



**PIERRE
& THE AMBIGUITIES**

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Part One

Chapter One

Knights, Snails, and Plastic Boogie

Three-quarters high on the edible he had taken to help him sleep, Pierre, lying lengthways across the couch with his legs sprawled over one armrest, granted himself two visions.

The first vision was inspired by an article Pierre had been reading earlier that day. It was about depictions of knights engaged in mortal combat with giant snails, doodled in the margins of medieval manuscripts for reasons unknown. The origin and meaning of this theme remained a mystery to scholars, in the same way that no one can ever quite agree on the etymology of idiomatic expressions. To say that the monks drew these scenes because they were bored is to leave untouched the most tantalizing aspect of the mystery: Why snails? Pierre had allowed himself to briefly and idly ponder this question and settled on a familiar refrain: Why is anything anything? As a kid, he had learned how to draw a cool-looking S from his older brother,

and showed it to his best friend. Soon enough, all the kids in his class were drawing sharp S's in the margins of their notebooks. Years later, Pierre had discovered that kids in every school across North America and perhaps even the world had been drawing this exact shape, and no one knew why or where it had originated. So, instead of trying to piece together a materially historical account of knights versus snails, most scholars instead tried to speculate as to why this theme appealed so greatly to the minds of medieval monks. The answer, similar to the schoolboy S's, might have something to do with the simplicity of the form, snails being easier to draw from a side-on perspective than other potential combatants.

Pierre initially meant to take such a scholarly approach, but his mind quickly turned toward fanciful imaginings. While the snails in the monkish doodles varied in size (some cat-sized ones were depicted resting on tree branches) Pierre was drawn most to those that towered over their bewildered opponents. And so Pierre's first vision was of just such a snail slowly trudging its way through the hallway of his apartment. Pierre knew the state of that hardwood floor; it was October, so beyond the normal layer of dust, bits of onion and garlic peels that had travelled from the kitchen via his socks, and little pebbles that fell out of Carlos' work boots, was a preponderance of pine needles freshly fallen from the trees that lined the parking lot. All of this, Pierre knew, would find itself stuck to the bottom of the snail as it made its way toward the living room.

So this creature of slime and dirt whose mass took up the entire breadth of the hallway was slowly making its way toward Pierre, who stood in shining heavy armour and balanced a lance in his right arm. Thrusting the lance forward with all his might, he watched it sink into the snail's soft, viscous belly, taking much of Pierre's forearm with it.

Pierre ejected himself from the vision with a few strong blinks and a cartoonish shake of the head. He sat up and looked around the room, trying to wash away the vision. He saw what he perceived as moonlight streaming through the window, which was actually coming from a streetlight. He lay down again and closed his eyes. For a moment, he was emerged in blankness. From this blankness emerged his second vision.

Pierre imagined himself in a labyrinth, gliding not walking between pink, featureless walls that extended a few feet above his head. The labyrinth was in a deep velvet underground chamber. There didn't seem to be any direct light source; instead, the walls were aglow in an almost phosphorescent way. At each intersection, Pierre turned left, as if compelled by a force beyond his control. At each dead end, there were small niches in the walls, about knee-height, that contained stark white objects. Many of these objects were familiar shapes, resembling office equipment such as staplers, hole punches, or pen holders, made strange by their pearly whiteness and alien smoothness.

We must note here that Pierre was not dreaming. He imagined all of this with intention. This is not say that he was in full control; the vision seemed to come both from him and from something else that was decidedly not him. For example, the whiteness of the objects was his decision, but their shape seemed to emerge from some unconscious source.

Pierre was sleepily engaging in a playful dialogue with his imagination. This differs from a dream, when the force of our imagination compels us just as powerfully as gravity compels us in our waking life. We act within dreams as if we are awake, whereas Pierre in his vision was deliberately exploring the world he had created. He was in that state between consciousness and sleep, and, we must remember, a little high as well. So what he chose to imagine as he trundled through

his labyrinth might not make a whole lot of sense to sober-minded observers of his story such as ourselves. But we must keep in mind that this part, at least, was not a dream.

Pierre became aware, or chose to become aware, of a precious treasure that lay at the centre of the labyrinth. This treasure was known as the Plastic Boogie, and it in many ways seemed to resemble the ideal to which all these smooth, white objects aspired: a featureless, textureless, shapeless chunk of nothing in particular. The name Plastic Boogie conveyed to Pierre some deep and profound idea, so deep and so profound that there could be no appropriate name for it, and thus any two words chosen at random from any language were equally adequate — that is, equally inadequate — to describe it.

This Plastic Boogie was the key to Pierre's future. This word, key, was meant in its most general sense: not only would the Plastic Boogie *unlock* his future, as a key unlocks a door, but it was also the key that would *clarify* his future, as the key of a map defines its various symbols and colours. It was also key, in the adjectival sense, to his future, and was the key in which the symphony that was his future would be played. Pierre understood all these connotations and many more besides, intuitively and instantaneously. Naturally, he felt a great desire to reach and obtain this Plastic Boogie.

It was soon after coming to this understanding that Pierre fell asleep, and began to dream. This dream emerged from depths of Pierre's subconscious that we dare not plumb. Dispassionate observer that we are, we will leave Pierre to describe it in his own words.

"It was called the Plastic Boogie."

Carlos laughed.

“It didn’t sound funny at the time. I just accepted it, like, ‘Of course it’s called the Plastic Boogie. What else would it be called?’”

Carlos was sat on his armchair in a dark dressing gown over shorts and a t-shirt, his black hair jutting out at strange angles from his head. He had thick, bushy eyebrows that sat above large, dark eyes. The light from the morning sun was reaching into the room, lighting his left arm, with which held a mug of coffee. He was watching Pierre, who was sat on the couch beside him, play a video game.

“There was this woman. She was like a Goddess. Like Minerva or something... Shit—” Pierre interjected, as his character took damage. “She was trying to tell me something about the Plastic Boogie, but I wouldn’t listen. I don’t know why, but I was super bored. You ever get so bored in your dreams that you just wake up?”

“No? No, I’ve never done that. Even your dreams are boring, Pierre! You need a more thrilling life.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He realized now why he had been thinking so much about knights; in the game he had been playing for the last few weeks, he took on the role of a knight, navigating a medieval fantasy world full of bizarre creatures. In fact, this game had taken over the household; when he wasn’t playing, Carlos was, and most of their conversations began with questions-as-greetings: “How far are you?” or “Did you beat that boss yet?”

Pierre was in the midst of his preliminary weekend morning attempts at the boss he’d been stuck on for the past few days. Carlos had emerged from his room, eyes still most of the way closed, and said, “Falsital?” He was, of course, correct. Falsital was simply too wily of an undead wizard for Pierre to get a handle on, with a wide variety of attacks that required perfect timing to avoid. It was all well and good at first; Pierre could take out the first chunk of his health bar without taking a single hit, but the second phase, in which Falsital

tore his staff in half and began firing magical orbs from both parts in tandem, caused Pierre to immediately panic, and often he was dead within thirty seconds. The screen faded to black, and he would have to restart from the beginning.

As Carlos watched, Pierre fumbled his way through the fight as he tried to explain the nature of his dream the previous night. He told him about how, after Minerva had explained the Plastic Boogie and Pierre's presence in the maze, she had transported him to another realm.

"I was on top of this hill, and before me stretched a vast plain. It had just been raining, so I was ankle-deep in the mud, and I could barely move. But it was sunny as well, and the sun was hardening the mud, so that it formed a firm cake-y layer that you had to push through in order to walk. I tried to walk a bit, but then I just gave up. It was too much.

"Minerva was still there, and she kept berating me, like it was all my fault that I had ended up there and I had no right to complain. Of course, she was floating in the air so it was no problem for her. Ah, fuck." Pierre, distracted by his narrative, had died to the boss. He revived at the nearest save-point, where he just rolled around absent-mindedly as he told the rest of the story.

"I remember she was still trying to tell me about the Plastic Boogie, but I couldn't listen because I was watching this large dark mass approaching on the horizon, cresting the hill.

"It was this giant army, but it wasn't walking or marching or anything. It was just sliding along. And as it got closer, I realized that they were all snails. They had funny little helmets that their eye stalks poked out of, and they had these bugles they were playing, but the sound was all muffled, like they were filled with mucus. It was really gross.

Watching the whole thing made me feel like I was eating a mealy old apple.

“I saw that they were all marching toward this knight standing in the valley. He was in glistening armour with a dragon on his chest, but he wasn’t wearing a helmet. I could see his face. He was sort of sunk into the mud, like I was, and holding this pike that was way too big for him, so big it almost tipped him over. And he was making this ridiculous expression: a combination of concentration, surprise, and utter stupidity. He kept wobbling back and forth, probably because of the weight of the pike, I guess.”

“And he was going to fight the snails?” Carlos asked. “This is like what you were talking about yesterday, right, with the monks?”

“Yeah, but they never actually got there. They were snails, so they were really, really slow. And so the tension sort of died away. They never seemed to get any closer. I was pretty uncomfortable standing in the mud, so I tried to sit down, but I just fell on my back and started sinking slowly into the mud. I remember Minerva was looking at me like, ‘Who the hell is this guy?’ but all I could do was stare up at the sky.

“Eventually I asked her if there was a point to all this, and she said I was supposed to be watching the fight, which had apparently started, but I was completely stuck in the mud at that point. So, I fell asleep.”

“Wait, in the dream?”

“Yeah, I was really sleepy. And then for whatever reason, I sort of coughed and said, ‘Ah, snail job...’ and I must have said it in real life too, because I woke up on the couch hearing the words, ‘Ah, snail job...’”

“Snail job? What is that? Is that an expression?”

“No, it’s not anything.”

"Like a snail goes to work? Or a job only a snail can do? You know what, Pierre," Carlos said, lifting his index finger, "You have a snail job. Every day you say it's a slow, slow day. You're like a snail, sliding back and forth behind the register-"

"Okay, yeah, I get it," Pierre said. "Or maybe the snails are all the customers who show up right when we're about to close, and I'm the knight who has to fend them off." This referred to a recurring dream of Pierre's in which he had to knock late customers on the head with a broom in order to close the store.

Carlos laughed. He got up and went to the kitchen, where he poured himself a bowl of cereal. Pierre remained on the couch, looking out the window at the trees that loomed over the parking lot. "I can't stop thinking about the Plastic Boogie, though," Pierre said.

"The what? Oh, yeah."

"It really felt like if I had it, I would be set. I would know exactly what I was doing and why. You know how some people just seem so self-assured, like they believe completely in themselves and what they're doing? That's the Plastic Boogie. That's what it gives you."

"You can't keep calling it the Plastic Boogie. I can't take it seriously when it's called the Plastic Boogie."

"But that's what it was!" Pierre got up and collapsed onto the armchair in the corner of the room. "That's what it was called."

"It's just a magic potion in a dream that gives you confidence. Confidence, that's the word, right? Not Plastic Boogie? Or did I miss this in English class?"

"Sure, confidence is part of it. But not just that. It's not just believing that you can do something, but that it's the right thing to do. You don't have to sit around all the time thinking, 'What the hell am I doing?'"

“You don’t have to do that right now, you know. Plastic Boogie or no.”

“I feel like that’s all I do.”

Carlos ate his cereal in silence. Pierre slouched deeper in the armchair. He knew that there was something to his dream, and that he just couldn’t explain it. “Maybe you already have it,” he suggested.

“Me? I never went through any maze. I just found something I don’t mind doing. Whether it’s the right thing or not, I don’t know. I don’t really consider it. It makes sense, I’m good at it, and there’s good money.”

“You don’t often remember your dreams,” Pierre continued, as if he hadn’t heard.

“I would if I had the sort of ones you do.”

Pierre went silent, his hands folded across his chest as he slumped in the chair. He was deep in thought. He had, as his mom described it, “filled out” in the last few years, to the point where his size almost gave him a regal air. And yet this was betrayed by the expression he made when deep in thought — which was most of the time — that looked like he was struggling to hide the fact that he was eating a sour candy and not enjoying it.

“Ah, I don’t know what I’m doing,” he finally sighed.

“You probably need to go back to sleep,” Carlos said.

“To find the Plastic Boogie?”

“No. You’re just tired. You always talk like this when you don’t sleep. And then when you sleep well, you come home and seem very happy about the fruit store and everything else. So you should just sleep in a bit. I imagine you haven’t got anything else to do this morning.”

“I was going to read a book,” said Pierre, gesturing at the pile on the small table next to him.

“It can wait. Anyway, I have homework to do.”

Pierre listened to the sound of Carlos rinsing his cereal bowl. Carlos was not wrong; this line of thinking did more often occur to Pierre when he was tired. But in Pierre’s eyes, this wasn’t reason enough to discount it. If it wasn’t a real problem, it wouldn’t keep recurring again and again. Why would he get so hung up on this, if it was not the vital question of his life? And is it not the vital question we all ask ourselves: What am I doing? And further, what am I supposed to be doing?

Many people can answer the former question somewhat easily. It’s often as easy as naming one’s profession. But Pierre always stumbled over it, because he felt there was a profound dissonance between what he was doing and what he *was*. “What are you doing?” to him meant “What are you doing *with your life*?” not just, “What do you do each week in order to get paid?” It implied goals, principles, and philosophical justifications. That he worked at a produce store was not enough. Working at a produce store was simply an accident of circumstance; there had been a produce store down the street from his parent’s house, and when he moved out, he found a branch of that same produce store down the street from his apartment. Nothing about fruits or even vegetables spoke to Pierre on a personal level. He had no passionate feelings toward peppers, zucchinis, or pears. He liked dragonfruit, and would sometimes proselytize it among customers, friends, and family members, but he didn’t get much joy from selling it. In all honesty, he thought they were a little expensive without the staff discount. Pierre’s passions lay in an altogether different direction, or rather, in a wide range of directions, all somehow equally opposite to that of fruits and vegetables. Pierre’s main concern, however, was that of living a “good life.” From the winding, meandering dialogues of Plato to the straightforward delineated steps of self-help, Pierre had searched through the annals of time for the answers to his two

burning questions: what is a good life, and how does one achieve it? It is easy to see already that Pierre's temperament bent toward the philosophical, and that the scholarly, contemplative life spoke to him most immediately. And in many ways, this is the life he found himself naturally rushing toward, as the waters of a frenzied river eventually settle into a smooth, calm lake. But his inner life was still too turbulent; inside of him too many competing ideas wrestled for dominance, bouncing against the walls of his mind. He longed to be a strong man, to be a smart man, to be a powerful man, to be a dependable man, to be a capable man; to be an unflappable, indefatigable, and altogether unimpeachable man.

But like all young men, and all young people for that matter, Pierre found himself impeached each and every way he turned. Every act was called into question, every goal turned circumspect, and advice constantly proffered "for his own good" that turned dreams into dust. Perhaps these dreams were idle; perhaps Pierre, in the folly of youth, reached too far beyond his means in his imaginings. But be that as it may, it is a sad fact that Pierre had learned by now, at the tender age of twenty-five, to be keenly suspicious of himself and his intentions. And so each idle fantasy, each potential passion that welled up within him, was followed by a corresponding "reality check," based on the only reality Pierre had come to know: a reality in which he would never actually do anything at all.

Chapter Two

Weekend Visions

It was Saturday morning, and Pierre was now left alone in the living room, with a fully free and unencumbered weekend before him. He had no plans, for he refused to plan on principle. Too often did his plans turn to naught; too often did he sit down or stand up to execute them only to find that the Pierre who had planned these plans was entirely different from the Pierre now sent forth to put them into action. He felt no need to honour the memory of that old Pierre who had so quickly passed away; his only obligation was to the Pierre of today and whatever emotion presently controlled him. Plans made by a happy Pierre were far too taxing; those made by a melancholy Pierre were far too dire. The rarest Pierre, the middle-of-the-road Pierre, made no plans at all, so content was he with this fleeting break from the tempestuous seas of his soul.

Pierre decided, in the end, in a decision that did little more than put off deciding, to go for a walk. A little ways down the hill there was a park, and around that park a small trail that cut through the forest, where Pierre often found himself wandering. During his first visit, on a drizzly November day, Pierre had dubbed the place “Brambletown,” for its knotted clumps of naked branches. Though he later discovered

that in the Spring all these brambles turned to wondrous verdure that threatened to overwhelm the very trail itself, the name stuck, and so Pierre often said to himself, "Let's take a brisk stroll down to Brambletown."

He spent a few minutes gathering his things: keys, wallet, phone, and then some mysterious fourth thing he felt was missing. He paced a few laps through the kitchen and living room in pursuit of it, before reckoning that it was probably just his keys again. Finally, he exited into the hallway, and from there into the empty alley that connected his building to the neighbouring streets.

It always struck Pierre, whenever he emerged from his house on a weekend morning with no compulsory destination, just how much *space* there was outside. The route to work felt like walking down a corridor or being carried along a conveyor belt; he was bound by the non-negotiable end-goal and the looming peril of being late (for the third time this week.) But when he set out on his own, the world felt so large and so open that it felt almost magical that he was allowed to be alive at all. Never mind that he always went to the same two or three places, and that he always took the same two or three routes to get there; it was the *possibilities* that excited Pierre. He soaked in all these possibilities as he gazed across the valley at the houses that seemed to grow up the side of the hills.

As he approached the park, he heard yells and shouts coming from that direction, and soon caught a glance of a volleyball soaring through the air. A group had set up a volleyball net right there in the park, and there they were, playing volleyball. There were three fit young individuals to a side and two less-fit, somewhat ragged-looking young men seated cross-legged on either side of the net. One of them had next to him one of those flip-board scoreboards that Pierre remembered from elementary school.

And the thought struck Pierre as a bolt of lightning: Should I be playing volleyball?

A VISION

The ball left a dull sting as it ricocheted off his outstretched arms. His hands clasped together, thumbs stretched out parallel to each other as he had been taught, the ball hit the sweet spot just below his wrist and sailed into the air, seeming to pause for a moment just above the height of the net, where it collided with Ken's palm and was re-directed at great speed back toward the ground.

The game had changed since elementary school. There had been no spiking back then, for obvious reasons, and not even a hint of tactical play. What separated the cream from the crop back then was the frequency with which one prompted the ball upwards and forwards, as opposed to sideways, backwards, or nowhere at all. Pierre had been awkward and clumsy back then, and a little afraid of the ball, since it seemed much heavier and more deadly in those days.

In the intervening years, however, Pierre had become used to the ball's weight, and it loomed less large in his vision and imagination. As elementary school dawdling had turned to high school training, he had lost a great deal of weight, and the bulk that remained could be harnessed into power, rather than holding him back. As high school had turned to college, Pierre could no longer devote the time necessary to volleyball as a duty; it was the best he could do to get together with old friends on the weekend for a pick-up game.

During a break, Pierre and the rest sat on the sidelines while Jason and Ismail, whose passion for volleyball had diminished as their love of beer had increased, took the court to play a game of their own invention, hand-head. The game had similar rules to volleyball, in terms of a point being scored upon the ball either touching the ground or hitting the net. The major difference was that instead of deflecting the ball, the objective was to catch the ball in one's hands, and then, from whatever position you were standing in when you caught it, bounce the ball off of your head and over the net. The game is primarily one-on-one, mostly due to the fact that there only existed two willing competitors.

The difficulty of scoring winners meant that the primary strategy was to hit the ball far enough past the net that it became tricky for the opponent to consistently hit it back. This didn't mean, of course, that the pair did not try for winners; Jason in particular often spent so much time on dummies and headfakes that an official shot-clock had to be introduced and strictly enforced. An idle comment from the gallery compares the ongoing match to a half-time show, to which Jason takes great offence, and declares that not only is hand-head the main event, but furthermore, the pinnacle of sport as we know it. Following which declaration he smashes the ball against his head with so much emphasis that his hat and sunglasses both go flying off his head, making Ismail laugh so hard that he just sits down right where he is, ceding Jason the point.

Pierre, feeling the grass between his fingers, looks up past the unfolding match at the road atop the hill, where he sees a solitary young man meditatively strolling along the sidewalk, and thinks to himself: Should I be taking more walks?

Pierre continued into the forest behind the park. The trail took him winding down the hill. Birds rummaged in the brambles on either side, and chirped from the treetops above. He found himself at a shallow stream that crossed the path, before winding between the tall grass toward the wetland. Pierre stopped there, as he often did, mesmerized by the stream. Always flowing, and yet never changing. The water always seemed alive, alive in some way between fauna and flora: the wilful movement of the animal combined with the steady complacency of the plant.

Pierre's life had been going on for some time now, and yet very little had changed. He was old enough to know that he wasn't going to change, at least not in any fundamental way. He was young enough to believe that the world was going to let him get away with this stagnation; that if he didn't do anything, nothing was going to happen. When he cast his mind toward the future, he saw himself standing at this very stream, dreaming these same dreams. On some level, he knew he couldn't continue this way forever. But on the other hand, he had made it this far.

Either enforce your will on the world, or accept it as it is, he told himself. But he put off the decision for another day.

After leaving the park, Pierre took a detour around his apartment, and headed into the city. Musty old stores from a previous incarnation of the area stood in the periphery of a gigantic, shiny and bright mega mall. It was as if the mall only let them remain out of a twisted sense of mercy, leaving them to slowly fade into their own irrelevance. When Pierre had moved in, there were already several skyscrapers across his street, mostly apartment complexes. Two or three more were in

the process of being built in the area surrounding the mall; Pierre had watched them turn from archaeological pits into vast mechanical skeletons. Recently, they had grown windows, so that from afar they shone in the sun like towering diamonds, but when you got closer, you could see that inside was only dust, cardboard, and foam.

He found himself at the bus loop opposite the SkyTrain station. This was where he caught the bus to work, and he generally avoided the route on his free days. But for whatever reason, he decided that morning to head down and mix with the crowds. He thought that it might cheer him up to walk part of the way to work, and then be free to come home. He figured the contrast might inspire him to best take advantage of his leisure time.

He watched ahead of him as the people queued for his bus filed inside. A young woman ran past him, fumbling in her bag as she rushed to join the line. The bus pulled away. Pierre continued on, passing to the other side of the station.

Down the street were three office towers. Two were identical rectangular blocks, notable only for their exact symmetry. The third was a more modern, sleek production, with a curved surface that reflected the sun directly into Pierre's face.

He watched a group of people emerge from the turnstiles, immediately bottle-necking at the crosswalk just outside the gate. The light changed, and the procession marched across. Many made their way toward the mall, but a narrow, regular stream branched off toward the trio of office towers that stood in a semicircle amid a concrete complex of stairs and ramps. They walked single-file, none in pairs or groups, each keeping about a meter's distance from the person ahead of them. Pierre was reminded of a class of elementary school children parading down the halls.

A VISION?

He could see in its glass complexion the reflection of one of the nearby unfinished buildings, although the strange angle of its surface made it difficult to tell which one exactly. Beside the skeleton stood a red crane, immobile at this time of the morning.

He climbed the five stairs, careful not to touch the railing from which blue specks of paint were shed, and vigilantly keeping in lock-step with the man before him. The lead man was a slow walker today, and thus everyone behind inched forward, their heads turning this way and that, pretending that they weren't doing what they were doing.

He passed an artificial waterfall that cascaded into a small pool. The air was brisk with morning chill. Passing through the doors, he almost immediately started sweating. Unbuttoning his jacket, he made his way toward the elevator. Groups of men and women sat and stood around with coffees in their hands, somehow different from the single-file men and women just now arriving from the train station. And yet, a more careful glance revealed they were the very same, transformed now by the insular atmosphere of the Tower.

Work — this was where Pierre came five mornings of every week, to perform labour and earn a wage. The labour produced results; the wage allowed him to live. With the company at his back, Pierre was making a difference in the world; and more importantly, *doing* something. As he rode the elevator up toward the fifth floor, he reviewed in his mind the tasks for the day. Yes, he thought, I will be busy today. Many projects to work on, and tasks to complete.

As he passed through the corridor toward his cubicle, he took a look out the floor-ceiling window, out toward the train station. And there he saw a young man, not part of the flow, going neither this way

or that, staring up at the Tower, to some floor far above where Pierre stood. And he saw the Tower all of a sudden as that young man must see it: not as a location, but as an aesthetic object. And he desperately wished he could soar out that window, out above the trees, beneath the cranes, toward the water that flowed not so many miles away, and lose himself in that terrible ocean.

Chapter Three

Pierre & His Ambiguities

Pierre did not dislike his time at the produce store, for what it was. The only part that truly bothered him was the questions customers would occasionally put to him. Not questions about fruits and vegetables, which he could usually answer with relative ease or otherwise pass on to a more knowledgeable co-worker, but the questions that were a little more personal.

Pierre always put on an appearance of friendliness, greeting customers with a smile and a “how are you today?” He found that engaging in such a way made the work more pleasant, and customers less likely to get upset if he made a mistake or if something didn’t go their way. It wasn’t entirely an act; it was deeply ingrained within him from an early age to be polite and courteous. However, this friendliness was also skin-deep; Pierre was comfortable for the fifteen to thirty seconds of conversation it took to complete a transaction, usually consisting of a “how are you” and perhaps a comment on weather, fruits, or the state of the parking lot. To Pierre, this seemed the logical extent of the

customer-cashier relationship. He would never dare ask a customer anything about their life outside of their trips to the grocery store. He considered it not his business, and frankly, he didn't care much to know about it.

While Pierre considered it rude when a customer didn't answer his "how are you," he did not wish to be friends with anyone. A customer had once told Pierre his name, and Pierre had, in good faith, attempted to use the name the next time he saw him. Unfortunately, he had said the name to the wrong person. This had so traumatized Pierre that he vowed against any future attempts.

However, some customers, either in the pursuit of friendliness, or — as Pierre sometimes reckoned — for some other nefarious purpose, liked to lightly interrogate Pierre about the state of his life. Such questioning may seem innocuous, but for Pierre, it carried deeper implications. For example, the question, "Are you in school?" indirectly revealed a condescending attitude toward his current employment. To work at a fruit store *exclusively*, at such a young age, was clearly an untenable way of living. Surely, one would have to be attending school at the same time in order to pursue some higher calling. Pierre, had, in fact been to school; he had graduated, albeit only with a diploma that called itself an "associate's degree." Sometimes he would tell people this, that he'd finished school, but this tended to only prompt more questions, so instead he had started to simply say, "no," to which most people had nothing to say.

Another question in a similar vein was, "Do you have another job?" — as if having one job wasn't already too many.

We bring all this up in order to present an example of an interaction that confirmed all of Pierre's suspicions of himself: that he was lazy, that his life was useless, and that because of these two things, people did not like him.

There was a regular who showed up to the store every Friday evening, when the place was near dead. She was small and incredibly skinny, and rode a motorized wheelchair. She required help to reach and carry about her purchases, and she usually requested Pierre's supervisor by name. However, on this day, the supervisor was busy. Pierre was a little afraid of the woman; she had a loud voice and she was quite particular about the fruits chosen for her. She always insisted on having *only the best*, and while Pierre could fairly confident he could pick out a good fruit, he didn't feel he could guarantee *the best*. However, he did what he could, lightly sweating as he tried to keep up with her requests. They were outside, and Pierre was picking through the bags of cherries, trying to come up with one perfect bag out of the several sitting on the table. It was late summer, and the cherries were on their last legs, the bags sticky with juice. Some were too hard; others caved in from a single touch. He was struggling with the task, and worried that he was being too slow, but dared not rush for fear of not being meticulous enough.

While waiting, the woman struck up a conversation. "Do you work here full-time? You always seem to be here." She had large, stern eyes, and a constant sneering expression. She seemed to constantly be in pain, which for all Pierre could tell, might very well have been the case.

"I'm just part-time," he said. "Three days a week."

"Do you go to school? Or have another job?" A two-in-one.

Pierre bristled. "No, I just work here," he said.

"You live with your parents?"

"Nope, with my roommate."

"And you can afford to live in this city? On three days a week? Do your parents pay your rent?"

"No, I pay my own rent. We're just in a basement suite. I get by somehow."

“I find that hard to believe,” she said.

Pierre felt suddenly guilty, as if he really shouldn't be allowed to get by somehow. He often felt that there must be mysterious expenses that other people paid and he didn't. Everyone always brought up the cost of living in the city, but Pierre ate only home-cooked meals (partially due to never having learned how to order take-out, and feeling it was too late now to learn) and borrowed all his entertainment from the library. He wasn't saddled with debt from school, having only gone to a community college for less than two years, and, maybe most importantly, had no pretensions to ever living any better than he currently did, and therefore felt no pressure to save up for a house or a better apartment. Lastly, he was far too young to worry about retirement, figuring he would inevitably die sometime in his thirties or forties.

“And what do you do when you're not working here?” the woman asked, still apparently bewildered by Pierre's part-time lifestyle.

Pierre took a second to decide whether to answer truthfully or not. Then, he realized that he couldn't tell what a truthful answer would be. So, he said “I don't know; I just hang out.”

She squinted at him. “I don't see how your parents are okay with that,” she said.

Pierre said nothing. At that moment, his supervisor stepped outside and greeted the woman, so he took her cherry bag to the counter inside, and then walked back into the storage room, where he stood in the walk-in refrigerator, staring at the piles of boxes that lined the wall.

Pierre knew that there was more to be done in this world than moving fruits and vegetables around. It was a fine way of getting out and about and putting a few nickels in your pocket, but it did not constitute a life. To call it a living would only prompt the jocular

response, “If you call that *living!*” If he had had kids to return home to, a sick mother to take care of, or a philanthropic mission to carry out in his spare time, such a career might not be in any way an object of censure. But Pierre had only “hanging out,” and though his “hanging out” had a little more intellectual rigour than the phrase generally suggests, it didn’t amount materially to much more than any other form of sloth, in the same sense that meditation is, when divorced from all spiritual or psychological ends, just sitting around.

He had spent the last few years ridding himself of the hopeless ambitions that had tortured his adolescence, teaching himself to live with only the bare minimum of money and excitement, stripping his life down to its essentials, with the hope that in this way he could realize its true essence, why he (and by extension, anyone) was alive at all. But so far he had found nothing but many ingenious cures for boredom.

He always felt that if he had just a little bit more time, he could truly make something of himself — learn some skill that would catapult him into his ideal dream-life, where money and time were no longer a problem. But time was never enough. His free hours flitted away just as fast, no matter how numerous they were. Even now, with his four free days a week, it never felt enough. At work, he was often struck with inspiration for a new way of justifying life; a new project to best take advantage of the freedom he had carved out for himself. But each new conception came with a new pressure, each “I could...” soon transformed into an “I should...” and becoming just another obstacle to his “freedom.” It was in this way that Pierre’s obsession with free time subsumed its own purpose: he no longer longed for the the freedom to do what he liked, but the freedom to not do anything at all.

He held to this idea of freedom with an iron grip, and was hypersensitive to any attempt to wrest it from his grasp. Any suggestion or proposition of how his time could be spent was met (at least internally) with bristling anger. He could actually feel his hair stand on end at times, as if pricked upright with righteous indignation. He *needed* this free time, this empty time, this absence of time — as far as he was concerned, the only alternative was death.

And so Pierre's life was more negative space than anything else — more idea than reality — more of a philosophical construction than an actual honest-to-God life. So it's really no surprise that we find him ruminating in a fridge full of produce, the words repeating in his head like a mantra:

"I don't see how you parents are okay with that."

Pierre wasn't sure that his parents *were* okay with it. In fact, he was quite certain that they weren't.

Pierre's last visit to his parent's house had not gone well. It had not gone poorly, by any stretch; in all, it had been quite uneventful. However, it had left a sour impression. He hadn't visited in some time, because every time he thought to call on them, he then thought, "Do I have anything new to say?" to which the answer was always no. He was in the exact same situation now as he had been in March, during their last visit, and the situation in March had not been particularly impressive.

"Not impressive" is certainly the right phrase. Pierre's parents were rarely impressed with what he was doing. This never reached the point of direct confrontation, but instead manifested itself in a subliminally communicated sense of parental disappointment. Pierre understood,

viewing the situation objectively, that his parents had probably put more effort into his life than he had.

He often felt that it would be best for all involved if he disappeared for a while, only to return when he had transformed his life into something more impressive. This slow drip of what he called “gradual progress” — which might to the more dispassionate observer seem like “doing nothing” — served to obscure any actual improvements he did make. Much like it is difficult to tell how much a child has grown until none of his clothes fit, it can often be difficult to recognize one’s internal development until it reaches some visible threshold.

When Pierre sat alone and thought about his life, he often felt quite assured that he was a better Pierre than he had been a year or two ago. But the fact remained that he had very little to show for it. And what external markers he did have, such as his diploma from the nearby community college, only prompted the question: And where has that got you?

Pierre had been trying out a version of this strategy by simply avoiding his parents for the last few months, despite the fact that he generally enjoyed their company. But he quickly felt bad about such unfilial behaviour, and agreed to visit them for dinner.

He arrived early, always at the whim of the bus schedule. He entered the passcode on the door, and then the same code in reverse to disarm the alarm. The house was empty. He walked around a little, up and down the stairs, confirming that his parents had gone out. A soup was simmering on the stove, and his dad’s glasses were sitting on the dining table. Aside from that, the house looked almost un-lived in, like something out of an interior design magazine. Ever since he had moved out, the house had been spotless: nothing left on the floor; not a drop of tea nor crumb of bread on the counter. Nothing was left out anywhere; everything had a drawer or a shelf to call home.

Pierre had come to understand rather quickly that this was not the natural state of things. His apartment only ever reached such a level of cleanliness immediately following a manic bout of tidying, which were as irregular as they were unthorough. Between these, the rooms sat in total neglect. In this way, Pierre's cleaning habits dutifully followed the pattern of his life.

The long bus ride had tired Pierre out, so he sat down on an armchair in the living room and closed his eyes. He awoke to the sound of the front door. His mom appeared at the top of the stairs. "Oh!" she said. "You're early."

"We thought we'd have time for a quick walk," his dad said, coming up after her. "I guess not."

"I was early," Pierre said.

"You look like you've been asleep," his mom said.

"I think I have."

"You're too young for naps, Pierre," she said, sitting down on the stairs to take off her shoes.

"Save them for when you're my age!" his dad yelled from the kitchen, still wearing his sneakers.

"Even he doesn't nap that much," his mom said, under her breath.

"Are you hungry now, Pierre?" his dad yelled.

"Yeah."

"What was that?"

"He said yes, dear!"

"Alright, I'll just heat up some bread."

Pierre took the time to accustom himself to being awake again. He had experienced one of those naps in which it felt like he had been on the verge of uncovering some secret truth, the nature of which he could no longer remember. It felt to him like the kind of truth which,

if he could have communicated it to his parents, would have changed their mind about something.

Growing up, Pierre had never felt any pressure from his parents to do anything in particular. They encouraged him to complete his schoolwork and get good grades, but would only truly push him as far as a passing grade. When he was a child, they acknowledged his dreams and ambitions, but as he grew older and tried to set himself toward more realistic goals, he felt that they were treated much the same way as his childish fantasies. Pierre was never told to be a lawyer or a doctor, but instead simply told that it was best to find something he enjoys doing.

After a disastrous beginning to his adult life characterized by shyness and fear, Pierre decided to cast himself free and see a little more of the world than was visible from the second floor window of his bedroom in his parent's townhouse. He moved into the city. To survive, he got a job at the fruit store down the road. During the first month at his new place, when it rained every day for an entire month, Pierre reset his ambitions. In essence, he gave up on everything. This was not as terrible as it sounds. It was only a method of formalizing what had already become clear: that at the rate he was going, he was never going to accomplish anything.

Pierre never explained this situation to anyone. Instead, he pretended that he was still pursuing the goals that had taken him to community college, while in reality, he struggled to cope with life in its most basic aspects. He made himself food, kept the home relatively tidy, and "accomplished" — as he termed it — errands. This he considered to be the limit of his capabilities.

Pierre's parents saw him as someone who was struggling to get a start on his life: who wanted more, but was unwilling to push himself toward it. In their mind, he wanted a career, but was unwilling to do

the work required to get one. It would never have occurred to them that he no longer allowed himself to want anything. The idea was simply too depressing.

And thus, their conversations often devolved into certain formulaic exchanges. The most common and distressing for Pierre always began with a half-hearted question from his father, asking Pierre if he'd made any progress in "finding a real job" or thought about "what he wanted to do." He always brought it up as if it was partially a joke, tacitly acknowledging the uncountable times this exact line of questioning had been raised and subsequently dismissed. Something like, "I don't suppose you've been applying for jobs lately?" or, "And how's the job-hunting going?" Pierre would squirm in his chair and make some sort of non-committal answer: often "We'll see."

From here would begin a short lecture on the lack of satisfaction to be derived from part-time work at a fruit store, and the need for what Pierre's father termed "a proper career." But eventually he would cut himself off mid-way, saying, "I know we've been through this lecture enough times before..."

Pierre would nod through the monologue, responding to the final comment with, "Yep, we sure have." He no longer attempted to defend himself, either with the truth or with falsehoods. He certainly wanted to defend — or, at least, explain — himself, but he didn't know how. He couldn't make any sense of his life, so he didn't see how anyone else would be able to. He couldn't say that he was satisfied, because he certainly wasn't. He couldn't say that he was "happy" or "content" or "grateful just to be alive at all," because he was none of those things. He was just alive.

What he perhaps wanted to say was that he was trying his best. It was just that his best was pretty bad, and that it also looked a whole lot like not trying at all. And also, if he thought of "his best" in an ideal

sense — i.e. his innate potential based on his skills, circumstances, and temperament, casting aside his actual experience, in which none of those things had any meaning set against the very real but indescribable inadequacy, fear, and general dysfunction that characterized his day-do-day existence — then he was nowhere close.

This time, however, Pierre had a response prepared. Because to say that Pierre had completely abandoned his dreams was premature and somewhat inaccurate. What Pierre had really done was clear the way for one Grand Ambition: one Grand Ambiguous Ambition whose ambiguity served as the great mystery that compelled him through a life barely worth wasting. And one week prior to this dinner with his parents, Pierre thought he had discovered its true nature.

Chapter Four

Rain

The rain fell hard, rattling through the ducts that snaked their way across the ceiling. It was rare for Pierre to look up there, and always startling to see that maze of pipes and light fixtures hanging just above him. It reminded him of a movie set, casting spotlights on the displays of lemons, apples, limes. It was beautiful at times: slow times, specifically, when Pierre had nothing to do but stare at the bright oranges, reds, yellows and greens that made up the scenery, so shining and so glossy that one forgot that all of it was just food to be cut up and chewed into mush, or else lost in compost bins and rubbish heaps. As a scene, as a painting, it could be beautiful; as a piece of actual life, it was a collection of items waiting to be sold.

The artificial calm that pervaded the store stood in stark contrast to the brisk November wind that stormed outside. Only the plastic signs closest to the entrance rustled slightly at the small gusts that entered through the open doors.

Raincoats dripped water along the floor, wallets and phones and keys spilled out as people rummaged through their ill-designed pockets. “Everything is just more difficult when it’s raining,” an old woman said to Pierre, as she struggled to open her purse. It was true; even the

routine act of paying for groceries somehow took twice as long, even while inside and sheltered. Line-ups grew twice as fast, disgruntled customers waiting impatiently as those at the register found a place to balance their umbrella. As they opened their wallet, they would notice that their umbrella had fallen over, meaning they had to pick it up and find a new angle at which to set it down before returning to their battle with the wallet again. Everything got wet: the scale was wet, the counter was wet, the card machine was wet. Receipts were placed carefully in customers' hands only to be thrust into wet pockets or wet bags. Then, the umbrella had to be taken up again, although no one ever left a free hand to take it, and everything had to be adjusted once more — at least, enough for the three-foot walk to the door, at which point somehow a new hand had to be found to open the umbrella, or lift the hood of one's jacket, or take out the keys so the car door was unlocked once one got there.

Outside, it was the end of times. The canopies and umbrellas billowed and threatened to escape, spraying water this way and that as they did so. Plastic bags, ripped off the roll in a fit of absent-mindedness, flew across the parking lot before settling comfortably in a puddle. Anything that fell to the ground was turned to mush; remnants of grapes, receipts, and grocery lists littered the floor.

Just before the rush started up, Pierre had been sent out to reinforce an umbrella that was teetering over a parked car. After looping a second bungee cord around the base and attaching it to a table covered in red peppers, Pierre had time to look out at the coming storm.

The sunlight was beginning to fade. The clouds were not amassed like one giant carpet, but rippled like waves across the sky with subtle gradients of greys and blues.

As night fell, the storm did not cease, but became invisible. From the lighted interior of the store, the rain could be seen only as flick-

erings silhouetted in the headlights of cars as they pulled into their parking spots. Customers grew few and far between, and Pierre began to feel as if he was stranded on a small island of light amidst a dark, lonely world. The strangers that occasionally emerged from the darkness lingered in the store for what felt like hours, dragging their feet like re-animated corpses, staring at the displays as if searching for some form of divine revelation. They came to him with baskets no sane person would ever dare construct. A single pomegranate, two mandarin oranges, and a head of lettuce. Three lemons and a pint of mushrooms. One man spent forty minutes circumnavigating the store, gave Pierre a discouraged shrug, and walked out with nothing.

Pierre read stories by HP Lovecraft on his phone behind the register, attempting to lose himself in sense-defying worlds and unintelligible insanity, but nothing could feel stranger to him than where he was. Of all the places in the world he could have gone or been, somehow he had ended up here, sitting on a little lip in the wall, half hidden from the entrance by a pile of apple boxes, nearly alone in a store packed with produce on a dark and stormy weekday night. It felt unreal to believe that only a few hours ago there had been light emerging from that sky, and that at the end of this impermanent night, the sun would appear again. Only a few hours ago, the store had been packed with rustling and bustling customers. And before that, Pierre had been sat comfortably at home. In less than hour, he would be home again; this fact was the hardest to believe.

Now, the wind pushed and the rain fell on an empty nothing, and in his mind, only Pierre was around to tell the tale. This wasn't altogether true. Pierre's supervisor was holed up in the office, cashing out the two closed registers on the other side of the store. There was a customer too, Pierre noticed, after taking a quick glance around, clad in a black coat over in the corner by the potatoes. She was picking up

the potatoes one by one, turning them over in her hands, and putting them back. Another ghost.

When eight o' clock rolled around and it was time to close the store, Pierre could hardly tell how the time had passed. Somehow, thirty-six hundred seconds had elapsed over the course of the last hour. In its simplest form, time is motion — and yet, in all those seconds, nothing had moved. Nothing had happened. Each time Pierre had looked at the clock, it had looked exactly the same; and yet, here he was.

After pulling the bins and umbrellas in from outside, taking the garbage to the dumpster, covering the potatoes and tropical fruits with black garbage bags, and locking the back door, Pierre stood near the entrance, twirling the chain they used to secure the front door. The bins and tables from outside filled the aisles, leaving only a small corridor from the backroom to the front door. It was 8:25, and Pierre's supervisor was stood on her phone near the back wall, waiting for the clock to tick over before she could shut off the lights.

Pierre was tired and miserable. The impending walk and bus ride were unimaginable in their tortuousness. He longed for either teleportation or death. The boredom had made him hungry, and this hunger had joined forces with the cold and the damp. The rain could still be heard softly through the air ducts. Overpowering that sound was the fluorescent buzzing that became audible only after the radio had been shut off. Someone timidly knocked on the door behind Pierre. He turned around and shook his head, and they walked off.

"Time to go!" The lights shut off with a click. Pierre stepped through the front door and closed it behind him while his supervisor set the alarm, then opened it briefly to let her out. He wrapped the chain around the handles and secured it with a padlock, wrestling with it for a few moments before it clicked into place. With a quick nod and

a good night, Pierre set off into the darkness, thinking that tonight was the night he would finally eat that pizza in the freezer.

Pierre stood at the bus stop, squeezing his umbrella between his right arm and torso as he rummaged through his bag for his phone. “Everything is just more difficult when it’s raining.” His umbrella tipped over, causing drops of water to fall on the touchscreen. He tried to wipe it off with his sleeve, which was also wet. He gave up and put the phone away.

He felt as if he could sink into the ground. Music would cheer him up, but there was no way he’d be able to gather together his earbuds without exposing them to a potentially destructive amount of rain. He watched cars navigate the intersection: the lights alternating red, green, and orange; the orange hand replaced by the walking man, the walking man replaced by the orange hand. On the opposite corner, a digital sign advertised programs at the nearby recreation centre. The top and bottom lines of texts were animated independently, and whoever had programmed the sign must have set transitions to random, meaning that often the second half of an announcement appeared long before the first. At last, wrapped in a confusion beyond mortal minds, the sign offered Pierre this message:

STARTING YOUR CAREER?

CLOSED FOR WINTER

A bus passed in front of the sign, and stopped in front of Pierre. It leaned over with a series of pneumatic whines, and the doors creaked open. Pierre tapped his card, passing rows of shivering, dripping passengers as he made his way to the back. He carefully balanced his grocery bag on the floor, leaned his umbrella against the seat in front

of him, crossed one leg over the other, and closed his eyes. The bus set off.

He opened his eyes a few stops later to see strutting down the aisle a man in his early twenties, with thick, black, curly hair and a burgeoning moustache. He glanced at each passenger he passed, as if he was looking for something. He caught sight of Pierre. He gave a quick nod of recognition, sat down on the chair in front of Pierre and turned around with a big smile on his face, showing off his braces. "Hey Pierre, how's it going, dude?" He reached over the chair, and gave Pierre a firm handshake.

"Oh, good. How about you?" said Pierre.

"Good, good. Don't tell me you're coming back from Lee's, dude..."

"Yep." Pierre grinned sheepishly.

"I can't believe you're still working there!"

Herbert had only worked at Lee's for six months or so, and had never been happy about it. He was about eight years younger than Pierre. During their first conversation, Herbert had asked Pierre how long he had been working there, and when Pierre replied that it had been almost three years, Herbert couldn't hide his shock. Pierre remembered at Herbert's age feeling a similar incredulity regarding the possibility of staying at a part time job for that long. When he had started at Lee's, he had imagined it was a short-term thing: six months, maybe a year at most. Just to tide him over before he started bigger and better things.

Pierre had never quite figured out what those bigger and better things were. Herbert, on the other hand, had known all along. His plan was to become rich. He strove toward this goal with an undying tenacity. His family was from Cuba, and the one thing he seemed to know about Cuba was that people there were not rich. This was

because of Socialism, he said. Born in a land of opportunity, Herbert sought to secure his birthright by “doing business.” He was always talking about “doing business.” He spent his days watching talks and speeches by productivity experts, motivational gurus, and passive-income wizards. He would play them on his phone as he packed cherries into bags, as he wrapped elastic bands around bundles of asparagus, and even while he was working the till. Pierre’s boss, generally an easygoing guy, couldn’t stand Herbert, and Pierre couldn’t really blame him. Herbert didn’t do his job. He liked to have friendly conversations with customers, but never actually helped them buy fruit or vegetables. He wouldn’t do a single task except under direct supervision. And his constant grilling of co-workers about their goals and aspirations made him few friends.

Despite all this, Pierre liked Herbert. He found him amusing. While their temperaments couldn’t have been more different, Pierre had made it immediately clear early on in their acquaintanceship that he was not interested in anything that Herbert was trying to sell. And Herbert eventually seemed to almost come to respect Pierre’s content and easygoing nature. Pierre brought a healthy skepticism to Herbert’s schemes, which of course did not affect Herbert’s actions in any way, but at least led to some amusing conversations.

The last Pierre had heard from Herbert before he was unceremoniously fired was that he had paid a guru several thousands of dollars to be his “mentor,” and had set up an Instagram account in order to resell jewellery.

“Hey, it’s a living,” Pierre said, shrugging.

“If you call that living, man. I couldn’t stand that place.”

“It’s not so bad. So what are you up to now?”

“Oh, you know, still on the grind.” He smiled widely and nodded his head as he spoke. “I was just at the mall, you know, making some connections. Doing business. Making deals.”

“Nice. So everything’s going well?”

“Yeah, it’s going good, it’s going good.” He made a fist and punched it into his open palm. “Grinding away. Glad I got away from that place. Did I tell you that I got a job at the YMCA? Helping out at the gym and the pool and stuff. It’s chill as hell, dude. Best part is I can do my business on the phone while I work. I’m taking calls all day. They don’t even care.”

“You did that at Lee’s too,” Pierre said.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s true... That’s true, actually,” he laughed, still nodding.

“The YMCA seems like a much better fit for you, though.”

“Definitely, definitely. It’s so much better, man. You know, one time,” he lowered his voice and leaned forward, “I had a nap on one of those big puffy mats in the back room. I was out for like, two hours.”

“What the...”

“I was so tired. I had been up all night the night before. Doing business, you know.”

“Of course.”

He took a look around the bus, and then back at Pierre. “So, you’re still at Lee’s, huh? Weren’t you planning on going somewhere else...”

Pierre had once inadvertently told Herbert about a fake plan he had concocted mostly for the sake of his parents, which involved getting a job at an ad agency. “That didn’t really work out,” he said.

“Ah, too bad... too bad. Did I tell you about my mentor? He’s great, dude. I could hook you up if you’re interested.”

“Nah, I think I’m okay. I’ve got other stuff going on.”

“Oh yeah?” Herbert’s eyes widened at the idea of stuff going on.

“Yeah... I’m writing a book right now, actually.”

“Seriously? Woah. That’s so you, dude. *The Pierre Philosophy*.” He made a gesture with his hands that reminded Pierre of a magician. “I can imagine it. Yeah... That’s awesome.” His nodding grew even more vigorous. A jingle played on the speaker, and the ‘Next Stop’ sign lit up. “This is my stop, man. Hey, it was good to see you. Good luck on your book. If you need anything, hit me up.” He nodded his head upwards in the same way as before, and extended his arm. They shook hands emphatically.

Pierre was not writing a book. He was wet, he was tired, and he was miserable, and he wanted Herbert to believe, if only for a moment, that he was doing more than simply working at Lee’s. This had nothing to do with Herbert himself; Pierre knew that he would likely forget about it before their next meeting, just like most things Pierre had told him, and even things he had told Pierre. Their conversations had a tendency to repeat themselves; Herbert had told Pierre about his family in Cuba at least five times as if it were brand new information. Herbert therefore was a convenient receptor for a lie. He was trusting, perhaps even gullible; and he saw Pierre as something entirely alien, thereby willing to believe anything about him.

But although this book of Pierre’s did not exist, and he had not been writing it, Pierre had not felt, in the moment, that he was lying. The lie, immediately upon being said, retroactively created its own truth. He *had* been working on a book. For quite a while now, in fact. That’s why he didn’t have a full-time job. That’s why he needed so much free time. That’s why he hadn’t started a career.

The book filled in all the empty spaces, all the unanswered questions that made up his life. It justified his past, his present, and his future. It did this so effectively that it immediately became necessary to Pierre's conception of himself; in that moment, Pierre became an author. Everything he did was now in service of his writing: all the menial shifts at the fruit store; all the days spent milling about at home; his whole lackadaisical community college career. These were no longer irrelevant wastes of time, but in fact necessary events leading to the creation of his book. It was all intricately connected and wonderfully teleological.

The question remains as to why Pierre chose writing a book, specifically. As it will turn out, there are several practical benefits to this choice, but to get into these would be anticipating ourselves; further, none of these were in Pierre's mind during these initial moments. No, Pierre's words had come from somewhere deep within, some part of himself that lay unreckoned-with.

Pierre *had* actually wanted to write a book, once. He had wanted to write many books. In ninth grade, he had listed "author" as his desired career on a form he had to fill out during a "career planning" seminar at school. In tenth grade, during a similar class, he had left the field blank. In eleventh grade, he had written "puppeteer" in order to prove to a friend that no one actually checked the forms.

He had spent a good deal of ninth grade thinking about writing books. He even got as far as sketching out a third of an outline and drafting a couple paragraphs. For a week or more, this book had been the only thing on his mind, but an idle comment from his father, whom he hadn't even told about his idea, suddenly put him off the whole thing. It was too early for writing a book, anyway, he decided. At fourteen, it was enough just to think about it. The time for actual writing would come later.

The time for actual writing had never arrived, because it soon became apparent to Pierre that he didn't actually like writing. What he liked was the idea of accomplishing something and having that accomplishment take the form of an artifact. He liked the idea of having something to point to, years or decades later, whenever he wondered what he had done with his life. Over the years, this latter idea had disconnected itself from the specific form of a book, and transformed into some amorphous grey cloud that floated through Pierre's interior world. Whenever he tried to convince himself that working at the fruit store wasn't so bad, that it was "a living," and that he had no reason to expect any more out of life, it showed up to tell him that this wasn't enough, that he needed to be doing something more.

Now, after almost a decade, it had, in a fit of panic, reverted to its original form. Pierre once again wanted to write a book. But it was more than a desire now; it was a need. And it was no longer too early. Pierre was twenty-five years old. He was an adult, with a full adult life. People expected something from him. He only hoped that their expectations would be satisfied with something as quaint and old-fashioned as a book.

Chapter Five

Edward Talbot

The next day, Pierre began work on his book. But before he could sit down and compose any words, there were a few important matters that needed attending to. The first was that his bedroom desperately needed tidying. In its current state, it was no place to write a book.

He started right away, beginning with the nucleus around which the whole project revolved: his computer desk. It was by far the messiest surface in the room, piled with papers, books, coasters, sunglasses, cords, notepads, rubber balls, a hacky sack, two chapsticks, and two pairs of nail clippers. The dark surface somehow left uncovered by all these objects was instead covered with a thin layer of dust.

He removed all this miscellany, along with his keyboard, mouse, computer monitor, and speakers, placing them on the bed after stuffing the duvet into a corner so that nothing got lost in its folds. He then swept up the crumbs with a small brush, before spraying the surface with a general cleaner and wiping with a damp cloth. Satisfied, he turned to the bed and deliberated on which items in which configuration would be most conducive to writing a book. He started with his monitor, keyboard, and mouse; these were essential, for Pierre was a modern man for whom long toil with a pencil or pen was a major

pain in the wrist. The speakers too returned, for he thought that the right music might make all the difference. He placed a single notepad on the opposite side of the keyboard from his mousepad, in case he needed to take notes by hand. He took some pens and pencils from the drawer, stuck them in a mug from the kitchen, and put that above the notepad. Then, he placed two coasters between the keyboard and the monitor: one on the left for water, and one on the right for coffee.

He stepped back, admiring his new minimalist workspace. It had all one might need for high-quality scholarly work: nothing more, nothing less. He turned back to the bed. Everything still remaining needed a new home. He opened the top drawer of his desk to throw it all in there, only to find that it was already full. He opened the second drawer. It was also full.

He dumped the contents of all four drawers onto the floor, and began reorganizing. After sorting out garbage and recycling, he developed a system for his four drawers so complex that he probably could not have explained it even to himself. The final object remaining was the hackey sack. He passed it back and forth between his hands as he deliberated. He finally decided that he might want to play around in this way while brainstorming the book, so he put it back on the desk, between the two coasters.

He put his duvet back on the bed, threw some clothes in the laundry hamper, swept the floor, and was just about to dust the shelves when he realized that he was hungry.

He had meant to continue his cleaning in the afternoon, but as he chewed his ham sandwich, he felt for the first time in a while the satisfaction of a good day's work. So, he spent the afternoon loafing about.

Pierre spent his mornings in much the same way for the rest of the week. After finishing his bedroom, he moved into the hallway, then the

bathroom, the kitchen, and finally the living room. These hour-long mid-morning frenzies would come to an abrupt end at lunchtime, after which he could rarely muster up much momentum. When he didn't have to head to work, he spent his afternoons sedentary, collapsed in Carlos' uncle's armchair, playing a game or reading a book.

Carlos couldn't help but notice the immaculate state of the apartment. He thanked Pierre one day after returning from work. Pierre's pleasure at having his accomplishments recognized prompted him to take a rest. On Sunday, he didn't clean at all. He felt so good, in fact, that he extended his rest through Monday. On Tuesday, he meant to get started on the book before his afternoon shift, but accidentally slept in. On Wednesday, upon sitting down to write, he realized that a few of the materials from the drawer had found their way back onto the desk. He glanced around the room, and realized that there were clothes on the floor again. He spent the morning cleaning, and then had to go to work.

It had now been almost two weeks since he had invented his book. It seemed to Pierre brutally unfair that life continued to get in the way of its realization. When he awoke Thursday morning, he was so irritated by the way going to work and cleaning the house were interrupting his writing time, that he wanted to quit his job altogether and go live in a cave. His anger did not abate when he walked into the kitchen and realized that he had forgotten to do the dishes after dinner. "A man cannot live like this!" he exclaimed.

Ignoring the dirty dishes, he hurried to his bedroom and sat down at the computer. His skin felt hot and itchy, as if he needed to sweat but couldn't. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, his forearms tensed.

He was an angry man. He had enough composure to realize that that was no way to start a book, but he couldn't help himself. He took a few deep breaths. He pressed down on the 'T' key — we can only assume that he was prepared to begin his book with that most inauspicious word: The.

But he never made it that far, for as soon as the letter appeared on-screen there was a knock on the front door, and such was Pierre's condition at the time that he actually jumped out of his chair. No one had ever knocked on that door before, not once in the eight months that Pierre and Carlos had occupied this apartment. Pierre understood immediately what was happening. He knew the Universe well; he had lived with it for some time now.

Unconsciously, Pierre realized in this moment that his book was dreadfully Important. And not only Important, but potentially so revolutionary and transgressive that almost every entity in existence had been set against its coming into being. This book was poised to change a world that feared change, or at least feared the sort of change that a man like Pierre — although we must admit to a certain difficulty in articulating exactly what type of man we mean by this — would bring about.

And as Pierre approached the door, he thought for a brief moment that the police would be waiting on the other side to arrest him, but on reflection that felt too obvious and frankly, a bit silly. And so one can imagine that Pierre made a truly indescribable face when he opened the door to find two policemen stood on the other side.

The two officers seemed quite young, around Pierre's age. The closer one to the door was tall and blonde, with the face and demeanour of a man who gets along well with mothers and grandmothers. The one looming behind was shorter and squatter, and had a more reproachable look.

“Good morning,” the good-natured-looking one said. “Does an Edward Talbot live here?”

“Nope,” said Pierre, although he did take a moment to ponder the question.

The officer looked down at his notepad. “You’re sure?”

“Yep. There’s no Edward here.”

At this, the second cop came forward and took a full step into the apartment, causing Pierre to step back. He scanned the hallway in both directions, and then leered into the kitchen. He turned to Pierre. “I have the same coffee maker,” he said.

Pierre didn’t say anything to that.

The first cop ignored this whole procedure. “Do you know Edward at all?”

“Can’t say I do,” said Pierre.

“He doesn’t live next door or anything?”

“I wouldn’t know, to be honest.”

“And can I get your name?” Now that the good-natured policeman had recognized Pierre as useless, he dropped the whole good-natured shtick and took on a more formal tone.

“Pierre Castorp.”

“And can you spell that out for me?”

Pierre spelled it.

“And you live alone?” He insisted on starting each question with the word “and.”

“I have a roommate,” Pierre answered.

“And what’s his name?”

Pierre told him.

After carefully jotting all this information down in his notebook as if it had any relevance at all to the case of poor Edward Talbot, the initially good-natured cop wished Pierre a pleasant day. The second

cop nodded to Pierre as he left, as if acknowledging some tacit understanding between them as owners of the same coffee maker.

After such a singular experience, there was little hope of Pierre getting any work done on his book. Instead, he roamed around the house a few times, trying to work off the nervous energy he had built up during the encounter. He felt guilty, as if he had failed in his civic duty. At the same time, the way the cop had taken that big step into his hallway had set off a wave of righteous indignation at the over-stepping nature of law enforcement. These conflicting emotions eventually led him to his armchair.

Pierre gave off a somewhat lordly aspect as he sat: his back straight, one leg crossed over the other, occasionally stroking his chin. Yet the look on his face as he thought was far from regal; it was a look of puzzlement and concern, as if he had just put some sort of disagreeable food in his mouth and was unsure whether or not he should spit it out.

Edward Talbot... the name actually seemed familiar to Pierre, although he couldn't place where he knew it from. It didn't strike him as someone famous enough to Google; no, he felt that he had known an Edward Talbot somewhere, at some time. He thought of the various teenagers, college students, and middle-aged women he had worked with at the produce store over the years. None of them were named Edward, although one had been named John, which for a moment almost seemed significant.

He made his way to his bedroom and took his high school yearbook from the bottom rung of his bookshelf. Upon opening it, he was immediately overcome with long-forgotten memories. It had been almost a decade since he had roamed those musty halls. He put the search for Edward on hold as he attempted to find the one candid photograph of himself that he knew to be in there — in which he appeared totally by accident, sat behind two students performing a

science experiment in the lab — but as page followed page, he realized that he might have been thinking of a different year.

He skipped ahead to the graduating class. Each student had a large head shot and accompanying blurb, often used to say farewell to the school and their teachers and wish the best of luck to the entire graduating class of 2013. Those most photogenic students who wore their gown and cap with pride generally used the entire word-count afforded to them, anticipating their future appearance on the Executives page of some world-destroying company's corporate website. They would list every one of their friends as proudly as they would later list their degrees, awards, and business achievements on LinkedIn.

(Pierre, in his ambiguity, had written this:

“The choices we make in life determine the path we will take and the levels of rad zen you will be able to accumulate.”

His guidance counsellor, after confirming that this wasn't some subversive message unfit for publication, told Pierre in class one day that she found it “profound.”)

There were also those whose cap and gown seemed ill-fitting, and who looked like they had been forced to sit up straight for the first time in years. Their messages were shorter but less formulaic, and often not punctuated correctly. Edward Talbot's was one of these. He had written: “Thx to all the teachers for helping me along the way, and thanks to my buddies for a good time. Rock on SDSS”

Looking at the portrait, Pierre realized why the name had seemed both familiar and not; Pierre and Edward had not shared a single class nor had any friends in common. Their only interactions had been during the one year when both played on the school rugby team, although Pierre couldn't recall any specific instances of the two speaking to each other. Pierre knew what little he knew of Edward through hearsay, from his name popping up in a conversation every

once in a while. His impression of Edward was informed by the people he associated with, and it was, admittedly, more unfavourable than favourable. He might not have voted Edward “most likely to get in trouble with the law,” but he certainly wouldn’t have voted him “least likely to get in trouble with the law.”

In his portrait, Edward had wavy blonde hair that curled away from his head at the ends. His eyebrows were light, and his eyes had a persistent gormless quality to them. His smile looked childish and at the same time devilish, rising more on the right side than the left, and showing slightly crooked teeth. He didn’t look much like a young graduate passing through the gates of maturity; rather, he looked like a mischievous kid who just got away with something.

So! Pierre thought, Edward Talbot used to live in this apartment. Perhaps he slept in this very room! This man from my high school in that town many miles away, with whom I rarely spoke at the time and about whom I have not thought of since, cooked his meals in that self-same kitchen where I, upon finishing this thought, will make myself lunch! And all this not six months prior to this very day! Upon reflection, Pierre struggled to imagine Edward cooking, but he supposed that he might at least have used the microwave.

When Pierre opened the door the next day, it took him a few moments to register what he saw. The buzzer had interrupted him just as he had sat down at his desk with a cup of tea. He had been about to open a webpage and start scrolling, but as soon as he stood up he became convinced that what he had actually been about to do was open up his book and get to work. The voice on the phone which hung in the

hallway told him that there was a delivery, which he assumed must be for Carlos, since he hadn't ordered anything recently.

Upon opening the door and looking up, he saw none other than a decade-aged version of the young Edward Talbot. He was dressed in the navy uniform of an Amazon driver, although it didn't fit him at all. The shirt bunched up where it was tucked into his pants and sort of ballooned out around his waist. The sleeves were rolled up, one more than the other, both dangerously close to sliding back down. He *did* have a package in his hand, but he didn't immediately thrust it toward Pierre like a normal delivery person would; instead, he just stood at the door shuffling his feet for a few seconds before saying, "Hey..."

"Hi," said Pierre.

"I've, uh, got a package," Edward said. "It's for, uh..." He held up the package and made as if reading the label. "Shoot, this is the wrong house. Nevermind. Uh, sorry, dude..." He spoke too quickly, not leaving enough of a delay for his ruse to be taken as legitimate confusion. He started to turn away.

"Hey, we went to high school together, didn't we?" Pierre said, as Edward was taking his first few steps down the hallway.

"What? No. No, we didn't." It was hard to tell whether he was lying, or if he just didn't recognize Pierre.

"You're Edward, right? Edward Talbot?"

Edward looked left and right suspiciously, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open like a cow.

"Uh, just so you know," Pierre continued, "there were police here looking for you the other day. I told them I didn't know you, but then later I remembered your name from high school. Did you used to live here or something?"

Edward looked as if his mind had left his body in order to consider the situation from a more detached point of view. He was halfway

between running away and crumpling to the floor. Suddenly, the lights came back on behind his eyes. "Pierre!" he said. "Yeah, dude, okay, yeah, we did go to high school together. I totally remember now." He walked past Pierre and into the apartment. Pierre stood in the doorway for a second, bewildered by the audacious deed, and then shut the door behind.

"Man, I don't know what the hell my plan was with this whole delivery thing," Edward said. "I just wanted to see who lived here, you know, but I didn't think it through at all. You totally shocked me there."

"Sorry," Pierre said, for some reason.

"No worries, man. It's actually quite a relief." He stood arms akimbo in the kitchen, looking out at the balcony window, in the manner of a man about to say, "I like what you've done with the place." Instead, he turned to Pierre and said, "The cops were here?"

"Yep. I said I didn't know you, though. I remembered the name, but couldn't put a face to it or anything."

"Yeah, fair enough. It's been a while... since those old days." He had transformed from a nervous wreck into the most comfortable man in the world in mere seconds. "I wonder what they were after. I suppose it doesn't matter. I left something here when I moved out — I was in kind of a hurry, and it was in my secret hiding spot, so I couldn't get to it while everyone was on my back, you know?"

Pierre nodded.

"I've been racking my brain for months trying to figure out some way to get back in. Without, you know, breaking and entering or anything like that. Then I'd really be in trouble with the cops! Today was something like a scouting mission: scope out the place, do some recon — that sort of thing. But it's great that it's you, man! Makes my life so much easier. If you don't mind, I'll just... Do you mind if I...?" He

gestured toward the hallway. Pierre took a step back as Edward carried on toward the bedrooms. He stopped outside of Carlos' half-opened door.

"That's my roommate's room," Pierre said.

"Is he home?" Edward poked his head inside.

"He's at school."

"I'm sure he won't mind," Edward decided, opening the door and strutting right in. Pierre followed to the doorway, but didn't go in.

The curtains were closed, tinting the room blue. Edward was in the corner near the closet, carefully setting aside a snowboard that had been leaned against the wall. He pulled out the bookshelf and stepped around it, trapping himself in a little corner behind, wedged between the foot of the bed and the wall. Pierre turned on the light.

"Oh, thanks," Edward said. "By the way, do you have a screwdriver?"

"What exactly are you planning on doing?" Pierre asked.

"There's a little panel in the wall back here. I don't know what it's for, but if you screw it off there's a little nook behind, and I left some stuff in there."

"What sort of stuff? Drugs?"

"Haha, no."

Since he made no further comment, Pierre went and got him a screwdriver. He didn't exactly like what was going on, but he felt powerless to stop it now that it had gone this far. For whatever reason, he found Edward's demeanour somehow reassuring, and was convinced at this point that there was nothing malevolent or criminal about what was going on. It still made him feel a little guilty, though. He kept thinking that if Carlos were to show up, he would have absolutely no idea how to justify the situation.

He reached around the bookshelf to hand Edward the screwdriver. From where he stood, on the other side of the bookshelf, he couldn't

see the panel Edward was unscrewing. Not wanting to pry, he left the room again, and stood in the doorway, respecting Edward's right to privacy in this bedroom that had once been his.

Edward worked quickly, and within a minute he called Pierre to help him put the bookshelf back in place. As they pushed it back, Pierre caught a glimpse of the curious object Edward held in his hand. It was blue and shaped like a crescent moon, looking almost like an oversized glasses case. It even had a seam through the middle. Pierre felt that he had seen it before, but couldn't place where or when. When the bookshelf was back in place, Edward opened up the case and checked inside, but in such a way that Pierre couldn't see its contents.

"All good?" Pierre asked.

"Yep. Thanks man, you're a lifesaver." As they walked through the corridor, Edward asked, "So, what are you up to these days? Going to school? Working?"

"I'm working on a book," Pierre said.

"Wow, a book. Damn, man, cool stuff. What's it about?"

"It's about... trying to live your life the best you can."

"Sounds deep. Maybe I wouldn't get it, haha. Though we all gotta live our best life, don't we? We only get one, you know. I've been working at the ferry terminal these last few years. Kinda fuckin' sucks being on-call but it's pretty chill most of the time. Can't complain."

"Yep," Pierre said. They were standing just outside the front door. Pierre was leaning against the wall somewhat awkwardly, with his hands in his pockets. Edward was once again looking around the apartment, admiring the furniture Pierre and Carlos had brought into it.

"Well, thanks again for all this. You really saved me here, man."

"Don't worry about it. Happy to help a fellow Sundevil."

“Haha yeah, alright, man.” He turned toward the door. “And don’t worry about all that police stuff,” he said.

“Shouldn’t you be the one that’s worried?”

“Hey, these things happen.” He shrugged. “Anyway, thanks again. I’ll see you around.”

And with that, he disappeared out the door.

Chapter Six

A Dinner With Family

We now find ourselves back where we were, for it is at this point in Pierre's story that he made his way by bus to his parents' house and fell asleep in their armchair, where, upon waking, he had the feeling that something was about to change.

After a few minutes, the bread was warm, and the three sat down to dinner. Pierre was still between one-quarter and one-third asleep, so he spent a bit of time simply staring down at his soup as if trying to remember how to use a spoon. His mom chided him for his sleepiness. His dad began explaining the renovations underway in the upstairs bathroom — their house was always being fixed up in some way, although it had seemed perfectly nice to Pierre when they moved in. Pierre wasn't particularly interested in this information. He wasn't even interested in news about his cousins overseas, or the adventures of his mom's coworker's children. He wanted to talk about his book.

Pierre knew how he looked to his parents, because he often saw himself from their perspective. He was a meanderer, a loafer, and a

bit of a loser. Since graduating eight years ago, he had done a large amount of nothing, punctuated with occasional glimpses of initiative that quickly fizzled away. For whatever reason, this time felt different. The book, despite not yet having come into existence, felt *real*. In fact, it felt all the more real for the fact that it as yet had no form. There were no limits in Pierre's mind to what his book could become. No one could place such judgments on it as "good" or "bad," because there was simply nothing there. It was beyond judgment.

It was clear that telling his parents about the book would destroy its status as an ideal entity. Because unlike Herbert and Talbot, they actually cared about what Pierre did with his life. Writing a book would be yet another distraction from the attainment of a "real career" and a "real life." They would probably ask if he was planning on publishing it. They might even ask what the book was about. This was a level of scrutiny Pierre was unprepared for.

On the other hand, Pierre understood in some sense that the only reason he had invented this book was to justify himself in the eyes of people exactly like his parents: to get them off his back, and stop all this questioning about careers and jobs and taking responsibility for one's life. This book was something Pierre could show to the world as a symbol for the fact that he did, in fact, take his life seriously; that he *did* wonder what he was supposed to do with himself; and that these questions actually bothered him a lot more than they bothered anyone else. It was only that Pierre had never been the type to come up with *answers* to such questions, but instead simply wallowed in them, slowly descending into the muck until he could no longer see the sun, until he was swallowed up right down to the hairs of his head, his bones crushed by the pressure, his lungs collapsed, and overall about as dead as a person can be. At which point, inevitably, he would find himself free again, perhaps after a good night's sleep, emerging into the

brightness of the sun and the freshness of the air, far from the darkness where such questions dwell. Walking along in this free & easy way, he would suddenly find himself with one foot in a puddle of mud. And with that, the questions were back, the cycle beginning anew.

His book was an attempt to end this cycle. It appeared to him as a shining beacon leading him to the promised land. It made life easy. But it only worked because it was not connected to anything else. It wasn't something his parents had told him to do. It wasn't something his teachers had told him to do. It wasn't something The World expected of him. It had emerged only from the depths of his own heart. He didn't want to contaminate it by exposing it to this worldly world and its questions of money and business and careers and a "real life."

He could imagine how the conversation would go. He had imagined it on the bus ride over. He would bring up the book, and they would ask what sort of book, and he would make some non-committal noise, and then everyone would sit there uncomfortable and confused. Or, he would lie, and say the book was about something or other (despite it not yet containing any words), and his dad would ask, "Are you planning on publishing?" and he would shrug, and then his dad would say something like, "publishing books is a career, but writing a book is not," which Pierre recognized was essentially true and therefore difficult to respond to.

The book, shining beacon of hope that it was, was also a paradox. It trapped Pierre in a double-bind. He could neither speak about nor not speak about the book. He could neither write the book nor not write the book. It had to exist and not exist at the same time — which is a difficult thing to do.

So, Pierre did not tell his parents that he was writing a book. Instead, he spent an incredibly normal evening at his parent's house, during which his father didn't bring up careers or jobs at all. For a few

hours, they ignored Pierre's un-begun life, as if it didn't exist. This was exactly what Pierre had wanted this whole time; but at the same time, he couldn't help but feel that perhaps they had simply given up on him after all.

Pierre returned home to find Carlos lounging on the leather armchair in the living room. The way he sat in the chair was almost comical; he was so thin that he didn't really occupy the chair, but instead seemed to float above it. You could easily have fit three of him side-by-side, and another on each armrest. At the same time, he slouched so low that it looked like he was sinking, with his long beat-up legs extending halfway across the room.

The armchair itself belonged to Carlos; he said it had been passed down to him by a great-uncle or some other equally distant relation. Pierre often wondered whether this had actually been included in the will — “To my beloved grand-nephew (or whatever he is) Carlos, I bequeath that old green semi-ragged leather armchair languishing in the spare study” — or if instead of being left *to* Carlos, the chair had simply been *left*, and Carlos had ended up with it. Pierre imagined Carlos' great-uncle to have a bushy white moustache, keen sympathetic eyes, and a shirt with the top button undone. He liked to think that he had smoked cigars in this chair.

Carlos had on a tanktop, shorts, and sneakers, meaning he had recently returned home from a run. The sweat was still drying on his forehead. He had turned the chair to face the oven, and was sat with his hands clasped upon his lap and a contented yet pained expression on his face.

“How was the run?” Pierre asked.

"Eh," Carlos shrugged. "You had dinner with your parents?"

"Yep."

"How are they doing?"

"They're renovating the upstairs bathroom now."

"That's what I like to hear."

The oven beeped, and Carlos retrieved a tray on which sat an exploded cordon bleu. He laid it atop the stove to cool. Pierre showed him the goodies his parents had sent him home with, including a tub of almond butter, a tupperware of the leftover soup, and a DVD of a movie from his childhood he had expressed a mild interest in watching again.

On the way home from his parent's house, Pierre had stewed. He didn't mean to stew, but sometimes he couldn't help it. He decided that his parents didn't respect him. They didn't see him as a complete person. He couldn't talk to them about working at Lee's, because they didn't see it as an actual job. He couldn't talk about his book, because his book didn't make money. He supposed he could've told them about his recent run-in with Edward, but he guessed that they would've found fault with him for abetting a wanted criminal. They definitely wouldn't have understood any talk of the Plastic Boogie.

What they didn't understand, most of all, was that Pierre had systematically analyzed the condition of the world in relation to his own personality, and through mathematical calculations reached the conclusion that a full-time job or a career would assuredly kill him. Pierre knew this absolutely. If there was one thing he knew, it was this. This knowledge was the foundation upon which his entire philosophy was built. No one else knew this, because he couldn't explain it to them. He couldn't explain it to them because it didn't make any sense.

"I've been thinking about the Plastic Boogie," he said to Carlos, who was now heating up a plate of leftover vegetables to go with his dinner.

"Huh?" said Carlos.

"The Plastic Boogie, from my dream."

"Oh... yeah. That thing Minerva gave to you," Carlos said, sitting down with his food.

"No, no. She didn't give it to me. That was the whole point. I just remembered the other day: she told me I wasn't *allowed* to have the Plastic Boogie. That it wasn't meant for people like me."

"Pierre... this didn't actually happen."

"Well, yes. But remember how the Plastic Boogie was this thing that lets you figure your future out? You just get this complete assurance that the goals you're chasing after are actually the most important and best you could've chosen. And that no matter what goes on in the meantime, you're just... good. You're good."

"Okay."

"I was in the labyrinth looking for it, and she said, no, I can't have it; I'm not supposed to have it."

"Yes."

There was a brief pause while Pierre tried to remember what he wanted to say. Carlos glanced up from his dinner.

"But why can't I have it?" Pierre continued. "Doesn't it seem like other people have it?"

"I've never heard of anyone having it, personally."

"You know what I mean. Like, they just have this certainty about them, where they don't second-guess everything and constantly wonder what they're *supposed* to be doing."

"But this is because they think they're doing what they're supposed to be doing, no?"

“Exactly! That’s exactly I mean. They think they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing! How do they get like that? I’ve never felt that way about anything.”

“Well, Pierre, it is because they went to the maze and met Minerva and she gave the Plastic Boogie to them. You saw the dream yourself.” Carlos enthusiastically took a bite of his chicken.

“Forget about the dream for a second,” Pierre said.

“Pierre, you’re the one who needs to forget about the dream for a second! You are chasing after this Plastic Boogie as if it’s real. People are not as sure of themselves as you think. They just don’t have as much time to ponder such things as you do. Most of us just want to do something. Anything!”

“I just feel like I’m going to wake up one day and realize that everyone else was right about everything, and I’ve just been a weird idiot.”

“Who? Who is right?”

“All those customers at work who give me weird looks when they ask if I go to school and I tell them no. They look at me like I’m the craziest man on Earth for working at a fruit store and not going to school. It’s like, who do they think is supposed to work at a fruit store, if not me? Why can’t I work at a fruit store? What else do they want me to do?”

“Much of this is in your head,” said Carlos.

“You haven’t seen those looks, man. They want to kill me. They want me to die.”

“Pierre, hear it from me: you are allowed to work at a fruit store. You pay your half of the rent, you keep the apartment clean, you read your books; who cares what your job is?”

“Well, my parents sure do.”

“Ah, parents!” Carlos made a gesture as if swatting a bug away from his face.

PIERRE’S FANTASY

Pierre was somewhere between thirty-five and forty years old — old enough to be universally recognized as a mature adult, but young enough to retain his youthful vigour. This vigour was important, for Pierre had to move through the world effortlessly, able to integrate socially with the youth as well as the older generation. He meditated for one hour every morning and every evening, and in spite of or perhaps because of this, he was able to accomplish in each day everything he had set out to do. He never rushed but was never late. He never grabbed for things, but always had them. He accomplished great feats without ambition or strain.

During his meditation, Pierre left the Earth. He had a separate life out there, beyond time and space. In this separate life, he achieved non-existence. This non-existence allowed him to practice *wu-wei*. With *wu-wei*, he was able to do without doing, and act without acting. This was not the only benefit of his non-existence. He was also free from self-thoughts. He no longer worried about what he was. He no longer worried about what he was supposed to be. It never occurred to him to wonder about other people’s opinions of him. You couldn’t even call this confidence. It wasn’t self-assurance either. Instead, it was a completely natural being-himself.

While being himself, Pierre could interact with others. These interactions were fluid and spontaneous. He unconsciously interpreted

the energies surrounding him. While doing so, he brought forth the energies that emerged within him. These previously competing energies were brought into harmony via his *wu-wei*.

What did Pierre do in this life? Well, that's the beauty of the whole thing. It didn't actually matter what he did. Whatever it was, the harmonious nature of his existence meant that no one would ever question it. No one would ever wonder why he was doing one thing and not another thing. The things he did did not seem to preclude other things, even though it's generally true that we can only do one thing at a time. The truth is that no one was quite sure what he did, and they didn't mind that at all. They never asked him about it. It didn't even occur to them to ask him about it.

Was Pierre married? Did he have children? Sometimes, yes, he was married and had children. His children looked up to him reverentially. His children's friends also looked up to him, as well as his nieces and nephews. He helped them through the troublesome parts of their lives with his sage advice. He was capable of understanding children, and of participating in their world. He was not merely a father figure, but also a fellow playmate. While playing, he never lost his dignity; in fact, the sillier the game, the more dignified he appeared. It was impossible to embarrass him. He could no longer feel shame — although, of course, his empathetic abilities meant that he understood it completely.

The fantasy was never so explicitly stated all at once. Bits and pieces occurred to Pierre at various times, in response to various insecurities. Most of the fantasy's appeal was the idea that Pierre would one day be free to not think about the problems that he currently always thought about. This would come about not through Pierre solving the problems, but transcending them — becoming a human being who was above the very concept of problems, and, as such, becoming not a human being at all. For example, this fantasy often included

the inability to experience pain, or get sick. This part of the fantasy occurred to Pierre most often when he was hungover, or had a cold — or, in his weaker moments, when his stomach was upset after eating too much ice cream.

Whether he was actively indulging in it or not, this fantasy played a vital role in the philosophical framework via which Pierre viewed the world. He did in fact believe this fantasy was achievable. He never explicitly thought or said so — for he knew that it sounded ridiculous when put into words — but it existed as a fundamental unquestioned axiom from which he derived his entire worldview. It was so fundamental and so basic that he was entirely unaware of it. Consciously, he knew it only as a fantasy, something to help get him through the tough times. We, as dispassionate observers, however, can see it as essential to his continual suffering.

Chapter Seven

Edward Talbot 2

On the wall across from the front door, Pierre and Carlos had hung a white board on which they wrote down their work schedules and, occasionally, plans for the day. Pierre had drawn a knight fighting a snail next to his name, and Carlos had drawn a strange geometric object that resembled a star.

Pierre woke up that morning feeling lively, and had made the decision to write on the board that he was working on a book. When he had done so, he looked with pride at the words for a few moments, and decided that they looked fitting next to his name. Pierre, an author!

After that, he left for work. After work, time slipped away such that it was not until the following morning that Pierre sat down at his desk with the utmost intention to begin writing down words for his book. But something was not quite right with Pierre that morning; he had woken up a little sore, a little weak, and even a little nauseous. He felt a twinge in his chest, and a touch of soreness in his throat. As he opened the document he had saved (which contained only the capital letter ‘T’) he felt that the mouse clicks took a little more effort than normal.

Pierre coughed. He sat still for one minute, eyes closed, and thought about the sensation of his body. He opened his eyes. There was cer-

tainly something going on in there. Whether he was definitively sick or not, it made no sense to embark on such a grand endeavour when not in perfect condition. It would only set a poor tone for the whole project.

He closed the document, renaming it “Book - First Draft,” and stood up. Once in the living room, his symptoms stopped bothering him so much, but he felt he couldn’t go back now for risk of aggravating them further. The best course of action was to relax, and in that way fend off any potential sickness that might be headed his way. So, he picked up a novel from the coffee table, tucked it under his arm, and settled into a day of idleness.

The next morning, after an uncomfortable night with a stuffed-up nose, Pierre awoke and, with the first hard push of air through his nose, forced out the cobwebs that had taken up residence in his nostrils. Those first two breaths of the day were glorious, like those of a man just freed from prison. Pierre’s life shone ahead of him like a ray of God’s light. But as he walked down the hallway to get a glass of water, he felt a sharp twinge behind his nose, and with it a drip sliding slowly out from his nostril and toward his upper lip. Increasing his pace, he managed to make it to the kitchen and grab a tissue just before it dropped to the floor. This first tissue of what would become many felt almost luxurious in comparison to the rough sandpaper-y feeling he got from the twentieth, which milestone he reached around noon-time. His nose was red with agitation, his throat itchy, and his mind had turned to smoke.

He picked up a book, but couldn’t lose himself in it. He was too much in his own body, overly aware of all the aches and heats and chills emanating from all its different parts. Eventually the mild annoyance of placing the bookmark and setting the book down every time he needed to blow his nose caused him to give it up. Instead, he sat up

in bed, mindlessly watching Youtube videos the way he had watched daytime television as a kid when sick from school. Halfway through each video, he'd start scrolling through the recommended videos below, just like as a child he would search the channel guide as the double-header of M*A*S*H drew to a close. Occasionally, back then, he would find himself ten minutes deep into a thirty-minute advertising block, assuming the next show was just around the corner; this, too, had its modern-day analogue, for in fits of total absentmindedness he would fail to notice the Skip button in the corner, allowing the pre-roll add to roll on and on. In truth, the ads, then as well as now, were sometimes more interesting than the actual programming.

All of this was an absolute waste of time, because sick time can only really *be* wasted: almost as if our sick hours were part of an alternate life that we lived only in fits and starts amidst our regular healthy one. Once well again, Pierre could not even remember what it felt like to be sick. However, as Sick Pierre, he could remember all those bedridden parts of his childhood, sipping at water (when he could find the energy to lift the cup), reaching for tissues, crawling into the kitchen for a piece of toast and some crackers. Compared to those times, Pierre was doing just fine, for now. He was only a little under the weather. The greatest problem facing him was boredom. He couldn't sleep, because he couldn't get comfortable. So, he just sat there.

The buzzer in the hallway went off violently, causing Pierre to jump from his bed. He dragged himself to the intercom. "Hello?"

"It's me," said a youthful male voice.

"I don't know who that is," said Pierre.

"Ed. Edward. I'm back again."

"Uhhhh..."

"I brought something for you. As a thank you."

"Wow, uh, okay. I'll let you in."

“You better! It’s cold out here, man.”

Pierre unlocked the door and waited for Edward to come up. He leaned against the kitchen counter, still in his pyjamas and dressing gown, which he tied up modestly while he waited. A few moments later, there was a knock on the door — which still made Pierre jump — and Pierre let Edward in.

Edward was dressed in more suitable clothes this time — in fact, he looked downright proper. He was wearing dark slacks and a button-up shirt that he had even tucked in. “You don’t look so good,” he said to Pierre as he walked in, closing the door behind him and even slipping off his shoes. He was carrying one of those triangular boxes of Ferrero Rocher in one hand, and in the other what looked like a jewellery box.

“I’m a little sick,” said Pierre, in a gravelly voice.

“You don’t sound so good either,” Edward said.

“Yeah, I hope I don’t get you sick.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not gonna get sick. My luck is turning up; can’t you tell? Just look at me!” He looked down and tugged at his shirt. “You like the outfit? I clean up alright, eh?”

“Very professional,” Pierre said. He could tell that Edward hadn’t been this dressed up since Grad.

Edward made his way into the kitchen and set his gifts down on the dining table. “Right? My buddy’s dad is hooking me up with a job. He said, ‘Just show up looking like a man who showers every day.’ Which, I mean, that’s what I always look like! You know? Guy thinks I don’t take showers! Anyway, he said, ‘Slacks and a button-up’. Business casual, as they say. And hey, it’s actually more comfortable than I thought.”

“Yeah, they’re not bad,” Pierre said, remembering that he also hadn’t worn a button-up since Grad, and the last time he had worn slacks was for a Halloween costume.

“Anyway,” Edward patted the chocolate on the table, “This is just a little something to show you that I appreciate what you did for me.”

“It was really nothing.”

“No,” Edward said, pointing his finger. “It was not. You did me a solid. I acknowledge that.” He picked up the jewellery box and presented it to Pierre with both hands. “This,” he said, “is a good luck charm. It’s a very powerful good luck charm. I had it cut off from a larger one I have; it’s, I don’t know, coral or something. It’s always been good to me, and I think you deserve it.”

Pierre nodded, accepting the box, also with both hands. Upon feeling its weight, he knew what it was. “Thanks,” he said, in a scratchy voice. He felt a drip in his nose, and frantically put the box on the counter in order to blow his nose.

Edward watched with a knowing smirk. “You won’t have to deal with that much longer.”

“You mean this thing cures the common cold?” Pierre asked.

“Man, you won’t even remember what the common cold *is*.”

Pierre picked up the box again, and looked at it in silence.

“Anyway,” Edward said, after a few moments, “I hope you feel better. Thanks again, and good luck. I love to see a classmate doing well.” He moved past Pierre toward the front door, and slid his leather shoes back on with the help of a miniature shoehorn he retrieved from his pants pocket.

“Yeah, well, uh, thanks for the gift,” Pierre said, holding up the box.

“Don’t mention it. Welp, see ya later!” And with that, he disappeared out the door.

Pierre collapsed onto the armchair. The standing and talking had left him feeling worse than ever. His lungs burned, his bones ached, and his skin was itchy all over. He had brought the jewellery box with him, but had to recline a few moments to catch his breathe before he could untangle the ribbon that kept the lid on.

He already knew what would be inside. Laid atop the velvet interior was a small white object, smooth to the touch and vaguely triangular — almost like a shark's tooth. It had a confusing sensation of weight; not heavy exactly, but somehow resistant to movement in the same way that a heavy object would be. It was as if it wanted to stay where it was, to be left alone — as if weight was merely the physical manifestation of an innate stubbornness. He rolled it around in the palm of his hand, finding no marks on it anywhere. He couldn't tell where or how it had been cut from the larger Plastic Boogie Edward had exhumed from Carlos' wall, and wondered whether that piece itself hadn't been cut from some even larger Plastic Boogie. Was there truly only one Plastic Boogie, of which each individual Plastic Boogie was merely a part? Were larger parts more powerful, or did each part, no matter the size, contain the full power of the Plastic Boogie?

(For the fact that this item was, in fact, the Plastic Boogie, was such a certainty to Pierre that it hardly bears mentioning.)

He wondered where Edward kept his piece. Did it have to be carried on one's person, or could he leave it at home? Clearly, it needed to be in one's possession in some way or another, or else Edward wouldn't have needed to retrieve it from their house. And that, in fact, answered his first question, because he wouldn't have kept it hidden in a wall if it needed to be carried around. But, was it perhaps possible that its sphere of influence had to do with its size, and that Pierre's piece, being smaller, needed to be carried around? And what did it *do* exactly?

Pierre considered for a moment whether he even wanted a Plastic Boogie. He remembered that Minerva had told him specifically that he wasn't supposed to have it, that there was something about his character that meant it was not *for* him. And yet, here he was, with the Plastic Boogie in his hand. Or at least, what he assumed was the Plastic Boogie. Was this some sort of test? If the Plastic Boogie was real, then clearly Minerva's warnings about it must also be real, as both "facts" had their source in the same dream. However, the existence of the Plastic Boogie had emanated from Pierre's own subconscious, whereas Minerva had seemed to appear from elsewhere — was it possible, then, that she was some sort of malicious spirit, trying to keep Pierre away from the Plastic Boogie for the same reason (or reasons) that the World seemed determined to thwart his efforts at every other juncture?

He remembered a key chain he had seen in his desk drawer the other week while cleaning his room. He had acquired it at some point as a child — probably part of a goodie bag. Attached to it was a little orange pouch; as a kid, it had felt like some smooth, luxurious fabric, but he realized now that it was only cheap plastic. He had thought about throwing it out — just as he thought about throwing it out every time he cleaned his desk drawer — but had decided to keep it. It didn't take up much space, and you never knew when something like that might come in handy.

He found the pouch in the second drawer from the bottom. He loosened the top, and placed the small piece of Plastic Boogie inside. It fit perfectly. He brought the pouch with the Plastic Boogie into the kitchen, where he attached it to his current key chain. Then, exhausted, he went back to bed. Staring at the ceiling, he thought about what had just happened, and what might be about to happen. His thoughts turned to strange premonitions, and cyclical movements

formed before his closed eyes. Within minutes, what he had been contemplating transformed into utter nonsense, and soon after, he fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

Book

On his desktop, a notepad document was opened, and into it were poured the following words:

“One p.m. Alone at a desk in the furthest corner of the Earth, a young man begins work on a document that will one day be recognized as a prophecy. The words are delivered to him via a small speaker embedded into the ceiling above him. The voice speaks slowly; the words are clear, but the boy can not grasp their meaning. He writes in a refined cursive script on lined paper. When a page is filled, he moves it onto a pile on the left, and pulls another piece of lined paper from the considerable pile to his right. Wholly entranced by the letters taking form beneath his hand, he sees little else. He does not hear the water dripping from the pipes in the wall. He does not see the bugs crawling along the ground, and up the legs of the desk. He does not feel them on his clothes, on his skin, enveloping him. He copies down the letters precisely; he can not afford to make a mistake.”

Pierre sat back in his desk. He had no idea where that had come from.

This wasn't the book that Pierre had planned to write. It felt as if the decision had been made for him: he was writing fiction. He had

implicitly assumed that his book would be non-fiction — perhaps philosophical or autobiographical in nature. However, he should have realized that he had little new to offer in the realm of philosophy, and a biography of only a few sentences. Fiction is the natural format of the young and the idle, of those who dream more than they live. It is not mere escapism. To dreamers, fiction is the true essence of their waking life. They do not take life step by step, but leap forward into speculative futures. Their past is a series of dreams they can never return to, each with their own future: alternate presents based on choices they never could or would have made. When such a person is presented with a blank page, fiction invariably tumbles forth. Their fictions can take many forms: they may masquerade as philosophies, memoirs, political treatises — they may write a history stuffed with counterfactuals and anachronistic advice. While Pierre may have imagined he was setting out to write non-fiction, he had no specific form in mind, and thus, his unconstrained imagination took the lead.

But Pierre was disappointed. Because now that there were words on the screen, his book was, in a certain sense, dead. It was dead as an object of fantasy; it was dead as pure potential. Before he had begun to type, his book could have been anything. It could have been a description of the true nature of all things, presented in such a way as to eradicate all doubt, convince all of the Truth, and sell 10 billion copies. It could have been a poem so abstract and experimental that no one in the world could possibly understand it, and yet so beautiful that no one could help but try. It could have been a utopian vision so inspiring that it would become the backbone of political thought for centuries. But now, it was just a story. It was a story that Pierre did not see the point of, or much like. It seemed to him meaningless, generic. It used all the same words that he and everyone had been using for his

whole life. These old, tired words in old, tired sentences, forming an image that is easily conceived and ignored. Just a story, and not a good one.

He could see the room clearly in which the boy sat. The paint was peeling off the walls, exposing damp, cracked wood. It was dark, lit only by a single weak lamp above the desk. The air was muggy, the whole atmosphere claustrophobic. He hadn't written this down, but the room was deep underground. The desk was one of those old ones you'd see on antique shows, made of mahogany or some other ancient-sounding wood, with drawers lining both sides. It wobbled as the boy wrote. The speaker was just like those in the ceiling of his elementary school, totally incongruous with the old-fashioned nature of the room. Pierre could see all that. He could even feel the bugs on his skin, although he would have preferred not to.

Where had this image come from? He had never seen such a room, not even in a movie, and yet it felt immediately familiar. The young man in the desk also resembled no one he had ever met, and yet he recognized him. It seemed that he had felt what this boy had felt, that he had been caught up in a similar situation sometime, maybe in a dream. He was one to remember his dreams, but surely there were far more he had forgotten than remembered. Somehow, this one must have been retained somewhere in his memory, only to be unlocked when he began to write it down.

That was interesting and all, but did this image have any value? If he were to present it to someone, would they feel anything? Or would they just say, "What's the point?" That question bothered him most. What *was* the point? He was writing a book because he had lied and told others he was doing so. He had told others he was doing so because he thought it might impress them, or make them feel better about his life. But now, he felt that they all would think him even

more pathetic than before. Who writes a book nowadays? His parents never told him they wanted him to write a book. They would probably rather he get a full-time job and make money so they could stop worrying that he would end up on the street, or worse, back in their house. Making good money writing fiction required skill and luck; Pierre considered himself to have neither.

He was 174 words into his book, and he already felt weighed down by the constraints. He felt there was only a narrow path through which he could take the story, and that path led to failure. Bitter failure of a sort that could end him. He had, in the last several weeks, placed a lot of his hopes on this book. In a way, he felt it to be his last hurrah, his last chance at redemption after many misspent years. Thoroughly discouraged, he sat down at the armchair in the living room. He couldn't allow himself to play his video game. He felt the eyes of The World on him, and spending his time in such a way would just be a confirmation of everything it had ever thought of him. So instead, he just sat there.

Chapter Nine

Out At The Pub

On the corner of the busiest street in Pierre's hometown was a pub — the only pub left over after its former competitor burned down several years earlier. It shared its name — The Rose & Crown — with hundreds or perhaps thousands of pubs across the English-speaking world. It was the first place Pierre had legally drank alcohol, and to this day the only place outside of his own home he felt comfortable doing so.

He was there with two friends of his from high school. Greg, the more gregarious of the two, had flowing dark hair and constant stubble. He taught English composition at various high schools and community colleges in the area. He had a passion for his work that expressed itself only via disdain for the material conditions imposed on those who did it.

Pierre wasn't sure what Stu did, but it had something to do with game theory, or set theory, or systems theory, for some corporation no one had ever heard of. Whatever it was, it paid well, and Pierre had never known Stu to spend a single extraneous cent, leading Pierre to imagine that Stu was sitting on some dragon's trove of gold to be used one day for the purpose of God-knows-what.

Pierre brought up his recent encounters with Edward Talbot.

“Wasn’t he in our math class with Mr. Nagel?” Stu pondered. Greg just shrugged.

“I never had any classes with him,” Pierre said. “But the police came to my house the other day and were asking about him.”

“At your house? Why?” Greg said.

“I guess he lived there before I did. Though I don’t know what they want him for. Was he a troublemaker or something?”

“The cops are always after us troublemakers,” said Greg, with a grimace.

“Did you tell them anything?” Stu asked.

“I didn’t have anything to tell,” said Pierre.

“Fair enough. And what did he want when he came by?”

“He grabbed something from in the wall in Carlos’ room. I felt kind of bad about letting him in there, but it made sense at the time. It all happened pretty quickly. He just unscrewed a panel from the wall, and took out this thing that looked like a glasses-case, only a lot bigger. Well, not a lot bigger. Moderately bigger.”

Greg squinted. “What the hell?”

“What was in it?” asked Stu.

“No idea.”

“Cash?” suggested Greg.

Pierre shrugged.

“Let’s just hope it’s not Carlos’ secret stash,” said Greg. “Then you’d be an aid to burglary. You’d be an abettor. That’s as bad as a burglar... if not worse.”

“But how would Edward know about Carlos’ secret money stash?” asked Stu.

“Hidden cameras,” Greg said smugly. “All throughout the house. Watching everything you do. Or perhaps — and consider this care-

fully," he said, lifting one finger in the air, "Pierre's the one who really took the money, and he invented this whole elaborate story in order to throw us off the track."

"He could have just not mentioned it at all," said Stu.

"You're not thinking like a burglar, Stu!" said Greg, pounding the table with his fist. "This man," he said, nodding his head toward Pierre, "has a slippery mind."

"I don't think it was a secret money stash," said Pierre. "I think I know what it is, but... it doesn't make any sense."

"Does it make more or less sense than what Greg's been saying?" asked Stu.

"It somehow makes less sense," said Pierre.

"How much do I need to drink before it makes sense?"

"Give it a few hours."

It seemed to Pierre recently that more and more, the things he knew were incompatible with the common understanding of the world. When he tried to look at it from an objective standpoint, or at least from the perspective of anyone around him, he realized that the principles he had begun to live by had no basis in reality. If he tried to explain any of this, from the Plastic Boogie to his novel-as-destiny, the best he could hope for were polite nods and uncomfortable silence. Isolated within the confines of this dream-understanding, interaction with the outside world was becoming almost painful. Constantly he felt the need to censor himself to avoid ridicule.

As the night continued, and drink compounded upon drink in an exponential way, this self-censorship became impossible barring absolute silence. This was more difficult for Pierre than it was for Stu, who managed to maintain a facade of infallible sobriety by, after a certain point, retreating into a posture of silence and deep, reflective nods of the head. This strategy was not only physically impossible for

Pierre, who despite his solitary lifestyle did in fact love to speak, but a social impossibility considering that if Pierre and Stu were both silent, Greg would have no one to talk to.

“Do you think medieval knights actually fought snails?” asked Pierre, after a brief lull in the conversation.

“What’s that you say?” asked Greg, leaning over.

“Like in the drawings on all their scrolls. They’d always draw knights fighting these giant snails,” said Pierre.

“Isn’t that just the medieval equivalent of a meme?”

Stu nodded deeply. “I read that the snails were a metaphor for the aristocracy,” he said, slurring the final word into oblivion.

“That’s just what they say now,” said Pierre. “But how do they know? They’re just guessing.”

“Well, there’s no such thing as giant snails,” said Stu, “which makes you think that, probably, they didn’t fight them.”

Pierre shrugged. “Animals go extinct all the time.”

“You know, you’re right,” said Greg. “They used to have giant sloths too.”

“That was millions of years ago,” said Stu, “Not like 500.”

“More like 1000,” said Pierre. “Think of the dodo, though. They killed them all off in the 19th century. Who’s to say medieval knights didn’t kill off all the giant snails? I mean, I wouldn’t blame them. Imagine having one of those wandering around your town.”

“Does anything eat snails?” asked Greg. “I can’t think of any animal that would want to eat a giant snail. It really would be up to us to destroy them.”

"Exactly." Pierre pointed a finger at Greg. "Exactly."

"Wouldn't there be some sort of historical record of them?" said Stu.

"Like drawings? In the margins of a manuscript, perhaps?" said Greg.

"Other than that. Maybe some prince writing about a snail-hunting expedition, or an ornamental shell hung on someone's wall." He slapped his hands on the table. "They would definitely have kept the shells! They'd have to; snail shells are crazy. Did you know they're all unique? Imagine having a one-of-a-kind giant snail's shell sitting in your drawing room, all polished and everything. They'd go nuts for that."

"Maybe they were banned," said Greg, quietly.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Just maybe."

"Stu's right," said Pierre, morose. "They would have preserved the shells. I didn't even think of that."

"Sorry, Pierre," said Greg. "Looks like not all dreams can come true."

The waitress showed up. They all ordered another. The mood at the table had turned inexplicably sombre in that drunken late-night way; the cheerful energy pushed away and replaced by a melancholy malaise. The change wasn't unpleasant; they all embraced it as the natural course of an evening, wallowing in it like no sober man can. Experiencing these extremes is part of the appeal of drink, and there is something pure and nice in the lows just as there is something coarse and regretful about the highs.

Pierre was wondering, as at the beginning of our story, about where the adventure of the world had gone. Greg was rueful of the fact that he so rarely got to go out and see his friends like this, and was on the

verge of delivering a speech on the subject. It is impossible to know precisely what Stu was thinking of, but one could tell by his face that it was of the same genre, although it would have taken a crowbar to pry it out of him. All three in their internal soliloquies were opining on entirely separate subjects, yet looking up at their table-mates, each felt a kinship of purpose that buoyed their spirits. Each could read on the other's faces the same troubles that were bothering themselves. Yes, at this time of night, all men are brothers.

With a new round of drinks came a new conversation, touching on subjects not pertinent to the present volume. Pierre, Greg, and Stu all wished only to speak of their own troubles, and yet none did so. Instead, they talked of old times, old at least by the standard of those not quite thirty years old. It was still novel to them that they could use the phrase "over a decade ago" to describe events from their adolescence, and they revelled in this newfound maturity. Little by little, their good spirits were revitalized by good spirits; the conversation grew louder and more boisterous, and the melancholy was pushed aside to bide its time until the long walk home.

Hours later, when the lights of the bar turned on, they realized the extent of their sleepiness. Paying their tab with whatever card they could fish out of their wallets — "no, we don't accept library cards here" — they shuffled out the door onto the dark, quiet street. To Pierre, his awkward locomotion felt like a dance, graceless as it was. Each step had a mind and rhythm of its own. It was freeing. They passed the shopping complex across from the bar, and the large parking lot of the grocery store. As they approached the fields of the recreation centre, Pierre felt like running; veering off onto the soccer field, he began to sprint at full speed. How long had it been since he had run like this! Greg and Stu followed, all three of them yelling, not with a desire to communicate anything, but just yelling for its

own sake. In the empty dark, it was possible to be children again. A sprinkler was watering the grass ahead, and Pierre challenged himself — in a loud voice — to get as close as possible without getting wet. He miscalculated, and suffered a spray of water. Running again out of range, he collapsed onto the dirt, rolling in the grass. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Greg and Stu had grabbed an arm each and were trying to pull him up, but succeeded only in dragging him along the ground. “Okay, okay,” Pierre said, squirming. “This isn’t helping.” They let go and he fell back onto the ground. He lay there for a few moments. “I feel a bit sick...” he said. “No, no, I’m alright, I’m getting up. I’m getting up... now!” and on the “now”, he sprang to his feet, walked a few paces in a lively step, and then slowed to a shuffle. “OoooOoooOooh,” he said.

He looked up to see that Greg and Stu were already exiting the field on the other side. Too tired to catch up, he settled into his own world. He took large sweeping steps that took him as much sideways as forward, and began to sing a song.

It was the kind of dark where everything seems blurry: all the trees rustled in the wind, from the bushy elms that lined the exterior of the field, to the tall hedges across the street. The sky was a mess of cloud, reflecting to the east the glowing orange light from the rural greenhouses. Pierre’s song carried he knew not how far. He improvised a whistle solo, which by the end had diverged so much from the initial tune that he forgot entirely what he had been singing, and returned to silence for a few moments while he found a new song.

He caught up with Stu and Greg a ways later, where the road diverged around a teardrop-shaped raised median, about three feet off the ground, upon which one large and three smaller pine trees grew. Greg was in the process of climbing the large one, one leg

wrapped around a horizontal branch, while the other dangled toward the ground. Stu stood to the side, leaning against the concrete.

“We were waiting for you.” Stu said, upon seeing Pierre walk up. He gestured to the tree. “Greg got impatient.”

Greg yelled to them from the tree. “Yeaaaahhhh!” He was now astride the branch as on a horse’s saddle.

Stu gave him a brief ovation. “Nicely done!”

Pierre stared up at him with a strange sort of wonder.

Part Two

Chapter Ten

Job Interview

Pierre paced nervously through the glass doors and into the empty lobby, his footsteps echoing on the marble floor. The walls were all glass, and through them you could see the imposing black stone pillars that surrounded the building like a cage. The doors opened to Pierre without resistance, and there was no one in the lobby there to stop him from marching through; the only security guard was in the far corner, gazing wistfully out the window. The reception desk was off to one side, easily ignorable as he headed straight for the monolith in the centre of the room that contained the elevators. As a child, Pierre had imagined that each building contained exactly one company, and that one could determine which company it was by the large logo near the top. He had only been disabused of this notion somewhat recently. The twenty-odd floors of this particular building, he learned as he skimmed the sign next to the elevator, contained within them as wide an array of business names and categories as the colossal mall near his apartment.

The office he was headed to was on the third floor. The elevator whisked him upward on this short journey at such a dizzying pace that he felt his brain nearly leave his head, and when, seconds later,

he found himself exiting the elevator into the hallway, his legs could barely keep him upright. The sign for Boston Enterprises pointed Pierre down the hallway to the right. Up here, the elegance of the lobby was replaced by plain off-white walls and carpet of such a bland colour that one immediately forgot it as soon as one looked away. More glass doors awaited Pierre at the end of the hallway, engraved with the Boston Enterprises logo.

It had been the Saturday following their night at the bar when Stu had texted Pierre, informing him that a job was opening up at his company, and that he could get Pierre an interview if he was interested. “You were ranting last night about Lee’s...” was how the text started. Pierre didn’t specifically remember doing that, but it certainly wasn’t outside of the realm of possibility.

As with any suggestion presented to him out of the blue, Pierre’s initial impulse was to say, “Absolutely not.” Like water in a current, it was difficult to tear Pierre away from whatever path lay directly in front of him. We could call it Pierre’s Law (if there does not already exist a Law with such a name): A man in a rut tends to stay in a rut. But Pierre did not act on his initial impulse. Yes, at first glance, it seemed a miserable existence to commit oneself to a longer commute and longer hours within the confines of some tech company’s offices (for Pierre rightly assumed that Stu worked in tech), but there was much to be said for taking this opportunity to get out there and see the watery part of the world. While not as promising an adventure as a whaling voyage or a military campaign — Pierre’s conception of an adventurous life was permanently stuck in the realm of 19th century novels — it was something different. For four years he had seen only that part of our globe that existed between his home and Lee’s, had known only the regular customers of that produce store, and had moreover felt, not every day but on many days, trapped. Everyone who knew him knew

that he could do “better,” although their definitions of “better” were so various as to defy generalization. Perhaps this job could, better than any announcement of an ethereal book-in-progress, convince all of them that he was on his way to doing “better,” and fulfilling their myriad expectations.

The e-mail Pierre had received from HR after begrudgingly submitting a hastily-assembled resume and a cover letter — which Stu informed him no one read but everyone expected — told him to check in at reception at least fifteen minutes prior to his interview. He showed up fifteen minutes prior to this fifteen-minute cutoff, having left early for fear of getting lost, which he in fact had done; otherwise, he would have arrived an undodgy forty-five minutes before the interview.

The door to the office was locked. Pierre peered through the glass, and spotted the receptionist. Behind her, people were moving about. He tried to get her attention, but she didn’t look up from her computer screen. The way she moved her mouse around, with her chin resting in her other hand, suggested to Pierre that she was playing Solitaire, or maybe Minesweeper. He felt it would be undignified to wave. He knocked on the door. She looked up like a hare in long grass upon hearing a gunshot. She saw him at the door. The machine on the wall beeped, and Pierre pushed the door open.

“There’s a button next to the door,” she said, in a way that was somehow kind enough to relieve Pierre of any embarrassment.

“I’m here for an interview,” Pierre said. “With Mr. Feldman,” he added.

She asked him to take a seat at one of two wide blue couches across from the desk. Pierre could see glimpses of the rest of the office behind her desk, and it looked exactly as he had seen on television. This was remarkable to him at the time, but in retrospect seemed rather obvious, since it’s hard to think of an environment more easily replicable

on screen. He wondered if it would be considered rude or improper to take out a book, and decided that, somehow, it was definitely more appropriate to scroll mindlessly on his phone, despite the fact that there was nothing on there he particularly wanted to look at. He tried to sit straight, and looked at the screen with a serious concern on his face, as if he was doing something important.

He had decided on the way there that it wouldn't be proper to try and meet Stu before the interview. However, after he had been sat there several minutes, Stu came around the corner and greeted him with a grin. He sat down next to Pierre on the couch.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Pierre said.

"You'll be fine. George is a nice guy. Just act seriously, like you want the job, and you're through. I've only said good things about you."

"Like how I have no experience or education and have barely even been in an office, let alone worked in one?"

"Yeah! He likes that kind of stuff. Outside thinkers." He leaned back. "I told him that you're a good guy, and you want a job. I told him I've known you for, what, twenty years now? Twenty five? And that you're the kind of guy who puts your head down and does the work."

"That's me, alright."

Stu patted his knee. "You've got this." He stood up, went over to the reception desk, and began a hushed conversation. He pointed with his thumb back at Pierre, and the receptionist gave him a brief and curious look.

Inside the glass box that served as a private office, Pierre was asked to sit at a folding chair placed in front of the desk. Mr. Feldman sat

across from him in a rolling chair with meticulous lumbar support, and began to speak.

"It's nice to meet you, Pierre," he said, extending his arm over the desk for a handshake.

"You too. Thanks for taking the time to interview me," Pierre said. All his handshaking practice with Herbert was not coming in handy. Mr. Feldman's hand was cold and strong.

"I'm the quality control supervisor," he said. "Call me George."

"Okay, George."

"Great, you're a quick learner. Sorry about the chair, by the way. I don't know where all our good chairs have gone..."

"It's alright."

"I promise that we're not such a destitute organization as to not have an ample supply of decent chairs; it's just that, at the current moment, I'm unsure where they are... I'm sure you understand. So," he said, looking down at some papers on his desk, "Moving right along. Now, Pierre, did Stu fill you in a little on what we do around here?"

Pierre had a few days earlier visited the company's website, only to find the words "The right WAAP solution > WAF + Bot + DDoS + API" written in white bold type on a black background. Underneath, in smaller type: "Join our webinar with WAAP experts to learn why." He had almost given up right there, but felt compelled at least to open the sidebar, where he found the options Application Security, Data Security, Network Security, Cloud-Native Security, and Security Automation on the menu. He scrolled to the bottom of the page and found the About Us link he had been looking for. Unfortunately, this page did not tell Pierre anything he didn't already know, which was nothing.

He had at least found out that Boston Enterprises had a “Customer Obsession,” a “Sense of Urgency,” and was “committed to disrupting the status-quo.”

Finally, he had in fact asked Stu to fill him in a little on what they do around there, and had been told that Boston Enterprises was a Data Warehouse that kept private information safe from cyberattacks. And so that is what Pierre told George Feldman, Quality Control Supervisor.

“Exactly. But maybe that’s a little too corporate, a little too jargon-y.” He tilted his from side to side as he spoke the last few words. “Let me give you an analogy,” he said, standing up and beginning to pace behind his desk. “Think of medieval Europe. Kings in castles, knights, dragons, etc. Snails, perhaps,” He looked at Pierre with a grin. “Our job is to defend the castle walls. In fact, we are the walls. The king in the castle is our clients’ data. Hackers and criminals and fraudulent actors may try to infiltrate, but we must stand our ground against them... You could say that we control the big drawbridge in front of the castle. Whenever anyone approaches, we verify them, and if we find they are supposed to be there, we lower the bridge. But if they are a thief or imposter, we deny them entry. In fact, we throw them in the moat, with the alligators, so they can’t come back. And when an enemy army comes, we stand atop the ramparts and rain down on them with spears and javelins and arrows and all sorts of weapons, laying our lives on the line for our king.

“If the walls fail, the king dies, the people die, and society collapses. The city is overrun by barbarian hordes, like Ancient Rome. They sack it all, just pull it to pieces.” He mimed ripping something apart with both hands. “It’s anarchy!”

He stopped pacing. “We are defending our civilization, Pierre. Data is civilization. If cyber-criminals are allowed to run free, looting the

data from banks, credit card companies, the government... that's worse than the fall of Rome. In Rome, it was people's property on the line. Now, in the modern world, it's our data, and data is more essential than property: data is our very being. We don't just own data, Pierre. *We are* data. We live and breathe data.

"As a quality technician, you are... you are part of the team that checks all the bricks in the castle wall. You walk around, and make sure there's no holes, no crumbling bricks, no secret tunnels. Secret tunnels... now that's a problem. That's almost worse than anything..." He trailed off, before beginning again. "You see, don't you, that while walking around the walls may not be as glamorous as riding a horse and cutting down dragons, it is just as essential for the preservation of the castle. In fact, more so. Glamour isn't everything, Pierre. But, look at you, you understand that already. We all have our own duty. You may say, 'Oh, well the Vice President of Quality is up there, dining with the king, advising him about the walls, and I'm down here carting mortar and patching up bricks.' Do you know how the Vice President of Quality got to where he is? He's been with this company since the beginning. He was there when the castle was being built. In fact, he built it himself. He was there, laying the first bricks. And now he's where he is, today. So with you, Pierre, if you work hard, and maintain those walls. One day you will be on top of them, ordering other bricklayers and inspectors around, with more responsibilities, yes, but also more rewards, and with the knowledge that you are doing as much as you possibly can to defend our civilization.

"Just think, Pierre. We're not developing video games here. We're not crafting simulated effects for Hollywood movies. We are doing something real. We are protecting people's data. Money is data. When people go to work and toil away, they come home with a paycheque, and they put it in the bank. That's data. The work they do, saved on

the computer, that's data. Their loans, mortgages, credit cards: data. Their personality, likes and dislikes: it's all data."

He stood still, as if temporarily lost for words. The metaphor upon which he had been building his speech had slipped away from his grasp, and he had inadvertently come to a conclusion without imparting to it the dramatic gravity he would have wished. He seemed to need just one more sentence, one with just the right emphasis, to bring it all home, but he was struggling to find it.

"Data makes the world go round," he finally said. He paused again. "And we make the data go round." He looked at Pierre with satisfaction.

"That sounds great," Pierre said. "It's nice to know that you're contributing to something important."

"It sure is," Mr. Feldman said. "It sure is." He made his way back to his chair, and pulled something up on his computer. Pierre shifted his seat to face him. "Starting salary is..." He offered a sum that was more than Pierre had made in the last three years combined.

Pierre was flabbergasted by the number.

"Plenty of opportunity for advancement. Your friend Stu has had four raises in the last two years." He looked around the room, as if being watched. "I'm not supposed to tell you that, of course, but I figure he's probably told you already, since you're good friends." He hadn't, actually. Pierre had never thought to consider how much Stu made — as far as he had been concerned, it may as well have been a million dollars a minute.

Mr. Feldman then clicked around on the computer for a full minute without acknowledging Pierre's presence at all. Pierre wondered if he was supposed to say something. Was this the time to negotiate?

"You like computers, Pierre?" Mr. Feldman finally said.

“Do I ever,” he replied, somewhat stupidly.

“Wonderful machines.” He shook his head in appreciation. “Just marvellous. You know C?”

Pierre thought back to his experiences in music class.

“Don’t worry, you’ll pick it up. Look, can you start next week?”

“Uh, I need to give two weeks notice to my last job.”

“Absolutely. No problem. You can start at the end of the month. I’ll send you over to Kristin at HR. She’ll help you with the paperwork.”

He stuck out his hand. “Good to have you, Pierre.”

Chapter Eleven

First Day

And just like that, a few weeks passed, and it was Pierre's first day. Up the sickening elevator again, and down the hall, he found a group of similarly-aged people waiting at the glass door of the office. There were four of them, standing around, looking at each other and at the elevator and at the door. As he first made his way toward them, they glanced up at him expectantly, but as he slowed down and came to a stop before them, they all looked away, at the floor and their shoes and the wall. He found out from one of them, a short dark-haired stubbly man who looked like he had spent his life in ill-fitting business attire, that they were all starting today, and being trained for the same position.

"My name's Andrew," he said.

"I'm Pierre," Pierre said. They shook hands. Pierre looked around at the other three people in the hallway. They all tried to pretend they couldn't hear Pierre and Andrew's conversation. None of them told him their name.

"The door's locked," Andrew said. "We're waiting for someone to let us in."

Pierre peered through the door. The receptionist wasn't at her desk. It was ten to nine. It felt undignified to stand here in the hall like a group of students waiting for their teacher; he felt that it wouldn't do his reputation any good to be included in such a rabble. People in suits passed by on the way to offices further down the corridor. They were all looking at their phones. Pierre and his four fellows attempted intermittent eye contact with them as they passed, trying to hide the desperation in their eyes.

A man in a blazer and a t-shirt with a comic book character on it finally let them in. He made a supremely uncomfortable face as he opened the door. They trailed behind him like ducks behind their mother, then fanned out in the area in front of the receptionist's desk. "Uh, someone will be here for you guys. Soon, I think," the man said, before disappearing into the break room.

They were in much the same position as before, only now on the opposite side of the glass door. Pierre decided to sit down on the couch, and Andrew joined him. He was wearing a pinpoint shirt tucked into loose slacks with a belt. The outfit reminded Pierre of his dad, although it seemed that Andrew still needed some time to grow into it. He had thick eyebrows and the hair around his ears was a bit long.

They were sat there for what felt like quite a long time. Employees filed in, glancing over but pretending not to see them. Pierre could hear conversations emanating from the break room. It didn't seem like anyone was in any hurry to start working.

Andrew kept saying things to him, as if trying to make conversation, but none of his statements left much room for discussion. He didn't ask Pierre any questions, but just made observations about Pierre, or himself, or the space they were occupying. "Nice couch," he said, at one point. "A man could fall asleep on a couch like this."

“Are you tired?” Pierre asked.

“Not at all!” He pulled out a thermos from his messenger bag. “Coffee,” he said, presenting it to Pierre as if introducing a new invention.

“Ah,” Pierre said.

“Nectar of the Gods.” He took a sip, then let out a satisfied sigh.

Soon after, Mr. Feldman, also known as George, entered the front door. As he walked by, he pointed a finger at Pierre and his companions, and said, “I’ll be right with you guys.” He entered the break room. For the first time, people began to leave the break room and make their way to their desks. Most were holding mugs or thermoses, and one long-haired man even carried a bowl of cereal with him. George returned with a mug in his hand and a spring in his step.

“Alright guys, I’ll give you a quick tour first, then I’ve got some paperwork for you all to do.”

It was an open-plan office, the desks arranged in irregular clumps scattered around the room. The long wall across from the front door was all glass, through which you could see into the window of the office directly across the street. It looked to Pierre much the same as the one he was currently in. Still, he wondered what they did over there. Then, he wondered what he was going to do here.

In the far corner were two private offices. One was George’s, where Pierre had done his interview. The other was that of George’s boss, the boss-boss, or “operations manager.” He wasn’t there today. He was in a meeting with other boss-bosses in a building somewhere else. On the opposite end of the room were three conference rooms with large elliptical tables. The last stop of the tour was the break room.

The break room at Lee’s had been cold and cramped: two rickety desk chairs and a table that was just a shelf attached to the wall. The space heater was stuffed in a corner where the most it could do was broil the left side of one’s body. The water heater had constantly

hummed, the microwave seemed to operate at only half-capacity, and the chairs had squeaked with every movement. The break room here was luxurious in comparison, with a toaster oven, coffee machine, espresso machine, fridge, and dishwasher, all of stainless steel. Nothing hummed; instead, there were high-tech beeps and boops emanating from all directions. There were even free snacks and cans of pop in the cupboard.

George then took the four of them to the cluster of desks that was to be their own, and set them to work filling out the various paperworks required to make their employment official. As soon as he was out of earshot, they all looked up from their paperwork at each other, like schoolchildren who the teacher has left alone in the classroom. None of them said anything; they just looked at each other with awkward, understanding glances. Pierre counted the papers stacked before him. There were quite a few. After the papers, there was a training program on the computer. Pierre learned about office safety and proper workplace conduct. He learned how not to harass people, and how not to be harassed.

Around noon, George walked past and told them all to take their lunch break.

“I know a great shawarma place nearby,” Andrew said to Pierre. “Wanna go?”

Pierre had brought a lunch, but the prospect of leaving the office excited him too much to pass up the opportunity.

They were sat on a cement block across the street from their office. Water from a small fountain streamed behind them. Pierre watched men and women in suits pass by on the street, as behind them the

neon-jacketed sign-carriers directed traffic around a construction site down the road. He was a little cold, as he hadn't expected to spend much time outside that day. He was, for the first time in his life, eating falafel. He figured now was as good a time to start as any.

Andrew asked Pierre what he had been doing prior to getting this job.

"I was working at a fruit store," Pierre said, preferring the term "fruit store" to the more accurate "produce store."

"You're just out of college then? Me too."

"No, I finished college a while ago. I only did a few years. Then, I worked at the fruit store for a while." He counted the years in his head. "About five years." As he looked over at Andrew after saying this, Pierre realized for the first time how much younger Andrew was.

"Wow." Andrew bit into his shawarma, and then spoke with his mouth full. "That's a long time to work at a fruit store. Do you think that experience helped..." he swallowed, "in getting this job?"

"Probably not," Pierre said.

"Wow," Andrew said again. He took another bite of his shawarma, and began to tell Pierre the story of his career thus far. He had worked at a fast food restaurant since high school, eventually working his way up to assistant manager. His advancement up the ranks, he told Pierre, had been rapid and unprecedented, at least for the first several months, before being blunted by a uniquely vindictive individual who happened to be Andrew's manager. Jealousy, greed, sloth — all played a factor in this manager's otherwise inexplicable enmity toward young Andrew, and it didn't help that their subordinates at the restaurant (Andrew insisted on calling it "the restaurant") were lazy and silly and always getting into their own dramatic conflicts. After a few years, it became clear to Andrew that this company wasn't going to satisfy his

ambitions, so he left for the tech sector, applying to hundreds of jobs before landing himself the one that he now shared with Pierre.

The whole conversation felt a little surreal to Pierre; he had never met anyone quite like this person. He had known ambitious people, but never one whose ambition took the precise character of Andrew's. The ugly look on his face when he described his former manager's attitude emanated more raw emotion than Pierre had ever felt, probably in his whole life.

They returned to work, and scrolled through page after page of orientation documents. It would be impossible for anyone to absorb the amount of information presented to Pierre and his fellows in that one afternoon, and clear that no one expected them to. Pierre, as was one of his tendencies, continually checked the clock on his desk and calculated the exact amount of money he was making per minute, only to promptly forget, because he was less concerned with the actual answer than with solving a diverting math problem. The office around him was silent apart from the clicks and clacks of keyboards, the pervasive hum of the AC, and the occasionally bubbling of the kettle or spitting of the coffee machine in the kitchen.

Around three in the afternoon, something in the atmosphere of the room changed. Chairs squeaked as bodies reclined, the clacking of keys became less constant, and a low buzz of conversation overpowered the hum of the air conditioning.

Stu came over to Pierre's desk. "Almost done," he said.

Pierre looked at the clock, although he already knew the time. "Aren't there still a few hours left?"

"I mean, sure, but they barely count."

"I've still got all these documents to go through..."

Stu leaned over and looked at Pierre's screen. "There's no rush. Tomorrow you'll start training, and you can just plug away at all this

stuff in the background. They try not to give you much to do on the first day.”

Pierre scrolled his screen up and down. “Stu... do you find this job kind of boring?”

“Absolutely.” He gave Pierre a few encouraging pats on the shoulder, and walked back to his desk.

“So, how was the first day?” Carlos looked up from his phone. He was sat on the armchair with his feet up.

Pierre set down his bag and settled on the couch. “Alright, I suppose.”

“Didn’t kill you?”

“I haven’t actually done any work yet.”

“Ah, I guess I should ask you at the end of the week,” he chuckled. “Full time work, it might kill you, no?”

“Maybe I’ll handle it a bit better this time. It’s been a while, after all.”

“We shall see,” he said. “No offense, Pierre, but I can’t see you as a quality assurance engineer, or technician, or whatever it is. I try to imagine you in a cubicle and it just makes me laugh.”

“Well, it’s an open plan office, so.”

“Ahh, too bad! You can not decorate! Hang a picture of Melville on the wall, maybe a shrine to Proust, make you feel at home.”

Pierre turned on the TV and booted up the video game.

“Straight to gaming, eh? After a long day’s work!”

“That’s right; I’ve done what’s needed of me. No guilt, just game. I could play all night if I wanted.”

“So what has changed? You felt guilt before? It’s just playing a game. Everyone does it.”

“True. But now I can play as a real work-a-day man.”

“Yes, you’ve worked a day! You have assured the quality. The world thanks you, Pierre. But I’ve got homework to do.” He got up, and headed to his room.

Chapter Twelve

Gotta Have A Job

Pierre had been working for three weeks when Mr. Feldman — or George — called him into his office. The two had not spoken one-on-one since Pierre’s interview, most of their interactions being via e-mail and at the daily stand-up meetings. During these meetings, as the name implied, everyone in the office was required to stand up at their desks, and describe in turn what they were going to work on that day. If they failed to complete the task they had announced the previous day, they had to say, “I didn’t finish what I was working on yesterday.” Pierre found it curious at first that everyone ended their short presentation by saying, “I don’t need any help,” which he felt to be a touch presumptuous. It wasn’t until his turn came around that he realized they were anticipating George’s inevitable question: “Do you need any help?”

The formulaic nature of these meetings made them less like a conversation than the filling out of a spreadsheet. The real conversations happened in the break room, where many of Pierre’s co-workers liked

to spend the first hour of their day, making and drinking a single cup of coffee in what seemed to be a sort of time-distortion field. George was not party to these conversations, since his presence immediately returned time to its normal flow, and prompted a mass exodus from the break room toward the main office.

Pierre was getting along well, for what it was worth. The novelty of the whole situation — the office, the commute, sitting at a desk, answering e-mails — appealed to his innate curiosity and sense of adventure. He felt as if he had been accepted into an entirely different world than the one he had lived in previously. This new world felt more “real,” by virtue of his having seen it on TV and read about it online. He hadn’t realized that all the jokes about office/corporate/white-collar culture were fundamentally true; it was exactly as they had said it was, which struck Pierre as inherently humorous. When someone in a meeting suggested “circling back,” or “actioning” something, Pierre had to look around the room to see if anyone else was as excited as he was. At times, he had to physically hide his mirth by putting on a serious expression, which, as a dispassionate observer, we can say he pulled off far better than we would’ve given him credit for.

This excitement carried over, at least for a time, to the work itself, which proved remarkably simple. Compared to the unpredictability of being a cashier, where a simple “Hello” might prompt a reaction so rude as to beggar belief, and where the loading of a grocery bag in the “wrong” order might make one the object of scrutiny or ridicule, Pierre’s new profession was a walk in the park. In fact, no one seemed to know or care about what Pierre was doing at all.

And perhaps it was the productivity that arose from this newfound freedom that caught Mr. Feldman’s — or George’s — attention. Pierre entered the room expecting a review of his performance thus far:

pointing out mistakes, offering advice, and generally setting him on the right path.

“Well, Pierre,” George said, leaning back in his chair with interlocked fingers, “How’s it treating you so far?”

“It’s treating me fine,” Pierre said.

“Good to hear, good to hear.” George leaned forward and scooted his chair closer to his desk to look at his monitor. “I’ve been watching your progress closely. Not you specifically, mind; I watch all our new hires closely, trying to suss out who has The Potential and who hasn’t.” He said “the potential” as if it had a capital T and a capital P. “I like what I’m seeing from you, Pierre.”

Pierre didn’t know what to say to this.

“I’m always on the lookout for someone who shares the passion I feel for data security. A lot of people, they just show up here for a paycheck. That’s okay; I can’t make people care, can I? As long as they get the work done, they’re welcome to think whatever they like. But I always think: how far are they going to get with such an attitude? Quality coordinator? Maybe. Perhaps even quality control supervisor. But quality assurance manager? No way. They’ll never sit in *this* seat. And if they have dreams of becoming director of quality, or vice president of quality,” here he looked up toward the ceiling reverentially, “they’re kidding themselves.”

He put his hands on his armrests as if about to stand up, and then decided not to. He leaned back again, trying to seem calm. “What I want to say, Pierre, is that I see something in you. I know you’re young, and you might only see this company as a stepping stone toward other, ‘better’ things, like so many others who pass in and out of these doors. But you have a future here. There’s something in your eyes. You’re serious about this; I can tell. You want to make a difference in the world. You want to leave a legacy. You want to answer the question,

‘what do you do?’ with pride, knowing that what you’re doing is important. Am I right?”

Pierre nodded.

“I have a sense for these things. And I want to start us off on the right foot here, because I know how ambitious people can get. I don’t want you coming after my job, do I? We can work together. That’s what a company is all about. Companionship, comraderie; the work-force working together. But to do that, we need strong leadership. We need people who can see the bigger picture, and have the passion and drive to get things done. That’s why, Pierre, I’d like to offer you a bit of a promotion.”

“A promotion?”

“In a sense. Of course, you’ve only been here a few weeks, so there are certain limits to what I can do. Unfortunately, I can’t offer you a pay raise right away — I’d love to, but even within a company like ours there’s still a bit of that bureaucratic red tape. However, we can make a half-step. I’d like to make you the team leader of Quality Assurance Team B. Andrew, Paula... and that other young man will be under you. Your duties will remain essentially the same, but when they need help, they’ll come to you.

“Just think, Pierre: you will be helping to steer the direction of our company, and having a more direct impact on the well-being of our clients, which of course, impacts the well-being of people all over the world. And on top of that, you will be making a good name for yourself, putting your name at the top of the list for when a chance for promotion does come around, which may be as early as...” he looked at his monitor, “—September, perhaps.”

Pierre felt a hint of pride at the acknowledgement of his good work, no matter how ordinary he had felt it to be at the time. He did have

a proper work ethic after all, he thought; he had just needed the right environment. Perhaps he *was* cut out for this sort of thing.

Chapter Thirteen

Parents Again

It had come time once again for one of Pierre's irregular comings-together with his parents. This time, Pierre felt something resembling excitement. He hadn't told them of the job interview, for fear it would come to nothing, and had in his first week been so swept up by events that it hadn't occurred to him to notify them. After that, since his announcement would already be late, he figured he may as well delay it until they met face-to-face. This time it was Pierre who made the first step, inviting his parents to a restaurant near his apartment.

After work, Pierre stepped out of the front door and into the 6PM air. He realized in this moment that he had never — not even once — left his apartment in the evening after getting home from work. It hadn't even occurred to him as a possibility. The evening was a sacred time — it was Home Time. It was the time when he was at home. The outside was a place he was forced to go; it was where he went when his time was not his own. Outside was the domain of Work.

But now, in the leisure of the evening sun, Pierre had a feeling like he was discovering the world again for the first time. Walking out of the building now was categorically different from walking into the building half an hour before. He had showered, yes, but more than

that, he had exchanged brains. His brain now was a different one. Like a man slipping into a smoking jacket, a dressing gown, or a pair of pyjamas, Pierre slid his work brain out of his head and replaced it with something altogether different. And thus, this sidewalk that he had just so recently walked along in the opposite direction, loaded with the fatigue and weariness of the day, now felt like a trampoline, as if he were bouncing along the surface of the moon.

When he arrived at the restaurant, his parents were already at a table. He had chosen an Indian restaurant he had never been to, after remembering that he had, in the past, enjoyed curry. Since his parents were English, it felt like a safe bet. The interior was dark and atmospheric, with light brown walls on which lamps with fancy shades cast strange shadows. He sat down to find that his parents had already ordered tea; they had, of course, ordered one for him as well.

"Well, Pierre," his dad said, "You could have just told me you don't like my cooking."

"I just thought it might be nice to go out," Pierre replied. The waiter came by and they ordered their food; before long, the appetizers had arrived.

"I half expected you to bring a girlfriend or something..." his mom said, "although that might have been a tad optimistic."

"Well, I don't have anything like that," Pierre said, "but I do have some news. I don't work at the fruit store anymore! I got a new job."

"Really? Is it closer to your apartment? It *was* silly commuting all that way just for Lee's..."

"The commute is a bit longer, actually. But the job is quite a bit different. I'm working at Stu's company, doing quality assurance. It's full-time, and they pay me almost twice as much as at Lee's."

His parents nodded as they ate their food. They didn't jump for joy or exclaim with delight. Instead, they merely nodded, and his dad

made something like a pained expression. "Twice as much as Lee's isn't as impressive as you think," his dad said, finally. "What sort of company are they? And what exactly do you do?"

"Well, it's cybersecurity. They make software that stops hackers, I guess. My boss says it's like building walls around a castle..." he stopped himself, realizing how silly the metaphor sounded divorced from Mr. Feldman's enthusiasm, "It's tech, in the end. Everyone says it's the place to be."

"It's not bad," his dad said.

"I think Hillary's son works for someone like that," his mom said. "Raytheon or something?"

"That's a different kind of security," Pierre said.

"Stu got you the job?" his dad asked.

"Yeah, kinda. I mean, I still had to interview."

"It's not what you know, it's who you know." He pointed at Pierre. "Don't I always say that? Not that you're one for networking, but I guess you get lucky sometimes. I didn't know you were interested in computer science, though. You never seemed to like the classes in school."

"I'm not that interested," said Pierre. "I was just talking to Stu about careers and he brought it up. It seems fine, though. Not too hard to get a handle on, once you get going. I grew up with computers, after all."

His dad ripped a naan bread and gathered some sauce from his plate. "Mm," he said, with his mouth full.

"Are you enjoying it?" his mom asked.

"Yeah, so far. It's only been a few weeks, but it's nice. I get to wear nice clothes and ride a crazy elevator up to the office. It made me sick at first — the elevator — but I'm used to it now. Everyone's just typing away at computers all day. Well, not really. I mean, they don't actually

do a huge amount of work, to be honest. But it's certainly something different."

"Sounds like you could make a reputation for yourself, then, if you work hard," his dad said.

"Yeah, I'm trying to."

"You can't take it for granted, just because Stu got you the job. It's all up to you, now. To be honest, you're not the ambitious type, but tech is a bit of a different world than a produce store. More cutthroat. You can't just be happy to be there..."

"I'm not. I've already got a promotion."

"Really? That quickly?" He turned to Pierre's mom. "That doesn't seem right. Maybe they're just putting you into the position they intended from the start, but calling it a promotion to make it sound better."

"Perhaps..." Pierre decided he shouldn't mention the lack of a pay-raise. "My manager seems to like me, though. Anyway, I think it's a good job."

"Certainly a step up from Lee's," was all his dad said. "Does this mean you're paying for dinner?"

Pierre squirmed in his seat.

"That's a joke. Unless you somehow become my dad, we'll still pay for dinner."

The rest of the dinner passed uneventfully. His dad seemed somehow off-balance, as if he had a lecture trapped inside him with nowhere to go. Neither of his parents asked Pierre anything more about the job, although Pierre still wanted to talk about it. He didn't have anything in particular he wanted to say about it, but he wanted to talk about it anyway. He felt like he finally had a job worth talking about in the way everyone else always gets to talk about their job. But when he really thought about it, he realized he rarely heard his dad

talk about his job at all. And he remembered that, in a way, the point of this whole thing was to stop having to talk to his dad about jobs all the time. And that realization left him with a rather empty feeling.

Chapter Fourteen

Gotta Have a Job 2

Pierre lifted the bag in his right hand just enough to reach the door-knob and pushed the front door open with his shoulder. He lowered the two overfilled grocery bags onto the floor, kicked the door closed behind him, and leaned against the wall. The TV was on, and Carlos was on the couch, watching soccer. He had become the de facto keeper of the house, a job for which he had no time nor interest. The house that Pierre had briefly kept in such good condition was now falling into disrepair. The dirt and dust from the hallway made its way over time to the living room, kitchen, bedrooms, to await a perfunctory sweep from Pierre on alternating weekends.

Pierre had developed something of a routine in the last several months, and it was starting to wear on him. He knew the exact moment when he had to leave home, and the exact moment he would return. He had come to know where and when to stop for groceries, and where to pick up dinner on the days when he was too exhausted to cook, of which today was one. He still felt a residual guilt upon pur-

chasing meals, an act he had succumbed to only rarely during his more frugal days, but this was lessened somewhat by the increased number on his paycheque and in his bank account. After that first paycheque, a switch had gone off in his mind, and he was now consistently buying himself “treats” as rewards for simple tasks such as doing the laundry or going to the bank. The treats quickly became staples, and then new more extravagant treats were found, such as video games, expensive new editions of books — he even started paying for streaming services, as he felt he barely had enough time for internet piracy. TV shows, which had been a non-entity in his life for years, soon became his lifeblood; his books sat on the shelf, his games sat on the hard drive, unread and unplayed. He just didn’t have the energy anymore.

He washed his hands, sat down before the fridge to find space for all the new groceries, and then set down at the table to eat his styrofoam box of Thai noodles.

“How was work?” Carlos asked from the couch.

“Boring.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“What are you watching? World Cup?”

“Qualifiers. If we win this, we’re pretty much in.” The ‘We’ was Spain, with their red shirts and navy blue shorts, comfortably sitting ahead 2-0 in the 60th minute. Carlos explained the qualification system, which was probably quite simple, but through the combination of Pierre’s mental state and Carlos’ half-hearted explanation, seemed as esoteric as an alchemical treatise. Pierre gathered that to win was good, and seeing as the way to win was to have more points than the opponent, Spain seemed to be in a good spot.

“Isn’t Spain like the best team or something? Do they ever not get in?”

“The best team? I wish, man.”

“Didn’t they win last time?”

“That was 2010. Two cups ago, Pierre. Then, they lost first round. Then, second round. You can’t trust them.”

“Well, here’s hoping.”

Pierre tried to watch, but the ball travelling back and forth across the screen started to mesmerize him. He leaned forward and rested his head atop his folded arms. He had eaten too quickly, a result of being too hungry, itself a result of an inadequate lunch. The sun was already fading fast, a trend that would only get worse as winter deepened. In a few weeks, he would be leaving for work and heading home in the dark. At least there were windows in the office, he thought. He would have to make sure to stand up and look outside of them every once in a while.

Starting at Boston Enterprises had felt like a whole new life for Pierre, and for those first few weeks, he had felt himself to be adjusting to his new life admirably. The excitement of the change buoyed him through the initial struggles, and the extra money coming in offset the free time he had lost. He felt as if he was a part of the real world now, and that he could look at the strangers he saw on the street or on the train from a position of well-earned equality. With his nice shirt, slacks, and side-bag, he felt unimpeachable. He stood tall, watching the city roll by the window, feeling that it was his city as much as anyone else’s.

After the first week of orientation, where he felt every day like he was back in elementary school, herded around from task to task, learning little but seeming to do a lot, never quite sure what he was going to do next, he had gradually transformed into a semi-competent member of the workforce, tackling his tasks in whatever order he saw fit, sending and replying to e-mails with reckless abandon, and finding it easier and easier to sit around for eight hours doing whatever it was

that he did. He still didn't feel much of a purpose — it was difficult, at the end of each day, for him to conceptualize how all of the minor tasks he had accomplished fit together into some grand scheme; but it was interesting enough just to have something to do, and to be allowed to do it on one's own terms. He no longer had to worry about a particularly rude customer showing up and ruining his afternoon; on the other hand, he could no longer hope for a particularly nice customer to alleviate a rotten mood either.

The main thing that struck Pierre, with a force that he never could have expected, was how little work actually seemed to get done at the office. He had always imagined that everyone in such buildings had been working much harder than he had been at Lee's. He thought that they sat at their computers for eight hours, non-stop, busy with some sort of work, even if the work they were busy with was only busywork. He had thought that he was the only person who slacked off, the only person who occasionally took an hour to do half an hour's job, and he had constantly derided himself for it.

What he had now discovered is that while the employees of Boston Enterprises certainly had to show up at 9 and leave at 5, there was little to make them actually do work that whole time. A large part of the first hour was spent gossiping in the break-room, and the following hour consisted of browsing through emails. He watched those around him do all sorts of things while spreadsheets sat neglected on their monitors: scroll through their phones, peel lazily at mandarin oranges, or even just stare blankly out of the window.

This last activity had become his personal favourite. He liked to gaze at the office across the street, and imagine it to be a mirror image of his own. There might be a mirror Pierre in there, reclined in his chair and staring back at him. Occasionally, he would see someone walking purposefully past the window with a file folder in his hand; he

half-expected to be able to turn around and see the same man passing behind him. This imaginary office carved out its own little space in Pierre's brain; at least, until a few weeks had passed and it became as dull as anything else.

It was occurring to Pierre that he had been right: forty hours was a lot of time. Mathematically, one could argue that, even accounting for sleep and commuting, there remained dozens of hours a week for Pierre to live his own life on his own terms. But much to Socrates' chagrin, mathematics has a funny relationship with the real world. Even the most meticulous calculation can never make anything feel true, and when it comes to a human life, that's what matters. Pierre felt like he was back in high school again, but somehow it was even more boring this time than ever before, and even worse, there was no graduation to look forward to. It was nothing but this until...

Until death. And thoughts of this had begun to reappear to Pierre, not as a looming spectre but as an ever-patient friend. He was not suicidal in any explicit sense, but damned if he wasn't starting to feel some sort of call from that other side, the faint whispers of the serpent in his ear, unintelligible at present but growing ever and ever more clear. A film was growing upon his eyes, turning the world greyer and greyer. His thoughts were easily caught in loops of repetitive meaningless phrases, like jingles stuck in his head, inane mantras. "The world is the world is the world..." is what he found himself repeating one day at his desk, as if his capacity for logic had been reduced to the point of cognizing only tautologies. These mantras kept his mind from wandering at work, because thinking of anything fun or pleasant gave him such an intense knot in his stomach that he felt he must either sprint out of the building or die. Such was his mental state that he found himself fantasizing about cartwheels. He would find himself in

an empty corridor and imagine himself cartwheeling his way down it; at times he had to physically restrain himself from doing so.

The world is the world is the world is the world... Pierre's brain was a computer and his body a machine; work was work and the world was the world. Life was what it was: nothing more, nothing less. He looked back fondly on his days of enthusiasm for his book, only months ago now but practically a lifetime away. He had sat down sporadically to write since starting his new job, but the words that came out only disgusted him, filled as they were with a thinly veiled resentment. He couldn't imagine anything or anywhere except as idealistic and nonsensical fantasy or dismal dystopia.

He had fallen asleep at the dinner table, only waking up at Carlos' cheer for a third goal for Spain. His food sat half-finished before him. He packed it up and put it in the fridge for lunch. He headed to his bedroom, and lay on the bed with his phone, trying to build up the energy to take a shower. But there was nothing interesting to look at; everyone was having the same problems he was having, and yet dealing with them somehow better and worse at the same time.

He woke up fully clothed, curtains open to the lamp-lighted darkness outside. Walking out into the hallway, he saw the light on under Carlos' door, and heard the rattling of his keyboard.

He made himself a cup of tea, put on a jacket, and stepped out onto the balcony. He placed the mug on the banister and watched the steam rise into the air. One couldn't see many stars this deep into the city, only four or five of the very brightest, and even those only if you looked into the sky in just the right way. And yet, it was calm, aside from the occasional engine roaring down the empty street behind,

which didn't break the calm as much as accentuate it. Pierre had not looked out upon this empty, sleeping world in a long time, so caught up had he been in regulating his sleep schedule. Even when he couldn't sleep, he would force himself to remain in bed just in case, bathed in the harsh blue light of his phone. His passion for sleep had become a mania; he feared a bad sleep more than anything, for making his way through a work day was exhausting enough in itself. Everything about his home life was devoted to making work as painless as possible; it lay like a constant spectre over him. He knew that, good days being what they were, a bad day would simply kill him. And not in a sudden and final way, but in a gradual, never-ending way, ticking on minute after minute into eternity.

Only a few hours had passed since he had fallen asleep, but the world had changed in that time. Work seemed so distant and inconsequential in the dark, and he found it difficult to even believe it was real. This newfound freedom shocked and confused him; he had a sudden desire to eat an entire box of cookies and stay up all night. What was the worst that could happen? Outside in the dark, eight hours seemed just eight hours. It occurred to him, in the way obvious facts often do, that every work day ends at some point, no matter how tortuous it is. Time reliably moves forward, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, but always forward and no other way.

He was free; but what to do? With all the time in the world, what comes first? He racked his brain for just the right activity to celebrate his freedom. And it struck him that the best activity, the number-one best possible use of his time, was to do nothing. Just sit out with his tea and listen to the winds of the city fly through the empty streets. Who could compel him otherwise? He had the job, he had the money, he'd

done the duty imposed on him by the Powers That Be. They could do nothing to him now.

With a crack, the light on the side of the apartment building went out, leaving the parking lot lit only by the moonlight.

Pierre, alone in the dim light, reckoned with himself as if meeting an old friend after a long absence. He had not been with himself truly since starting what he liked to call his “career,” and it was almost strange for him to realize that he was still much the same. The job had not changed him much, it had only caused him to temporarily lose aspects of himself, the parts that were irrelevant to showing up to work and surviving through the day. He had been living as only half a person for a while now. Spending his days in that large room full of professionals, never watched but always under scrutiny, never alone but never really with company either, was doing something to him. It made him frightened to think of it, to think of how easily he had lost himself, and how little he had noticed. It was not until he had stepped outside into this total loneliness that he had even remembered himself at all, like a song you love but only think about when it happens to come on the radio.

He yearned again for his freedom. He yearned again for the days spent in idleness and apathy — even those many hours of confusion and doubt he looked back at now with fondness. Here he was, doing as he was told, and what had come of it? A single word of praise from his parents, a little extra money to frivolously waste, a slight decrease in the shame he felt at his existence. But the shame had not gone away, only transformed, from the shame of thinking he was incapable of having a real job, to the shame of knowing for certain that he was incapable of having a real job. Millions of people in the world worked at jobs much like his for untold hours over years and decades, but Pierre knew without a doubt that a few more months of this would

kill him. He felt the exhaustion in every part of himself, felt the weight of the job in every waking moment. He had even begun to dream of it, frustrating dreams in which he was incessantly stymied by a malfunctioning mouse or keyboard, or frightening dreams in which he found that he had forgotten how to read, or else fantastical dreams of waking up in the middle of the afternoon and finding that he had simply forgotten to get on the train and head to the office. These last dreams had a sort of mirth and joy to them after the initial shock; once he realized there was nothing to be done, he would often jump out of his window and begin to fly over the city and into the clouds.

He watched the lights of an airplane pass through the sky. Perhaps with his newfound wealth, he could go travelling.

He leaned back in his chair. His keychain slid out of his pocket and onto the balcony floor. He felt around with his hand, and picked it up by the orange pouch. Holding it before him, he opened it up, and checked inside. There was his piece of the Plastic Boogie, looking exactly as it had when he first placed it inside. He knew it was this that had prompted Stu's text, and he knew it was this that had fast-tracked him through his first job interview. He recognized all the luck it had given him, how it had provided him the opportunity to make his way back onto the beaten path and join the everyday world. And yet, he saw now the limitations of its power. He understood now what Minerva — or whoever it was — had said about him. Such luck just wasn't right for him: even with all the luck in the world, even with the ability to fail upwards forever into the highest positions of the land — Pierre knew in a strange way that with a little patience, he would become CEO in time — he couldn't change who he was. It held no appeal to him, being CEO or President or even Vice President of Quality. It was just more empty words and empty work.

He held the little shark tooth between his fingers. He thought that it might be a good idea to grow a beard.

He thought of Andrew's beard, from work. It was fairly scraggly, never quite filled in, but it gave him a certain character. Particularly the sideburns. Perhaps it was because Pierre had never known Andrew prior to his beard, but the beard felt essential to Andrew's character. Then again, Pierre imagined Andrew without the beard, and felt that such a look might also work, but only because of its contrast with the bearded version of Andrew. If Andrew had never grown the beard at all, he would've always been but half a person. Pierre wondered, in the darkness, if he needed a beard to discover that part of himself that he knew was missing. He had grown partial beards only through negligence before, never quite taking ownership of the hair sprouting from his face. It's not a beard, he decided, until one declares it to be so: when one is asked, "Are you growing a beard?" and one's response is not to instinctively feel one's face, as if surprised that hair could grow there. Pierre decided that he needed to grow a beard by choice, out of his own free will. He needed to take agency.

Many thoughts of this kind entered and exited Pierre's mind during this night. Eventually, he grew too cold, and came inside. For an hour or so, he sat in the dark. Then, he turned a light on. He read a book for a while, and then closed it, and sat with it on his lap for a while. Around four in the morning, he grew tired of thinking. He decided he should do something he would never do during the day, out of a fear that it might be considered a waste of time. He put on the DVD his parents had lent him months earlier, and watched the whole thing. It was just as good as he remembered.

Around six in the morning, he went back to bed. He lay there awake for about an hour, not because he was sleepy but simply because he was bored. He heard Carlos wake up, tie his shoes, and leave for a run.

He checked his phone. His alarm was due to go off in half an hour. A new day had begun.

Pierre rarely ate more than a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast, but since he was up early, he felt he might as well make himself something nice. He fried some peppers, mushrooms, and bits of sausage, toasted a piece of toast, and poached an egg. As he ate, the sun began to rise. His skin felt tingly and a bit itchy; his eyes were dry and occasionally twitched. He could feel his hair growing out of his head. He seemed, in all ways, more aware of the world, like his senses were alerting him to things they usually kept to themselves. He was hot, but when he removed his sweater, he was cold. The food tasted nice but out of place. He had this feeling that he shouldn't be eating it.

As he stepped out the door, the frosty air stung his face. The cars were bustling about as normal; as usual, the Skytrain station was packed, and he shuffled his way on to the train car, squeezed between a tall man and a remarkably short woman. But everything was different today for Pierre. He could see through all these people, right through to what they truly were. He was experiencing an extra level of reality, a layer that peeled back all the prior layers, leaving everything plain and naked. His position between the tall man and short woman struck him as particularly comical, to the extent that he had to repress laughter. He imagined aliens viewing a heat map of the Earth from space, and seeing that, with all this land at our disposal, a few hundred people had crowded themselves into this tiny box on rails to the point where they could barely stand without touching. They were all headed into the city, to sit in offices much like Pierre's, and do work that he now imagined couldn't be too dissimilar. When he had first started to work,

he had felt a sense of communion with the every-person, a comfort in being one part of the grand machine. Now, he found it nothing but absurd. This absurdity prompted a weird euphoric sense of power, as if finding this packed train-car funny made Pierre the King of the World.

He was the King of the World, and he was Free, and in his Freedom he was choosing to go to work, because that is what those lower consciousnesses expected of him, and why should he let them down? It made no difference to him. What was time or space to a man in Pierre's position? He could sit in an office and feel like he was atop a Nepalese mountain; he could sip his coffee and imagine it, as Andrew had once obsequiously put it, to be the "Nectar of the Gods." The world was his oyster, and in becoming his oyster it had folded into a sort of unity, no place in it being any better or worse than any other. Total metaphysical freedom! Complete power of mind over matter! Pierre almost wanted to cackle with glee as the train dove underground. Underground! The very idea made him hysterical! We're flying headlong into a hole we dug in the ground!

Every thought was a joke. Walking along the street, he saw a crow grabbing garbage from a bin. He saw a construction worker adjust his pant leg. He saw a tree, growing out of a hole in the cement. He saw buildings with glass walls, and he saw clouds floating high up in the air, as if they didn't even know we were down here. This last thought almost made him sad for a moment — all these lives down here chock full of emotion and intrigue and excitement and boredom, and yet the clouds never even knew it. But this melancholy soon passed.

The elevator ride made him more nauseous than normal. His head started to spin a little as he stepped out into the corridor, the dizzying design on the carpet reminding him of the optometrist's office he visited as a child. He entered the office, went to the break room,

poured himself a decaffeinated tea, and sat down at his desk. Andrew was already there beside him. He had his phone on the desk, and was scrolling through videos as he checked his e-mails. Pierre looked at his own e-mails. He began typing a response. His fingers felt electric as he typed, the keys jangling pleasantly at his touch. He just kept typing, the words flowing out from somewhere beyond his own mind. A scroll-bar appeared on the side of the e-mail window as the letters flowed down the screen.

He stopped. He looked back at what he had written. He held down, Ctrl, pressed A, and then hit backspace.

Staring at the screen, it was as if the spirit that had possessed him had silently evacuated his body. He looked around. It dawned on him that he was going to be here for the next eight hours, and that there was no possibility of him accomplishing anything during that time. The weight of the hours bore down on him. He grew a little frightened.

Pierre was a hollow man by the time the sun had risen to that position in the sky he called his lunch hour. His right eye was twitching incessantly. His scalp itched. He couldn't help yawning. Worse than any of these physical symptoms, however, was the state of his mind, and what that did to his perception of the world. He had been wrong before: there are places that are better or worse than other places. This place he was in now was the worst of all places. It was a place in which an army of ghouls in little clusters sat and stared stone-faced at shining screens. There was no privacy; Pierre could see everything that Andrew did beside him, and vice versa. Andrew could know, then, if he cared to know, that Pierre had simply been flicking between tabs for the last two hours, filling out one cell of a spreadsheet every several rotations.

This was all he could do; some organ in his body — he would have guessed his appendix had it not been removed a few years prior — was performing some instinctual function, convincing his body that this spreadsheet was evil. It was a natural reflex, like how you gag when you clean out the gunk in the pipe below the bathroom sink. He felt a spiritual aversion to this spreadsheet that would give even the most courageous man pause. To look at it was torture. Even when it was minimized, just knowing that it was there was enough to almost send him screaming from the building.

Andrew was an innocuous and somewhat entertaining individual. He had certain quirks and certain characteristics, and on most days, Pierre found it enjoyable simply to watch him exist. Today, however, he couldn't talk to him. He just couldn't think of anything he might possible want to say. Andrew had greeted Pierre that morning with a comment on the unique challenge of a new client they were working on. Pierre had simply stared back, his lips wavering, and his eyes stinging. They had maintained eye contact for a few seconds. Then, Pierre had nodded, slowly, as if this gesture took every ounce of his energy, and turned back to his computer screen.

Pierre went outside during his lunch hour. He had brought a lunch, but he didn't want to eat it. Instead, he drank a coffee. It swished uncomfortably in his stomach. He knew, at the time, that this was a bad idea, but he didn't see many other options. He needed a drug of some sort, something powerful, and caffeine was the only such substance acceptable at the workplace. Pierre never knew what he was going to get with the stuff; at times it raised him from his dour mood and made him energized and cheerful, whereas other times it just made him both dour and jittery.

The world brightened up a little bit, with the coffee. The layer of clouds before the sun had thinned out a little. It seemed to Pierre

a sign: the sign said, "All shifts must pass." He looked at his phone. There were four hours left until he could go home. He thought about saying he was sick. That wouldn't do — he needed to save those sick days. This was a particular point for Pierre — those sick days were insurance in case of absolute emergency. He knew that days would arrive when leaving the house would become impossible. Days when eating a meal would feel like climbing a mountain. Days when, no matter what words he told himself, he would not be able to see the value in living. These were the days when Pierre was truly sick, and they struck at whatever moment they pleased. Today, at least, he was not in a bad mood. He was simply tired. The world seemed a great place, still; in fact, he would've given anything just to be allowed to walk around the city a little, maybe go see the waterfront. It was the office that was the problem: the computer, the confinement, the company.

Chapter Fifteen

Night Flight

“Pierre!” said a voice from the sidewalk, elongating the second syllable of his name with a surfer’s enthusiasm. Pierre looked up to notice that there were humans in this world. Passing on the sidewalk before him were hundreds of unique specimens of that wondrous species. Still more occupied the cars that tentatively zig-zagged their way through the lanes of cones set up to protect the construction workers, who were human also, and engaged in replacing a pipe beneath the street.

A particular one of these many people had called out Pierre’s name, and it was a voice he almost didn’t recognize, until he did. It was Edward Talbot’s voice. He was wearing the same suit as before, except now he had grown into it, and it fit him like a glove. His hair was gelled back, and he carried a briefcase. His face still had some of the look of a frivolous and careless young man, but there was a newfound hint of seriousness to his brow and the corners of his mouth.

“Edward,” Pierre said, as the two shook hands. “How’s it going?”

“Great, man. What are you doing out here? And all dressed up too. Did your book hit big? Are you shopping it around to publishers?”

Pierre scratched the back of his neck. “Ah, the book is on hold right now. I’m actually just working across the street at Boston Enterprises.”

Edward looked up at the tower across the street. "Boston Enterprises," he said. "Never heard of it. Tech?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Nice, that's the place to be right now, man. Tech is big. Big money, big future. You're in the right place. I've been thinking about making the switch."

"You don't like what you're doing right now?"

"It's great. I love the boss and the company and everything. But tech... that's just a whole 'nother level. Lots of money. Lots more money than what I'm doing."

"I suppose so," said Pierre. "Do you remember Stu, from high school? He works with me here."

"Ohhhh yeah, Stu. Stu was the man. Smart as hell, too. No wonder, no wonder. He was your in, then?"

"In a way, yeah."

"Lucky man. I'd ask you for a favour..." He swiveled on his heel. "But you already did me a huge solid before. Don't worry about it. I'll figure something out for myself. Hey, you still have that gift I gave you?"

Pierre fished his keys out of his pocket. "Right here."

"In the little pouch?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there you go. Hey, you wanna see something? It's just down here a bit." He pointed down the street.

"Sure? What is it?"

"You'll see." They continued down the street about half a block, before stopping next to a shining red Ferrari convertible. "How about that, eh?"

"This is yours?" Pierre thought he was joking.

"No, no. It's my uncle's. He's letting me borrow it for the week. Can you imagine? Look at this thing. It's like a dream."

The car seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. Pierre had seen cars like this before, of course, but he had never seen them as actual objects real people could own. He wasn't much of a car person, normally, but this car emanated a sort of aura that made him want to approach and touch it. But he didn't dare to.

"Speechless?"

"Yeah, wow. I can't believe your uncle would lend this to you. It looks so... expensive."

"Hey, when are you off? You want to take a ride?"

"Like, drive it?"

"What? No. Of course not. Are you kidding? But I can drive you somewhere. Anywhere, I don't care. I just love driving it around. Last night I was out 'til almost midnight, just cruising around." He raised his hands before his chest and said, "Night flight," in a TV presenter voice, as if it meant something.

"I mean, sure. I usually just take the subway. You don't mind heading into B ____?"

"The farther the better, man."

Pierre didn't drive anymore, but he had certainly been inside a fair number of cars. They had all felt more or less the same, which is to say, they didn't leave him with any lasting impression aside from 'having been in a car.' There are cars of many makes and models, but for the most part, to a laymen at least, they are all just cars, and any car is as good as any other car.

But there was something different about this car. It was not just that it was a luxury brand, likely several times more expensive than any other car Pierre had been in. It was not just the leather seats and the low roof, so low that Pierre had to properly think about how he was going to contort his body through the door and on to the seat. What this car seemed to provide was a sense of isolation; it made the outside world seem totally unreal, as if driver and passenger were the only beings properly worthy of being called human, and everyone else was some shadow or automaton. It turned the world into a film set, and the citizens of the world into background extras.

As soon as Edward sent the car lurching forward from its parking spot and executed a remarkably cavalier merge into moving traffic, Pierre felt that sensation that comes upon one during the take-off of a plane: he didn't think he was going to die, but he didn't think he was definitely not going to die either. The rate of acceleration evoked a sort of animal fear within Pierre.

Immediately, they were stuck in traffic. The surrounding cars towered over Pierre as he looked out the window. He realized around this moment that Edward was exactly the sort of person who would weave back and forth across lanes looking for whichever was "fastest," narrowly avoiding accidents — or rather, forcing others to narrowly avoid accidents. And this proved to be exactly how the first leg of their journey went, Edward treating the slow-moving traffic as a sort of maze designed specifically for his torment. However, there was no sense of malice or frustration in Edward as he drove; his face was absolutely serene. He never cursed nor shook his hand at the cars in his way. Instead, he was all concentration, going so far as to leave his tongue sticking out of his mouth. This too was part of the game.

Pierre had never seen a man so engaged in the act of driving. He had always seen it as a mere means of getting from place to place — some-

times more or less practical than other means, but not fundamentally different. After years of riding public transit or walking around, cars had become mere objects, fast-moving metal boxes that littered the streets. It was really only when they almost hit him, usually by turning through a crosswalk he was on, that he projected onto them any sort of personality, generally a malicious and ugly one. But now, riding with Edward, he was sucked into the solipsistic worldview that came from driving a fast car. It seemed only fair and natural that Edward should drive the way he did in the car he had. The car was built to do this very thing.

The stereo was playing Jazz fusion, a genre Pierre never would have associated with Edward the person, but perfectly matched Edward the driver and the car he drove. By the time they reached the highway, Pierre's fear had evaporated. He was smiling. He couldn't help it; the thrill was simply too much. They weren't even headed the right way; Edward didn't have a GPS, and he might even have forgotten that Pierre was in the passenger seat. They were just zooming around, passing cars left and right, despite the fact that they had nowhere to be. Driving fast, Pierre realized, has nothing to do with getting places fast. That was pedestrian logic. From inside the car, driving fast was about nothing more than driving fast. What use was there getting anywhere, when getting somewhere meant that you would have to get out of the car?

Usually at this time, Pierre would have just been getting home, dragging himself through the door, down the hallway, before collapsing onto either the armchair or his bed. Too tired to make anything, he likely would have thrown a frozen pizza in the oven, despite the fact that he had grown sick of pizza weeks earlier. It always felt when he got home that he had no time. No time for his own life. Everything that occupied his life only took time away from his life. But here he was,

dinner-less and not even hungry, far from home and unsure whether he would ever make it back, living not his life but Edward's, entirely at his whim. He was not writing, he was not working, he was not producing anything, he was just allowing himself to be carried along by the speed and the music. The feeling arose within him that he had been approaching his life all wrong, that there was something about life that he had never been able to understand. It was something that Edward had grasped, intuitively it seemed, and that he held on to, something that was embodied in midnight driving his uncle's car.

"He's real," Pierre thought. "He could make me real."

The two hadn't spoken a word since getting in the car. This was a solitary drive for each of them. Pierre and Edward were absorbed in two different ideas: Edward in the pure sensation of driving, and Pierre in his usual world of gazing longingly at other people's lives. It was a different and brand new type of life, which made the sensation feel altogether fresh to Pierre, but in most respects it bore very little difference from the thoughts that plagued him every day of his life.

He would never have actually allowed himself to devote his evening hours to driving around aimlessly; for one, the expense must be incredible with gas prices what they were, which would of course mean more time spent working. And, when actually behind the wheel, he was a nervous — nay, terrified — driver, incapable of performing even half the feats Edward pulled off. On top of this, at the end of the day, how would driving around move him toward respectability? What did it contribute to the world? Or rather, how did it add to *his* personal contribution to the world?

It was good enough for Edward. This was not an intentional knock to Edward, but it was a knock, nonetheless. Edward could get away with this, because he was just a person. He wasn't Pierre. Pierre was important. Even in his unimportance, Pierre was important. This

kind of paradise was very nice for Edward, living his life *over there*, somewhere on the outskirts of the world, adding character to the background scenery that surrounded Pierre. But it was not enough for Pierre. He wished desperately that it could be. He wished for that sort of satisfaction, that sort of contentment... no, he wished for that sort of *thrill*. The thrill of losing oneself in an activity without the constant gnawing feeling that there was something more that needed to be done, that one was in this moment not doing what one should be doing.

Out the window, he recognized his grocery store, and realized that they had at some point reached his neighbourhood. "Oh, just turn right over here," he said, pointing to a side street that ran behind a Korean church. Edward just nodded, making the turn without slowing down. "I'm right here," Pierre said, and Edward pulled over to the curb. Pierre wasn't sure what to say as he gathered his bag from the backseat and prepared to contort his way out the door. Edward stared out through the windshield, seeing before him all the miles he was still to drive that night.

Just like that, the magic was over. Pierre felt his stomach grumble.

"Thanks for the ride," he said. "I appreciate it."

"No problem, man," said Edward. "Hope you enjoyed it."

"It was great," said Pierre. "This is a great car."

Chapter Sixteen

Cast Off That Plastic Boogie

Stu, Greg and Pierre walk into a bar. Greg says to Pierre, “Hey, why the long face?”

“Just tired,” Pierre says.

One lesson Pierre had taken from his recent experiences was that he needed to get out more. He figured that perhaps his isolation was a part of the problem. He had shut himself away, first to write his book, and then to work his new job, and thus had lost any sense of his place in the world. So, he had decided to place himself in front of people — those who knew him best and appreciated him most — and see what they thought of it all.

“I feel like I need a hobby,” Pierre said, idly tapping at the edge of his glass.

“Isn’t reading your hobby?” Stu asked.

“I mean a hobby where I do something.” He pounded his fists on the table. “I wanna do something! I wanna race RC cars, or make

quilts, or construct model airplanes, or something. Something real. Tangible. I wanna be a tangible man.”

Greg poked him in the shoulder. “You’re real, Pierre,” he said. “You’re matter.”

“You’re matter... you matter,” Stu mumbled.

“I’m not real,” Pierre insisted.

“What if we all got really into Warhammer or something?” Greg said.

“Too much painting,” said Stu.

“I don’t want more games,” said Pierre. “I have enough games. It’s all just games all over everything. Everything I do is games. My job is a game. My job is the most boring and not-fun game in the world.” He was starting to wish he had never introduced the topic. They didn’t understand what he wanted to say, because he wasn’t able to say it, because he himself did not understand what he wanted to say. “Just forget it,” he said.

“An elephant never forgets,” said Stu, thoughtfully.

“You don’t need a hobby, Pierre,” said Greg. “You need a girlfriend.”

“I don’t think that’s it...”

“Well, *I* sure as hell need a girlfriend,” Greg said. “I need a girlfriend who will quit my job for me, and take me to a different country.”

“Why don’t you just do it” asked Stu.

“No... that would be wrong.”

“What do you need, Stu?” Pierre asked. “I need a hobby; Greg needs a girlfriend. Do you need anything?”

Stu rubbed his chin. “I don’t think I need anything in particular,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about buying a house.”

“A house!?” Greg said.

“I mean, a condo. Not like a house house.”

“Still...”

“Okay, so Stu doesn’t need anything,” Pierre said. “Good work, Stu. You’ve got it all under control.”

“I guess I wouldn’t mind a hobby, too,” said Stu. “We should go hiking next summer.”

“Do you never feel like you’re just... missing something?” Pierre asked. “Like, you should be doing something and you’re not?”

“What should I be doing?”

“There’s nothing to do,” said Greg, “We just mess about until we fall into a pit and die.”

“You’re already in the pit,” said Stu. “Alright, we need to cheer up Greg. Gimme a sec.” He pulled out his phone. “Just wait.”

“I’m a man of misery...” Greg said, and they lapsed into a brief silence. The first synth hit of Billy Ocean’s ‘Get Outta My Dreams, Get Into My Car’ played on the pub speakers. “Oh shit! Oh shit! I’m a man of bliss! I’m a man of bliss!”

Stu turned back to Pierre. “So, you’re not liking the job too much?” he asked.

“Uh, it’s alright. It’s kind of different than I expected.”

“In what way?”

“It’s a lot less work, but a lot more tiring.”

“Yeah, that’s office life. Pays well, though. Better than working at Lee’s.”

“At least at Lee’s I felt like I was existing in the world. Like, I was talking to people, and I could walk outside. At Boston, I just feel like I don’t exist. I’m just living in a box.”

“I didn’t say it before, but it doesn’t seem like it would suit you,” said Greg, resuscitated by the music.

“What would suit me?” asked Pierre.

“Lee’s suited you,” said Greg.

"That kinda sucks," said Pierre. "I don't want to work at a fruit store my whole life."

"You'd rather do QA for a tech company?"

"I don't rather anything. I just feel like everyone who sees me at the fruit store thinks I'm a loser. They're always asking me when I'm going to graduate, as if I should be doing something else. But it's like, what do they want? Someone's gotta work at a fruit store! Those \$15 papayas they buy and complain about aren't going to stock themselves!"

"Who cares? They're miserable about something else," said Greg. "They're miserable about something and they take it out on you. They're losers. We're all fucking losers. Everyone's a loser. Who's winning? Stu's the only person in the world who's not a loser. He's the only one. Everyone else, they talk shit but they're just pissing in the wind. Jobs are stupid. We just do them because we need money to buy video games. Video games are the only fun thing in the world."

"I don't think I'm winning," said Stu. "I'm just living."

"That's how you win, Stu. You're alive. Pierre, you could be alive if you just stop thinking you're not. If you're not living now, when are you going to do it? What are you waiting for? You always said you liked Lee's because you had your own time. You were free! You were free and you chose to crawl back into a box!"

"You don't get it," said Pierre. "I was free but I wasn't doing anything. I was just wasting my life away. My parents thought I was an idiot. I thought I was an idiot."

"What do you think now?"

"I'm a different kind of idiot."

As they were walking past the sports fields again, Pierre felt in his pocket and pulled out his keyring. He held the pouch containing his small piece of the Plastic Boogie in the palm of his right hand, and stared at it. He pushed it around with his left hand. Beyond his palm, he could see the grass as a green blur rushing below him. As he did this, he was listing to the right, walking only to keep from falling down. He was thinking.

Pierre was drunk. And it's fair to say that drunk people who are drunk don't think in the same way as sober people. In most aspects and for most purposes, it is fair to say that their thinking is of a lower quality. It is slower, less focused, forgetful, and prone to error. However, in some aspects and for some purposes, it excels. It excels for exactly the same reasons as it fails. By being plodding, it catches ideas that we often skip over; by being unfocused, it allows totally unrelated ideas to slip together and intermingle; by being forgetful, it puts the thinker into a world where these forgotten things simply don't exist; and by being prone to error, it allows one that childlike freedom from reason, logic, and the fear of being incorrect.

Unfortunately, it is impossible for a sober narrator such as myself to properly describe the meanderings of Pierre's drunken mind, and the whirl of thoughts that accompanied his staring at the pouch in his hand as he walked through that damp, dark field. It is my hope that I have been successful thus far in communicating to you enough of Pierre's thoughts, at various times and in various forms, that a careful reader can assume the tenor and general outline.

What I can tell you is that as he walked, a phrase grew in Pierre's mind:

Cast off that Plastic Boogie!

This phrase kept repeating in his head, in his voice and one other, in between and overlapping all his other thoughts, growing ever and ever

more powerful, until finally he was saying it aloud, first in a mumble and then with greater and greater volume and emphasis:

Cast off that Plastic Boogie! Cast it off!

He was holding the pouch now in a clenched fist up and ahead of him, marching with large steps toward the bleachers beside the soccer pitch; he continued to hold it high above his head as he marched right up to the top step, where his hand loomed ominously over a large metal garbage can attached by chain to a pole stuck in a piece of cement. Atop this bleacher, Pierre began to soliloquize.

In rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter, Pierre amused himself for several minutes with a speech so full of utter nonsense that it would be irresponsible to transcribe it here. The rhymes were forced, the iambs were clumsy, and his adherence to meter was dubious at best. But we have to admit that Pierre carried himself well, such that a deaf observer — or someone merely standing beyond earshot — might have perceived a certain dignity in his oration. And we must admit that any person for whom English was an utter mystery would have been compelled by the sounds, by the unmistakable passion that rung out with his words, and would have wished in that moment that they had the key to deciphering the meaning of words so clearly courageous and beautiful. Sometimes it is just best not to know, and I see it as my responsibility, as the teller of this story, to hide from you any detail or circumstance that may diminish its resonance.

With one last solemn and perceptive observation, communicated in impeccable verse, Pierre ended his speech. And with a final philosophical flourish, he removed that Plastic Boogie from its pouch, gave it a ceremonial yet tender kiss, and held it once more above his head, from where he cast it groundward with all his strength. A metallic clang rang out as it struck the bottom of the bin.

He looked down into the utter darkness where the Plastic Boogie now resided. He felt for a moment a twinge of regret, and almost leaped down into the garbage himself... composing himself, he looked around at the dark field and the empty streets, and felt a sense of freedom and a desire to run. And so he set off across the field toward his friends, tripping only once, laughing and yelling and feeling for all the world like the man for whom this whole darn thing had been made for.

About the author

Mike Blackwell is a fiction writer and essayist based in Saskatoon, Canada. His writing can be found on his website <http://www.balckwell.online> (not a typo.) His prior novel is *Only In Dreams*, available on most online marketplaces or on his website.