
ROB BENVIE

MAINTENANCE

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For my mother

'Don't be fooled,
By flowers and waves:
They're your family.'

– Arthur Rimbaud, 'Golden Age'

'Not long ago when things were slow
We all got by with what we know
The end is near
Hearts filled with fear
Don't want to listen to what they hear.'

– Bad Brains, 'Pay to Cum'

'Even when I was little, I was big.'

– William 'Refrigerator' Perry

THE SPIRIT THAT PLAGUED US SO

Five storeys below, the Senegalese girls grow sweatier with each stroke. In midday's swelter their heels dance over green clay, crossing baselines to backcourt, Reeboked soles bouncing and pivoting. As one of the girls flubs a return, her opponent seizes the opportunity to angle a purple squeeze bottle over her head and, arching her back at a greedy angle, drenches her face in water. The runoff from her chin soaks the second skin of her Lycra sport top, which, while also purple, is not precisely colour-coordinated with the purple of the bottle.

From his distant perch on the Atlanta Smithson International's south balcony, surveying not just the expansive tennis courts but also the crowded cabana lounge and concrete poolside deck beyond, Parker Sweltham can't actually feel the moisture trickling down the girl's jutting collarbone, or detect the sweaty warmth of her underarms or her buttocks' cleavage, or inhale the reek he imagines in her damp ankle socks, or listen to her carbureted breath while she readies her next serve. From here, high above, the squeaks of her sneakers are mere blips. But he can somehow imagine these surfaces and scents as interchangeable with, or part of, the crush of sun-slaked Atlanta's heat, its taxis and the subdued tones of its offices' decor, the eagerness of its profit motives and its voices filling his phone with brusque messages, squawking logistics and demands. The girl in the purple sport top plucks a fresh Wilson from a plastic bucket and bounces it against the court. At the other end, her foe, markedly more wiry and stylistically inelegant in her play, yaps something with a wave of her Head Liquidmetal racquet. This too is unheard from a distance.

Sheltered in the cool protection of the balcony of his Smithson Matchless for Business Class™ Single Suite, Parker hears nothing, not even the chatter of television or the revving air conditioner. He is there but not there: he is smushing his nose into the cavity of the girl's belly, the exposed stripe of flesh at the lycra hem, jamming his face so deeply into her body he enters her muscles and tissues and internal

fibres, face first into her heat, dissolving into nothing but some by-product of her thighs' stretch and sweat glazed on the peach fuzz he imagines lining her lower back.

The girl hoists her racquet back and squints up into the sky.

Parker rests the glass bottle of chilled lime Perrier he has been semi-nervously sipping from on the narrow ledge before him and adjusts his fingers into fists. His stomach twists with dread over the looming reality of today's lunch sit-down with Smithson International Senior Athletics and Recreation Administrator Deryk Cheung and Cheung's humourless assistant, Michaela. Quarterlies hang on Parker's landing the contract, ensuring DynaFlex meets quotas and reaping him and his team a bountiful harvest of commissions. Michaela has been emailing Parker almost hourly in preparation for this information session slash product demo slash cost estimate.

The serve comes like spat lightning, its velocity highlighted by the sun; barely brushing the net, it glances neatly past the shorter girl. Triumphant, the server turns and jogs backcourt, switching her racquet from right hand to left, reaching with freed fingers to pinch a stuck section of fabric from between her buttocks, then with the same hand scratching her upper ear. Her opponent grunts and whacks her racquet against the clay.

Sightlines beyond the tennis court find asphalt segueing into a slotted mesa of parked minivans, then a decline into an unseen but possible horizon obscured by office towers and freeway ramps and clogs of traffic. Triangulating these points between land and sky is Parker. And there seems to be something in this, this idea of distance and its presentation: lines on clay delineating zones, speed generating revenue, proximity, ambition – something.

An unfamiliar sensation, an unwelcome thought, leaps forward from somewhere in Parker's core. Something is happening: an iciness and a sense of loss. He tries to resist it, fighting to focus and regasp his surroundings. All that is distant – the horizon and the heavens, the time and trials that have delivered him here – is horribly close, yet remains distant. Like a dossier to which he has never been privy, tossed on his desk. His knees threaten to give way. He sniffs hard sniffs.

A nonsensical refrain – *grandfather clock grandfather clock* – sings inexplicably in his head.

The next serve is less commanding, coming at a flunked angle and met with a lunge and hurried volley crossing the court's span as the tall girl bounds back to root herself. The interval between one girl's *ungh* and the other's *hng* is a flash; Parker's awareness of the perspiring Perrier bottle's wobble on the ledge is too late, the sight of its downward pitch a sharp boot stomp to his chest.

A moment passes. Then a youngish wail is heard below. Parker inhales and looks: glass glitters on the pool's ceramic deck. A child falls into a mother's arms, her scalp showing a stringy wad of blood. The faces of bathers turn upward and fingers point. Someone shouts *there*.

Parker backs into the room's air-conditioned vacuum, where CNN dominates: *Three killed twenty wounded after NATO aircraft mistakenly bomb Chinese embassy in Belgrade*. He lurches to the bathroom and grips the valves, staring at himself in the mirror, silently mouthing a sequence of panicked expletives. He fears he might vomit, but does not. Staggering back into the bedroom, he clicks to life a pen bearing Smithsonian's distinctive crest and searches for a suitable writing surface, finding only the laminated service guide. The pen digs futile trenches into the plastic; by the time he manages a few pen strokes he's already forgotten what he'd meant to get down, and why.

The hallway is empty. Parker hurries toward the elevator. His leather loafers make no sound on the thick carpet; the only sound is the change he jangles in his pockets.

Then: the recognizable whoosh and lurch of an elevator's arrival. He halts, then slides into a nearby alcove containing the floor's ice dispenser and a garbage bin. The elevator dings, then the doors part with a sigh. Parker crams himself behind the large machine, feeling his blood pressure pounding in his temples as a reedy man leads two uniformed security lunks into the hall, passing so close Parker can smell on them the same complimentary aloe toner with which he'd splashed his own cheeks only minutes before.

The reedy man, by appearances some sort of managerial lackey, begins briskly knocking on doors, moving room by room down the hallway, calling to guests in this heralding whinny. The first two rooms he tries are empty, but at the third – only one away from Parker’s in the row – a woman answers. Parker can’t see her, but she sounds drunk.

Parker’s throat is a block of putty. Shame or something indigestibly worse burns in his chest. The lackey asks the woman if they could possibly take a quick look inside her room. She groans, but then agrees. Parker cautiously slides from behind the machine and chances a look as the guards and lackey disappear into the room, the door shutting hard behind them. Breathing deeply, Parker hurries to the elevator and hits the down button. Placing a fist against his jackhammering chest, he tries to remember if idle elevators in the Smithson remain on their present floors until called or automatically return to the lobby. Five floors, a long ascent. But then there is that funereal ding, somehow louder than before. He hops inside, spins, thumbs L and waits, jangling change. A century passes; a system grinds. Then, just as the doors ease shut, he can hear the distinctive clunk of a door opening down the hall.

The lobby is a hubbub of queues and ringing pay phones and baggage-laden guests mobbing kiosks and couches. Parker whisks through the crowd, making for the doors to the lower concourse, still unsure of what he is actually doing, or why. There are distant sirens, or the perception of sirens.

Then he hears a name being called, shrill through the noise; he shudders, recognizing it as his own. His already sinking spirits plummet further as he sights Michaela hurrying toward him. Parker continues aiming for those doors, hoping to vanish from the busy scene.

But Michaela heads him off at the entrance, a football-sized coffee pinned in her elbow’s crook, a leaf of memoranda weighing down her arms. And yes: a pace behind is the man himself, Deryk Cheung, he of powers to forge season-defining accounts, followed by a pair of junior attendees in identically crested blazers. Parker looks back to see the lackey and lunks aimed roughly in his direction. He tries to explain to

Michaela that he needs a sec to check in, but he can't imagine with whom he should be checking, and she is already prefacing her restructuring of the April memo. Cheung observes, wordless.

Bystanders turn and hush as a trio of young lifeguards barge across the lobby, blowing whistles and humping a gurney toward the west stairs. Cheung looks to Michaela, who looks to Parker, who offers nothing. The managerial lackey passes, lunks close behind, issuing commands into a walkie-talkie with a volume and metre that seethes insistence: *I have police on the way*, he says.

The Senegalese tennis players enter via the entrance's revolving door, caught in the middle of a shared laugh as they almost collide with the gurneyed brigade. Sidestepping onlookers, the taller of the two girls wipes her forehead with a sweatbanded wrist and takes one of Cheung's junior attendees by his sleeve; they seem to know one another. Parker notices this girl too smells of aloe toner.

'What the fuck is happening here?' she says.

Late afternoon: the fenced backyard of the Swelthams' Mississauga detached split-level becomes its own shady pergola of seclusion. A slatted deck descends to a footpath flanked by beds of rhododendrons, boxwood, peonies and shrubbery, cascading to a trellis of trickling vines barricading against the Figueiredos next door and their yapping Finnish Spitz. Here one can lounge unhassled: far-off honks and woofs and jet takeoffs are filtered by the insulation of concrete planters. Weeping cherry trees and sunflowers drowse like flags, dead in no breeze.

Trixie opens her eyes. Unmown blades of a week's overgrown grass tickle her neck, earlobes, elbows. Somewhere a telephone rings, oddly in tune with a mosquito hovering at her ear. Yet she remains still. Corpse pose, *savasana*. Palms to the sky.

It's happened again: a gap of time outside inventory. The buckling of knees, the world's upending, emptiness – then, eventually, a tough return. Trixie sits up to a lazy *siddhasana* and scrapes a fingernail across her right temple. The summer light shifts; a power line creates a shadowed cable across the path's ruddy brick, the angle loosely reminding her of cigarettes.

Then, again: the phone, reminding her of the toaster strudel and a world beyond the backyard. It is June 1999 in North America. She is a mother and a wife, an editor, an amateur searcher of the cosmos. And: the envelope, that envelope.

'Stars and damnation.'

She actually says it aloud, this strange curse of her father's. *Stars and damnation*. She shouldn't echo Lloyd this way. But something has changed; there is an urgency brewing in this coming summer she hadn't anticipated. And so, with a bothered head, she rises and goes.

The toaster oven chuffs greyish smoke, but no flames. Trixie opens its front panel and dials down the heat. The Pillsbury Wildberry Toaster Strudel inside is a ruin of black crust and blood-hued filling. She plucks

this desiccated pastry from the tray, almost burning her fingers, and tosses it into the sink to land beside a Kikkoman-crusteD saucer. Running the faucet over the crusteD husk, she listens closely to the clarity of the water's gush. Then she starts the dishwasher and cracks one of the two tallboys of Grolsch she finds left in the fridge. There is so much care and no care at all in these spaces – the sink, the unruly garden, the garage's storage units direly needing reformatting, the ailing furnace, the concrete below foundationing it all. It lives around her and because of her.

Trixie spatulas the destroyed strudel into the trash.

The living room television is paused on a video menu reading *Turok 2: Seeds of Evil*. This room is a mayhem of incompatible objects: a Ruffles bag spills yellowish dust next to a Nintendo controller and an empty bottle of Wild Cherry Pepsi staining rings into the coffee table; her own Gourevitch paperback lies fanned on the coffee table. The Sky-Watcher f/8 telescope sits in the corner, aimed at the Figueiredos' side deck. Trixie clicks off the remote and kills the screen.

Returning to the kitchen, Trixie locates the cordless phone and retrieves messages. She hopes for hang-ups, but there is a jerky sequence: Allie, her mother, describing the horrors of a frothy tidal pool in her basement that may or may not be a breeding ground for small frog-like creatures. A rep from the gas company about their last statement's error. Parker, phoning in from Hartsfield-Jackson; an airport PA squawks in the background. She returns the phone to its cradle, then thumbs through a drawer of papers and warranties. All this archaeology, but no envelope.

No luck in the first-floor bathroom. Same with the vestibule, among notepads and key rings, a wad of windowed envelopes bound in an elastic. She thinks: it was, to her best recollection, last seen in her purse yesterday afternoon. But after unsealing it and scrutinizing its contents, she'd strategically opted to stash it where it would not be found. Mission accomplished.

She is again unsuccessful in the spare bedroom, a room once intended for guests who never arrived, now used for storage and the

tired IKEA desk she regretfully calls her home office. Atop a stack of cardboard boxes housing Parker's old Bauer skates and trophies and other junk, someone has left half a sandwich: Kraft Singles and pastrami, atop a paper towel. She inwardly curses Owen, then forces herself to reel back, recalling Dr. Fultz's professional edict to judge her son less sternly, to assert a *gentle but vigilant* parental presence – emphasis on *gentle*. Pick up the dirty socks, excuse the after-school dilly-dally, if only for a month. Six weeks, regular check-ins. Trust: the entryway to a new level of understanding, she is told.

The house hums with absence. Oak flooring costumed in Osaka hand-knotted rugs, half-dialled dimmers, calming lamps, a small pantry smelling of turmeric – all quiet. Only the dishwasher's chug as soundtrack.

Work at her PowerBook proves fruitless. Fact checking for the next issue of *Record of Truth* is tedious, and the tribunal report history is not a gripping read. *Co-accused in the second indictment had been arrested in Yamoussoukro on 29 October 1996; subsequently transferred to the Tribunal on 30 November 1996. Prosecutor filed motion before Trial Chamber 1 on 17 February re: all three accused, i.e., Kayishema, Ruzindana and Ntakirutimana, maintaining Kibuye violations in sequence.* Rooting through procedure notes weighs her eyes, and she finds herself fiddling restlessly with her screen's display contrast. Faxes, transcripts, Polaroids of blood-splashed bodies – the records are clinical in their horror.

She's cross-referencing recent testimony from Abuja when the telephone rings again. The cordless is in the kitchen.

'Hello?'

'Hi. I tried you like an hour ago.'

'I was working. You're where now?'

'Houston.'

'Houston. Is it Astronomical?'

A lame joke. No laugh.

Parker: 'Did the pavers call?'

'Nyet. Did you ... I haven't looked at the estimate.'

'Did Heath bring back the glue gun?'

Parker would be reclined on a hotel queen-size, loosening his tie, catalogues and sales sheets fanned around him. Her husband lives in day planners and coil-bound calendars and notepads; for last Christmas Owen suggested they give him a hand-held gizmo to replace the accumulating stacks, but the thing now sits in a kitchen drawer, still in its plastic with warranty and manual, awaiting return to Best Buy.

‘Heath was by,’ Trixie says. ‘But no gun. He was really sweaty.’

‘Mm. Well, that’s how he is.’

‘I took O back downtown yesterday.’

‘Right. I was going to ask.’

‘Afterwards Fultz said O was asking strange questions. He said young men rarely exhibit such destructive behaviours without some sort of, he said, *libidinal motivation*. His words, not mine.’

‘Really.’

‘He suggested in this roundabout way that he might be having doubts about his, um, sexuality.’

‘O suggested this?’

‘No no no. Fultz wondered if Owen might have a tendency or something.’

‘God. And we’re looking forward to a bill for how much?’

She sighs. ‘Look ... I know. But we obviously have a situation where not everything’s understood. Honestly, I kind of think he secretly enjoys therapy.’

Silence.

‘Something wrong?’ she asks.

Nothing, he says. He tells her to take care, and he’ll see her on Monday.

But something is wrong. It’s in his tone: a warble of doubt. But surely her husband of seventeen years is thinking only of heart-rate meters and treadmill pad static and slide-show product demos, tromping convention lobbies free of concern over the rotten crumbs crushed into these old carpets and the groan of this house’s ailing pipes and the assholes who insist on jamming their mail slot with those World Vision flyers that look like Consumers Distributing catalogues. He’s not here to see it.

The bedroom is the cleanest and cruellest of these rooms. Bedsheets tucked firm, Parker's freshly laundered cotton boxers folded next to her own skivvies: the boys and the girls. One could see this straightened room as sanitized following juicy indiscretions, or primed for yet-to-be committed sins. Neither is the case.

In the closet's wicker hamper designated for off-season shoes, Parker has dumped a load of grungy workout sweats. There have been humidity issues, leaving many winter clothes dank and musty; coupled with the crusty sweats, the closet smells bad. Indulging a long shot, Trixie kneels and rifles through blankets, turtlenecks, wadded mittens. No envelope, of course. Digging behind the hamper she finds a lidless plastic storage box of crumpled papers, thin file folders, scraps. Photographs: vacationing mopeds in Nassau, DynaFlex seasonal bashes, Owen Halloweened in an ornate foam duck costume. Trixie flips through the first few strata of this box, knowing the dig will prove fruitless.

But here, unanticipated, is the recognizable black vinyl of an old journal's jacket, atop a brief stack of similar volumes. She extracts the book from the box and pries it apart. Pages crinkle with moisture, overused with scrawlings. She knows it well, but has forgotten so much.

10/17/79. Does it ever end? Everyone so assured. Think of Mercy, moaning every pitiful emotion. I look at my face, freckles look like syphilis. My neck looks like a turtle.

These were dreamy seasons, so long ago. Montreal at a decade's slumbering dawn. Days both soothing and devastating, like an afternoon bottle of depanneur wine or three. Trixie sits cross-legged on the floor, leafing through pages of these fevered scratchings crammed in during miserable metro hauls or library catatonia or over ciders on sunburned terrasses, to-do lists in margins, the quotations, doodles, phone numbers driven into pages. Years have passed since rereading these complaints and codes, long lost to her now.

Owen appears at the doorway. He has very little hair.

Trixie: 'What happened to the curls we knew and loved?'

‘Buzzed it.’

Every day he looks different. Taller, thinner. He is only a boy.

He leans against the door’s frame. ‘Can I take an advance on next week’s? I Windexed, I swear.’

‘Oh brother. Ten.’

‘Come on. That’s lunch.’

‘Ten dollars isn’t *my* lunch. Is it yours?’

He weasels. ‘Fifteen?’

‘This is for ... ?’

‘What? Crack cocaine and ammo. What.’

Again, he is only a boy. *Gentle but vigilant*. ‘Take the card, get out twenty. *Twenty*. I will check.’

‘In your purse?’

‘Mm hm. And did you feed Satan?’

But he’s already gone.

Up and down the hallway she retraces with mounting frustration, running her knuckles along the wall. Fruit flies circling the kitchen wastebin remind her of past days, old apartments. Sipping the Grolsch, she drifts to the stairs, swiping the balustrade and struggling to remain focused on the hunt at hand. Recall: it came from the purse, then the unsealing. Then the consideration and reconsideration and consideration of reconsideration, then the impulse to have it not be found by those who should not see it. Up and down the hallways, she levitates, teleports, phases through dimensions.

The writing switches to red ink, rotates ninety degrees into landscaped margins: *Sacred drunken night! Sacred if only for the mask you grant us something illegible We put faith in poison. We know how to live completely every day. Behold an age of assassins.* Copied from one of many paperbacks shoplifted from Argo Bookshop on Ste-Catherine, torn through while laid out on the rug in her Outremont three-and-a-half, gulping drugstore Italian wine and evading sleep – her brick-

thick Penguin edition of Rimbaud's *Collected Poems*. The gaunt prodigy, with whom she grew semi-erotically obsessed in those undergraduate years, whose allure lay in the slender purity and crude passions of youth, somehow even more raw in translation. Her wispy Comparative Lit class prof darted across a sunken lecture floor, slapping the dog-eared paperback, and she was enrapt – Rimbaud did that to the young. But youth is now a mystery; she reads quotations in her own handwriting, a script she doesn't recognize: *My betrayal of the world is too brief a torture*. Through such eternities they time-travelled and flirted with celestial grace, arguing over bar tabs and attempting to live ferociously. Meanwhile the city groaned with settling foundations, woozing in decline after separation politics and an Olympic post-coital drift.

10/21/79. 3am. Sickening silence. Mice scrambling in the walls like fingernails clawing out of tombs. Called Victorio about it but that fat fuck never shows his pocked face anymore. So sick of this lack of control. Can't focus on anything. Dizzy and cardiac crossing Maison-neuve. So many choices and no way to choose. Seldom do people discern eloquence under a threadbare cloak. Confirmed Dean's List this aft. Reminder: send notice to Allie, she'll waggle a fist in joy. Things have to change.

At the kitchen table now, Trixie closes this ancient volume and bites her cheek, remembering a just-about-finished pack of Matinée Extra Milds in a raincoat pocket upstairs. She clears material from her eyes and stands. Muffled thumps come from upstairs – Owen's new barbells touching carpet. She smiles.

Twilight introduces a cooling of shadows. With head aching, Trixie again retreats to the backyard to droop into a wooden deck chair with the last Grolsch. The fraying eaves at the roof's northeast corner remind her of all the work that should be done that won't be done, or at least the remorse she should be feeling over it not being done, but does not. So many hours still ahead, so many messes to mop up.

Overhead loafs a hint of a waning moon, a librating ribbon of its influence. This same moon, she thinks, has bored a thousand generations with its loom. She takes comfort in knowing so many despairing humans have gazed up to the same sight. And none received the confirmation hoped for.

She braces herself, worried another blackout is coming. Her neck loosens in a way that has become frighteningly familiar.

Then: in the unmown grass by where she'd conked out, she sights a recognizable corner of envelope that snaps her back. With a roosterish blurt she fires herself across the yard and retrieves the envelope. On the face, no address, no addressee. She opens it and withdraws its contents: an index card, unlined, monogramless, of stock rigid enough to imply an aura of formality yet free of ornament. Businesslike, but not of business.

She rereads.

Hi Trixie! Great to run into you the other day at yoga! Be great to get together sometime! How about lunch or drinks next week maybe! Throw me a dingle when you get a chance ... it'd be great to hear from you! Ernie.

Three different numbers, plus an email address and a fax number. Fax? The inclusion of this detail should mean something, but what that is remains unclear. A lot of *greats*. And: *dingle*?

Turning the note over, she discovers a blemish under the third sentence. Held to the light, the card reveals a deft application of white-out, annihilating a word or two. Trixie squints, angling the page, finding a slight twist of blue ink behind the white, pen-strokes that look like the lower section of a Y, with what seems an *o* adjoined. *You*. Or, possibly, *Yours*. *Yo* seems out of Ernie's character. *You* – you what? Some commentary on her character, presumably from the impression made after last week's Svastha class, with an awkwardness held between them like a vat of some unstable element. In this line, something compelled him to reconsider and withhold. He went for whiteout rather than starting anew. Again, this should indicate something, but Trixie comes up empty as to what. She folds the card and pockets it.

But this isn't the envelope she seeks, the one from the neurology clinic, filling her with dread beyond dread. That document and its results remain hidden somewhere, lost in the house's beleaguered floorboards, its veining cracks and caulking. She breathes deeply of evening air, then finishes the beer and heads inside. There's still so much left to do.

Against everything, you have to keep pushing. They will try to knock you down, defeat you, make you less. Odds are against you, always. So you have to tough it out solo. You have to persevere and believe, even when no one else does, because all you have is yourself and nothing else. Even those closest to you will be of no help in battles ahead. So you have to set guidelines. You have to establish a regimen and stick to it every fucking day. You have to look hard at what is real and keep going, even when the body and the brain scream no. You have to see the challenge as a thing that it is real and true and not something imaginary or dumb. You have to know what's what. Never weaken. Never show weakness. Never be weak.

Legs at shoulder width, wearing only Umbro shorts, Owen Sweltham stares into the weight-room mirror. The results of weeks' rigours – the curls and lifts, toning, bearing weight, fighting weight – are still barely manifest. To take this puny thing in the mirror and reshape it into its ideal version – this takes weight. Struggling to achieve mass, to occupy more space – this takes sweat. It requires a steady vision. You aim, focus, target. Shoot. Look at these shitty delts and these scrawny biceps. Look at this nothing chest. Look at these zits crusting this forehead and this neck, the greasy clefts of these nostrils. Everything is oozing and swollen and broken.

He drops and initiates crunches. Down on the mat, lowered under everything, the rattle of gymnastics horses jostling in the adjacent gymnasium, he fights to concentrate. Here, in the weight room dank with unlaundered towels and the stink of teenaged bodies, the work of flexing and leveraging of pressure takes place. With enough persistence and pain, any muscle, no matter how shrivelled, can be persuaded to harden and swell. You can conquer. You can solidify softness into steel – just like the steel-like material of the seven-pound jar of Xyience XGainer in his locker. And down on the floor, with pelvis pulled toward shoulders and breath heavy in his nostrils, Owen understands that if you are going to conquer your foes, you just have to get through this pain.

Against everything. You have to push against everything.

Lunchtime. Persian Pizza and Seafood is stuffy, crowded with bashed booths and wrecked video consoles and gunk-glazed trash bins, sunlight squared through windows imprinted with remnants of masking tape. Someone dings up triumphant scores on an ancient 1943 console, pixelated choppers pitilessly bombing aircraft carriers.

They wait in line for pizza, four of them.

'I'd destroy that ass,' Lucky says. 'She's got this sort of attitude. Nasty.'

'Hundred percent,' The Bying says.

Gwen Huang is the subject, in the context of tonight's Year-End Sock Hopp.

The Calch: 'And you saw her this morning. With the boots.'

Lucky snorts.

Owen is last in line, feeling as fucked up as one can feel without crumbling into dust. This new hash is much wetter and more serious than Sad Tony's old hash; on top of the half-bottle of Triaminic after his workout, things are getting pretty wacky. His thoughts are pornographically pizza-fixated; there is no earthly or heavenly desire greater than his anticipation for this slice, Persian's specialty of extra-spiced sausage customized with sweet donair sauce, a.k.a. the Bubbafied Slice. Yet so much noise surrounds: the clanging of pans and revving of ovens, the barks of the Lebanese cooks, the digitalized bombing of Japanese harbours, Lucky and The Bying and The Calch flapping lips. And now Deanerz enters, burdened with a massive backpack and a hockey stick straggling loose tape. This talk of Gwen Huang rekindles an image haunting Owen since yesterday's morning's B Math: two rows over she sat with her earlobes and coloured contact lenses, her suede skirt and her veinless calves, and in leaning over to retrieve something from her bag her small tank top was hiked to expose a glimpse of lower back, the sheer gooseflesh there, and the floral hem of a Hanes waistband. Owen had sat paralyzed by this sight for the entire period, scarcely even noticing when the terminating bell rang. Thoughts regarding Gwen taint his tongue with a bitter taste that is most definitely

not pizza, and all he wants to do is ride out this clammy smoke-out and sit and eat eat eat pizza pizza pizza.

One of the cooks, the one with the moustache and glass eye, sloshes a strainer of frozen fries into the deep fryer.

The Calch says, 'O.'

Owen nods, hearing him. 'Uh.'

'You're back on team now?'

Deanerz: 'Wait. O's still kicked off soccer?'

They are speaking to him, but he is unable to answer. The combo of dextromethorphan and hash is really setting up shop in his head, sending the possibility of uttering actual words adrift. Words are only sick echoes. And if these people can't see or *feel* the limitlessness of his thoughts, words will remain useless. He's elsewhere: from the coil-bound reader of photocopied pages from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, sixth edition, the class read Samuel Coleridge: *Nine fathom deep he has followed us From the land of mist and snow. And every tongue, through utter drought, was withered at the root.* There Owen lives, in a land of mist and snow and mozzarella clinging to a tear of dough, like tissue from a bone.

'I'll be back in,' Owen manages.

No one responds.

The line edges forward as The Bying receives his slice and moves to the register. Money is borrowed and lent throughout. Only The Calch and Lucky boast any real income, both shelving sneakers at Coastal Athletics on weekends. Deanerz has started on the fryer at Swiss Chalet, but The Calch is now hooking him up with an interview at Coastal; there you get discounts and don't wear hairnets. O is short as always, his only income those dollars wrenched from the Maternal Unit or by hawking CDs pinched from Sam's downtown – at the CD Plus near Kipling station they pay three to four-fifty for almost any unscuffed disc. And the scant amounts he does make usually end up in Sad Tony's clutches. Money remains an abstraction.

The small Lebanese guy behind the counter waggles a finger to fetch Owen's attention. O nods back.

The afternoon is the morning. He forgets what's next. Biology Three – the one about procedures, observation hypothesis conclusion and its chapter on genetics, where your father becomes your son and your grandmother is inside you, where you are molecules in stacks and nothing else. Or World History, the one with pictures of bodies in trees. But dead people are not bunches of bananas. Grade 11 is a nightmare.

The distance between where he currently stands in this greasy galaxy and the seat he will occupy through this next class, forty-five minutes of hostages attention, is incalculable. The imprisonment of Owen Sweltham will not be relived. He remembers the clang of barred doors sliding shut, then long silences, sobs down hallways. All these impulses become hard to filter – it's impossible to strip the layers into something workable. The shit is heavy or it's nothing.

The Calch takes his steaming slice and buries its glisten in chili flakes. He nods at Owen. 'Seriously, O. You're playing with us this summer or what?'

Owen moves forward to accept his pizza. 'I'm destroying it,' he says.

At St. Dismas it was lineups too. Lineups for everything: water fountain, breakfast, showers, pills, phone privileges, pills, bathroom, laundry, pills. Waiting for disposable razors, towels, Right Guard. For fresh bedsheets, after tearing his own to ribbons. In those yellowed halls of linoleum and clanging lock bolts, any expression was so closely monitored and reined there was nothing one could do but just *exist*, waiting to be institutionally reformed. Nothing remained but to try and avoid others and wile away hours in a sedated stupor that led only to further stupor; he slumped through the hallways in standard-issue jammies and smoked weeks of cigarettes in the back foyer and avoided speaking with anyone. Periodic visits from the Paternal and Maternal Units went without incident. February faded into March; March faded into April. He idly half-memorized a battered *Funk & Wagnalls*, vols. A through M. He attended sessions in C Wing, where a jury of counsellors reminded him of his crimes. He scrubbed his ball sack with dispenser soap and rubbed his chin with towels that reeked of something vinegary. He lived a

filtered life. And yet the promise beckoned: all would be reinstated in proper time, in due course.

During his third week of incarceration he was in the West Common Room, alone except for a guy named Barney dozing in a chair. Owen was scanning *Funk & Wagnalls*, reading about the Crimean War, smoking the last cigarette from his pack, when Fat Brian plopped next to him on the couch.

‘Can we talk about this morning?’

December 1852: Sultan Abdülmecid I decided in favour of the Catholics, while Nicholas, protector of Orthodoxy, dispatched a mission to Constantinople, aiming at a treaty guaranteeing the rights of the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire.

Owen edged away. ‘Reading.’

‘You said some pretty serious stuff in session.’

‘Read. *Ing.*’

‘I’d like to open up. Like Susan was saying.’

‘Susan’s a Nazi.’

‘Susan’s not a Nazi.’

Siege of Sevastopol. Battle of Inkerman. Battle of Eupatoria. Campaign in the Sea of Azov. Siege of Kars.

‘She said communication is your most serious obstacle. Do unto others. Be the change you wish to see. Behave as you’d have the world behave.’

The Russians refused the terms.

‘I’m trying to help you. What don’t you understand?’

Owen turned and faced Fat Brian. You have to learn to machete these distractions from your path and forge ahead. You have to push harder against everything.

He put out his cigarette on Fat Brian’s eyelid.

In the Quiet Room you could be as loud as you wanted. You could holler and complain forever. No one cared.

‘*Wink Martindale!*’

Or: ‘*Chuck Fuck Barris Barky Bob Barker Farker Fuck!*’

Or: ‘*Dick Van Dick Dickybird Dick Dyke Cockfuckingsucker!*’

Nothing changed the fact that you were there, captive. But you could grow accustomed to torments, learning to handle persecution. They locked up Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and gave him a really ugly shirt when he got out. They threw the Godfather of Soul into lockdown in South Carolina. The world tries to beat you down, and you can only find freedom in fighting your way through. You have to just sit and let every minute squash you and dare you to submit, to strangle your soul and twist you into submission. But Owen knew no one could control him – but him. And no one could destroy him. But him.

Lying on his bunk, his intestines afire, he would stare up at buzzing fluorescent grids, their radiative glares engineered to enfeeble him. Horrible patterns emerged: refractions like butterfly eye-spots, raccoon claws, roses laid at gravesides. Cycles of the past. Tissue and bone.

Then, at the conclusion of millennia of drought and decay, a door opened.

Noel from Second Ward loped in and led Owen back upstairs. Then his captors listened intently with stethoscope to torso while a procedural world massacred all hope. They dared to explain to him, the incarcerated, how it was not the world, meaning *this* world, that did the actual killing. Or, in this case, violations and regulations. It was his fault, his and Ike's violence, that brought him here and kept him behind locked doors – and they were correct. They audited his behaviour in sickening detail, mincing Owen just as he'd minced his bedsheets. They jabbed and ballpointed. They waged queries and analyses.

And after it all he ended up in the same place he always did: across a desk from Fultz, his court-appointed counsellor's antennae perked and ballpoint pen readied for the coming litany. Clinician and prisoner, probe and project. Both sank into their opposing chairs.

'You reported sluggishness,' Fultz said, running a thumb down a clipboard. 'Dr. Stickings had you on ... chlorpromazine and risperidone.'

'I survived.'

In Owen's every movement, his every tremble, the smothering weight of his own awesomeness has been what wracks him most deeply. Not easy, sustaining the heights demanded of ultimate greatness. These meds were almost successful in their efforts to wear down the People's

Champ. You falter in aisles and talk to your fist. You don't know when and where you are. Things are heavy like rubberized hex dumbbells and light like Librium. Owen once fought to balance his lunch plate of potato salad and lemonade while trying to visualize the flames of Hamburg's 1810 annexation as described in *Funk & Wagnalls* vol. C; he fell to lunar dust and was lifted to his feet by a slo-mo cosmonaut who ESPed his mind in the Sea of Tranquillity. Then the Paternal Unit was eyeing him over the neck of a light beer, telling him *every passing second* means a new future: apparently something the Paternal Unit's own mother would say.

Yes, superiority hounded him.

Fultz scanned his clipboard. A photocopied bulletin on his desk bore the headline *Restorative Justice in Youth Corrections*.

'Do you find yourself disoriented, or confused?'

Owen scoffed at this. When one's mental faculties operate at levels entirely beyond the scope of these technologies and treatments, as Owen's do, all these showers of glitter simply fail. Owen goes for the sharp, Ginsu-sharp. Slice and dice, Julienne-style. Like *ninjutsu*.

'Nope.'

'Nightmares? Bad dreams, you said.'

Dreams? The true hero defies the chokehold of such drowsy prisons, the assassins twisting *shuko* claws, slithering into bedchambers in deadest night. He trained himself to sleep with one eye cocked, ready for any opponent.

'Nope.'

Fultz returned pen to desk, removing his glasses to thumb eyes ridged in weary pouches. His skin appeared sunken and sore, an over-shaved pink.

'So tell me something,' he said. 'Anything.'

To the wincing, pitying Parental Units, Fultz had expressed confidence that all waywardness could be quelled; we did not see here the beginning of a life of delinquency and malice, he said, but we certainly had a case. He reported that, while incarcerated, Owen was in tears every day. *Unable on some days to even properly dress himself*, Fultz slandered. But how could Owen possibly be expected to comply? His

enemies lurked everywhere: steak knives like enemies and mascots, vials of poison singing to him like cartoons. He had to resist; like Mr. T put it: *Quit yo' jibba jabba*. Anger forked Owen's brain while he innocently consumed trays of Eggos. He died and lived, and he was launched upon the beach at Damascus as his Robitussin-poisoned blood ran into the surf. Meanwhile he fought to hold steady, letting his frown be his umbrella.

So he could tell Fultz nothing. And as the weary man fingered his intercom's keypad to inquire about the afternoon's scheduling, Owen reached and swiped the clipboard from the desk. To Fultz's horror, Owen began cramming the pages sheet by sheet into his mouth, stealing back his case notes, reclaiming his past as his own.

But that was months ago. Tonight spotlights scatter and flare, blemishes strobing across the loose crowd. The school gymnasium, navigable by day, is tonight recreated as a torture chamber of unrecognizable faces and flung shadows. Sweaty smells intermingle: hair mousse, contraband wine coolers tucked into sleeves, cologne-filtered sweat. Gummy slowness washes over Owen as he raises his face, letting the speakers' thump peel layers from his cranium. A girl in a Red Sox cap staggers into him; Owen rebounds her back and she is immediately forgotten.

Earlier hours pre-gymnasium are fuzzy. In the woods behind the school he'd joined Dean 'Deanerz' Prendergast and Lucky Chartrand and Chuck 'The Bying' Byng and Corrina Squelce – who'd arrived with Chuck – in huddling around bottles of Golden Glow and Schooner and a baggie of crumbling brownish crud that The Bying described as genetically enhanced shrooms. Prospects for the night's Sock Hopp were discussed. The Bying predicted it would be a *final blowout*, which sounded completely retarded. With Cardinals cap in reverse, one Schooner in hand and another tucked in his belt, Owen wobbled uncertainly, the afternoon's cough syrup now a half-digested red mess painting the Shoppers Drug Mart's wheelchair access ramp. And when the shrooms eventually kicked in he'd been stricken with a vision, there in the darkened forest. Sunken in night's trickery, his friends became

corpses, their faces teathy skulls, the muscles clinging to their bones atrophying, their fleshless frames and enamelled grins like marionettes on self-dangled strings.

In the forest's mausoleum he'd seen something new: a confirmation and a reminder that made him want to crack apart his own ribs. Even when they told him to chill the frig out, he felt on the brink of something important. He kept touching the knife in his boot; he'd found the groove-handled thing with the worn blade in the woods a week ago, glinting in the sun like a trophy. The weapon, tucked at his ankle, provided reassurance.

But now, inside the gym's fortress, everything goes haywire. The rent-a-cops and girls aligned on bleachers, the snarl of whoops, the hypnosis of enormous video screens, speakers blasting TLC. Despite it all, he hears a reassuring voice, perfectly clear, speaking only to him: 'Don't worry – all's all right in the end.'

Then someone takes Owen by the shoulders. He spins one-eighty and seizes his attacker's throat.

'What, O ...'

Eyewitness accounts of the ensuing scuffle would flow free-form throughout next week's rumour channels. One account saw Owen launching Chuck back into the surrounding fray, Chuck then flailing into exchange student Luther Wang, who then executed some serious Qwan Ki Do on them both. In another, the two stripped to bare torsos and squared off Mike Tyson Punch-Out!!-style before hired police busted in and sent them both downtown for punitive annihilation. Another version saw Owen morphing into a wild creature swearing to devour The Bying's heart as a supreme sacrifice to the unholy – with whispers that O's time out of school last term was to undergo some unspeakable demonic transformation. Everyone saw it happen, but no one knew what happened.

But the truth is, as he is being dragged full nelsoned by security toward the exit, all Owen senses is the violent clenching of his body's every tendon. He is granite, impervious under Par 56s and epileptic video monitors, his mind full of puke. But as the opening strains of K-Ci and JoJo's slow jam on the PA sends the dance's awkward and

unmatched to the hallways, the swarm makes for an effective cover, allowing Owen to shake his captors' grip and make for the exit. Before anyone understands what has occurred, Owen bursts through the school's front entrance and is out in the night, free.

He can do nothing; he can do anything. He can strike back against the noise, fighting an unending battle. Against everything, you have to keep pushing. They try to knock you down. Everything is on their side; the thing is weighted. Odds are against you, always. So you have to go it solo. No one else will be there to help you. In the end, all you can do is fight.

The earth revolves, parrying a sluggish moon. Loafing dust joins the puzzle of Saturn's ring – his mother would refocus her telescope. Everything is united, crude in particles and scuzz, the cigarette-butt-stuffed beer bottles, the crumpled gum wrappers.

Owen sits immobile on the grassy slope beyond the vacant basketball courts, riding out this stone. Music from the gym has died, and Sock Hopp attendees now spill into the parking lot below through jousting headlights, their faces flushed with contact, with giddiness, with humiliation. Potential violence sparks between two guys next to an Integra blasting Silkk the Shocker, but to onlookers' disappointment it turns out to be only a playfight, a joke.

Owen briefly wonders if this entire night has all just been part of some elaborate trick. He feels sick and his temples ache. He touches his head, now bare; he's lost his Cardinals cap.

Then The Bying is there, as if helidropped in.

'Puff?' he says, offering his cigarette.

Owen accepts. Toward the lot's front fencing he sights Gwen Huang, hanging with her usuals, Melissa Sachs and Moira Llewellyn and that girl Kath Kough. Gwen's windbreaker is zipped to her chin, sleeves pulled over fists. From here Owen can still see that lip gloss shining: it's a post-storm moon, barely there, but there.

Owen hands back the cigarette. They all smoke Belvedere Milds, except for Lucky, who goes for Export A's.

'Back there,' Owen says to Chuck.

'Yeah, cock.'

'I was fucked. I thought you ...'

He stops. The Bying nods, smoking. 'Let's get out of here,' he says. 'Things are getting hoary.'

They rise and head up the hill, back toward the forested path and the bus stop beyond. Everything is wearing off, wearing down, and they are tired. The only thing Owen feels is that never-fading want, a recurring dream never understood.

Gwen and her glistening ponytail. Gwen and her open-toe flats. Gwen and her lip gloss.