence. The cracking of his beers. The steaks, balanced by TV tray, on his lap. The newspaper-reading of The Father. The nervous chortle of The Father, no longer stuttering in hallways and living rooms. The jangling of change, or keys, or change and keys, in The Father's pants pockets. The Father, wraithlike, skulking on the periphery. The pallid cheeks of The Father.

The apartment of The Father. The yellow-tinged ceiling of the apartment. The stifling atmosphere of the apartment, late in the afternoon. The blankness of The Father. The farewell of The Father, or, rather, the absence of a farewell. The gradual emaciation of The Father. The extended exit of The Father. The silence of The Father.

The bottle finds a target, striking an unsuspecting officer in the side of his unhelmeted forehead. He reels back, his face spewing blood.

The mob erupts. A phalanx of police surges forward, clubs raised; the melee crashes back in response, while another tide of protesters disperses. Tear-gas canisters erupt. David is again swept into motion by gathered impulse, flailing, scrambling to flee. Pandemonium prevails; elbows fly.

A few of the more animated agitators fall behind to be pummelled by police. A dreadlocked kid in a hooded sweatshirt falls in slow motion to a torrent of blows, his cries and flailing arms no defence against his attackers. It is amazing how many blows – and these are not tempered blows, but blows delivered with zero restraint – are required to demolish the head. The skull is strong. The skull is resilient. Dreadlocks turn ruddy under truncheons.

Night has now achieved its full dark bloat, the utility-orange cast of streetlights turned hazy, bluish gas staining the street with caustic vapours. Through rising fumes the city is remade as a battleground, everything lagging and watery. David watches – there is something powerful and dark generated in the murk, phantoms and zombies walking among men, hints of history in nethers. Something is happening.

In the distance, speakers from a restaurant sing *baby hold on to me whatever will be will be*.

A group of punks has commandeered a nearby bus shelter, dangling from its sides while randomly kicking and swiping at passersby. A skinny kid in snowboard pants and a balaclava teeters, brandishing a pair of Colt 45 bottles, one in each fist. He waves them over his head like he's conducting symphonies, shrieking *muthafucka*. He casts the bottles earthward.

Geysers of glass. A woman cries in outrage, or pain. Wails against the night.

David feels something detonate in his face. He cries out. There is a whirlwind of pain. Shock. He drops to his knees, then further down.

The world goes flat, terribly flat, then black.

When he stops throwing up, David says, 'I'm really sorry.'

The doctor pats him lightly on the back. 'No worries.'

David falls back in bed and wipes his mouth with the back of his wrist.

'A reaction to the anesthetic, perhaps,' the doctor says. 'And shock. The body seizes up against trauma. Your body is in a state of alarm. You'll be all right for now.'

'I... I think so.'

'Good to hear. Good to hear. I'll call a nurse to clean up that yuckiness.'

Exit Doctor.

Lean back. Stare at the ceiling. The ceiling is flat. The ceiling is a photocopy of a ceiling. The lights are artificial solar splinters. The flaws in the ceiling, the panels dotted with holes. The ceiling is a hack's rendering of a ceiling. The ceiling is a display wedding cake, unspongy and undelicious. Styrofoam. The ceiling is not sympathetic. The room smells of – The room is absent of smell, except for David's vomit, which smells foul. The room is quiet, except for the hum of equipment and voices from other rooms, which are loud. The room is not quiet.

David's temple and left cheek are numb, yet hinting with tingles.

He is not entirely confident this is not a dream. It could be a dream. But dreams are fluid and shifting, while nothing here shifts. It's all flat.

A nurse enters with a mop and pail. She is disarmingly small. 'Got a little sick on the floor, hm? No problemo. Wouldn't be a hospital if people didn't get sick, would it?'

David really really *really* doesn't feel like faking a laugh to that. He fakes a laugh: 'Ha.'

The nurse mops. David concentrates on the ceiling, the emptiness of the lights.

'We'll be keeping you here overnight, I'm afraid,' she says. 'We have to keep an eye on you, pardon the pun. *Ha*. But overall we're not finding any spread of nerve damage. So as long as you listen to the doc you'll be back in action in no time. You'll just have to be careful. We'll be setting up appointments for you with an ocular therapist. But you won't be in hospital too long.'

David grunts. He is cold.

The nurse leans over him and peers intently at his face. She frowns. 'Still feeling any pain?'

'Not really. My face is mostly numb.'

'That makes sense. We'll be giving you enough Tylenol and gauze to tie you over. Did the nurse at the desk get your info?'

'I. Um. I don't think so. I think I was unconscious ... '

'Oh. Well, we can do that now. I have your chart.'

She questions him. Name. Age. Date of Birth. Allergies. Medical History. Et cetera.

'Someone you'd like noted as an Emergency Contact. A relative, a spouse ... the person to be contacted, if anything should ever happen.'

Think. 'Like my parents or my mother or someone.'

'Sure. Your mother's name.'

'Uh ... she's sort of unavailable.'

'I'm sorry?'

'I just think she wouldn't exactly be the most helpful person to contact. She lives ... abroad, and she's not, exactly, in this sort of ... '

'Perfectly fine. Your father, perhaps?'

'Deceased.'

'What's that now?'

'Dead.'

'Ah. Right. Sorry.'

Flat sympathy. Flat clipboard. Flat room, flat walls, flat medical paraphernalia. Flat tubes and flat windows. Flat diagram of the flat human anatomy, hanging flatly.

'Anyone you can think of. Anyone who you'd consider responsible.'

David touches the thick wad of bandage on his face.

'Um,' he says, 'I'm not really what sure what's happened ... '

'What *happened* to you?'

'I think I blacked out for a while there. I have a tendency to faint. It's a recurrent ... I don't really remember.'

'What's the last thing you remember?'

He thinks. 'Was I shot?'

The nurse snorts. '*Shot?* Gosh, no. You were hit by a shard of glass. In that demonstration downtown. Somebody smashed a bottle. You got glass in the eye.'

'In the *eye?*'

The bandage is bulky, heavily packed. A weighty growth sitting on his face.

'I'm surprised you don't remember. You were quite lucid when the ambulance brought you in. You were saying something about returning videotapes. Or something like that.'

'Videotapes?'

'Something about videos. You were very composed. Nary a tremble.'

Nary.

Hours creep. In this sanitized bunker, time's passage is undetectable. There is no window, no moon, no stars; there is, however, a television mounted on the wall opposite his bed. David watches *48 Hours*: tired-eyed Lesley Stahl shakes her head, perplexed in inquisition.

A trickle of pus dribbles from his eye. It is warm, pudding-like. David feels nauseous again, but convinces his stomach not to lurch. His body's facilities feel remote and out of his control. Cushioned in self-pity, his head's ache throbs and dwindles to strange dreams. He dreams of past seasons, of birds, ducks fleeing terrestrial shackles for freer horizons. Ducks gliding across the hazy topography of sleep.

Flat flat sleep.

Dream of the beach. Beigeish sands, infirm under nubby toes. The sky a parfait of vanilla and grey and Pepsi blue. Perspective is tipsy. *Whoosh* – a steamroller of swelling frequency, then an immediate ebb: tides. Craggy boulders line the outer periphery, pounded

into misshapen sandstone husks. Swimsuited bodies lie slain along the beach's stretch. Aunts, hoary neighbours, picnickers, cottage neighbours basking, all incorporated. A youthful summer retained in dream, scraps shredded with associations. Everything is shifting and relative, floating above the slathering of buttery lotions and capping of beer bottles and thumbing of paperback corners, drifting toward the rushing ocean. Breakers are coming down hard, cyclical bursts leaving silt streaked with wet traces. Dive like a manic dolphin through the crashing spray. Drive into the wave, ride its crest until, upended, you are cast back ashore. Spit. Pant. Collect gritty sand under your toenails, in your scalp, in your navel's pit, in the crevice of your butt. Bathe in pebbled foam. Nearby an adult voice calls out. Gaze into the distance. Conjure fantasies of riding adrift in the sea, floating off to foreign lands. To Africa. To Antarctica. Envision stadium-sized squids patrolling the ocean's floor, squids with huge wrinkled eyes gawking up from darkened depths. Think of sharks. The freedom of limitless ocean. The immeasurable. You enter the sea not as conqueror but as co-conspirator, wading through froth, buoyant with pulsing waves. Rough waters impede your stroke – and yet, you persist. Breathe steadily. Maintain a pace. Let waves persuade you up and down. Somewhere, way back, your mother might be glancing up over her *Chatelaine*, scanning the shoreline. And you are not there. No, her son has fled for wilder worlds, forsaken this world's playpen for the chop of the sea. A buccaneer, set sail. But there is the increasing barrier of pressure. Escalating weariness. Waves come raging. The horizon in glimpses, unmarred and pale. Surging whitecaps break in your face. You lose grip, on direction, on *up*. Twist in the overpower of waves. Vie, struggle. Weight crashes down, and now you are underwater and without air. Your eyes open to a misty emerald smog. There is a tugging, torso's twist, and the understanding: you are *going under*. Panic rises. Something hard slams against your coccyx – rock or tide or squid – in an attack of bright pain. There is a bursting sensation. You flail for up. Something hammers on your chest and grinds you into the rocky floor. Casting you ass over eyeballs. Helplessness assumes full command. A young life, a doomed way. A fistful of years

against the fury, the brine and the scum and the inviting darkness. Watery demise. But – despite the crush, you find a brace in the floor, you manage footing, and somehow your face emerges from the lapping waves. You cough and suck at air. The sun’s full arsenal showers upon your face. Unthreatening shallow waters surround. Your heart pounds as you wade back ashore, the waves’ rise and plummet now calm. This is something unexplainable – this fleeting, or half-imagined, encounter with mortal threat. Details, moments in peril, as momentous as genocides. Perhaps we will perish in trivialities. Reassume the beach to resume the sunburning afternoon. The dream is not the peril, the dream is the disappointment melting into stomach growl and a need to urinate. Goodbye, Antarctica. Exit the beach with a flutter over sand and a sidestep through years, a skim over losses, waking *waking up*.

In the night David is woken by a nurse attending his wound’s dressing. She dabs at his eye’s under-region with a soft swab, inspecting whatever mess waits underneath. David hasn’t yet investigated his wound, and hasn’t asked to. The nurse’s nasal breath brushes lightly against his forehead. He struggles to keep still, maintaining pretended sleep.

When she leaves his bedside, David relaxes. The bedsheets are crispy, like crusted Kleenexes, the bed an unforgiving torture rack. The door of his room is left ajar, allowing a constant scuffle of feet and slivered light to invade the room. Even the simplest comfort is unimaginable.

The doctor has said there could be operations, possibilities. Techniques and treatments. But the reality remains: his left eye has been damaged very badly, nearly destroyed, by the edge of bottle which neatly speared it. Nerves severed. Tendons detached. In the bag there is a medical eyepatch to be placed over the bandage, which is to be replaced daily. The doctor said there are other options beyond this medical patch, a whole catalogue of styles and devices. David imagines this particular market must be an extremely specialized one. Cripple fashion: Gucci crutches, Armani prosthetics. Snappy logoed dressings. Snazzy wounds.

If he is lucky, the doctor told him, *extremely lucky and open to experimentation*, one day he might again see out of his left eye.

In the wheelchair he is Franklin Roosevelt, overexposed in newsreels, iconic in spastic frame speeds. He is Christopher Reeve, Stephen Hawking, Dr. Strangelove. He is an evil genius, an arch-enemy, a criminal mastermind, complete with eyepatch and wheelchair. He is plotting global domination, cackling as his plan unfolds.

A stocky male nurse steers David's wheelchair down the hospital hallway. They pass doorways, tributaries of bodied stretchers, ceiling-high piles of dingy linen. David is still groggy. In his lap are pill bottles and dressing materials and a scrawled prescription. In his throat is a salty heap of humiliation. The nurse wheels him through the labyrinth of corridors and observation rooms and waiting areas and stretcher bays. There are charts pinned to every available space. Everybody appears insipid and gaunt. Everything is sterile. Flat.

He does his best to not weep. FDR would not weep. He would assure in firm but gentle tones. This is David's own New Deal: itchy semi-blindness.

They reach the main door. The door revolves. Outside is a jolt – it is early morning, and the sun is sharp. Intermittent snow falls earthward in lazy static. Everything, traffic and corners, is distant and close. Near and far. Nowhere. Blurred. The x-axis fails to meet the y-axis. Or the z. No depth through dead eyes.

'Someone coming?' the nurse asks.

'Taxi ...'

They wait, watching ambulances zip in and out of the emergency parking. David wipes his nose and barely feels the pressure on his face. How could this have happened. His horoscope hadn't anticipated this.

The taxi issues him through the starkness, this city of chances and unlucky breaks. Scarecrows with rubicund faces wave their arms and shout at buses; legions of men in suits patrol sidewalks, uttering damnations into cellphones; square-shaped mothers push strollers, shopping carts, wheelchairs. This is a city of rejects and

would-bes. An unbounded architecture of failure. David receives these visions, halfway and skewed.

The taxi driver *hgcks* a cough and turns up the radio. It's the same song that played last night, in the confusion and clamour: *baby hold on to me whatever will be will be*.

Eddie Money.

Someday all of this will be just a paragraph in history, an anecdotal passage. The travails of time. *Yes*. Hugeness in towers and technologies. All of this will be gone. Raise glasses to the triumphant spirit. Salute. And David – his story, his sad tale, will be only a brief file in the ever-expanding cabinet of time. A moment, a blink. Forgotten. Temporary.

But. How did this.

How.

If only. So many. But what if. Lisa. But the eye. *Eye fucking eye*. She smiles. If only I and the eye and the smile. But there are so many. Jim never said. Jim's jawline, like what, vulture beak. *Rewrite*. Her sparkling eye *damn eye* and the doctor scratching his chin, but if the eye was only, and the gym was only, but *fucking eye stings like* but Jim and the whole office, a good night's sleep, and her neck, and her mouth.

It's late. David is at home, queasy with painkillers and drink, growing concerned that his eye has acquired infection. It itches. See him cracking yet another beer, watching television with one eye. Infomercials: lawn-care demonstrations. See him isolated. See him alone in his apartment, his bomb shelter, awaiting apocalypse.

Perhaps we will eventually be extinguished in our own idle decline. We will become the signals we pursue, only blips and bleeps and the chatter of transmission. We will be instant and eternal.

What if only this, nothing but this. *What if nothing but the itch*.

Boosting himself from the couch, he teeters, uncertain, an unsteadily staked flagpole. Half-blind. Nothing: the only worse thing would be – *if only*. The little things that. The only way it could be worse – nothing. All he has ever wanted was to journey an epic journey. To affect and be affected. To dream dreams.

Last November, after the dust of The Father's funeral settled, David's mother had insisted on whisking him away to her home in Spain. *To put some distance*, she said. David supplied little resistance. He hadn't seen his mother in eight years, so her participation after The Father's passing had been unforeseen and odd; David wasn't even sure how she learned the news. But, regardless: bam, she had arrived, wailing and gesticulating, assaulting him with an outpouring of concern. He was at her mercy.

As they taxied back from the cemetery, she told David he *simply needed to have a degree of faith in the ways of God*. David said he didn't even know who God was, how could he trust someone he didn't even know? But his mother just sighed and patted him gently on the forearm, her eyes misty and disengaged.

So he had flown back to Spain with her and her husband, Darren. Darren, with his jowls and vassally complexion and Irish brogue. Darren and his doctorate degrees. David tried his best to reserve judgment of Darren.

*Put some distance*. He couldn't say no. Not to her.

David's mother: a juggernaut of emotions.

Of all Barcelona's strangenesses, the mopeds were some of the most amazing. Seated on the balcony with his arms dangling over the rail, David would peer out at the narrow passages between huddled buildings, gazing down at bobbing heads, the parts of hair, the thin Spanish women in skin-hugging dresses, the burly chests of men peeking from loose collars, at the fat old grandmothers airing laundry, sheets flying like flags down the street. At mid-evening the plazas would flood with people, and he'd sit awestruck at the TelePizza delivery guys weaving through the tight crowds on their mopeds, free of caution. Delivering pizzas – this was amazing. In Barcelona David was constantly ill at ease, but in his anxiety he was enthralled. The lisping language. The unfamiliarity. The vigour of the hazy sun, high in the highest heights of a cloudless shield.

Here he spent afternoons lazing in the Parc de la Ciutadella, drinking Fink Brau under quivering leaves, listening to their coded rustle while waving away pigeons. He felt plunged into a reassuring blankness. Here his thoughts did not lean to the consequences of The Father's self-immolation. Forget about the monotony. Forget about nooses. His thoughts led nowhere. He felt shaken. His past had been conveniently removed. Barcelona, a bath of breezy unexperience, enwreathing him like a glob of cool gel.

It was empty and good.

David travelled waterfronts, sucking aqueous air as yachts and sharp-hulled schooners filled the marina. Small men, shirtless, hailed one another. The congregation of small craft forming an

unbroken wharf of wealth and overtanned flesh. The water rippled out into unimaginable distances, a straight sheet of unmarred blue.

Down the beach, in the shade of an overhanging walkway, groups of men sought shelter from the sun's steady blaze. The men lay on tattered mattresses in the shade, smoking, drinking Coca-Cola, playing cards. They wore undershirts and stubble and worn-out shoes. Sun-cooked complexions. Many of the men seemed ruined – all appeared weary.

David stood at a distance, watching and chewing gum, wondering. Two men playing checkers mumbled to one another; they looked like fathers. Most of the men looked like they were, or once had been, fathers. Their weathered forms – stout, thick bodies wrapped in tough hide, clenched jaws – were those of fathers. The Father's body had been trim and narrow, yet, with time, displayed deterioration. He lagged like an aging stag, acquiring new tics and unsightly habits. Twitches. The jangling of the keys. The clearing of the throat that substituted for laughter. The men on the beach were addicts and schizophrenics, damaged artifacts – the first line of souls, perhaps, sacrificed in impending judgment. Perhaps we will perish in self-saturation and alienation. Perhaps we will recline passively into a dreamlike abyss. There will be walls built and lines drawn and status granted, tickets drawn for salvation's cloudy advent.

This place was good as any to be Ground Zero for the final reckoning. Perhaps the Hard Rock Café, just a brief scamper up the beach, would prove the first stem of impending ruin.

The restaurants. The glimmering lights. David couldn't get used to the unsystematic catacombs of streets and alleyways. Nothing was orderly. Home was traffic clots and teeming streets pitting man against bus, crowds against corners; here all was squirm and coil and cobblestoned mazes, indistinguishable doorways, mystifying crooks.

His mother had begun inserting the word *if* into discussion of David's return back home.

At dinner Darren grinned, hastily ordering carafes of wine. David stared blearily into the hazy candlelight, sipping at his glass, trying to wrap his mind around the squirmy situation.

Darren said *David I perceive you to be a touch nihilistic or misanthropic.*

David's mother said *Europe provokes intelligent thought and freedom of mind back in Canada you're so restricted from discovering the purity of your spirit don't you feel a weight a burden lifted.*

She said to him *these are precious days.*

David could only nod in agreement as he gazed into the candle, fork-sifting the remnants of his paella, wondering what meagre part of her mind bothered to confront the facts. The Father's suicide. The impulse behind the action. The tying of the noose. The securing of the noose. What was her take on that? The stepping up on the ottoman. The fitting of the noose around the neck. The tightening of the noose. The final sighs. The last tastes of the apartment's air. How does she imagine these last desperate gulps? Whatever treat his eyes found in their final scan: a section of wall, a pane of strewn light, a TV screen. Kicking away the ottoman, his feet dangling, his neck *cracking*, his throat clamped shut, did he have regrets, doubts? And what would David's mother, here espousing the *underappreciated delights of the Ribera del Duero reds*, find in these hypothetical doubts? This imagined purity of spirit – where to go from here?

Darren, still grinning, said *I can see your mother's dreaminess in you David you both see life as one endless fantasy.*

Enough.

He runs an unsure index along the television's surface, tenderly strokes its screen, its possibility. How it naturally accompanies the stereo amp, the face of the CD player. All these machines he has purchased on credit and account overdraft amid careening economic shufflings, delving into phantom finance – he appreciates them in light pats, languishing in their smoothness and purpose. Machines. Adore the machines.

Along the narrow shelf behind the TV are videotapes. Movies. And atop the stereo there are more videos, rented tapes yet unwatched, their cases banded blue-white and yellow-lettered.

At the top of the pile is *Patton*. Its cover bears the noble image of General George Patton, as portrayed by George C. Scott, in

poised salute before a limitless span of red and white and blue, stars and stripes. David considers this general. He considers this entertainment. He considers bed and possible rest. Outside his apartment, in the world, there could be battles storming, allegiances tested, virtues affirmed.

*A critically acclaimed film that won a total of eight 1970 Academy Awards PATTON is a riveting portrait of one of the 20th Century's greatest military geniuses.*

Realities grasped by remote control, rewinding, pausing. Frames of film collaborate into mythologies, like slogans from schemes of language. Heroes of imagination. Villains of sleepless nights.

His head swims.

David pries apart the dual case for *Patton* and inserts the first tape into the VCR. The tape is in rough shape; its digestion is poor and wobbly. There is a laboured instant of snow, but nevertheless it rolls: black screen, FBI warnings, 20th Century Fox logos, trumpets.

All sequence is plot, every moment a balance of tension. Everything is up for action.

A hall. A flag. Patton at the flag.

Movie.