

2017

The Penobskan Porcupine Panic

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The Penobskan Porcupine Panic

By

Quinn Riesenman

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On a cold winter's day a community of porcupines huddled very close together to protect themselves from freezing through their mutual warmth. However, they soon felt one another's quills, which then forced them apart. Now when the need for warmth brought them closer together again, the second drawback repeated itself so that they were tossed back and forth between both kinds of suffering until they discovered a moderate distance from one another, at which they could best endure the situation.

- Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 2

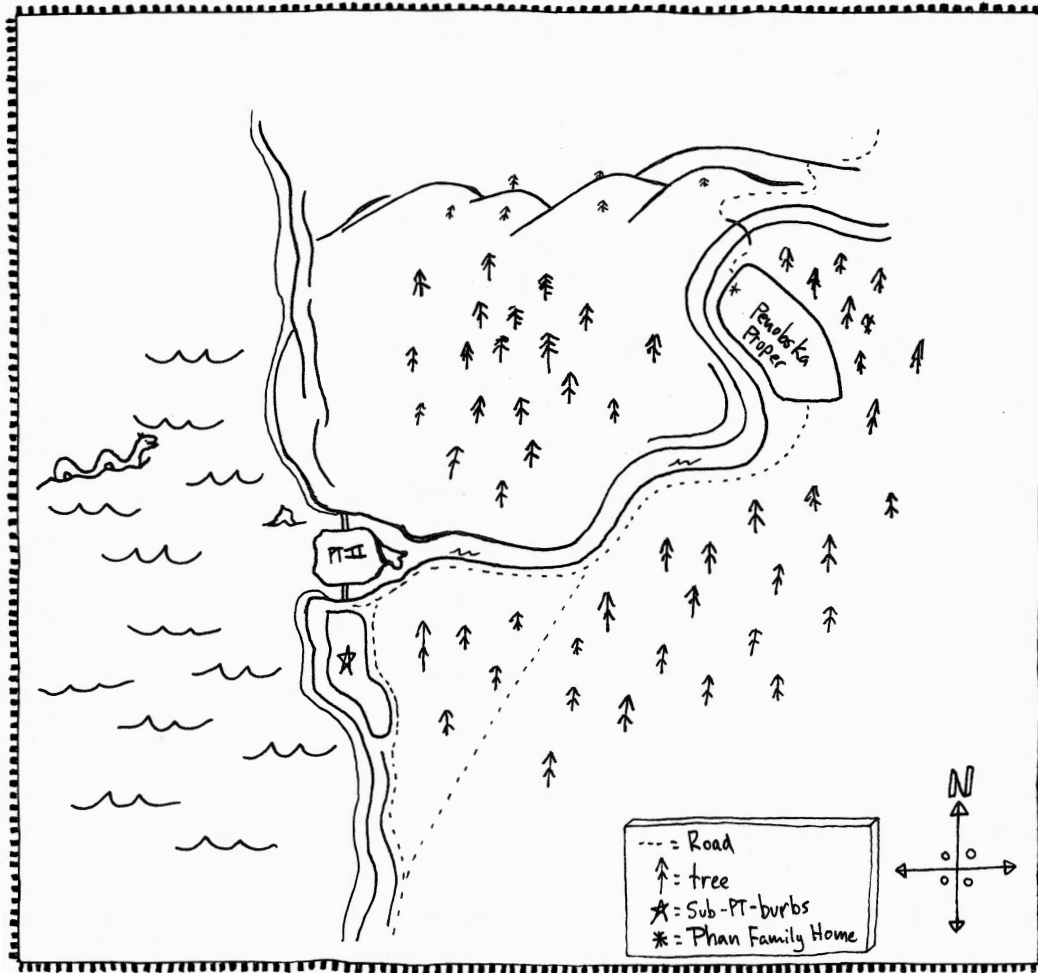
Why would we try, why should we try to make anew
When we could be intoxicated by this ordinary turn again?

- Quilt, "Penobska Oakwalk"

It is from that in water we were from
Long, long before we were from any creature.
Here we, in our impatience of the steps,
Get back to the beginning of beginnings,
The stream of everything that runs away.

- Robert Frost, "West-Running Brook"

PENOBSKA & its environs



Buried at the River's edge, beneath the wind-waved sand, beneath the first thick, gooey strips of mud that drink the soaked River, beneath dense oily layers of long-slued blackened ferns, past the fossilized flower petals, some less twisted or grained than others, past compressed fans of cedar needles and serrated bunches of porcupine quills set like a god's graffiti in the sunless stone, between pressurized puddles of granite and veins of quartz, under the twisted wreckage of what could either be a machine's power cables or the truncated roots of vanished trees, through lightless mile after mile of quiet heavy earth, under all this and under the remainder of the world's cumulative weight, through the molten core of it all, you'll find all of it again, in reverse, until you emerge dripping with sand from the bank of some other river, less mythic, some simply flowing vein. You'll find yourself in what once folks called Penobska Prefecture. Stand here, drip your sand from the tips of fingers. Some animals may find their way from shadows slowly to be around you. A huddle rotating around the earth-borne visitor, dripping with the silt and soil of the middle of it all.

Features partially humanoid, ridged like a hacksaw with rows of scintillating quills. They might use language. Their eyes might catch yours and wink. In them you might find someone you think you once knew.

Shake your sand off, traveler, knock those stones out of your shoes, unroot your right foot from the tangled brambles that catch you and bare your wrinkled face to the sun. Sit down, and see what this place has to tell you. See the past caught up in the gleam of these creatures' eyes.

Chapter One – In Which Tripdoe Contemplates a Stranger's Living Room While Pretending to Diagnose His Treadmill, and We Learn a Thing or Two About the Phan Family

'I was about twenty minutes into my usual jog when the phone rang, and I pressed the STOP WORKOUT button there,' he said, gesturing with a bruised wrinkled hand at the treadmill in the corner, 'and I hear this...this sort of *grinding* noise, see, as if somebody outside's dragging a slab of...flagstone over the sidewalk, and before I have time to hop off the damn thing, it speeds almost totally up. Like a awful engine, taking my feet right there from under me, and I go head-first into the belt, as you can see here. Yeahp. I thought I was all done for, it don't take much to put an old-timer like me out of commission, but I came to and the thing was just speeding there without anyone on it, I could see the strip of tread that took some of my skin with it going around and around, and I thought, by God if the damn thing didn't bust up on me again, and busted me up here in the process.'

Tripdoe Phan, 19, Treadmill Repair Specialist, crouched and scribbled in the closed-blinds living room of this old man's wood-paneled home. She held her clipboard in the crook of her left arm as she took notes. A waft of old carpet smell tumbled under her nose like a wad of dryer fuzz in the wind. 'How long've you had this machine?'

He was wearing a plain white tee-shirt tucked into a loose pair of pleated slacks. His skin was that papery brittleness of the aged, and a strip of gauze covered the right side of his face. Animal cracker-shaped bruises traipsed up and down his arms in a blotchy procession. He calculated quietly for a short minute. 'Coming on twenty-some years, I guess.'

She whistled, impressed. Coming into people's homes, she's always amazed by what they hold on to, how devoted to ageing equipment they are. 'These old things'

circuitry tends to get mixed up after a while. The wire insulation gets all gooey and greasy, things start softening up, you know. My guess is something's touching something else that it shouldn't be. Like the STOP button's wires and the INCREASE SPEED button's wires, in this case. Which is...' she traced the gauze on his face with her eyes, '...you know. Kind of a problem.'

'Heck,' he said, an embarrassed cloud passing over him that he tried dispersing with a short thick wad of laughter, 'you don't have to tell me twice. My question is whether the old thing's worth spending on repairs or is scrapping it better? My thirsty vengeance says one thing and my pocketbook a whole other.'

The old machine – built in a lighter time – weighed close to a lot. Thick wheels sprung from its front corners like iron mushrooms and the rubber mat circulating underneath the user – worn down where years of the old man's sneaker'd feet had tread it – could give an ox a tough time towing. Even the buttons – as Tripdoe fiddled with them – were thick and heavy as if their making took place in a dusty cobblestone forge. A relic, really. It was no surprise this thing bugged out on the poor guy, and was a miracle it didn't happen sooner, or with more permanent consequences.

Tripdoe, for the sake of the old timer, took her professional time assessing the machine she'd already decided needed to be hauled, dismantled, dumped, and rusted. She exhaled through pursed lips as if wrangling down the decision in her mind. She *could* fix it, sure. She could fix any treadmill in any shape anybody showed her. But, honestly, she just didn't want to spend any more time crouching here in this old man's living room. Something about it – perhaps all the small personal details that lunged out at her but to him had probably become invisible years ago – made her feel unmoored from herself.

The thick, mustard carpeting tracked with the shuffling of his socked feet. The brown-framed paintings, hung from the faux-wood panel walls, of grey-skied harbors and boats bumping the docks waiting for a storm to pass over onto land unpainted, with small incoherent black signatures in their corners to commemorate the probably dead or dying artist. It was all weighed down by an unfamiliarly familiar cloak of sentiment, an outdated simplicity of design and tone and texture, all huddling there in his house, on the man's sloped shoulders – and on top of it all the old man's shiny, sincere gaze, his twitched look of concern when she finally said, 'Well...you *could* go through the repairs, but with a machine this old, who knows what all we'd find in there that needs fixing. I can't guarantee you a price by just looking at it like this. We'd have to crack it open and take a look before I give you any numbers.' She glanced at her clipboard, then at her watch. 'Aaaaand...I got a few other appointments this afternoon, and soonest I could be back is...sometime next week? By then you could be back up on a brand new GaspMaster in here for the same price as repairing this old thing. Plus those new models have it all. Cable jacks, mist-fans, spit trays. The works.' She gave the clunk a polite toeing with her right shoe and waited for what she knew would be the man's quiet acceptance.

Tripdoe started repairing treadmills and other indoor exercise equipment at a very young age. The treadmill fascinated her. Roge, Tripdoe's dad, would always tell her how when she was a toddler she would sit on the carpet and watch him or Tripdoe's mom Nikosi run on the old wood-print-paneled machine he'd picked up at a garage sale for fifteen dollars. He told her how her eyes would follow the blurred *Fast Track* logo printed on the mat as it shot from the front of the belt, curving back underneath, and

back out from the front over and over. Her eyes ran from right to left like an oracle in the heat of prophetic reception, and no matter what she'd been doing, or what her parents had given her as a distraction to do, she'd abandon whatever she'd been doing or whatever her parents had given her as a distraction to do, so that she could watch one or the other parent run in place there on the treadmill facing the window that looked out into the backyard.

Tripdoe's fixed gaze made Nikosi self-conscious while running: 'Trippy, sweetheart, do you wanna watch a program while momma runs, hmm?' she would ask. Tripdoe would sit on the carpet, legs partially draped in a bright-blue and white striped blanket that she chewed on the corners of, moving her pursed lips from one corner of her face to another, puzzling together the machine's mysteries and ignoring her mother's high-pitched bargains. Behind uneven reptilian blinks, Tripdoe's eyes ran the treadmill.

Eventually Nikosi started running outside. Tripdoe, still obviously in the throes of some incomplete quest for understanding, would pull Nikosi by the hand to the treadmill when she saw her mom lacing up her running shoes, her slick black hair pulled into a tight ponytail, wires trailing from her ears. Nikosi would detach Tripdoe by turning the treadmill on to let it spin around and around. That's how she learned Tripdoe wasn't interested in watching her run as much as just watching the treadmill run itself.

Roge on the other hand used Tripdoe's enthusiasm for the treadmill as athletic inspiration: 'I feel like an Olympian,' he'd say at dinner while Nikosi chomped a cob of corn. 'It's like she's cheering me on silently or something. My own cheer squad. Plus it's gotta be setting a good example for her, watching all this exercise take place around the house. She'll probably end up being a national athletic heroin. A hurdler or something, her face, flexed biceps printed on cereal boxes or whatever,' he chuckled and chewed, coughing as a renegade kernel flew down the wrong pipe. Toddler Tripdoe, hearing this, took a handful of pork chop and dunked it quietly into her glass of milk. 'Swimmy swimmy,' she sang.

This was right around the time of the initial porcupine sightings.

Mr. Bozeman was Penobska's Prefect, its mayor and figurehead. He'd been not so much elected as hoisted into office randomly from a crowd of people who showed up for a Prefecture Public Meeting a few decades ago after the previous Prefect had disappeared in the wilderness outside town. The porcupine panic initially started because of Bozeman. Here's the transcript of the first televised segment of his initial 'Porcupine Awareness' campaign:

Bozeman: Hello, fellow Penobskans. I'm speaking to you all tonight to bring a particular set of circumstances to your awareness. Recently, my homeotherapist prescribed thoughtful walks through the woods as a means of balancing a few of my chakras that have been a little wonky as of late. As far as I'm aware, one's chakras are like emotional gyroscopes, and a few of mine have been tilted slightly this way or that. The symptoms are nothing to dwell on, just a few lapses here and there...Eh... but anyway...on one such walk, not two miles outside of town, I began feeling particularly hot and sweaty; something was definitely out of place. I felt as if something, or someone, were observing me.

So I took stock of my surroundings to make sure I was not being pursued. In the distance some fifty yards to my right I noticed several medium-sized mammals, lumbering in my direction. I crouched behind a shrub in an attempt to disguise myself among the leaves, branches, and other plant material while also maintaining a direct line of sight on the approaching troupe. Alas, my eyes picked up the anatomical features that suggested members of the porcupine species, and for a brief moment my body seized with terror at the possibility; I became rigid with fear. This close to Penobska? Travelling in packs freely about the wilderness? I thought of the children in our town. I thought of the elderly, perhaps relaxing on a park bench in the open air contemplating the general delight of their long, eventful, and productive lives. I regained my composure and managed to alight from there without attracting their attention. However, their progression through the forest suggested they were heading in the direction of town. I'd be a fool not to pass this information on to you, the citizens of Penobska, and I encourage you all, especially those of you whose homes skirt the edge of the forest, to keep a vigilant eye out for any mammalian activity, especially that of the porcupine. If you make a sighting please dial the number on screen and make your report. Thank you all, and goodnight.

At first nobody really knew what to make of Bozeman's televised speech, or why they should all of a sudden be worried about porcupines of all things. After all, there hadn't ever been any serious problems before, in fact some of the townspeople kind of like having some semi-docile wild animals to peer at from their back yards. Roge just ignored the whole growing fuss, but Nikosi's ears pricked up. Roge started finding her standing at the back window in the pale hours of the afternoon, arms akimbo, gazing out into their backyard while Tripdoe played with old spoons in the long grass, the TV on in the background.

Nikosi stopped running outside, and spent more and more time in the house, staring out the back window and watching Bozeman's now-permanent porcupine preparedness channel. She dragged the recliner over to the window and moved the phone so that it sat next to her on a tall wooden reading stand, trailing its curly cords halfway across the living room, as she gazed through binoculars into the dark forest beyond their backyard.

When their old garage-sale treadmill pattered out a few years later, when Tripdoe was about five years old, Roge found her one morning on the unplugged treadmill pushing off the front panel with the open palms of her hands, laboring with her legs to make the mat roll laboriously under her. 'I'm fixing it, Pappy.' Roge just laughed and patted her bouncing hair before brewing a pot of coffee.

A few months after the Phan family's treadmill broke down, Tripdoe asked sweetly if she could use a screwdriver in order to take a look at its insides. As far as either Roge or Nikosi could tell, Tripdoe hadn't the first piece of knowledge about motors or electricity, nor the cognitive equipment to crack into, let alone fix, anything of the sort. It wasn't that they thought she was stupid, she was just so young.

Perplexed by Tripdoe's request, Nikosi came up with various diversion tactics to discourage Tripdoe's use of tools, the screwdriver in particular. 'What if she runs around

with it and trips, hmm?’ she asked Roge. ‘Do you want to be the one to carry our daughter into the ER with a screwdriver sticking out of her eye socket? Or what if she starts jabbing around in the toaster with it? We can’t watch her all the time, and we can only tell her *no* about so many things.’ Roge didn’t have much to say about *those* particular images, but it didn’t end up mattering much anyway. Tripdoe, bored by her parents’ game of word-tennis, snuck the screwdriver from the toolbox in the garage and started performing clandestine repairs on the dusty machine by the glow of a small pink flashlight she’d saved up her tickets at the arcade downtown for.

One day, Roge came home from work and she was trotting triumphantly on a low setting, making sure to step deliberately on the *Fast Track* logo as it emerged each time from the front of the machine. The little red-handled screwdriver, he discovered, sat in the toolbox slightly askew.

Later, after Nikosi uncovered and confiscated a shoebox full of salvaged wires, screwdrivers, scraps of old rubber, the pink flashlight, and elementary drawings of circuit boards from under Tripdoe’s bed, Nikosi scratched under her right breast and exhaled, looking at the open shoebox. ‘Roge I get this image of her on her back on one of those rollie carts under a Chevy in twenty years with grease-matted eyebrows and a husband named Luke who’s got a checkered racing flag neck tattoo. Shouldn’t we be signing her up for some gymnastics classes or something? Or piano?’

Roge shrugged and gestured toward the shoebox they had open on their nightstand. ‘You see what she’s willing to do to keep at it. And for goodness sakes she’s only eight years old. I suspect if we try to stop her she’ll split for hills, start haunting junkyards looking for scraps of wires to splice together or something. You can’t suppress a kid like that, Nikki. It’ll just come back to us somehow anyway. Now don’t you wanna come to bed, hmmm?’ he asked throatily as he launched into the air from their bathroom and onto the bed, flopping up and down like a fish.

Nikosi reluctantly returned the shoebox to Tripdoe the next evening after Tripdoe got home from school. Tripdoe sat at the kitchen table chewing on the ends of her hair, swinging her feet around in wild little loops as they dangled from under the chair. Nikosi gave her three conditions: ‘One: that you never fiddle with anything inside our house, especially not the electrical wiring inside the walls, and keep your distance from the toaster. In fact, keep away from the kitchen in general while holding anything metal...besides spoons or forks, I guess. Two: tell me or dad when you’re working on things. And three: you have to wash your hands after you’re done. I don’t want greasy little handprints all over the house. Got it?’ Tripdoe nodded in agreement, a nod that Nikosi couldn’t help but translate as ‘Well duh.’ Nikosi slid the shoebox onto the table toward her. Tripdoe bent back the cardboard lid and gazed into it like a sea captain might gaze at a chest of doubloons. She rubbed her little hands together and smiled.

From that point on, when she wasn’t sitting at school mentally disassembling treadmills while she should have been paying attention to a history lesson, or hastily eating meals, she was usually found gouging out the electrical innards of some machine or another, crossing wires to make whole a discombobulated mess of parts; she’d made friends with the wealthier kids at school knowing their parents would have newer treadmills in their homes. Whenever she went over to their houses she’d make sure to

pack along her little shoebox, which itself needed duct tape repairs from being toted around so frequently. When the parents of her friends dropped her off back at home the mornings after sleepovers, they'd always have some story about how they'd woken up in the middle of the night to the sounds of metal on metal, thinking themselves victims of robbery, only to find Tripdoe elbow-deep in their treadmills smudged with dust and grease, a sharpness of concentration rimming her eyes. Nikosi always apologized to the parents, but Roge just smiled and asked if she'd damaged anything. They always said, 'Well, no. It's strange. I think she tuned it up for us, actually.'

Slowly, word got around that the Phan's daughter could crack into old treadmills and fix them up without hardly blinking an eye. At around the seventh grade she got her first payment for fixing a neighbor's burnt-out treadmill.

When Prefect Bozeman – who Roge worked for as personal assistant – found out about Tripdoe's specialty, he renovated a large room in his basement and bought three old treadmills that he hired someone to run on four times a week. Slowly they wore down and slowly he planned on asking her to come work on them for him.

By then, though, Nikosi – and most of Penobska – had fallen into the mouth of Bozeman's Porcupine Panic. She wouldn't leave the house, and sat in the reclining chair all day watching the daily Prefecture Preparedness Programs, designing complex evacuation maps for the family, and researching porcupines' evolutionary history: 'It's obvious. Their whole genetic history is sharpened to a point, and they're getting sharper, their quills are mashing into firmer bundles, and their eyes are growing heavy with sentience.' She'd holler stuff like this into the kitchen where Roge, bewildered, would be hunched over a cutting board, quietly chopping vegetables in preparation for dinner.

When Tripdoe left the seventh grade, Nikosi had started eating mostly canned food and popcorn. Her physical boundaries had expanded in all directions, and soon she was only ever found wearing light grey sweat suits stained darker in patches by spilled Spam, popcorn, canned beets. She'd quit her job at the bookstore. By the end of Tripdoe's eighth grade year Nikosi had gained over ninety pounds and rarely left the living room, whose back-facing window was rimmed with black and white printouts of porcupines that Roge assumed she was using to identify the creatures she never spotted. She contracted Tripdoe to design a special track for her chair to ride on so that she could glide from the TV to the window without all the effort of getting up and scooting it manually over the carpet, which had become nearly impossible.

Seeing her overweight mother drag the chair to the window gave Tripdoe all the encouragement she needed to design and install the track as quickly as possible, and even took a few days off from school to finish the job.

Roge didn't know what to do, and spent more time at work to avoid having to worry himself over solutions and conversations he couldn't quite seem to wrangle under control. Soon Nikosi was restricted to the checkered-blue recliner over the sides of which her increasingly rolling mounds of flesh spilled like clothes from a neglected laundry hamper, gliding back and forth between TV and window. Tripdoe barely noticed, or at least acted like she barely noticed, now in fact being quite busy repairing

Bozeman's and whoever's else who asked treadmills every couple weeks and spending the money he paid her on new tools and parts.

Chapter Two – In Which Tripdoe Breaks for Lunch at Gullah Bowl

Then one day toward the end of the summer of her 19th year: Tripdoe, breaking for lunch after having sealed the deal with the old man who's living room gave her the creeps, swung the repair truck into the parking lot of a Gullah Bowl: Quick Creole Restaurant. Taking the turn into a space next to a ragged Vespa scooter, the loose treadmill parts in the truckbed rolled and clanged into each other and into the side of the truck. Tripdoe whistled melodically over the metal anti-music and wished the radio in the truck weren't permanently stuck on the Penobska Prefecture Porcupine Invasion Drill Station, which was a looped recording of Prefect Bozeman making siren sounds with his mouth and periodically saying in a flat, even voice: 'Inhabitants of Penobska Prefecture, this is a Porcupine Invasion Drill. In the case of an actual Porcupine Invasion, bar yourself in a windowless room and wait for further instructions on this frequency. Thank you.'

The station had been sending Bozeman's precautionary loops into the airwaves for the past four months, and most everybody in Penobska Prefecture had stopped listening. But every time Tripdoe started the truck up, the radio turned on automatically and, being stuck on the station, her ears were subjected to a brief blast of Bozeman's mouth-siren before she pressed the dial off.

In Gullah Bowl, some heads turned from bowls of gumbo to watch Tripdoe as she – in pressed white uniform repair shirt and navy pants – walked in. The wet chomping of the clientele backdropped Tripdoe as she scanned the menu. Spicy sausage gumbo, crawfish gumbo, shrimp gumbo, vegetarian gumbo, and so forth. The crowd of noise behind her sounded like a clothes dryer filled with warm sausages, tumbling moistly. The soft, velvet jazz dripping from the ceiling seemed to be in time with the sound somehow.

Tripdoe ate there almost every day during the week. A brief, soupy, rich respite nestled warmly at the crux of treadmill tedium.

From the kitchen, shuffling toward the cash register, much to her eye-rolling displeasure, the narrow hog-trough face of Fenny Joils glistened like crude oil on the feathers of an endangered bird in the light of the order-screen he approached. Seeing her waiting at the counter, his smile opened like a wallet stuffed with damp business cards. 'Well shoot, good afternoon there Ms. Phan! Such a *rarity* seein' you around Gullah Bowl here! Heyuckheyuck.' His laughter smeared across the countertop and into Tripdoe's ears. Fenny twisted his head around to make sure his one and only coworker Big J – standing hunched over a pot of gumbo in the back – laughed. Even the sogginess of Fenny's greetings failed to overpower Tripdoe's love of gumbo; her loathing of Fenny and his sock-with-a-hole-in-it sense of humor could never make the gumbo any less appealing, as hard as that was for her to keep believing, persistent as he was and all.

'Ah Fenny. I see that reptile brain transplant went well,' she said. 'Although it certainly didn't make you any better looking. I'll have a bowl of shrimp gumbo. Medium spice.'

He tapped the order into the screen, a large wet rag of a grin wiped itself across his face. 'Well, how adventurous of you, Ms. Phan! Why, I've *never* seen you order *that*

before! Hyeckhyeckhyeck.’ He twisted back to see Big J stirring and snickering over a huge pot of gumbo. ‘Hey, uh, by the way,’ he said, leaning on the counter with his elbow, ‘...*Calypso Comet II*’s playing at the drive-in this Saturday if maybe you wanted to, you know, ride bikes over there together...I found a stash of my dad’s old bourbon, we could pour some in a water bottle and...’

‘It’s a *drive*-in, Fenny. Not a *peddle*-in. Plus I’m already going with Lambo. He’s driving. Now here. I’m trying to pay for the gumbo, if you’ll just...’ Tripdoe held out a couple bills toward Fenny who ignored them. She moved them closer and closer toward his face...

‘Well maybe I’ll see you there then, heyuckheyuck. I’ll knock on the hood to warn you two so’s I don’t *interrupt* nothing too steamy or nothin’...’ the bills inched closer and closer until Tripdoe stuffed them into Fenny’s mouth. ‘*Glaghyumff*, hey that’s *unsanitary*.’

‘In your case, Fenny, money in the mouth’s probably a hygienic improvement.’
‘Huh...?’

They were in the same graduating class out of Penobska High just two months ago. Fenny’d always harbored a leaky sailboat of a crush on Tripdoe, and tried in the most soul-nauseating ways to convince her to climb aboard...the time in Biology when he actually *dipped a comb in Vaseline* to slick his hair back in front of her, a scene that every now and then returns to her in nightmares. But, uh, well...Tripdoe was immune to his advances by this point, and only interacted with him because of the gumbo...he the snickering troll under the bridge on the way to the magic castle, Tripdoe the obliged pilgrim.

He fished the money out of his mouth and Tripdoe endured a few more gobbles of flirty sarcasm, stared blankly through several poorly-deployed winks as he counted her change out and slid it across the counter to her saying, ‘We’ll have that right out for you, ma’am.’

She sat in a corner spot by the soda machine, sipping from a plastic cup of water, out of sight of Fenny. The sweaty necks of her fellow Penobskans shone like saran wrap. Fat men in collared shirts hunched their hairy necks over steaming bowls. Their wives’ pinkie fingers tautly aimed away from the spoons they held. Penobska’s genetic pool was less like the full-sized Olympic kind and more like a fill-with-a-hose-and-drag-around-the-yard kind; people looked puffy and homogenous, with stale blue eyes and rounded-off skulls like expressive watermelons. It always amazed her that there were so many treadmills that needed repairing in a town so full of people who – by all available evidence – didn’t know the first thing about personal fitness.

Those born in Penobska lived, bred, and died in Penobska; that’s how it’d been for as long as anyone could remember, although on some evenings after having smoked a joint or two in the shed behind her house, Tripdoe couldn’t help but entertain this vestigial buzz in the back of her head that seemed to say she’d come from somewhere else, somewhere far from Penobska, but not quite *not* Penobska, exactly, instead some core – or symmetrical yet invisible spirit – of Penobska she’d never really seen or heard, but just, somehow, intuited. And looking in the mirror, past her bloodshot eyes, she saw something in the structure of her face, the skull under her skin, that told her the

same thing. Like the outline of a map drawn on the other side of a receipt for an item she didn't remember buying.

Fenny called out: 'Ms. Phan, an order of shrimp gumbo here at the counter for ya.'

Coming back to her seat, gumbo-bowl steaming hypnotically in front of her, Tripdoe scanned the crowd again. An older, bearded guy sitting alone in a booth by the window caught her eye; she'd never seen him around town, let alone in Gullah Bowl. He was taking slow bites from his gumbo, and his hand shook like a feather each time he brought it to his mouth. He had on a long-sleeve shirt with a big picture printed on it of what from Tripdoe's point of view looked like a sunglasses-wearing hen standing on a pool table; a duct-taped motorcycle helmet on the floor by his chair held a pair of ratty gloves and a scuffed leather coat hung off the back of his chair. His hair was cropped short, grey, and whirled from wearing the helmet, and his scruffy yet short beard was of the same color. Very briefly – she barely noticed – something seemed to ripple up and down his sleeve from underneath...a quick shimmer passed across his shoulder and disappeared, the faintest flicker of fabric. She kept watching, but he acted the same as most everyone else, and the rippling stopped.

Feeling the steam under her chin, she took a thick shrimp from her gumbo and traveled the miniscule highway of shrimp shit running along its back with the electric-blue minivans of her eyes, then ate it. She stirred, watching chunks of seafood and vegetable rise tumbling, and settle. She gathered another red bite and lifted it to her mouth –

Fifteen Minutes Ago

An electronic remix of "All Along the Watchtower" played from the ceiling. Synthesizers designed to sound like Bob Dylan warbled worn-out wearinesses as Big J and Fenny tipped industrial-sized cans of tomato chunks into even more industrial-sized steel pots in the cramped kitchen of Gullah Bowl. They snickered at jokes either made to pass the hot time, hunched over the bubbling pots, arms churning the thick substance. Bubble bubble, gumbo in Gullah, the clockwise stirring of the stew, the steamy rising of the daily grinding, Big J and Fenny, chasing down their paychecks with heads full of steam. The two boys sweat. Synth-Bob's splitting harmonica had been replaced with a rapid succession of reverberating beeps and boops, which the radio station broadcasting the song was supposed to warn people about due to rumors of the sound setting off unforetold seizures in the station's listeners. It accompanied the thick splashes of tomatoes as they tumbled into the pot...

'Gosh golly gosh,' Fenny said over the beeps, the boops, the splashes. 'It's sure a hot one back here today, ain't it?' Little racetracks of sweat bent down from his neck into the unbuttoned mouth of his red-collared shirt.

'What'd ya mean, *today*? It's always a hot one back here.' Big J angled his dripping head to the burners, as if to say: Uh...?

The cauldrons of simmering, lightly bubbling gumbo radiated heat inside the teal-tiled kitchen, and only when one of the Summer Jobber boys cracked the freezer to grab frozen sausages or shrimp to huck into the mix did the rippling heat's edges soften. Sometimes the boys joked about crawling in there for a *well-earned siesta* during the hotter hours of the summer days, frozen mounds of shrimp for pillows and so forth, but

of course never did. They just stirred and scooped and poured and stirred and scooped, and every thirty-five-or-so minutes Fenny went out back where the shimmering broken-glass parking lot unfolded into the strip mall to smoke cigarettes and grind gravel under the sole of his rubber kitchen shoes while listening through the door to whatever hum played from the ceiling inside. Gnats and flies, led there by the sun-hot dumpster, would whiz in their patterns like disorganized acrobats through his exhaled smoke.

His stepmom Wei hated his smoking, his dad Ruthbert never noticed, being a catatonically depressed multiple amputee, and Fenny himself disliked his own habit, the feeling, the way his hands stunk after each brown and white stick he sucked into his bloodstream and brain and bowels, but he kept knocking the pack against his hands to free the smoke, and free the smoke each outbreath, on and on and in and on and out...

Fenny scratched the back of his red Gullah Bowl hat. Under that hat a geyser of anticipation was near to bursting the top of his head clean into steam, but in his cool eighteen and three-quarter years of life he had found ways to keep things under control, keep his lid on...but *gosh golly gosh* was he just brimming to show Big J what he picked up yesterday from the Asian food market where his stepmom Wei went bi-monthly to get those fat old white radishes that only they sell, cuz she...well.... He was hardly able to keep his mind on the job, but splish splash splat there it went. *And on account of how the summer's almost through and I'll be quitting sometime soon, I don't see why a coupla Summer Jobbers can't have a little fun every once and a while...*

'Big J,' Fenny hooted, 'you ever feel like this gumbo's a little light on the spice? Like maybe we're making it too...*tame*...on account of all the wimps out there ordering the stuff? You ever wanna make it more...*authentic*?'

Big J, whose basketball of a face turned toward Fenny revealing tomato-splatter polka-dots on brow, chin, cheeks, said, 'Whaddya mean, Fen? Put extra pepper in the gumbo? Whaddif someone complains about it and it comes back on us?'

Earlier in the summer when endless days of gumbo-stirring stretched in front of them, Big J and Fenny went down to the river one day after work, the sun still high and hot. They hopped around on the stones skipping flat discuses of rock into the flow, chatting low and kiddishly the while. Around a southern bend in the river, they came upon a rusted-out engine somebody'd dumped on the bank. A tiny bird flew out of it as the two boys approached. Big J gave the thing an exploratory kick and said to Fenny, who stood there scraping some of the rust off with a windy old twig, 'I betcha Monday's pay I can lift this here engine up over my head.'

Fenny sized his coworker up and spat into the water, threw the rust-tipped twig in after, and said 'Don't throw yer back out, big guy. There's plenty of people who needs work at the Gullah Bowl, heh heh.' Big J rubbed his mitts together, squatted low to wrap his arms around the engine, and scooped it high overhead and *whooshing, thunking, splunking* right into the water like no whoop. He danced around like a show horse clapping on its toes in front of a crowd of Equestrians while swiping rusty handprints all over the fronts of his jeans. Fenny just nodded and stretched his lips over his teeth like a dehydrated lizard, deciding right then he'd never get on Big J's bad side, or bet against his lifting. The sunken, bubbling engine, meanwhile, was busy shedding a red ribbon of rust downstream, like a leaky capillary...

A gust of steam wafted under Fenny's chin, bringing him out of the memory. 'Well, J,' he said, 'on account of the summer being so close to finished and us being so close to quittin, I figured that, you know, maybe it wouldn't hurt to do a little practical prankery around here to...*lighten* the mood just a touch, hmm? *Spice* things up a bit, eh? Hyuckhyuckhyuck.'

'What're you getting on to, huh?'

His deep-sea fish of a rubber-gloved hand darted into the folds of his shirt. Big J stopped stirring to watch the hand search around amid the red cotton. When Fenny pulled it out it held a clear plastic container like what sweet cherries come in, but these weren't cherries. Gnarled red bumpy boily peppers peeped from the plastic like pimple-swollen trolls. At a certain angle, they seemed to have millimeter-tall red-orange haloes radiating off them.

'Gosh,' Big J said. 'Those look awful mean.'

'Oh. *Oh*. These're mean, alright. Ghost peppers, J. *Ghost* peppers. They'll haunt yer palate worse than a real ghost haunts...uh...an old *mansion*.' He daintily unpopped the plastic lid and lifted one of the bumpy devils in between two cautious digits as if about to present it as a bouquet to a grieving widow, and...*whoops*...tossed it into the gumbo, stem and all. Big J stared with wide eyes.

'Oh, man. Fenny...maybe...Fenny...'

'Huh? *Wha?*' *whoops* again, this time into Big J's pot. Fenny's rubber hand darted with the plastic tub back under his shirt, and when it came back out he found his big spoon, and kept stirring. Slowly Big J's eyes settled into half-lidded homes and he too stirred, nearly forgetting. Fenny eyed Big J out of the reddened corner of his left eye and said slow: 'There's just two. Maybe nobody'll even...' but the high-pitched beeper at the door, signaling a customer, interrupted him.

Chapter Three – In Which We Float Some Distance Above Penobska Proper and Outer Penobska in a Multicolored Hot Air Balloon, and Receive a History Lesson on Pixie Town and its Discontented Inhabitants

Penobska Prefecture rested twenty-or-so miles in from The Ocean along the banks of the Katabasis River in a spot clear and cocoa-smooth, like the surface of a glass walnut. Along the banks red, brown, orange, grey boulders crumbled in geodic clumps and rolled gradually sloughing into the water. To the north, forests of massive cedar, spruce, pine leaned in toward the town like an eighty-year-old man leaning in to hear his waitress ask what kind of soup he wants. The trees' mossy beards brushed against each other in the wind. They were descendants of the old logging companies' required re-planting, some of the originals having even fallen over with age, rotted nurses guarding wind-shivered seedlings, and shading daytime nappers such as the salamander, the shrew, the newt, the chipmunk, the squirrel. Nobody cared much about all that old hooley though.

Penobska Proper – what everyone in Penobska knew meant the city – was separated from the denser forest on all sides by a fifteen-foot tall steel fence that, after years of increasing porcupine tension and sightings, Bozeman dumped funding in order

to erect. Foot-wide wooden troughs filled with broken glass sat at the top of the fence. Before the troughs' installation, the townspeople got together to paint flowers and sunsets on the sides of them. 'Operation Beautify' as the fliers Bozeman distributed called it.

In a commencement speech for the event, Bozeman said: 'For heaven's sake, people, we've been living in fear for too dang long! The prickly menace will finally remain at bay. I know that this fence isn't the most aesthetic option, but dammit, it'll keep Penobska porcupine-free! We've gathered here today to beautify our newfound security; we can't be walled in by bland wood planks and steel! Let's keep our town spruce, safe, and pretty!' shouted Bozeman as his fist, curled tightly around a paintbrush recently doused in canary yellow, shot up into the air. He stood on one of the troughs he'd up-ended to use as a temporary podium, the crowd bubbling him.

The troughs of glass were to keep invaders and wildlife from climbing into the city. The glass would cut their hands or feet or paws into confetti, was the idea. Bozeman proclaimed: 'Porcupines may be decent arborealists, but I'd like to see them try getting their little hands...or, uh...paws?...across this system here.' He theatrically stomped one foot down on his trough podium for emphasis. Then he hopped down and painted a startlingly vivid yellow crocus on its side in a concentrated silence. The event was fun for everyone including Tripdoe, up until her foot tendons got incised by a shard of dropped glass she stepped on. Roge whisked her home to blast the wound with anti-bacterial spray and Tripdoe pouted the entire rest of the day. She'd wanted to paint a few gears and wires into the otherwise flower-laden scenes her fellow Penobskans were content with.

The Phan household sat right on the edge between city and forest. Their backyard once went from lawn to scrub and gradually merged right into the thick growth of the forest itself. When Bozeman proposed the erection of the trough-topped fence, some of the Phan's yard had to be hacked back and set apart by mulch and landscaping for the installation. Roge, though uneasy about the fence, sighed with relief when it was finally up. He'd hoped the fence would offer Nikosi peace of mind so that she could get back to normal and stop obsessing over the possibility of porcupine invasion. She forced Roge to stop cutting the grass in the backyard in hopes of it growing tall enough to block out the view of all that shifting greenery behind the fence.

Besides Bozeman's obsessive, sometimes worrying leadership style and the inclusion of the fence in their little world, life was generally fairly straightforward for people in Penobska. Paved roads, fresh air, trimmed green yards. The tap water tasted fine (although the piping was corroding and lead had been rising in the water, worse in some parts of town than others). Everyone had their spot in the machine that was a functional Prefecture: from the tailors and bakers and treadmill repair specialists to Prefect Bozeman himself. There were nine restaurants, three grocery stores, three banks, nine bars and/or taverns, a crematorium and funeral home, a small fish market, several clothiers, a pharmacy, a barbershop, a semi-functional car repair garage, a small police force and fire brigade, and handfuls of independent contractors, including Tripdoe's self-run treadmill repair business that relied almost solely on Bozeman, Tripdoe's most regular and well-paying client.

To the south of Penobska Proper, the Katabasis River bent and curled to the east so as to cradle the nestled Prefecture like a swaddled babe, the river a plump and yielding brown-skinned arm, forever fingerless, forever flowing. Fallen trees rimmed the banks, eroding walls of sandstone crumbled annually into the flow, making new embankments. If you followed the river downstream it would deposit you into the ocean, as most enough-followed rivers do. There the ocean spread across the horizon in a grey smear, hardly discernable from the sky that it mirrored.

From the exhaling mouth of Katabasis River a sturdy, lush delta hung like a chipped mossy tooth.

This delta was once the bedrock for the lurid, overpriced Pixie Town II – Outer Penobska’s outlandishly popular Adult Theme Park that had once – back when it was just Pixie Town – been an amusement park for families, replete with roller coasters, game booths and a petting zoo, but had been bought out and converted into a nefarious satire of itself: Pixie Town II.

In Pixie Town II’s prime, garish neon-laden bridges straddled the split veins of Katabasis and led in toward the mesmerized walkways of weekenders drunk on neon Ferris Wheels. The veins of the patrons glowed with liquor, cocaine, and any other substance one hoped to suck or snort or inject into oneself. For those seeking the ultimate weekend departure, a small wooden cart in the back corner of the grounds waited for visitors, lit by a single oil lamp. In it a gnarled, swarthy, thick-accented chemical maestro sat amid walls draped in elegant Turkish rugs. For a small fee he gave you pomegranates whose jeweled kernels were laced with pure LSD.

Foreigners from outside Penobska travelled in orgiastic flocks to Pixie Town II in boats or planes or helicopters to take part in the weekend revelries, and often left the place ravaged, vomited-on, exploited. The setup was essentially that of any nightlife scene: rows of variously-themed nightclubs that patrons cycled among as the night wore on, getting higher or lower depending on your substance of choice. It was a bright, shimmering cornucopia of lust and excess.

Weekend garbage tossed in intoxicated torpor washed up in pestilent, rotting piles – condoms, syringes, soggy cigarettes both tobacco and otherwise, the occasional toupee, socks, Vaseline, dead birds and sealife that had consumed the aforementioned wastes, and any other type of debaucherous debris – for twenty miles up and down the coast, forming lines of waste like plaque on the unbrushed teeth of a poor-dieted uncle. On hot, wet days the breeze sighing in from the sea caught the decaying debris and wafted the half-buried odor deep inland – on notable days almost in as far as Penobska Proper. On such days the sidewalks were sparse, and those that *did* walk about did so with mild but noticeable grimaces.

Pixie Town II was wildly profitable, but shut down after a strike led by the grounds’ lanky lead arborist Larry Lawnyawn who’d been roused into action one day after watching a patron puke at the base of the grounds’ oldest oak tree, Larry’s best friend and mentor. Larry, very much accustomed to such sights, stood by and waited until the man stumbled off before he could hose the chunks into the soil. But the man, straightening himself out and wiping off his stubbled mouth, lit a post-puke cigarette while his black-leather feet straddled his recent expulsion. His white shirt, Larry often revisits in his dreams, was speckled with a constellation of pink bile.

The man was so gorged with high-proof alcohol that when he brought the match to the cigarette, his breathe burst explosively into flames. His face caught on fire, and then his clothes, and then the base of the tree where the potent vomit had soaked. He'd been slopping around Pixie Town II for several days and by that point his veins were too far drenched with the flammable fluid: he ran around in sloppy circles until he collapsed in a smoldering heap outside the entrance to the bathrooms.

People screamed, pointed. Larry didn't even try to put the wick of a man out, and his attempts to douse the fire at the base of the tree were met with disagreeable hisses and leaping tongues of flame. He had to stand back as spark-speckled smoke slowly whirled into the sky. The dramatic heat-drunk dance of the tree's arms looked like red waves coming down out of the sky.

Eventually, with the help of Pixie Town II's on-call fire brigade, the fire was extinguished, but it had scarred the tree irreparably; a month later Larry had to chainsaw it into removable segments. Sawdust clung to the sweat on either side of his face, and that night as he finished stacking up the massive pile of lumber outside the grounds he resigned himself to shutting Pixie Town down by whatever means necessary.

It turned out that basically every single employee of PTII that wasn't an owner or investor felt the same fed-up-edness as Larry: let the shitheap crumble. Working there was like working at a very dangerous pre-school, where the kids were all drugged-up adults that fucked whenever they happened to find themselves in the company of another. All it was anyways was a huge pot of waste rich folks tossed their money into to forget their miserable circumstances of fortune for a handful of hours. You could feel the derision in the staff long before Larry vocalized it concretely: people slogged to and from the parking lot with what looked like pounds of weight on their shoulders. Drawing on what they'd all deeply known and saw but were too fearful to follow into action, Larry had an easy time getting his fellow PTII workers on board, or off it, depending on your position.

Larry's first move was to roll one of the sections of stout, fresh stump from the cut out into the staff lot where folks shuffled in each morning. On that first morning a trickling rain fell from a pure gray sky. He crouched in the asphalt hacking and carving the stump into a comfortable seat where he planned to sit until the strike caught on. As it went, he didn't even get halfway through the backrest before he'd spoken enough of his coworkers into mutual states. Not only were most people outright sick of the practices of the park, but seeing a man burning alive amid the general glamor and disinterest of the grounds struck a deeper cord than any workplace tedium ever could. And Larry's straight-eyed, seat-carving stare spelled out a confidence the other workers felt comfortable gathering around.

Soon, without anybody there to scrape the place together after each chaotic night, doing what needed to be done to keep the place running became impossible for the last few who were either too stubborn or desperate to let go. The general tiredness, the sickness over having to watch the weekends lurch by in blurred formations, was suitable kindling for the strike: people just turned their backs on the place and started carving out stools for themselves out in the lot with Larry. Management couldn't find replacements anywhere, and sent groveling emissaries to the lot to cut pitiful dollar-signed bargains with Larry, thinking his stance a financial one. After several of them came back doused in tar and slathered in sawdust, management realized they weren't

dealing with some temporary wage-increasing pushovers like they'd so necktie-wringingly hoped.

Just one week after having sawed the tree down, the last groups of horny, alcoholic, fiending foreigners showed up at the wind-blown, grey-skied bridge entrance to find Larry sitting there with a big CLOSED UNTIL FUCK YOU sign that he'd carved that night into a piece of his old mentor. 'Go someplace else,' he said with a fat mean smile, that month-old fire burning in his head. 'We're not tolerating your adolescent fuck-for-alls around here anymore.'

Grumbles and meager protests from the disappointed revelers bubbled lazily as they realized PT wasn't going to be opening anymore; some anonymous protester tossed a beer bottle at the unlit Pixie Town II sign. Larry laughed and yelled, 'Keep it comin', you brainless weeds! It's already plenty broken.'

The owners, afraid of the strike's potential for violence, skipped out of town and fled to who knew where, and who the hell cared anyway. All the better, thought Larry. Their cancerous intentions could go off and get fucked up and loaded on riches in some other diseased abscess, for all he cared. The abandoned property, the nicotine-stained skeleton of the old owners' vainglorious dreams, on the other hand, was a source of wild interest to Larry and his closest sympathizers who, riding high on their seamless and gleaming ousting and now free to make of life what they wished, felt like they could do some good with a plot of lush land such as the one PTII sat on. Yes, something wildly good.

Together they turned the limp corpse of Pixie Town II into an overgrown haven.

When Pixie Town II was still open for business, the employees – including Mr. Lawnyawn – commuted into work from a sprawling network of dilapidated suburban neighborhoods that stretched from the southern bank of Katabasis River along the coast down for about seven miles. The network was organized into loose confederations of familial units that grew most of their own food in the yards that had been converted from the standard flat-green aesthetic into fecund yet disorganized ecosystems. Larry travelled around the area to host informational sessions on how to best tend one's plots and was known among the area's inhabitants as a kind of Johnny Appleseed; he carried a little velvet pouch around his neck filled with various species' seeds, and the pet salamander he seemed to have inexplicably always had sat on his shoulder like a parrot, observing the scenes with sparkling jet black eyeballs. He'd bestow random handfuls of seeds to families just starting out, and would make a great celebration of the first sowing.

His popularity among the various confederations partly influenced the ease with which his strike shut Pixie Town down later on, and supported his bid for residency in the vacant grounds.

But before the strike, Larry lived alone. When he wasn't managing and beautifying the landscapes inside Pixie Town II or travelling around the suburban networks dispensing seeds and advice, he meticulously tended a bonsai collection that

filled his flaking yellow, sagged-siding house that crouched fortunately in the armpit of an ovular overgrown cul-de-sac.

His yard was a wild tangle of bushes, shrubs, trees; he wove for minutes through the twisting organic corridors to get to his porch and door; passed through low canopies of blooming fuschia, stuck to the route that was kept clear by his feet's routine returns and departures. Only around the doorway did he keep the feelers trimmed, though he often dreamt of letting even this portal grow over, trapping himself either within or without, depending on where he'd be when the final gap knitted itself together.

The state of plantaen affairs inside the home was only slightly less anarchic. Scattered all around the barely-habitable house were hundreds of seedlings shivering in their black square plastic plots of earth. They lined the window sills, occupied the bathtub, flooded the cabinets, and gorged the guest bedrooms and closets. The bonsai were all in different stages of development, and all required different seasonal treatments based on their species. Along the wall of his living room, on even-spaced shelves, his favorite, most mature plants lived out their meticulously managed miniature lives in hand-painted pots of incandescent blue, green, purple, deep speckled red. He tended them late into the night and on into morning sipping watered-down vodka out of a coffee mug, trimming tiny leaves with equally sized scissors, upending the roots to tie them into place to promote specific curves of the branches, balances of the boughs.

On watering days he took his clothes off, hung them on the arms and twigs of his yard's tangled occupants, and ran through the house with a hose in one hand and a watering can in the other, sending rivers down the stairs, damming lakes on the carpet, making oceans out of armchairs, sending monsoons through the living room.

He usually fell asleep on his beige plastic-covered couch, the fluorescent white-blue of the bonsai lamps mixing with the single red bulb that glowed above his salamander that curled like black and gold fire into the ridges of a damp log Larry found in the tunnel of his front yard. The blue-white-red light blended in the early hours of morning to cast his sleeping body in an aura not-quite-spectral, not-quite-anything. The sound of his neighbor's garage door sliding open on its rusty track usually woke him.

Chapter Four – In Which We Learn a Thing or Two About the Green-thumbed Larry Lawnyawn

That was all before the strike, of course. Since the abandonment of Pixie Town II's grounds by the management, Larry carted his whole bonsai operation from his saggy yellow house to one of the mirror-walled dance halls. He lined them up in the rusty bed of a little wagon and went back and forth between Pixie Town and his cul-de-sac. His new place, the dance hall, looked exactly as it had on the last night of regular Pixie Town operations, minus all the patrons and staff and strobe lights and bass throbbing. Shimmering disco balls twisted unlit from the ceiling, the tan wood dance floor showed the dance-scuffs of the night before the strike that the club's janitor hadn't waxed bright before realizing he wouldn't've been paid to. The place shut down so quick that even the bar was still stocked with booze: Larry found crates of unopened bottles in a back room. He didn't water vodka down anymore.

The main reason for moving was the new arrangement the space afforded his bonsai seedlings on the dance floor. He'd built up a short border around the dance floor

with two-by-fours and lined the area with waterproof sheeting that he filled with water. It looked like a large, shallow baby pool. He then constructed a mesh net that fit the individual black bonsai containers and organized them into grids. The mesh net was as large as the dancefloor and could be lowered with a makeshift handcrank so as to dip the perforated bottoms of the tubs into the water for optimal soaking. He would then crank the winch up and the bonsai, in their varying degrees of growth, would float there above the pool, dripping. It saved Larry time, and watching all his little plants rise and fall at once put tears in his already vodka-shiny eyes.

In the back where the manager used to count the evening's earnings, Larry slept on a dark green, stained cot; his salamander's tank was on the bar. The red heat lamp's trailing cord plugged into the outlet that once powered an automatic martini shaker. Several emergency generators were left behind after the strike, and Larry claimed one for his bonsai operation, and the other folks who began living in the abandoned regions of PTH made communal areas where the other generators were used for whatever they needed them for.

Several other families and individuals lived within the grounds of old Pixie Town, having migrated from the ragged suburbia to take up their residence in the husks of Pixie Town's old attractions. Over years, they morphed into a food-production-centered community, guided by the seedy Larry standing in as their constantly, tastefully inebriated figurehead. Where Larry's oak mentor once stood grew a vegetable patch that the families gathered around to exchange news and share homemade liquor. Larry was usually there exchanging old tales and imparting advice, getting drunker and drunker the longer he stood around talking.

Often times, on the mornings after such gatherings, he was found asleep in the grass, a loose smile hiding under his thickening beard.

Which is where Larry found himself on the morning of the day of his death, out there in the communal vegetable patch-cum-meeting area. Dirt clumped in his beard and he pushed himself up from the earth and stretched his arms up into the sky. Because he still felt slightly drunk, the world lifted itself up with a kind of loose humor that was particular to having slept through and then woken groggily into intoxication. A seagull overhead wobbled in such a way that caused Larry to think it might have a toothache, but because, it slowly dawned on him, seagulls don't have teeth, Larry's loose morning brain replaced it: beakache. He laughed and chomped his teeth up at the bird that was unaware he existed, until he shouted, 'Come on down here, little feather! I've got an old boot that'll fix you up real sweet!' On days like these, when the specter of hangover and the spirit of humor hovered at the edge of each unfolding moment, simultaneously haunting and tickling him, Larry usually drove his old patchwork Vespa that coughed like a tuberculosis patient and shed rust like a leper into Penobska to eat his favorite hangover remedy: gumbo. He couldn't buy it anywhere else but there, and though he could certainly make it for himself, or commission one of the neighbor families to make it, the pleasure of having to journey alone to have it made for him in a foreign town – where the folks had the consistency of papier mache stand-ins for the types of people he was used to – was the magic of the ritual on mornings that he knew would unfold into afternoons and evenings of headache if he stayed still or ate his usual daily diet of cashews and greens and warm vodka. So he took the day off to disappear

into the thick outer reaches, to let the wind ruffle the pain in his forehead, gumbo calm his hunger, and the strange habits of the Penobskans bubble his eyes with laughter.

He got up, the plan settled in his head, his old bones groaning as the morning's humidity pressed in on them, and walked with pep down the crumbling cobblestone path whose flanks once featured beer carts and wine wagons and old carnival-style games with sexual re-imaginings (instead of throwing a softball at a stack of milk bottles, you threw a disembodied rubber tit at a pyramid of rubber penises...instead of blasting a water gun into the mouth of a clown to win a stuffed bear you...well, you can imagine) and whose perimeters Larry once soaked with weed-snuffer fluid on the weekends to keep the cracks clear of feelers, and the patrons' eyes free from anything not beaten back with the rod of mechanized maintenance. Now, though, most of the booths had been disassembled and reused; most of Larry's bonsai pool's border, in fact, had been constructed with the lumber from those booths. He hadn't the first thought of or desire to know the locations of the phallic paraphernalia that would have served only a handful of recycled purposes.

Every booth that still stood had grown over with ivy or moss, or collapsed under the soggy pressure of the seasons, making the walk back to his headquarters fresh and pleasant, like the first bite into a new piece of peppermint gum, if not a touch too bright for his throbbing skull. But a cloud dimmed the harsh morning and by the time he made it back, his head felt nearly clear of the loopy remnants of last night's drink, but not of this morning's gumbo yearnings. He creaked the front doors open and stepped into the hazy ex-club, switched on the disco ball for fun. Coins of light arced through his home. The bonsai filled the whole place with a musty, earthy odor, and the constant moisture billowed around and sat like a second skin on whoever entered. He knew his little salamander buddy loved it, the moisture, and oftentimes he let the critter loose to wander around the place on its own. As he approached the bar where the tank sat, he saw the salamander in his usual spot, asleep under the curved arm of the old section of log, one of the only remaining relics of his old house in the suburbs. Larry tapped at the glass and the salamander lifted one eyelid and closed it, looking itself to be in some salamanderly state of post-intoxicant daze.

'C'mon, lil buddy. Let's go get us some gumbo, eh?' He always brought the salamander along with him on his forays into Penobaska to break up what Larry regarded as the otherwise monotonous pace of its life. He thought brighter things about his salamander's daily schedule since moving, but still...what was there to do in an abandoned nightclub for something the size of a toothbrush, and as fragile as a bunch of toothpicks wrapped in a tissue? Larry liked letting him sit on his shoulder or crawl into his shirt while he cruised down the highway zig-zagging along to avoid the legions of potholes and debris, scrambling over Larry's body like a loose bug. He tapped the glass again and the salamander opened both eyes and looked up at Larry, yawned. 'Shake it out, sucka! It's time to roll,' Larry chimed. He tilted the top of the tank open and reached in, wrapping his wrinkled fingers around the shimmering black and yellow torso. Lifting it out, dirt clung to the tiny pads of the salamander's feet, but it otherwise did not resist, and seemed to be figuring out what Larry was up to. It wagged its little tail.

Larry set it on his shoulder and went behind the bar and poured a few glugs of vodka into an electric water boiler. He turned it on and leaned up on the bar, looking out over the grid of growing trees as the disco ball spun above, until he heard a low

gurgle just before actual boiling, then poured the hot pungent liquid into a thermos that he sipped from. 'Wheew. That's the stuff.' The salamander caught a whiff of the fumes and retreated down the neck of Larry's shirt. He screwed the lid on, rummaged through a pile of clothes and found his patchy leather coat, pulled it on, and went out the back door, scooping up his duct-taped helmet from off the barstool on the way, and coaxed the rusty Vespa that he parked near the back door to life. He tucked the thermos of hot vodka in the basket strapped to the back, then immediately removed it to take another sip before replacing it again. A little red gallon jug of gas sat in the basket too, along with a sunset orange flare gun that he didn't have any flares for. He'd written his name on it with a black marker like a kid marking his lunch box on the first day of school.

He fired the only flare he had for it eleven years prior on the longest night of that particular year, the winter solstice, which him and his neighbors always celebrated with the reserved solemnity that accompanies that time of year, and that much darkness. He'd had more vodka than usual that night during the fire ceremony, which for him was more than most adults could drink and still have their vision the next day. All his neighbors gathered around a sizeable bonfire with wishes or hopes for the coming year literally or figuratively written on dried leaves they'd kept pressed since the previous fall. When it was their turn they'd cast their leaf into the flames and try to hold their wishes in their minds until it had been fully incinerated. If another thought wedged its way in between your leaf and the fire before it was burnt, then the wish's coming true took a lot more cosmic juice, or so said the gnarled, swarthy, thick-accented chemical maestro whose small wooden cart still sat where it always had in the corner of the grounds, though instead of dealing out his famous pomegranates he dealt in cosmological advice and practices.

When it was Larry's turn, he botched his leaf toss and the wind took it into the darkest sky of the year. Remembering the flare gun that he kept with him for obscure reasons, he fumbled it out of his coat pocket and fired it after his leaf into the sky hoping to burn it up and release his wish in his own way. The spark-trailed projectile burst and illuminated everything. People's upturned faces looked lit from within as the flare slowly drifted back toward them. He would never be sure if he'd hit his leaf, for he had forgotten whatever he'd written on it the moment the wind flicked it into the darkness.

So he kept the flareless gun in his Vespa's basket as a reminder that anything good that happened to him might be the forgotten wish from so long ago having only then come true. Wherever that leaf flew off to, he liked to think, there was the distant chance that it landed in and had been consumed by someone else's faraway fire.

As he rode out of Pixie Town, waving to his friends that hung out on the front steps of their homes drinking tea or flossing teeth, the flare gun bounced around in the basket with his thermos of vodka and jug of gasoline, and the salamander sat on his shoulder looking at the road behind them, watching Pixie Town shrink and eventually disappear behind a hill poky with conifers.

A few months ago, on one such ride into Penobska Proper, he stopped by a rusted-out, hubcapless sedan to stretch out his back muscles, shake feeling back into his hands, and pee into the jagged tears in the pavement. He leaned in through the yawning window-hole to look into the sedan and saw broken glass on the gaping,

stuffing-spewing seats, dust on the dashboard, the little domestic scuffs and scrapes on the steering wheel that must've been there before the car'd been ditched, and, practically gleaming against the grime of it all: a human jawbone on the floor mat by the crooked brake pedal.

After thinking about it, and after searching the rest of the car for evidence of whatever'd long-since elapsed, he lifted the jaw between thumb and forefinger and held it close, looking at the teeth that sat in such an orderly row in the curve of bone. Their abandonment had colored them yellow, and Larry noticed a little black seed wedged between two molars, oddly intact, unscathed by the chewing that had lodged it there. He couldn't identify what plant it had come from. He put it back onto the floor mat, bent over into a few more forward folds to limber up his back, and rode the rest of the way into Penobska. During lunch he couldn't stop that jaw-lodged seed from planting itself in his mind. On his way back through he stopped, freed it from between the teeth with a twig, and pocketed it. Not knowing then what to do with it, he put it in a jar next to his salamander's tank.

Larry got into the habit of addressing his deepest concerns to a woman he'd seen in a dream a few nights after having returned home with the jaw-seed: in it he drives down the highway as he always does. High noon sun blasts shadows out of the road's pebbles. The forest on either side blends into a solid green periphery as he speeds between. Up ahead, he can see, a woman as tall as a tree leans out of the curtain of green, her jaw working on something tough. She's picking at her teeth with a toothpick, but he can't make out the expression on her face. Her tongue – black and dotted with yellow – darts from her mouth. As he gets closer, he sees that her skin is sickly green. Her breasts' wide dark nipples leak slow smoke into the air. Her groin is a mat of tangled green moss. He slows to ask her something, but knows she'd just sink into the forest if he did. So he keeps on, knowing she watches him recede, and at some point down the road he woke up.

Sometimes the addresses developed into drunkenly distracted pleas that he forgot after muttering them. One such long forgotten was this: *despite perhaps what each individual party may believe, the beasts and the humans and whosoever in between are the nock of the arrow. The bowstring, whosever it may be, is taut and trembling, the bow angled toward the sky, the blank-blue target of the sky, angled toward the ethereal blue. At least I hope. In my wildest wanderings from the mouth of Katabasis to the first paved street of Penobska Proper this hope rings loudest. The vectors converge. But at either end there may be a few too many loud-brained frictions filling the air to really hear it, to hear this hope, even if you're saying it to yourself, over and over, louder and louder, to no one in particular but the creatures growing, knitting themselves together, on either side of the road...*

Chapter Five – In Which Ghosts are Found in the Gumbo

At Gullah Bowl Tripdoe chewed her gumbo stew. If she'd been counting she would have known that her next chew would be the 144th since her first mouthful of gumbo; shrimp exploded between her molars. A bead of sweat rolled behind her ear. She heard Fenny hooting a new order back to Big J. Two or three cars drifted behind the windows, reflecting the sun.

The bearded old man sitting at the booth in the corner put his spoon back into his bowl of gumbo. Tripdoe thought of a massive metallic bird landing beak-first into a lake; something about the formality of the bearded old man's movements caught her eye. His hands were flat, flanking the gumbo bowl, he sat up unnaturally straight as if his scalp were connected to a wire that hung from the ceiling, and briefly he appeared to emit light. He breathed normally at first, but gradually started panting. Alone at his table, his panting looked all the more desperate and uncontrolled. His tongue lurched out of his mouth like a drunk man thrown through a wet window, and his eyes puffed out of their sockets and stared like sailors at something on the floor that Tripdoe tried to see but would never see. Her mouth – running on its own motor – chewed at its regular pace even as she pushed her tray away to get up.

The other patrons' eyes followed Tripdoe, who had gone over to the man and was crouching next to him now. She looked around wide-eyed as if to say, "Uh, help...or...something?" His tongue whirled in circles around his mouth like a rubber treadmill mat, tears and sweat rolled off him in rivulets. The table was quite slick with it all, and Tripdoe made the mistake of looking directly into his eyes, whose pupils were dilating and constricting rapidly like black strobe lights. A thought went through her head frictionlessly: *this man's skull's a hummingbird cage*. His eyes were flashing from pools to pinpoints – Tripdoe started – or wait, maybe she just *thought* she started – seeing different shapes emerge from the oscillating irises: a wheel, a wire, a tiny tree with cured roots. She slapped him, hoping to make the eyes stay still, to bring him back into his seat. She knew how quiet it must have been in the restaurant, but it was the occupied silence of a Happening. Her second slap was hard; fear slipped into her. On the third fully-wound slap his neck went limp, his head teetered, and his face plopped into the bowl, splashing gumbo all over Tripdoe's shoes and shirt. The spoon clattered onto the ground.

Silence roared into the vacuum. The sound of a chair scooting carefully, quickly backwards. A bubble rose from the gumbo. The ripple she noticed earlier travelled up the man's sleeve, and a tiny sticky-slick black face peeped out from under the stretched-elastic collar and caught Tripdoe's eye. Tripdoe stared back at the tiny, bulgy-eyed face for a full four seconds, thinking it a person, an ink-black gnome.

Its tongue flicked out, eyelids rose from beneath its blank eyes. It broke the stare to look up the neck of the gumbo-gorged man whose shirt it was now halfway out of. It looked back to Tripdoe, then dove into the shirt (*I was rummaging around in the shirt, trying to feel Larry's heartbeat, hear the familiar gurgle of his guts. All I heard was a slow wringing-out, a peculiarly high whine, so –*) and emerged frantically like a terror-blind horse fleeing a burning barn. It ran down the man's leg – Tripdoe caught a flash of yellow-gold shimmer off its black slender body – onto the tile where it vanished under the shadow of the table.

The guy's face was still in the bowl. Horrified, she pulled it out. Hunks of crawfish slid off his forehead and cheeks, some catching in his beard, the red sauce squirmed off his skin. The eyes were slack, lolling in their sockets like billiard balls in a fishbowl.

Tripdoe looked bewildered toward the register, where she hoped to see Fenny calling for help.

Instead: a metallic clanging from the kitchen, a pot hit the floor as the back door whips open, filling the kitchen with an all-over kind of shine. Tripdoe saw Big J's silhouette fill the doorway.

He watched Fenny zip out into the parking lot, cross the street at a full, desperate, loose sprint. Big J patted his right hand on the top of his own hatted head, as if perhaps Fenny's rapid exit were the bizarre initiation of an impromptu game of *Duck, Duck, Goose*.

Fenny, red in the face and absolutely terrified, continued chugging his cigarette-scarred lungs down a few blocks until he reached the fenced outer lip of town. His Gullah Bowl hat flew off behind him. The wind rolled over his greasy skin while simultaneously rolling his hat down the street and into the Phan family yard. It kept rolling until it tipped into the gurgling, algae-bloomed synthetic pond that Roge had installed four years ago to increase the pleasance of their yard. The hat soaked in water that darkened the redness of it, and sunk.

Chapter Six – In Which Bozeman Unveils His New Legal Restrictions, and Roge Casually Hallucinates

'All Penobskans are required by law to own a home.

'Correction: all Penobskans *within the fence of the Prefecture Proper* are required by law to own a home.

'Exceptions: minors, the mentally unsound, those in an advanced state of elderliness.

'When you turn 20 years old, if you do not have the monetary resources to purchase a home, the Prefecture will lend you the required amount and establish a fixed payment system based on your income. If you do not have and show no signs of obtaining an appropriately lucrative job by the sixth month of your 20th year, your case will be brought to court and you may be expelled from Penobska Proper, and your rights as a citizen revoked.

'In order to maintain the equilibrium of our Uto—...eh...better keep it as *Prefecture* for now...in order to maintain the equilibrium of our Prefecture, these statutes are not negotiable. Any dissenters may be summoned to court and have their cases reviewed by Prefect Bozeman, per his convenience.

'Now read that back to me, would you please Roge?'

Roge, sitting in a black leather swivel chair with his elbows on his knees and a laptop in front of him on the glass coffee table, read the statement back to Bozeman. He emphasized the words *required, purchase, Prefecture, fixed, expelled, stripped*, and for Bozeman's sake, the phrase *per his convenience*. The air conditioner unit turned on filling the room with a womby hum, the breeze from the vent bobbed the potted fern in the corner. Bozeman's back was up against the wall, his feet in the air, and his head pressed solidly into his headstand pillow. His face was a swollen red sunset. On each upturned sole of his feet balanced one plump strawberry.

'Thank you Roge,' he gasped. "Now please, dear God, take these strawberries off my feet and help me down.'

Roge pushed his laptop away and stood up, plucked the single strawberries off the soles of Bozeman's wobbling feet, then eased his legs down by the ankles until

Bozeman rested on all fours on the carpet, breathing steadily, loudly. He craned his head up to look Roge dead in the nose, his face already lightening.

'I have high hopes for this system,' he said, doing his best to wrangle his ragged breath. 'My headaches've been less intense the last few days, and I hardly notice em when I'm inverted like that. I've also felt the stirrings of life *down there* in the morning. The faintest hint of a possible erection, perhaps? I think so. I do surely think so. Not really sure I get the whole strawberry thing. Symbolism? Or wait would that be more of a metaphor type deal?'

'Not sure, sir. I think symbolism...makes more sense...?' Roge found his swivel chair again. The strawberries rested in his hands, one in each palm. He imagined squeezing them into red pulpy wads. He looked down at Bozeman, still on all fours, getting his breath back.

Instead of smooshing them, he placed the strawberries onto the glass tabletop next to his laptop. He scanned the screen and flicked through a few pages until he found Dr. Sassoon's homeotherapy and toxicology website. He clicked open the private chat feed he and Bozeman had set up a few weeks prior and typed in, 'Should the berries be disposed of somehow after each session? Still edible or...?' and sent it off to Dr. S. with a little clickedy click. The message popped up in the chat profile that Roge had created for Dr. Sassoon, and he typed in a response to it, making sure Bozeman didn't notice; the messages went through different identity channels so that when Bozeman received the messages on his computer they looked like they'd come from two distinct accounts – Dr. Sassoon and Roge – as opposed to just Roge...

A couple minutes later, after Bozeman found his way back to his desk where he had draped his forehead over his folded arm, and appeared to be sleeping, Dr. Sassoon's, which was ironically his own, message beeped onto Roge's side of the chat feed: 'Strawberries should be fine. Maybe rinse due to feet contact etc....' Roge juggled the idea in his head, then, Bozeman's face still wedged in the crook of his elbow, tiptoed out into the staff lounge where he washed the strawberries off in the mug-laden sink, and ate them down to their green leafy caps. The overhead lights buzzed bluely, and gnats stumbled through the air around the trashcan that he threw the caps into.

'Roge...?' Bozeman called from his office. 'Roge...?'

Roge left the staff lounge, stopping outside Bozeman's office. Thirty-two painted portraits of past Prefects hung from nails imbedded in the mauve walls of the Office of Prefectural Command. Roge, pretending for a few minutes not to hear Bozeman's nasal summonses, regarded the portraits with tired, over-caffeinated eyes. In the sagging faces of these men and women, in their wood-framed imperial grins, their frizzy, smooth, bowl-like, non-existent, fluffy, flat, brown, white, black, gold hair, in their pressed suits and paisley-splattered ties and blouses, in the rippled Penobskan Flag behind their right shoulders, its single black silhouette of an evergreen on a field of blue and green stripes, Roge found his own scattered appearance reflected off the gleamingly-rendered eyes that only at hours like these shifted under their static, pigmented lids: his lopsided afro, bloodshot eyes, the two tinkling coffee-stained teeth that perpetually-peeped from and perched upon his lower lip that wore a square soul-patch like a Christmas ornament, the round chin like a radish with stubble, the nearly-opaque-with-scratches tortoise shell glasses. He was handsome in a sort of non-professional way.

Sometimes, after late hours propping himself up with the rickety crutches of caffeine, these portraits whispered tired monologues to Roge. Tales of their tumults, proclamations of love from beyond the grave, ragged regrets, and unfathomable, probably impossible conspiracies relating to the Prefect Bozeman and his questionable policies regarding everything from pre-schools to porcupines. Only after several days of not sleeping, of forced caffeinating, have these hushed narratives actually started sounding plausible...and began – despite Roge’s constant attempted dismissals – accumulating and crystalizing in Roge’s brain like a calcium deposit, or a tumor.

The tangy flavor of strawberry still lounged on Roge’s tongue as Penobska’s 11th Prefect – Marcy McMouty – winked at him from inside her frame. She went: ‘Psst. Hey, Roge.’ He usually did a good job at not responding, but there was something in her *Psst* that perked his ears. ‘Psst. Roge. Over here. It’s me, Marcy.’

Without moving his lips too much, Roge, while fidgeting with his hands in a way that made it look like he was washing them, quietly said, ‘What do you want?’

‘I want you to go to sleep. You look like a dishtowel somebody used to clean up ravioli.’

‘Long night ahead, Marcy. We’re getting to the bottom of some really technical stuff. The sewer system’s looking nearly mapped-out. Can’t just leave Bozeman alone with it all.’

‘Sure you can. He’s capable. He’s the Prefect after all. Plus the whole “miniature-Penobska” thing is his grand scheme. Let him bear the brunt of it...Listen, Roge, when I held office I had four people doing your job, and we weren’t making it a day-long hobby session. We were actually making stuff happen in Penobska, implementing infrastructural advancements and so forth. He works you too hard, like using two horses to build the pyramid of Giza. Or camels, whatever.’

‘Yeah, well...’ Roge pulled his eyes away from her portrait. Some Giza. She was referring to the thirty square feet of finely-detailed, down-to-scale miniature Penobska – very close to being finished – that sat on a raised wooden platform in the middle of the building’s lobby. Huge rectangular zones of brown paper stuck to the floor with blue painter’s tape surrounded the sloping, building-dotted territory. His and Bozeman’s dark shoeprints zig-zagged around the paper.

He and Bozeman had been laboring for the last eight months, trying to mirror the model city in the lobby with the city that breathed and pulsed outside the Office’s doors. Every scaled house was about the size of a tissue box. The geographics sloped and swelled, every tree occupying its own place and every stone set on its own lip of fabricated land. At first, the diorama and then the precision of the diorama was solely Bozeman’s obsession: he brought the idea into fruition after having watched an episode of *Eli the Engine*, a fictional children’s show about a model train town that plays through all hours of the night on a local station. He’d watched one episode of the show at around four in the morning while high on heavy-duty painkillers.

He came into the office later that next morning huge-pupiled, mute. He went immediately to his office, sat down at or rather merged with his desk and carved a miniature version of Penobska’s public library with a sharpened fork from the staff lounge and a hunk of balsa wood he’d found some-unknown-where. The resemblance, Roge was mildly hesitant to admit, was uncanny.

Scaled carvings of his own home followed, then the Office of Prefectural Command, both marked increasingly with unsettling and simultaneously impressive accuracy. At the end of the day Roge couldn't get him to answer any questions or say anything, he just sat there with his chin resting on the edge of his desk, staring at the remarkably realistic miniatures. Finally, he looked up and told Roge to cancel all of his appointments for that week: 'I've got an idea in the idea-oven, Roge.'

Oh...uh...yikes? thought Roge.

It didn't take long for the gravity of the project to start pulling Roge in, being in near-constant proximity to Bozeman and all. Now the two fed off each other's need to perfect the miniature Prefect, and the diorama had advanced considerably: they had been working on a functional sewer system that they designed to run beneath the scaled-streets, with tiny little steel pipes and removable manholes, even a few colonies of rats added in for accuracy and, as Bozeman said, 'flavor'.

Also: an electrical grid for lighting up the little neighborhoods during evening simulations.

Roge had Tripdoo teaching him the basics of circuitry for this, and she'd even been in twice to help them wire some of it up, but she always found a reason to leave after twenty or so minutes: 'I don't know, Pappy-O...something's a little weird about the whole thing to me...Bozeman gets this...eh...*twitch* when he's staring at *Penobska Petite* for too long, I've noticed. You guys sitting in there getting it closer and closer to the real town...there's something, I don't know, *freaky* about the whole thing,' she explained. But Roge, too deep in Bozeman's tiny town, couldn't quite make sense of her.

When Roge looked back at Marcy, she resumed her existence as dried paint and frame. Scanning the row of portraits, Roge saw one of Bozeman he hadn't noticed before...but this one was different, his head was canted off at an angle, hardly as polished or imperial as the others and, oh good, this one started talking to him again here...Roge jumped: it was the *real* Bozeman poking his head out of his office door, staring at him.

'Roge? Uh, what the fuck?' Bozeman's rectangular mustache danced when he talked, using his thin, straight upper lip as a cabaret stage. His ears were the shape and size of quarters, and fluted outward off his toaster-shaped, pompadour-crowned head. Slope-shouldered, swarthy, bowling-ball round like an auto-body-repair shop's office manager, with a glare that when staring seemed impassive and uncaring but – at the moment it looked away – betrayed a deep, sharp intelligence, like the glance gave you a taste of what Bozeman actually thought about you, all in a flash, like a mugger flashing a glimmering razor blade from inside a flap in a leather trench coat.

Roge stuttered: 'Oh, uh, just thinking out loud here, sir.'

Bozeman's face compressed in a squint. His eyes flitted over to the miniature *Penobska*, lingered there before turning back to Roge.

'Right. Well. Knock it off and get your ass in here. I just found something groundbreaking.' Bozeman's little hand shot out from behind the door, armed with a thumbs-up which then, in a blur, transformed into a beckoning gesture. Back inside his office, door closed behind them despite them being the only two in the building, cluttered with discarded models, unused materials, unwashed coffee mugs, potted ferns, and glossy photographs of random parts of *Penobska*, Bozeman sat behind his desk and turned his computer screen around so Roge could see what he'd been looking

at. It was someone's website, what looked like a bunch of trees. 'They're bonsai trees, Roge. Little miniature trees. This guy, Larry Lawnyawn, he used to do landscaping type stuff for the old Pixie Town, grows and sells bonsai trees on the side nowadays. He's been doing it for years, probably the last living bonsai specialist in this part of the world...I mean check some of this shit out...a little tiger-shaped maple, huh? Huh? Pretty sweet. You thinking what I'm thinking?'

Roge, doing more blinking than thinking, nodded.

'The integration of a functional, miniature biome. Forget these little pipe cleaner and paint forests,' he flicked a few in-progress trees off the desk that tapped and clattered somewhere over by the door. 'We could have a real-time, small-scale ecosystem at work here Roge. Tiny plants, wee squirrels, perhaps, maybe even a flock of thumbnail-size geese?' Bozeman still angled the screen toward Roge. He shook it rhetorically to match the rhythm of what he said. 'If we can get this scale to balance out perfectly, imagine what we can do for Penobskia...imagine the change that will happen in our lifetimes, Roge. Just imagine it. Imagine it.'

Roge had developed the perfect balance of facial laxity and exertion, to where he could stare into Bozeman's watery, unsleeping eyes, and be somewhere far off doing mental cartwheels down the unpaved avenue of memory. As Bozeman rattled rhythm into the bonsai-filled screen, Roge thought back to when he first became Bozeman's assistant, some seventeen years ago. The Office bustled with healthy activity. Roge still drank coffee as an ante meridiem treat. Bozeman bumbled about, forearms exposed in that bizarre mix of studiousness and laboriousness that sometimes peeps its way into busy office days, winking at secretaries and bantering like a high school football coach with the other guys, keeping the machismo just shy of slaps to the male staff's khaki rumps. A general warmth floated on the air, a light liveliness, a solid purposefulness; nobody took their jobs very seriously, just enough to get things done, but not enough to where anything actually happened.

Thinking back on those first years, they blended into a warm pulpy fluid that seeped and briefly clogged Roge's memory. As his mind returned and reconstituted itself amid the visual data its eyes were feeding it, the memory dissolved like a sweet piece of candy on the tongue of his mind. Now, well. Now. All he wanted was to go home and find Nikosi asleep on the couch and Tripdoe waist-deep in somebody else's treadmill or eating a bowl of leftover microwaved gumbo. He wanted their quiet, warm, composite presence to sit down next to him by the kitchen table and hold his hand firmly and hear exactly what he needed to say, which was something so beyond his tongue and brain that sometimes it felt like a bunch of red hot springs rolling loosely around the inside of his skull, fusing his synapses together, burning the backs of his eyes.

Roge stared deeply at Bozeman. His eyelids hung unmoving like curtains over their wintered windows. Bozeman kept rattling on, the room a curved diorama on the gleaming surface of his eyes.

'Mr. Bozeman,' Roge added when silence sat in the room for long enough, 'A miniature forest...is...an excellent idea.' Behind Bozeman's emerging smile, something bloomed.

Chapter Seven – In Which Tripdoe Is Surprised By Something in Her Pants

Tripdoe's long bony fingers fiddled themselves nervously in her lap. She sat in the Penobska Medical Center's emergency waiting room watching a thin bald twelve-year-old boy play with an empty box of candy on the floor next to his terminal-looking mother's wheelchair. The mother's wispy brown hair cloaked patches of her scalp unevenly. Watching them put Tripdoe in a hollow mood. The twelve-year-old's sharp features were sharpened by his baldness, and his wiry hands hovered the candy box over the mouth of the trashcan that the mother's wheelchair was parked in front of. She craned her neck whenever he hovered the box and said shrilly, '*Don't* you throw that in there. Wait until we find the *recycling*. Hey! You hear me?' The kid smiled crookedly and brought it back to his feet where he pushed it around like a toy car, then, seeming to remember his recurrent plan, hovered it again over the trash can. A new string of words amounting to the same message, the empty box rose then sunk like a rectangular multicolored whale coming up for air.

Tripdoe had to call today's only other scheduled client to cancel. She used the hospital's phone, pulling its coiled tan wire over the counter behind which a turquoise nurse penciled in squares on a clipboard and typed visitor's names into a grey boxy computer: 'Just make it quick,' she said, so Tripdoe made it quick.

The lady on the other end of the connection sounded uninterested in the cancellation, and asked to reschedule for the same time next week. When Tripdoe mentioned she was at the hospital, the lady said, 'I hope everyone's OK.' Well.

The guy was definitely dead, despite the paramedic's procedural efforts to revive him. And because she was the only person besides Big J left in Gullah Bowl by the time they arrived (seeing Fenny run out in tandem with the image of Tripdoe holding aloft a gumbo-dripping head stirred a robust athleticism in the patrons that propelled them into the parking lot), she felt obliged to keep the corpse company on its rocky ride to the hospital. The entire way there the black-latex-gloved paramedics slid needles into Lou's deflated veins and sucked his stomach dry with a white corrugated tube. They cut his weird hen-on-a-pool-table t-shirt down the middle of the front, letting it drape open over the sides of the gurney like the open flaps of a cardboard box in the rain, exposing a little velvet bag strung around his neck. The paramedics removed it and set it in a clear plastic tub. Limp Lou lolled through the various probings and wardrobe alterations uninterested. Tripdoe, too, watched the drama unfold from what felt like behind a thick pane of glass, the sturdy grey plastic fold-down passenger seat numbing her legs. She thought her lack of emotional response might be evidence of post-traumatic shock, but thought that if she could sit there diagnosing herself with post-traumatic shock while the two men poked and tubed and thudded the flimsy corpse of a stranger, that it couldn't possibly be post-traumatic shock. Plus she felt fine, calm, serene, just...far off, behind a thick pane of glass, or on the other end of a broken telephone wire.

Sitting in the waiting room, the memory of how raw the man's head felt as she pulled it from the gumbo bowl stuck to her hands like peanut butter. Heavy, wet, the energy of his person draining out of him like the gumbo draining off his face, the passive shedding of some essential heat that even now, after having felt it slip between her fingers, she couldn't pin down or recall with anything she feels halfway comfortable considering complete. The difficulty of trying to remember that feeling flying through

her hands was replaced by how the door Fenny fled from swung shut, bouncing off its frame, letting less and less light in after each bounce until it filled the frame fully with darkness.

The gumbo on her shoes had since dried but only after it had soaked through to her socks which clung dryly to her ankles. When she moved her feet the caked gumbo pulled on her ankle hair and sent zingy zaps of itchy pain up her leg. She got up, scratched the base of her disorganized braid of black hair, and walked past the twelve-year-old who, finally ignoring his mother's proclamations, lowered the empty box of candy completely into the trash can's mouth and let go. 'Oh, this is just too *much!* I said it *eighty times* not to toss that in there. Good luck gettin any more treats today, mister.'

In the lemony bathroom, she removed her shoes and painfully peeled her crusted socks off her feet and stuffed them into her pockets, rolled each navy pant leg up a few inches, and hoisted her left foot up onto the counter and halfway into the sink, running hot water to scrub the dried gumbo off. She felt weird watching herself in the mirror, and noticed how zapped she looked. Eyes heavy in the sockets, frazzled hair like frozen black lightning bolts. She felt something in her pantleg move (*I was getting very thirsty up there, my skin starting to tighten and shrivel like a sliced cucumber in sunlight. When I felt her leg jostle and saw light pouring, I knew I'd have to split for it...then the sound of tumbling water made holding still another minute fully intolerable. I'd hopped out too many articles of clothing in the last day, but I'd have to make it one more if I didn't want to just dry right up in the poor girl's trousers. So I made a split for it, running toward the light...*) and then felt much weirder as a small black-yellow torpedo launched from under her rolled up cuff landing splashing in the sink. Tripdoe gave a high frightened hoot and scoot-tripping backwards with her left foot still in the sink fell ass first onto the bathroom's tile. Water trailed from her foot down her leg. The sink's hot water ran, she watched the steam curl toward the ceiling.

Breathing heavily she elbowed herself back up and inched her way over to look in through the steam. From the hot swirling basin a midnight-black and sunlight-yellow salamander came screaming like a bottle rocket. Wet-toed Tripdoe leaped a loose hop back again as the critter scampered in disorganized zig-zags along the countertop, tiny feet pattering, and then halted at the edge of another of the countertop's three identical sinks. Tripdoe, heart quickening, moved forward again and turned the faucet off.

The salamander sat at the edge of the other basin, its front feet fully extending its upper torso into the air, head raised up and right eye angled toward her, watching and waiting. The sides of its slick black body vibrated up and down. The salamander blinked.

As possible choices, explanations, considerations kaleidoscoped their way around Tripdoe's mind, another woman walked in to the restroom. She wore a tan blouse with tight black leggings, makeup. Blonde tousled hair in a top-of-the-head wad leaning to the right. She didn't see the salamander at first. At first it's all Tripdoe, standing in front of the sink mildly crouched, still as a stone, wet, staring at what seems to be the corner of the bathroom.

The woman's eye caught a twitch in the salamander, and she locked up as her eyes found it resting there on the edge of the sink.

They were the three points in an acute triangle of stares. Tripdoe and the woman darted their eyes back and forth between each other and the salamander,

whose marbled eye seemed to be looking at both, neither, all at once. It opened its mouth, exposing rows of sand grain teeth. Tripdoe wasn't really freaked out by the little guy, but...uh...what the fuck?

Then the fresh memory materialized: the same curvy dark face popping up out of the dead guy's shirt's neck-hole back in Gullah Bowl...the under-the-shirt-ripple...it was this little critter.

The third-point-on-the-triangle-woman whispered: 'Should I...should I get a janitor...?' through little square teeth. Tripdoe could tell by the way she stood, balancing weight from one leg to the other, that the woman needed to pee, badly.

The salamander, now staring directly at Tripdoe, shook its head back and forth. Tripdoe shook her head too. She walked over to it and put her hand down in front of its head, her fingernails pressing against the cold counter. It walked forward and placed one little wet four-fingered hand onto the tip of her pointer finger, lightly flexed it, and drew its chin up to look her in the eye. A handshake. A tiny sincere handshake. Then it quietly, calmly, walked its way up the staircase of her fingers, into her palm. It was wet, mildly warm, its little heart pulsing through its skin.

She turned and said to the woman, 'He must've just...slipped out of my grip there,' tacking on a chuckle for good measure, 'Little guy's getting restless, I guess. Wants to get home. Don't you, huh? Don't you?' She addressed the salamander as one would a baby or dog, trying to affect a pet-type-relationship to the woman, though Tripdoe didn't quite know why. As she tried shimmying past her through the door the woman asked, 'Wha...what's its name? Your lizard there.'

'Eh, oh. Well, uh.' What felt like an open hand travelled into her mind. In the open palm of it a small word sat, she picked it up and said it. 'Tap. His name is Tap. And I don't think he's a, uh, lizard...?' Tripdoe she scooped up her shoes into the crook of her left arm like premature Siamese twins. She slipped by the woman back into the hallway, shielding the salamander from the overhead fluorescence.

Halfway down the hallway she stopped and slowly peeled her fingers away to take a peep at her new passenger...or, she guessed, if not exactly *new* then at least *exposed*. She almost felt the heat of the fluorescent bulbs on the downturned back of her head. The crusty socks got bunched into her pockets, but she slipped her feet into the rough shoes. Tap rested in the calm clouds of her hands: something about his stillness suggested an expression of a deeper, abnormal sentience that flowed through the contact his little feet make with her skin; he wasn't clambering about in blind terror as other enclosed amphibians might. The salamander maintained an unusual presence that persisted as she found her seat in the waiting room. The twelve-year-old kid lay on his side in front of his mother's wheels sucking his thumb with his knees curled up into his chest. Busy hospital noises fluttered about like invisible moths.

With Tap in her hands she felt a sudden rush of exhaustion. His little heartbeat ticked in her palm and spread throughout her body, making her feel warm and safe. Soon her heartrate mirrored his, and the two drifted off into a deep, identical, sleep. Tripdoe's legs sprawled out into the space in front of her as she slouched deeper and deeper into the uncomfortable plastic chair. Tap's tail wound close around his body, so close to his mouth that when he woke up an hour later he would almost bite it, mistaking it for a worm.

The turquoise nurse tapped Tripdoe awake. The salamander shuddered in her hands. 'Sorry to wake you, sweetheart.' Her mooning face blocked out the overhead light, a kind of white halo formed around her face. She asked: 'Are you and Mr. Lawnyawn related?'

Scooping herself back into a sitting position, rubbing sleep from her eyes, Tripdoe shook her head. 'Who? No, no. I just...I just was there at the restaurant when he nose-dived into the gumbo.'

'Oh...uh...well, I guess that saves me from having to be soft around the edges here. He's dead. Heart failure. Attempts to revive were unsuccessful.'

'Yeah, yeah. I know. Was it just a heart attack or what?'

An awkward several seconds passed.

'I'm sorry, sweetheart. We can't release that information to you if you aren't related to the deceased.'

Tripdoe lowered her eyebrows and sighed. She felt Tap shift. She raised her cupped hands to the nurse and said, 'What if I told you I had his salamander?'

'Whose salamander?'

'Mr. Lawnyawn's salamander.'

'How did you get Mr. Lawnyawn's salamander?'

'I think it crawled into my pants.'

'Young lady I think you need to leave.'

Another few seconds passed. Tripdoe retracted her hands.

'If you're not gonna tell me how he croaked, can you at least let me use your phone again?' Tripdoe asked.

'Sure...but you have to show me the salamander first.'

'Why?'

'I guess I've just never seen one before.'

She whispered: 'I think he might be asleep actually.'

The turquoise nurse's eyes flicked left and right. 'Show me.'

'Let me use your phone.'

'Fine. But you have to show me first.'

Tripdoe extended her hands again and uncupped them. The turquoise nurse, as if being reeled in by a very meticulous fisherman, leaned slowly in to peer at the salamander.

'I thought salamanders had scales. Are you sure this is a salamander?'

'His name is Tap,' said Tripdoe. 'And yes.'

She whistled like an old man might whistle at a very nice automobile. 'He looks like he's listening.'

'Can I use your phone now? Please?'

Entranced, the turquoise nurse's mouth opened. 'Look at those spots. Like neon mustard stains.'

Roge didn't pick up, big surprise, so Tripdoe called Lambo, who was at home playing checkers with his blind Gramaw. The stomach-lining-pink phone on the end table rung aggressively. Lambo, scratching his sparse chins hairs in next-move contemplation, looked up at Gramaw to see if she was going to make a move to answer it. Shoulder-shawled, she angled her head toward the phone. She said, 'I wouldn't answer that if I were you.' He got up hesitantly, pushed his thick-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose, picked up the phone.

'Heylow?'

'Hey Lambo. It's me. Trip. What're you up to?'

'Playing a game with Gramaw.'

'She's beating you again, huh.'

'No shit she is. I'm doomed. I've been doomed on this board forever. What's up?'

'Nothing much. I've got quite a little tale for you though. Can you pick me up?'

'Oohh. Mysterious Madame Phan with a big story. Whereabouts?'

'The hospital.'

'Oh. Whoa. Uh, you're not...eh...' he glanced over at Gramaw. She heard everything anyway, so he didn't bother lowering his voice, '...pregnant or anything are you?'

'Wha? Jesus, Lambo. No. People go to the hospital for other reasons besides, like, babies, ok? I'll have to just tell you in person. It's weird. Too weird for the phone.'

'Well, alright. I gotta wrap this game up but I'll head over right after.'

'Okie doke. Don't be a sore loser. Thanks and bye.'

She hung up.

Lambo lived with Gramaw in her weird little blind-woman's house. She paid him twenty dollars a week to help her keep things in order. He basically just followed her around sweeping up forgotten piles of refuse and making sure she didn't light her nightgown on fire while making food on the stovetop. Old lamps scattered around the living room bathed the walls in soft gold dreamy light. Quilts and magazines draped the couches and recliners. It was clean in the kind of way a vintage shop is clean, but made Lambo feel like he was already as old as his Gram. Sometimes, sitting in one of the velvet green recliners he felt time waft over him. It felt like, he often thought, standing under a very slow waterfall of warm milk.

'Hey Gram, that was Tripdoe. My friend from school. She needs me to give her a lift from the hospital. Let's finish this one up so I can get her, yeah?'

'Uh-oh. Uh-oh. The game's already finished, you just don't see how yet,' she sang, rubbing the face of a black checker with the pad of her bent right thumb.

Lambo sat back down and in less than five minutes lost, and was pulling his boots on, snatching up the keys, and heading across the yard to unlock and start the truck.

Tripdoe stepped on little bits of trash that the wind pushed to her feet from the edges of the parking lot. A crumply pile amassed. She stood under the awning outside the hospital when Lambo pulled up in the truck, his soft, boyish features blurred then clarified through the windshield.

The tires disrupted the bright coins of parking lot puddles that filled the usually-imperceptible dips in the asphalt. She'd set Tap down next to one so he could moisturize himself and take a few sips before climbing back into her hands which were now cupped around his body. She kept a little gap between her fingers so Tap could look around. His head peeped through her fingers, and his odd attentiveness scanned the space in front of them. They shared a non-verbalized agreement. Tripdoe didn't know how it got there, like a mule on an airplane.

Lambo stopped and Tripdoe opened the door and hopped into the warm dry womb of the truck. They leaned in to exchange a quick kiss. Tripdoe cupped her hands

away from her lean, but once the briefness of the peck concluded she pulled her hands over to Lambo's lap. 'Check it out,' she said, smiling, opening her hands. 'Tap, Lambo. Lambo, Tap.'

'Oh. Uh, hey?' Lambo said, shooing Tripdoe's salamander-filled hands away to wiggle the truck into gear.

'I inherited him from this guy who died in front of me at Gullah Bowl. Usual deal, Fenny getting all chatty and shit,' she saw Lambo's cheeks flush with annoyance. Any mention of another guy even remotely in their age-range so much as glancing at her did it to him. 'And pow, this dude I've never seen before starts flailing and sputtering there at his table and I get up to see what's up and wham he's face down, dead as a dog in his gumbo. I think Tap was his, and he climbed into my pant leg at the restaurant and waited there until I got to the hospital. We're friends now though. I think he can understand what I say. Oh and take me back to Gullah Bowl. My truck's still there.'

Lambo found it hard to keep his eyes on the road, looking back and forth between it and Tripdoe's quick unfolding. His pale arms stuck to the steering wheel like two melted plastic chopsticks sticking to a forgotten stovetop.

'I've known you for all this time and you still find ways to just, like, make me feel totally boring and crazy. Are you going to keep him? Do you know anything about salamanders? And aren't those yellow splotches basically saying, like, "Hey, if you touch me, you'll start vomiting blood," or something? I mean, shit, what if that thing's the reason the dude died? Maybe it's not his pet at all and it just climbed onto him and, like, bit him or, uh, rubbed up on him or whatever...?' Lambo's base state was nervousness. Checkers or ironing Gramaw's nightgowns usually topped the level of excitement in his day-to-day life, so this was, well...

Tripdoe laughed and brought Tap up to her face. 'You won't make me vomit blood, will you? Will you? Ha!' then gave him a tiny kiss on the top of his head. Tap's tail wagged slightly and Lambo, though he'd never admit it, felt the sharp prick of jealousy. 'I just have this feeling, Lamb. Tap is a good guy. He may be a mute amphibian but, dammit, he's a good guy. If he lived in the Wild West he'd be the type of dude to kick really drunk bandits out of saloons and shoo em out of town. If he was gonna dose me up with neurotoxins he would've done it already, anyways.'

'What, now lizards can choose who they kill with their neurotoxins. Ok.'

'Amphibian, Lambo dear. Amphibian.'

'What's ol' Pappy-O Roge gonna think about this, you think?'

'Nothing. He probably won't even notice. It's my mom's eyes I'll have to pull shades over. But I'm thinking of just making him his own special pen in the yard. Like a slimy little dog. Maybe we can make a leash out of a rubber band and some string for him.' Tap swiveled around to look up at Tripdoe and then hissed. Tripdoe laughed and said, 'Fine, fine. No leash. Geez.'

Lambo looked over at Tripdoe with wide eyes. 'Are you and him, like, communicating?'

'Like I said, I think Tap can understand English.'

'Try speaking to him in Spanish.'

'*Hola, señor Tap. Como estas?*'

Tap hissed and Tripdoe shrugged. 'English it is.'

Lambo pulled into the Gullah Bowl parking lot and Tripdoe gave him another kiss as she got out. 'Thanks, Lamb. Wanna come over later tonight and help me put Tap's habitat together?'

'I'd love to. Once Gram's in bed I'll head over.'

'Sounds good. See you then.'

He blew a kiss toward Tripdoe as she turned to watch him leave after slamming the door. She responded thusly: delicately pinched one of Tap's little hands and lifted it waving in Lambo's direction. She turned toward her truck, fumbling in her pocket for the keys, laughing.

Lambo pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and drove home.

Chapter Eight – In Which Erethizon Misinterprets a Variety of Stimuli

The male porcupines outside the fence of Penobska Proper were driven wild by an odor emanating from inside the town. Several times a year, when seasonal winds gusted the musky air hither and yon, the porcupine males gathered 'round the town in hormonally-angsty throngs. This seasonal gathering was the cause for Bozeman's panic...he watched their arrival from his second-story balcony, wringing out whatever article of clothing he happened to be wearing, his disheveled AM pompadour teetering like a wedding cake on a broken bicycle, his mind hard at working coming up with a scheme short of gunfire to dispel the horrible mob...his mind wandered, coming steadily back, magnetized to that One Thing...he'd seen this whole scene before somewhere...the feeling was indescribable but he was so sure, the memory danced stubbornly on the edge of the diving board above the pool of his brain...

But today, just outside of the fence on the rough fringe of the forest, no writhing crowds of porcupines, just the still sun and far-off sounds of town. A mile or so away Larry Lawnyawn was casually dying inside the gumbo restaurant. The glass shards in the troughs atop the fence glinted. The late afternoon air was feathery with light, clouds hung like frozen milk stains in the sky, a storm brewed to the west. Up in the arms of an oak that overlooked this side of the fence, a single porcupine rested, watching the town as the day slowly passed over it. His huge grey-black body slung over a bough, his striated tan-white quills pressed permanently flat against his back, his little clawed hands lazily folding and cramming leaves into his mouth. Erethizon, the Poky Prophet, on his parapet of oak bough.

Do not let Erethizon's lethargy fool you. He smelled it too, and was also driven mad by it, but had learned to curb what the musk stirred about in his blood. He sat in the same tree day after day. He smelled the musk waft in on the wind, letting it flow into him, knowing what it did to him and what it would do to his kind. But knowing, he took care never to move because of it, to never grant it influence over his actions.

When the musk first drew him to the fence years ago he acted as all the others did when they first smelled it. He paced, screamed, clawed at and bit the steel, turned inside out by the air's thick musk. Others, hearing the screams, arrived and paced in ever-thickening mobs. Someone bumped someone else. Quills were bared, and blind orgies of violence released into the gathering like poison in blood. An unlucky quill drove itself through the bridge of Erethizon's snout and into the nerve behind his right

eye. He remembered white pain like a permanent flash of lightning, then waking up half-blind in the grass, the quill still rose from his face like a broken pool cue, the last instant of vision burned into the right side of his visual memory, a constant ghostly reminder that refused to fade.

Now, though, he knew. And he met the musk in the middle ground of his mind with an offering of peace, an oath of unwavering indifference. He knew it as a sign from the people behind the steel, but he also knew the legions of his brethren were drawn to the fence because of the musk's deceptive quality, and he had taken it upon himself to redirect their energies. He marked the months by watching the inevitable gathering of those who had come before and those whose first time to pace and fight arrived. He called to those who would listen to hear his proclamations.

'Brothers: the smell from behind the steel has lured you, otherwise you would not be here. I see the craze in your pacing, in your eyes. Take a deep breath and let the air rush around inside of your blood. Look at me. Do not let the craze manifest in your actions! If you let the musk overpower your minds, then your minds will overpower your bodies! See the blinding quill! It will blind you as it has me if by pacing here along the steel you search for resolution to the sensations of the air!' At around this point in Erethizon's speech he came to recognize the gathered porcupines below becoming stirred by his words. Some yelped out, other balanced on their hind legs, but inevitably someone bumped into and quilled someone else, and a melee broke gradually loose, scattering the gathering back into the woods, leaving some permanently crippled, others dead.

Here was what he wanted to say, here was what he had been planning to say, here was what the eruptions of violence kept him from saying: 'Be at peace with the stirrings. Let them stir. Let them settle. Then know that our place, being called here by the musk, is for now on the outside! To gather and celebrate the pungency of the air, yet to deny its sway over our bodies! We must give our thanks to the people inside the steel for their difficult proposition, their brutal challenge, and gather here in peace to show them our understanding! For when we all come here as a whole, when we have proven to the people behind the steel that we have quenched our thirst and dried up our reserves of violence, then shall we be granted entrance to this land of infinite musk. Then we shall have our deliverance. But to do so we must leave our violence, and our lust for the musk, behind. On this side of the fence. Completely, and Forever.' But he never said it all before the crowd collided. One or two individuals sometimes took heed, having perhaps been there before, having seen the eruptions of violence before, but after the dust settled Erethizon found the field beneath him empty, even those weary enough to hear him had scattered in the cloud of combat. He waited.

Erethizon, dooming himself to stay above and watch, the crier with his broken bell, did so with half his vision, the other half hovering disembodied over the last critical moment that day so long ago when his vision half left. When the two converged, when the lingering ghost-image of the past merged with the present carnage, he knew it was too late to stop the violent seepage. Briefly he saw the world whole again, united by bloodshed, and he wept in the tree above his brothers.

Today, however, the wind rested and the musk rested. Erethizon was alone with the heat. Distant clouds threatened to disrupt the calm afternoon, but for now he simply breathed and chewed leaves lazily.

He heard the rhythmic patter of footfalls. A boy in red ran panting under Erethizon's tree into the forest. He watched him through trembling veils of leaves. Rarely did he see people pass through from their place to the forest on foot, and never did they waver from the road. But this galloping boy weaved carelessly through the brush. Erethizon turned to watch him leap over downed logs and snap twigs as he disappeared headlong into the trees that knitted themselves closed behind him. His time-numbed, time-bored brain thought: A sign. How could this be anything other than an exchange? One insider for one outsider? He sat very still thinking.

Chapter Nine – In Which Nikosi Departs, and Erethizon Crosses Over

When Tripdoe opened the door Nikosi craned her neck to look at her.

'Where the heck have you been?' Nikosi asked. She had a can of lima beans open on her lap. A spoon poked from the open mouth of the can. The TV, per usual, was on. The screen showed a long-haired blonde woman walking by a sunburnt man asleep on the beach. Nikosi looked back at the screen just in time to laugh. 'He's sure crispy! Oh boy!' Tripdoe imagined that if she wasn't holding the can of lima beans, her mother would be slapping her thigh.

She cupped Tap closer to make sure Nikosi didn't see him, but Tripdoe walked over to her mom's easy chair. Tripdoe patted the brown top of her mother's head with the hand she wasn't holding Tap with. 'Well Ma, if you must know, I was at the hospital basically all day. This guy died right in front of me when I was at Gullah Bowl and I felt like I had to accompany him into the afterlife, or the morgue, I guess. Like the boat guy in hell or whatever. He was all alone, or at least kinda all alone.'

Nikosi laughed again, still glued to the screen. The sunburnt man woke up and tried to stand up without bending any part of his full-frontal sunburn. 'You shoulda used sun lotion, fool! Oh, what's that you said? Hospital? You're not dying are you? Do you drink enough milk? How're those bones of yours?'

Tripdoe opened her mouth and closed it. The sunburnt man's slow struggle absorbed Nikosi's attention again. 'I'm not dying, Ma. Just a checkup. Make sure everything's ticking alright inside, you know? They said my bones are OD'ing on calcium. They said I'm healthy as a fuckin horse. Better than a horse, actually. They said if I got any healthier I might just ignite and turn into some kind of very bright and hot sentient jelly. Then they gave me a little yellow lollipop and I skipped my way home. And, well, voila.'

'Great, great. Listen, darlin' would you mind tossing this can in the garbage for me? And, and washing off this spoon and stickin it back into the drawer there? Thanks so much.'

Tripdoe slackened her grip around me as she spoke to the Large Mother. I wiggled free without her noticing and climbed down the plush back of the reclined chair and onto the warm, damp shoulder that rose before me. The Large Mother exuded an appealing heat and I curled closer to her neck.

Tripdoe, having forgotten Tap amid the familiar homey rituals, tossed the empty lima bean can into the white plastic trash bin in the kitchen. She turned on the faucet to wash the spoon, and halfway through the lathering stage she inhaled sharply and felt a

rusty knife-edge of panic as she looked down into her Tap-less, soap-white palms. She heard Nikosi say, 'Tripdoe, what in the heck are you doing? Quite ticklin'...I'm trying to watch my program here...wha? AHHHHHHHHH!'

Tripdoe ran back to her mom: Nikosi held Tap in the wrapped grip of her hand. She screamed and Tap screamed and Nikosi screamed and threw Tap at the TV. He bounced off with a terrible hollow glassy thud and cartwheeled like a toy into the shadowed corner of the room. Nikosi's screams developed further until she emitted a single high pitch, her body undulating in terrible groaning waves in her chair that wobbled and tilted back and forth unstably, she still held something dark in her hand out in front of her face and whatever it was evolved her terror into some kind of exponent of regular terror. Tripdoe started moving in two directions: toward the corner where Tap had hurdled and toward her mother whose uncontrolled panic rocked the chair like a storm-drunk boat. Tripdoe took one step left, one step right, one step left, one step right in the infernal tango of indecision, the room torn in two, until Nikosi's flailing rocketed her backward out of her easy chair and through the bay window behind her. She landed in the darkened overgrown yard, her high pitch raised above the shattering glass beneath her, and her body curved into a terrible ball that rolled and gathered momentum as she tumbled downhill, through the grass, bursting a yawning hole in the fence, screaming that single terrible tone as she disappeared in a straight line into the dark quiet forest that muffled the pitch gradually until Tripdoe stared in silence through the Ma-sized hole in the window, the TV behind her chatting with itself.

She stepped quietly away from the window and found the TV remote. She turned the screen off, and the room sunk into silent dimness, the only light bleeding in from the kitchen. She righted the tipped-over chair and lowered its footrest so she could sit down easily. Something like...relief? Couldn't be. Ma just rolled ass-first into the void.

She inhaled slowly, her breath shaky and weak. If this wasn't relief, then was at least relief's well-mannered elder cousin.

Into the calm lake of her mind, a foreign call for help splashed like a smooth stone. It came from Tap, and it wasn't *sound*, it was an actual thought, aimed at Tripdoe's waking mind like the stony arrow of *homo neanderthalensis* aimed at the unsuspecting vitals of some kind of wooly beast. *Help, please. For heaven's sake, help.*

Tripdoe got up and fumbled along the wall looking for the lightswitch. She found it and flicked it on, revealing the stuffed room: towers of Roge's work papers swayed like the branches of a willow tree, and Tripdoe saw that over in the corner where Tap had cartwheeled a pile of papers had collapsed. She shuffled over and started digging through the sheets gently, afraid that anything more than caution might disrupt the delicate, and now potentially harmed, anatomy of her slimy little friend.

At the bottom of the pile, she located him. A forgotten Styrofoam cup once used to shuttle coffee into Roge's work-drowned mouth had landed crosswise over his torso, and the falling pages crumpled the cup and pinned him to the carpet. Tripdoe peeled him delicately from the floor like a toddler removing a band-aid from a three-day-old scab. His tail was missing, and little drops of blood dripped into her hands. She rushed to the sink, turned the faucet on, making sure the water was hot before she splashed Tap's motionless body with some of it. The blood curled and swirled down the drain, diluted by the water.

'Hey there little fella. Come on. Come on.'

He squirmed in response, and another thought-arrow flew into the flank of Tripdoe's mind: *Turn the temperature of that water down a bit, please. It's scalding me.*

She reciprocated.

The steam faded and Tap shook his now-much-shorter body like a dog. Tripdoe turned the faucet off and unwound a few rectangles of paper towel to dry him off. He shivered mildly, but the little dribblets of blood had stopped pipette-ing out from his stump of a tail. Tripdoe remembered her wadded up gumbo-crusteds socks and yanked them out of her pockets and threw them like undesirable evidence into the trash can.

She dabbed at his wet body until he was dry, then set him down on the counter and crouched to look at him at eye level. 'Y'alright? Can I leave you alone for a second?'

He nodded.

She ran over to the back door and opened it. She ran outside over the night-sparkled glass to the ragged hole in the fence. She crawled through and started yelling for her mom. The night chewed up her yells with its dark, mossy gums. A faint, meandering trail that her mother's swiftly rolling body had compressed wove away from where Tripdoe stood, on into the forest where it disappeared behind the shifting shadows of trees. She called her mother's name again, then ducked back through the torn fence. The night's cold wind fumbled with her forehead like a drunk man fumbling with the door of a taxi cab.

When Tripdoe came back inside, Lambo was standing in the kitchen petting the top of Tap's head with a thin outstretched index finger. He was bent over at the waist looking at the yellow splotchy designs on Tap's back and head. In the white overhead light, his pale skin looked almost translucent – Tripdoe thought she could see his veins, his bones. He looked up.

'Yo. Thought you were in the bathroom. What in the hoot happened to the little geek's tail?' He must've noticed the vacant shock on Tripdoe's face: he stopped petting Tap's head, stepped forward clumsily, stopped, then walked toward her, wrapping her in a thin full hug that she crumpled into. Her cheek rubbed against the wiry whiskers that poked out of his chin and she blubbered:

'Bomjahbucketedbahlunkpettedfrumbbandoh!'

'Wha?'

'Mom just fuckin rocketed out of her chair out of the window!' She slacked all her muscles and Lambo struggled to keep her in the embrace that had gone from high-budget romance pivotal scene to emergency responder training video blooper. His wiry arms shook under her armpits, and his knees quaked like uneven barstools.

'Uh, hey, don't quite know what you're...uh...' his grip slipped. Tripdoe slumped into a pile on the crumb-strewn linoleum floor where she started crying quietly into the spread open palms of her hands. It looked like she was reading a very finely-printed pamphlet about something very sad. Lambo stood there, feet spread wide, looking down at her, glasses sliding down the grease-slick bridge of his nose. He pushed them up obliviously.

The quiet crying went on and on, and Lambo's feet slid farther apart until he was doing the splits right there by her, his overwhelmed hands resting on her shaking shoulder. Tap climbed down off the counter and started drinking from the salty pool of tears that puddled around Tripdoe's floor-pressed face. Lambo, in his usual state,

freebasing compassion off the crinkled tinfoil of his instincts, had nothing in his head to do but rub her back and stare at the jagged window's yawn.

Eventually Tripdoe drifted from tears to a cold shallow sleep, and Lambo, lulled by her deep breathing, slumped over and curled his knees in like a child, his head halfway inside the cabinet that the Phan family's skillets occupied. Tap, being nocturnal, found the right crook between them, not unlike the grooves of a shadowed section of log, and kept a vigilant eye open to the kitchen around the sleeping youths.

Meanwhile, Erethizon, huddling under an overgrown rhododendron in the Phan family's backyard, took a deep breath. He had just finished wiggling his way through the hole he had been digging beneath the fence for a few hours when Nikosi broke through the window into the yard. Her rolling body had almost crushed him. She rolled just to the left and scared him half to death. He fled via instinct into the rhododendron where he shook until the house quieted down, and until his nerves settled and he regained his usual serenity that he now regarded briefly with confusion, as it had been dismantled so effortlessly by the threat of being crushed by the rolling woman's body. Perhaps his composure wasn't as thoroughly rooted in him as he, in his tree, had thought. But then again, wouldn't any porcupine, wise or otherwise, be shaken by such a close encounter with such strange danger?

Never had he seen them expel themselves from their territory with so much momentum, or such a lack of ceremony; it would be a while yet before either of the two he'd seen stopped, he thought as he shook the clinging dirt from his quills. First the red boy, now the round woman.

He waddled back to the hole he had dug and kicked and pawed dirt into it until it was mostly filled on this side. He knew his brothers would soon find the wound in the fence though, and when they did they would file into the town like ants after spilled wine. Indeed to them the musk was as compelling. He didn't know what would come of his brothers if they entered the town without the purity of heart that had allowed him entrance. Nothing good, certainly, but if what would fall upon them from entering was more disastrous than what they enacted on each other along the outskirts of town, then, he thought, he needed to find some way to stop them from bringing such events upon themselves. He had to clog that fence-hole.

Keeping quiet, he waddled around the backyard, through dense thickets of entangled grass, looking for materials to obscure or clog the gap in the steel. He tried biting the tall grass down and piling it up in front of the hole, but the scant progress he made after a few minutes sent him off to find alternatives. While clawing at the padlocked door of the small peeling shed that Roge hadn't opened in months, and that Tripdoe occasionally smoked pot in, a flipped-over neon orange baby pool beneath the shed's clouded window glowed in the evening, catching Erethizon's only eye. Repeating blue cartoon whales swam the dented orange ocean and the bowing face heavy with rainwater reflected the night as it blinked alive with stars. Leaves and other windswept debris sat still and dark in a thin film of mud at the bottom of the shallow water. Grass had grown perfectly around it, forming a slight canopy. He ruffled the grass to poke his head through to see the entire pool, and decided it would have to do.

Erethizon gnawed the canopied grass, clearing a path to the fence. He ate a few mouthfuls to fuel the laborious extraction. When he cleared a way, he clamped his jaws

around the curled plastic edge and upturned the pool to slosh the water off the opposite side in chunky splashes.

The baby pool had sat there, bottom up, for several seasons. Its rim had sunk into the soil, but when Erethizon finally freed the bulging plastic tub, it left a perfect circle of damp mud that he scuffed with his claws as he pulled backward toward the fence. Where the baby pool had been, a grassless circle sat. Squirmy tracks of earthworms crossed and recrossed its diameter and traced its circumference like a schoolchild's wild dark crayon. The spilled rainwater filled the shadowed tracks and disappeared. Stale earthen scent rose from the flat area like after rain.

Over by the fence, Erethizon struggled to tilt the baby pool on its side to prop against the hole. It wouldn't block it permanently but its brightness could ward off his brothers' curiosity long enough for Erethizon to locate the musk's source and come back. He dug more dirt up with his paws and packed it around the base of the pool to bolster it against the wind, and jammed bunches of loose grass near its edges where the pool met the earth. The oddness of the task struck him: attempting to preserve the souls of his brothers with an upturned whale-dotted tub streaked with the wet sliding detritus of previous seasons. Behind him a hinge creaked, the house clearing its rusty throat. Turning away from the tilted pool, Erethizon saw Tripdoe's darkened cutout staring into the night, arms crossed over one another like folded napkins, Tap sitting on her shoulder.

He froze, hoping that her eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark. Then a voice whirled into his head: *She hasn't seen you. She won't if you back slowly up and take shelter behind the shed. She has been sleeping and is not yet fully awake, but the night will wake her shortly if she stays in it. Stay there for a time and you will hear me again.* Almost immediately after the voice went quiet, a breeze blew a fresh, intoxicating gust of musk into Erethizon nose. He shivered and backed up as he had heard to do, and concentrated to settle his quills flat onto his back again.

Tripdoe, too, shivered in the breeze, though the subtleties of what had drawn Erethizon into Penobska drifted through her undetected. She squinted her eyes to make out her old baby pool leaning against the fence. Thinking it the odd coincidental fault of the wind, she went back inside and collapsed onto the couch where she fell into a deep sleep. Lambo was huddled in a ball on the kitchen's linoleum, dreaming about checkers while Tap padded his dark way back outside.

Chapter Ten – In Which We Receive a Few Bits About Doctor Sassoon

Roge had a complicated relationship with parenting. Being uncomfortable with his role as authoritarian and rule-enforcer, he'd developed a system of Tripdoe-teaching in order to impart important yet stern lessons without having to be the one Tripdoe associated with the punishment or lesson-imparting. Taking seriously attempts to alter her behavior or coerce her into compliance was not something Tripdoe did very well. And Roge feared retribution if he should make a negative-enough impression: he'd seen how deftly she handled a screwdriver while opening up a treadmill, and was not unreasonably wary of confronting her with anything close to parental criticism, not that he *really* thought she would ever do anything to him...but, well...her surpassing knowledge of all things electric and mechanical opened up a wide field of payback for her that Roge, in his ignorance, would have a hard time proving she'd actually had

anything to do with. He was much less on edge if he just closed the door on the possibility of her having anything to hold against him in the first place.

Once, during Tripdoe's second year in high school, the bodacious fragrance of cannabis seeped its way from underneath the upstairs hallway bathroom's locked door, a bathroom that was Tripdoe's informal territory and where she took hour-spanning showers that drained the water heater. The robust smell diffused evenly throughout the rest of the house. At first Roge tried to ignore it, thinking it sufficient to merely look up from his laptop every five or so minutes with a confused expression on his face, adding in a few puzzled sniffs to complete the empty acknowledgement. In case Nikosi smelled anything from her seat and brought it up he could at least say, 'Yeah, you know, I smelled something weird too...?' and then angle his head down to work again until she demanded further investigation which, now that the smell was growing ever thicker and more obvious, looked inevitable.

Sure enough, in the gap between her program and the station's advertisements, Nikosi hollered: 'Roge, what the fuck? I smell something stinky. And I don't like it. Smells like pot.' He sighed.

'Yeah, uh, I think maybe the oven got left on?' He left his laptop screen and went into the kitchen to fiddle with a few of the oven knobs loudly, open and close the door. 'Hmm...' he said, glancing back to see Nikosi's TV-haloed head re-absorbed in a recycled porcupine identification commercial. He went quietly back to his computer.

After a while Nikosi fell asleep, and the smell gradually faded. Roge heard the bathroom door wheeze open and Tripdoe's wet feet pattered into her room. Worried that if either he or Nikosi failed to acknowledge the obviousness of what was going on in there, Tripdoe would continue getting stoned in the steamy bathroom. And the more she got stoned in the steamy bathroom, the more likely the possibility of Nikosi making Roge bring it up with Tripdoe. And he didn't want to do that.

So for the next two and a half hours, Roge utilized his digital design prowess to forge a research article about the negative side-effects of marijuana usage. He conflated some numbers, invented a few diseases, made some very visually-appealing graphs and charts, and found a hi-def picture online of an overcooked meatloaf to use as photographic evidence of a long-term marijuana user's lungs. When he'd polished the article and signed it off with the pseudonym he'd cloaked himself with as Bozeman's personal hometherapist Dr. Leonard Sassoon, PhD in Complementary Health-Uptake Methods, he leaned back in his chair, found his Styrofoam cup of cold coffee, raised it in silent honor to Dr. Sassoon, and took a big gulp.

Thirty or so minutes later Tripdoe came downstairs, her hair a complicated tower secured mysteriously atop her head. She didn't stop to acknowledge Roge sitting at the table as she went into the kitchen. From the corner of his eye Roge watched her open the fridge and stare into it for a very long time. She seemed to have forgotten why she'd opened it until she pulled out a jug of cranberry juice which she twisted open and drank. She gazed longingly at the toaster as she lowered the jug to wipe her mouth with the sleeve of the magenta bathrobe she had on.

'Hey Tripster. I found an interesting article online I thought you'd like. Actually, uh, Bozeman told me to pass it along to you. He thought you'd be interested in it, I guess. No idea why, but, hey, uh...I have it here if you wanna read it. Or I could send it to you...?'

She walked over with the cranberry jug in hand, bent down to look at the screen, smelling like shampoo, and, having read the article's title, immediately started laughing. Roge slumped into the chair, sensing defeat. She couldn't stop, and had to set the jug on the table next to Roge's laptop, and flung her torso onto the table. Because of Tripdoe's persistent laughter, Roge started laughing too, until both of them were hunched over in hysteric tears, Roge's more the result of confusion than delight. Nikosi heard the laughter over the TV, but couldn't twist her neck far enough to see what was going on, and then the TV gathered itself about her. They just sat there laughing, Tripdoe draped over the table, arms flapping, Roge's chin buried in his slouch, his afro wiggling like a loaf of bread on a runaway freight train. Shortly after they stopped, and after Tripdoe patted Roge on the back and gave him a theatrical kiss on the top of the head, she made her slow way back upstairs to her room. The cranberry jug sat open on the table sweating, and the fridge door hung open, its bare bulb bathing the kitchen in white light.

Roge never detected the seeping odor of combusted cannabis in the house ever again, but Tripdoe would occasionally call him Dr. Sassoon with a wry smirk on her face.

That wasn't the first time Roge had used the pseudonym; he'd first coined it years ago, when Tripdoe was five or six, around the time of the first few porcupine sightings in response to Bozeman's demand to hire a personal therapist to help him remedy his sexual impotence that had rendered his love life flaccid and unappealing, like a celery stalk exiled at the bottom of the vegetable crisper. The Office of Prefectural Command still had a few employees besides just Roge and Bozeman at the time, and the construction of mini-Penobska was not yet even a moist gleam on the rim of Bozeman's eyelids.

Several days before Bozeman tasked Roge with finding a personal therapist, Bozeman had embarrassed Roge in front of basically everyone at the Office during a meeting he called apparently in order to merely single Roge out. Roge's afro sported excess frizz that day, mainly because he'd slept under his desk the previous night. He'd used a few feet of wadded up brown paper towels from the bathroom as a pillow and blanket, and he tweaked out a stripe of muscle in his lower back that jittered like a narcotized lab rat every time he bent or twisted. When he woke up, he'd forgotten to tend to his fro, which Bozeman noticed and considered a viable subject of public mockery. Bozeman, addressing everyone in the office from the counter in the staff lounge that he'd converted briefly into a stage by climbing onto it like a powerful toddler, said, 'And the employee of the month award goes to Roge Phan, who seems to have forgone medical attention to come into work after having been struck by a lightning bolt, or perhaps a series of lightning bolts! Now *that's* dedication, people! Now Roge, make sure to discharge all the electricity you're carrying around up there by, uh, rubbing yourself up against a lightswitch or something.' He led a sarcastic, ebullient round of applause, his face warm as an oven's glowing coils, his legs victoriously straddling the coffee-stained sink and the legion of unwashed mugs and silverware therein. Everyone laughed and applauded except, of course, Roge, who'd only slept

under his desk because Bozeman demanded he stay overnight to make sure the building's newly installed automatic lights turned off precisely at ten o'clock PM and then back on at seven o'clock AM. Which, by the way, they did.

The coworkers who patted Roge's back buddy-buddily in response to the public stinging noticed his right eye twitching rapidly as he stared somewhere very far off in the distance, or perhaps somewhere impossibly close. He stood there in that same square-foot of space in the staff lounge until Bozeman came over and waved his hand in front of Roge's face. 'Hey, anybody home, eh?' Roge shifted his bloodshot eyes and smiled at Bozeman. 'Oh, I'm home alright,' he mumbled. 'Little home on the fucking...prairie.'

When Bozeman called Roge into his office a few days later, glimmering gates creaked open to grant Roge access to vengeance. 'Roge, dear Roge,' Bozeman's meaty face barely moved. He was, as usual, hunched behind his desk, his elbows propping his round torso up, thick baseball-mitt-like hands cradling his toaster skull, his shiny pompadour dipping and reflecting coins of light around the room like the face of a wrist watch. 'I have a very sensitive task for you. I wouldn't trust any of these sewer rats around here with the information I'm about to trust you with,' he spat, gesturing disgustedly toward the door. He always seemed so convivial around the rest of the office, until he had Roge alone in his office with him. 'And that's how I want it. I trust you like a political prisoner trusts the sharpened spoon he plans to slash the night guard's jugular with.' Roge sat in the leather guest chair with his hands sweating in his lap, not sure if Bozeman was about to lunge at him with a sharpened spoon or offer him some kind of raise, or perhaps some unique combination of the two. He hadn't slept much since the lightning-comment incident. 'I hope you can read between the lines here, Roge. Over the last few months I've been noticing some uncharacteristic *slackness* with regards to a certain *member* of my *family*. You dig?' He stared at Roge, but his forehead was almost parallel to the floor, so Roge could barely see Bozeman's eyes from underneath his ridged eyebrows. He entertained the notion that Bozeman was addressing the desktop. 'What I'm saying is, Roge, is that me and my girlfriend Kandy haven't been to the *park* in a while. We haven't been *walking our dog*. And he's starting to *get a little restless*.' It was true that Bozeman's girlfriend's name was Kandy, but this whole euphemism thing started creeping Roge out, but he saw Bozeman's evasiveness as an opportunity to exchange some of his own simmering embarrassment.

Roge leaned forward and knocked a pen off Bozeman's desk. Bozeman brought his head up slightly. Roge bent down to pick it up and said, 'Sir, I think I'm...picking up...what you're putting down.' Bozeman burst into hysteric laughter, slapping the desktop with the flattened palms of his hands over and over like someone tenderizing prime rib. When he regained his composure, he faced Roge and said, 'This is why I trust you. You deal in the subtler aspects of human communication. Some might call you an artist. Not like the rest of these swine.' He leaned back in his chair, apparently pleased with his declaration. 'Your task, then, is to research professionals nearby whose specialty is *repairing* such situations. By whatever means necessary, be they tonics, salves, inhalants,' he lowered his voice, 'Legal, illegal. It matters not. This situation is, shall we say, of immediate importance.' The conversation went on in a similarly vague fashion until Roge and Bozeman shook hands. Roge would consider that handshake the beginning of what would become their close correspondence that would eventually lead to the reduction of the rest of the Office's pool of employees, until just he and Bozeman remained, locked in mutual dependence.

Back at his desk after the handshake, his simmering thirst for vengeance combined with having been deprived of sleep several days in a row prompted Roge to develop an immaculately fraudulent website and persona for a one Dr. Leonard Sassoon, PhD in CHUM (Complementary Health-Uptake Methods). His initial plan was to diagnose Bozeman's sexual ailment vicariously through Dr. Sassoon as an imbalance of chemicals and energies.

He got most of the terminology he ended up using in his first official Statement of Ailment from an old brochure he found in one of the kitchen drawers back at home, a drawer that also held one spool of old twine, blue safety scissors, glue, pencil erasers, a red plastic teaspoon, and two old brown coins. The brochure was for one of Pixie Town II's most popular nightclubs that claimed to offer a full staff of 'chakra-alignment specialists' who would 'rebalance your energies' and 'bring your consciousness in line with its ideal cosmological coordinates'. Toddler Tripdoe had casually sabotaged the pamphlets by drawing twirling mustaches on the upper lips of all the featured employees and patrons, male or female, it mattered not to the indiscriminate hand of Tripdoe.

Dr. Sassoon as Roge borrowed heavily from the pamphlet, and, after having convinced Bozeman of his competency and career-long effectiveness, eventually started prescribing Bozeman weekend forays to Pixie Town II in order for him to attend the 'cleansing retreats' that were essentially just thirty-hour-long drug-fueled dance parties.

Roge thought he saw Bozeman sigh with relief when, a year later, Pixie Town II got taken over and converted by its ex-staff. The drugged dancing that was supposed to balance his chakras was starting to make all of his thoughts feel like a Slinky going down an infinite staircase, not to mention all the prickly paranoia of travelling through the wilderness every weekend. However, he did claim to feel an awakening in his loins.

Though the months went by, the sparks of electric anger that sunk irrationally deep into Roge that day in the staff lounge glowed bright, and cast odd shadows only he could see on Bozeman. Dr. Sassoon as Roge eventually abandoned the pamphlet to come up with his own regimen of sexual healing methods that became increasingly patronizing, but that Bozeman adopted with increasing enthusiasm and praise. A few of his regular recommendations included balancing upsidedown for five minutes at a time with ripened strawberries on the bare soles of the feet in his own office, contemplative walks through forests, monosyllabic chant sessions, therapeutic crayon workshops, and, as an extension of his wanting Nikosi's obsession with porcupines to end and his home life to settle back into normalcy, a diet of fresh female porcupine reproductive secretions whose harvesting Bozeman would, without Roge knowing, expand marvelously as the next few years went by.

Bozeman's sustained and faithful practice in whichever fictional therapies Roge puppeted over the internet became a tiresome responsibility for Roge as the months and years wore on. Not only did he have to respond to Bozeman's constant feedback that he messaged to Sassoon's fake account, he had to do so clandestinely while also performing the duties of his public station as Bozeman's now singular employee, a position that came with the lofty title of Prefectural Observator. His vengeful scheme

had blossomed with flowers whose perplexing fragrance attracted the loud and aggravating birds of Bozeman's enthusiasm, but now that he had let it grow to such proportions, he had no other option but to continue his two-pronged life as glorified secretary and sham sexual therapist.

Chapter Eleven – In Which Bozeman Drinks a Fertility Smoothie, and Kandy Takes Yet Another Bath

Bozeman drank a banana fertility smoothie, like he always did, as early light cracked like an egg over Penobska the Friday morning after Nikosi rolled into the forest. He stood on his second-floor balcony with one hand on the chilled metal railing and the other gripping a ceramic jar that he ceremoniously drank fertility smoothies from. The jar was stout and covered with tiny scenes from Penobskan history that Bozeman had painted on himself. The scenes looked like something found scratched into a cave wall, and only some of them could be verified as de facto historical events, the others being Bozeman's personal elaborations. He savored each swig, even the bitter aftertaste that lingered like a bruise on his tongue for half an hour. The cloudy evening had burned away in the morning. Thin mustaches of clouds looked like they'd soon be shaved off the lip of the sky's powdered face. Bozeman wasn't wearing slippers or socks, so the smooth marble floor sucked heat from his soles, and his thick leg hair ruffled in the light breeze.

Bozeman's house sat on several acres at the heart of Penobska and was secluded from the rest of town by a thick surrounding of old trees. Visitors often described the house as 'gorgeous', 'magisterial', 'a monument to simpler times', and/or 'plantational'. Tripdoe had been over to Bozeman's at least once every two weeks since the seventh grade to repair or tune up one of his many antique treadmills that were always falling into some kind of disrepair and then being mysteriously discarded and replaced by different treadmills that were somehow also in bad condition and in need of her expert (and expensive) care. When she asked Bozeman about the appearance of these new machines, he would start sneezing repetitively until she went away.

She saw Bozeman's place more as a renovated mausoleum, what with its marble floors, corrugated pillars, antique sconces that if yanked may or may not have activated winches and exposed dusty staircases leading to subterranean vaults and/or chambers, paintings of waterfalls and sailboats, and huge leather armchairs that lurked in the corners of every softly-lit room. Bozeman's exercise room impressed and mystified her quite a bit. They were models she'd never seen anywhere else, from distant lands and times, all of which impressed and intrigued her mechanized curiosities. She suspected somehow the reason he owned, consistently damaged, and replaced so many different exotic models was related somehow to Roge's relationship with Bozeman, whereby he singlehandedly employed Tripdoe as some kind of favor to Roge, or perhaps as a way of incentivizing Roge's otherwise cumbersome position as his personal assistant. Regardless of Roge's involvement, Tripdoe made wads of money from Bozeman's conspicuously and consistently damaged treadmills, even if it meant, from time to time, having to deal personally with Bozeman, something Tripdoe didn't much care for.

Bozeman's girlfriend Kandy – a few years older than he – played the accordion inside their bedroom which was through open double doors with eight square windows each sectioned off by dark stained wood bars. She lay naked on the disheveled bed facing the ceiling, her arms pumping the old instrument, a cigarette dangling between her lips. Her hair was the same color as Bozeman's banana fertility smoothie, and her skin sometimes blended with the marble floor. Whenever she hummed part of the song she played, ash would flutter off the end of the cigarette and pepper her face and the sheets beneath her. She'd been playing all morning, and ignored Bozeman when he offered to make her breakfast, instead opting for cigarette after cigarette and accordion song after accordion song.

Bozeman gulped down the last thick mouthful of smoothie and went back inside, swinging the doors shut behind him. The stout history-depicting jar found a spot on the bedside table and began exporting its ring of moisture onto it. Bozeman stripped off his bathrobe and stood at the foot of the bed, feet spread wide, waiting for Kandy to glance up from her musical reverie, which she refused to do, knowing that he stood there. He thought he felt a stir between his legs, but when he looked down to investigate, his penis only reminded him of a field mouse in a snowstorm: stubborn, still, patient, and to the untrained eye, dead. He sighed, and Kandy exhaled a cloud into the room that settled down over them both slowly. The migrating cloud slowly occupied the sixteen angled beams of sunlight that passed through the door's square windows.

'Kandy, baby,' he said covering his unresponsive genitals with a floral-embroidered pillow he'd picked up from the floor, 'you sure you don't want any breakfast? You look hungry. Baby, you look hungry.' Kandy compressed another tired song into the room.

Bozeman dropped the pillow and re-cloaked himself with the bathrobe, and grabbed the empty smoothie jar. Kandy sat up, flopped the accordion beside her, took the cigarette out of her mouth with her left hand. She brushed her bangs out of her eyes with the back of the hand that held the cigarette and exhaled. She rolled off the bed, slapped both her feet down on the marble simultaneously, and stood up. Her arms went stretching into the air, and Bozeman watched her full length expand upwards, her muscles in her back and in her buttocks and in her legs tensing, her hair hanging loose off her tilted head, the cigarette held high in the air like a torch, her whole body now balancing on the tips of her toes. She sunk back to normal size and walked into the bathroom after replacing the cigarette between her lips, shutting and locking the door behind her, never looking back at Bozeman.

The empty smoothie jar felt light in his hands, and it had warmed to them after having been drained of its thick contents.

He stood there for a minute quietly, the rising sun licking the backs of his legs. From the bathroom he could hear small sounds, then the bathtub's knobs twisting, then the white noise of falling, pooling water.

He went downstairs to the kitchen where he rinsed out the jar carefully so as to not scrub off or chip any of the delicate scenes. When the jar was clean, he stared at the faucet. He turned the cold water off and turned the hot water on. He let it run as he set the jar in the drying rack and found half a bagel in the fridge that he microwaved without a plate for forty-five seconds. When the microwave beeped, he pulled the naked bagel out and ate it, exhaled through his nose while chewing, the steam from the

hot water swirling around the marble island the sink sunk into. Wet globs of half-chewed bagel crowned his back teeth.

In a rutted, grassless pen behind his house, Bozeman kept a crowd – 30 or 40 – of female porcupines. Once a week he sprayed a fluid into the pen whose smell imitated a horny male porcupine's urine. The females would react as they would in the wild if presented with such a fluid: they secreted reproductive fluids of their own that, in the wild, would be the go-ahead signal for mating. Bozeman, in a state of self-deluded personal dependence on the secretions, wearing stitched-together porcupine pelts, doused in the imitation urine, would lumber slowly into the pen on all fours and approach one of the females that presented itself, and collect her secretions via specialized swab and jar. Once he'd filled the jar he would back slowly out of the pen and lock the little metal gate behind him. He kept the porcupine pelt hanging from a small hook on the inside of the kitchen door, and always made sure to keep it on until he was out of sight of the females. Then he'd empty a little bit of the jar into a refrigerated tub in his garage that he drew his daily dosages from, and poured the rest into a huge storage tank that he'd installed on the side of the house. He had more than enough of the fluid in the refrigerated tub inside, but some compulsion drove him to horde the thick, mucoid substance en masse. This massive storage tank was what drove the male porcupines – who'd been at a shortage of females ever since Bozeman rounded up dozens of them years ago in order to fill the prescription Sassoon had filled out for him – absolutely mad outside the Penobskan perimeter. The crowd of females had been healthy and productive, though in the last few months they'd been dying off one by one gradually.

Some of the older females that had stopped producing the reproductive secretions were taken into Bozeman's basement's basement, accessed via concealed hatch in the floor of his exercise studio where he'd been storing all the treadmills Tripdoe had repaired for him over the years. He'd bought them used, intentionally damaged, so that Tripdoe would come over to fix them up endlessly in order for him to garner an impressive subterranean collection. There, in this dismal sub-studio, the older female porcupines ran out the remainder of their lives, chasing scent-enhanced videos of baby porcupines they were chemically induced to think of as their own, generating the electricity needed to power the televisions with their endless, desperate trotting.

Oftentimes Kandy watched the whole secretion collection ritual from the upstairs bathroom window as she bathed, which she did frequently, sometimes as many as four times a day. She referred to these days as Prune Days. The window by the tub was too high for her to watch while remaining in her comfortable tub-slouch, so she would get up on her knees to peek over the edge of the window into the pen. Bozeman's lumbering, all-fours shuffle toward one of the bared porcupines reminded her of a movie she'd been horrified by as a child and that her father watched ritually every weekend. The only scene she remembered – or at least the scene that burned itself deep enough into her psyche to be able to recall in any detail now – was the one where The Creature emerges from a swamp dripping algae and mud. Its eyes glow, and all that can be made out of it is its silhouette, but the wet sounds it makes climbing out of the swamp stuck with her through all these years. Slowly she would sink back down

into the bathtub, usually adding more soap for bubbles, lighting a few more scented candles and cigarettes.

Today on her knees she peeked outside. Several female porcupines scratching at the dirt. Another chewing on the fencepost. Some out of sight, probably in the corrugated-steel-roof enclosure they all shared and in winter huddled under. Bozeman nowhere to be seen. The water was about up to the tops of her knees by now, luke-warm. The water spewing from the tub's spout wavered between cold and semi-cold. She got out of the tub dripping and stomped on the floor for twenty seconds. Her reflection in the mirror bounced and blurred. She heard the pipes groan, and steam swirled once again from the renewed heat of the water. The warm water greeted her as she sunk back into it, and she lit another cigarette off a tub-side candle's twitching flame.

Bozeman, downstairs, watched the visible porcupines through the kitchen window after having turned the faucet off. Fucking Kandy.

By the side of the pen a young tree grew. In fall, the porcupines caught the young tree's falling leaves in their mouths until there were no more to catch. The leaf-catching thrilled Bozeman, who thought of it as a kind of game that the porcupines had come up with to entertain themselves. Generations of porcupines seemed to re-learn it without instruction, as if catching leaves in their mouths was an instinctual remnant that each porcupine lugged around with them as they lugged around the instinct to secrete, or to huddle in the cold shelter with each other, or bristle their quills when flocks of dark migrating birds landed in a continuous border along the fence's rim and squawked ceaselessly until moving on to warmer winds. On the day the final leaf fell, Bozeman had begun celebrating by popping open a bottle of chardonnay and drinking it with Kandy, and splashing some into the water tub for the porcupines that he regarded only in that moment of empty tree as victorious.

He didn't know it, standing there with slack hands cradled in the pockets of his robe, fertility smoothie working its way through his stomach, that one of the porcupines, one not gnawing on the fencepost or clawing the dirt, lay curled and dead in the corner of the shelter. Kandy had inserted a mean shard of glass in a head of lettuce that the porcupine had eaten, and which incised her insides and flooded her with her own blood, overwhelming and drowning her. Killing the porcupines sporadically had become a hobby for Kandy; rat poison in the feed, strangulations before sunrise, shooting their own poison-tipped quills into vital regions with a blow dart gun from a perch on the roof, anything that Bozeman wouldn't figure she'd had anything to do with. Sitting hot in the bath she dreamt up more quiet and consequenceless ways to bring death into Bozeman's porcupine pen. Curlicues of smoke leaked from the tips of her fingers and candles casted their blurry shadows onto the ceiling where she pretended to read them like lines of poetry.

Chapter Twelve – In Which Roge Figures Out That His Wife is Gone, Loses His Fucking Mind, and Tripdoe Goes on a Walk

Roge, standing in the Phan family kitchen, shrieked and tore two tufts of lopsided afro free from his scalp and stuffed them into his pockets, shrieked again. Tripdoe, sitting up on the kitchen counter in clean clothes she'd changed into after Roge

woke her up from her thick night of couch sleep, shuddered and sunk her head into her shriek-shrugged shoulders. Lambo, nervously buttering a crispy square of toast, fumbled and dropped the toast onto the floor. 'Sorry,' Lambo said to no one in particular, referring to the now-buttery kitchen floor. He picked up the toast and threw it into the trash and started digging around in a drawer for something to clean the butter up with. Tripdoe carefully slid off the counter and inched toward her manic-eyed father. She set a neutral hand on his shoulder. 'We'll find her? I mean, she couldn't've rolled *that* far, right? The forest's pretty thick after all...lotsa trees and shrubs to slow her down, right?'

Roge shrieked again for probably the thirtieth time since Tripdoe had told him what she'd seen...he'd just come home from seven straight days of mini-Penobska construction during which time he'd barely slept at all. To find his daughter covered in crusty soup asleep on the couch, his daughter's boyfriend fetal-positioned on the kitchen floor with his head in a skillet, a broken window, and missing wife was a weight too great for Roge's work-weakened constitution. When Tripdoe, having been yanked from sleep by Roge's initial shriek, tried to gently explain the previous day to him, he shrieked and kept shrieking every few minutes, standing perfectly still except for the swift journeys of fists to hair that were starting to really worry Tripdoe, and freak Lambo out. Lambo, unsure of how to engage, decided to busy himself by making breakfast, hence the toast, of which he had prepared a precarious and fragrant tower. Tripdoe felt a warm and damp pain inside her head.

Roge's mind, which let's not get into too much, was in the process of some very serious renovations that it wasn't really in control of. The self-constructed persona of Dr. Sassoon was busy ransacking, burning, and then re-populating the usually safe and settled territory that the lived and established self of Roge Phan had occupied. Not unlike an invading horde of warmongers, the self-constructed persona of Dr. Sassoon was reducing most of Roge's identity to fine, unrecognizable powder, in the haze of which the persona seemed all the more valid and habitable. The shrieking and hair-pulling was Roge's body going into a kind of mindless state of automatic panic; with his mind fully occupied with the mutinous takeover of Dr. Sassoon, its bodily-expression gear got briefly jammed in panic-mode. Unfortunately, Tripdoe and Lambo had to stand by and watch Roge reboot the same shriek-and-yank over and over, without realizing it was as automatic and timed as, say, the toaster popping a new crispy square into the room.

Eventually he pulled all of his hair out. His pockets bulged with the totality of his afro-extraction. The self-constructed persona of Dr. Sassoon had plastered itself fully onto Roge's neural pathways, assuming control.

He stopped shrieking and exhaled, looking around through new eyes. He recognized the house as his house, Tripdoe as his daughter, and all the various other relations that, as Roge, had given his life structure as a kind of worldly scaffolding. Now, though, the fleshy drapes of his personality fit the scaffolding differently, and prompted him to respond from the seat of his invented persona. 'Sorry about that, darling. A bit overworked, I guess. Where did you say your mother went?'

Tripdoe, with her neutral hand still sitting like a clammy parrot on Roge's shoulder, said, 'Uh...out the window? She rolled...through the fence and disappeared...?'

'Disappeared, huh? Well. Nothing really *disappears*, darling. Matter is only *rearranged* and *retransmuted*. Nothing to be afraid of or angry about. Mommy is somewhere. We just don't know where. Perhaps I'll meditate on it.' Roge/Sassoon scratched his pasty, lightly-bleeding scalp and wandered quietly into the living room where he sat down on the couch. Tripdoe and Lambo exchanged a stiff glance. The warm, damp pain still throbbed like a chicken's heart in the center of Tripdoe's skull. From their spot in the kitchen they saw the mottled back of Roge's head as he sat staring into the stacks of paperwork he'd accumulated over the last few years.

Lambo backed cautiously away from the swaying tower of toast he'd prepared. Having glanced at the green analog clock on the microwave, Lambo had a vision of Gramaw accidentally eating thumbtacks with milk instead of cereal, or popping oven mitts into the toaster. He whispered to Tripdoe that he had to get back to her, and shrugged apologetically a few times. All this had become too much for Lambo. He thrived on predictability. The pacific prospect of going back to his Gramaw's house to play checkers and nap on her quilted couch was irresistible in contrast with the astringent situation unfolding for the Phans. He thought he loved Tripdoe, but how could he love her under this roof, amid such fluctuating and terrifying circumstances? Plus, what was there for him to do? Gravity pulled moms one way, downhill, toward the river, and nothing he could say or do would change that. He wondered, driving back to Gramaw's house, whether he and Tripdoe would still see *Calypso Comet II* together on Saturday. Somehow even the thought of not going, of not having that simple, comfortable normalcy restored, pierced his heart, and he sat, gray-minded and deflated, for a while in his parked truck in Gramaw's driveway, his forehead pressed onto the plastic curve of the steering wheel.

Tripdoe, meanwhile, had taken three parts of the roof of Lambo's toast tower down and sat at the kitchen table eating them. She hadn't noticed how hungry she was. She ate the roof quickly, licking her fingers afterward. Tap was gone now, or at least she couldn't see him or hear his voice in her head. A deep feeling, maybe in the same place as the damp pain, gave her a small word about Tap: return. Which somehow, at least sitting there at the table for one passing breath, she knew was meant to mean something good. Maybe he'd gone to the forest while she slept, on some nocturnal mission obscure to her, which would probably be for the best. Her mind, suddenly unencumbered by Tap or Nikosi, or the thin passing soul she'd felt drain from Larry, wandered. It wandered into the backyard where her childhood had once passed like a migrating bird. It wandered in circles around the shed and it unscrewed all the screws holding it together until it was nothing more than a pile of plywood. Her mind wandered tinkering further til it had disassembled all the tools in the shed and laid out their parts in rows on top of the flat walls of the shed itself. It swept up all the anonymous piles of marijuana ash she'd scattered there and set the pile, no larger than a golf ball, next to a palms-up pair of faded work gloves. It wandered into the sky to look straight down on the organization of her work, the precise curve of the clipper's one sharp tooth, the formless splotch design on the plywood, how each heavy wall's uneven balance suggested the grass underneath pushing up into it in lopsided force, like someone without teeth chewing on a stale biscuit. It wandered further, separating the layers of the plywood, pulling apart the tools into their elements, and organizing them all in even rows, pressing down the wavy grass, until the yard itself balanced loosely upon itself in

two imagined piles: the molecules and the space between molecules. Then slowly, absently, as it always did after she'd pulled treadmills apart, Tripdoe's mind brought everything back toward itself until she sat staring once again at the backyard, the red paint peeling from the meeting walls of the shed, and at the wheeling bird that flew above it. She noticed for the first time her old baby pool leaning conspicuously as it was, secured by a hasty mound of mud patted down by some clawed paw, blocking the jagged tear in the fence her mother had rolled through.

She went out to look. Grass had been gnawed and pressed into the mound that propped up the baby pool. She easily removed it from its divot, and looked into the unfenced mouth of forest that filled what the pool had been blocking. Grey clouds moved hesitantly in the light wind above her. She turned away and saw how the prints paced about the yard. The prints looked like a lost helix. She followed them backward up until they seemed to emerge from the earth, which she noticed had been a tunnel covered over on this side. The opening of the tunnel on the forest side of the fence sat open, and she stepped through the fence hole her mother had made to the other side. The prints grew harder to follow, but she saw they led up into a tree. Patches of bark were freshly scraped. She stood for some time watching the tree, trying to read its limbs. She looked back at the house and could see the pale dome of her father's head through the broken window. He'd fallen asleep, his mouth gaping open. She followed the prints back through the fence and continued to do so until she'd walked off her yard, the prints leading her around the side of the house, past the gurgling pond that Fenny's hat sat in the slimy bottom of.

When the paw prints crossed the street, Tripdoe stopped and imagined where on the other side they would resume. She looked down the road to the left where houses strung after each other like pearls on a necklace. To the right, the same. She crossed the street, but couldn't find where the prints picked back up, so she just walked along the sidewalk past all the houses strung out like pearls, leaving the paw trail to its helical wandering. The shades on some drawn, others open. A car drove past, the back of some neighbor's head shining through the rear window, the eyes framed in the rearview mirror glancing back briefly to look at her, then when they saw her looking back turned quickly away toward the road which after a few long seconds the car disappeared down. She kept walking, only then noticing that she hadn't put on any shoes. The cement felt good on her bare feet, the light solid dust sticking to her soles after each step, the cold of night yet to be filled with the afternoon sun's heat. Wet, almost.

She hooked a left at a stop sign and walked further in toward the center of town where most of the restaurants and shops were. Fire hydrants nobody'd used in years and probably couldn't even be wrenched into use, streetlights whose bulbs flickered on hesitantly at twilight, barely lighting anything other than two or three feet around themselves in a kind of dim white aura that remained, sometimes, for hours after they'd turned off. A man with a baseball hat walking his black dog passed, both him and the dog keeping their heads low to the ground until Tripdoe passed them, only then did the dog, seeing her bare feet, look up to watch her go by, its nose twitching lazily. On the other side of the street, in the parking lot of Gullah Bowl, Tripdoe saw a cop car parked near the entrance. Two barely-uniformed cops sat on the hood of the car with their feet swinging beneath them. Neither wore a belt, and one of them had a pair of sweatpants on. Tripdoe crossed the street and tried to go in through the main entrance.

'Hey, uh, place's closed, lady. Investigation in progress,' the sweatpants-wearing cop said. They both had huge bowls of gumbo cradled in their hands. The one with sweatpants was jabbing crawfish out of his bowl with a coal-colored knife. The other, who hadn't seemed to notice Tripdoe yet, ate with a spoon in big slurping bites. She looked in through the glass door and saw the lights were on back in the kitchen, a few shadows moving around, and steam. 'Wait a second, I know who you are,' he said, pulling her attention back. Tripdoe could tell he was carrying his gun in the pocket of his sweatpants, it bulged awkwardly and part of the grip poked out. 'You're Bozeman's guy's daughter, huh? You were here yesterday?' He set his gumbo bowl down and hopped off the hood. 'Hey, you think you could help us out? We're trying to find the little guy who works here? A Mr. Fenny Joils? He seems to've split town.' He looked down at Tripdoe's bare feet. 'Uh?'

'My pet salamander ate them. And Fenny? Last I saw him, he was handing me a bowl of what you've got there,' she said, gesturing toward the bowl angling on the hood of the car. The other cop, absorbed in his meal, still didn't seem to notice her. 'Except, see, it was shrimp? Not crawfish. And, uh, do you think I might be able to...?'

'Huh. Oh sure, sure.' He grabbed the bowl and handed it to Tripdoe who stabbed a few chunks of crawfish with the knife and ate them up. 'We have some questions for Mr. Joils.'

'I bet.'

'Bozeman, as it turns out, was stricken to hear about Mr. Lawnyawn's unfortunate lunch for reasons unclear to us. He's not even a citizen of Penobscot. But Bozeman's yearning to shed some light on the deceased's situation.'

'And you think Fenny had something to do with it? Ha. Hate to cut your leads but Fenny's not just like an earthworm because of how he looks, or what his personality's like. He's also basically just harmless, too. You talk to his, what, coworker? He seems like more of the killer type.'

The other cop finally looked up from his gumbo and exchanged a funny glance with his partner. 'Yeah, we talked to him.'

In fact, they'd just been over to Big J's mom's house that morning looking for him. His mom – a homely woman clad mostly in flour-dusted denim – answered the door with her arms crossed, one hand clutching a wooden spoon, and asked them to come back another time. When they insisted, she sighed, disappeared, leaving them with a slight gap between the door and its frame that the fragrance of fresh bread wafted through, and a few minutes later a huge, shivering Big J filled up the doorway, failing to provide either cop with any eye contact. One question in, and Big J threw up nervously all over the front of one of the cop's pants.

He ran a hand down the side of his sweatpants, 'Hence,' he said to Tripdoe, 'I found these bad boys wadded up at the bottom of my locker back at the station. After we hosed off my shoes, and after the big guy calmed down a little, he babbled some interesting information about a couple of peppers that may be responsible, and said Fenny'd know more about it.'

'Yeah, well, gross. I can't say I know anything about all that, boys. Hey, you guys know what happens to dead people who don't have anyone to pick em up?'

The cops looked at each other, and after they told her, she handed the bowl back and walked further down the street, turned left at the laundromat and walked

another couple of blocks. She ended up outside the brick crematorium. She walked in and in twenty minutes, during which time a yellow bird had flown down out of the sky to dig around in the mulch by the side of entrance's small huckleberry shrub, and clouds passed over and off the sun, and wind scattered trash some of the way down the road, she walked back out with a black square the size of a tissue box filled with Larry's ashes. On its side in embossed gold letters read, HEREIN REST THE REMAINS OF (and in the ballpoint scribble of the crematorium clerk) Laurence Fernando Lawnyawn. Then, bored, she walked all the way home where, in the front yard, she opened the box, split the plastic lining that contained the ashes, and dumped them into the gurgling pond. She shrugged and said, 'I don't know what to say. Good luck, over there. In the land of death or whatever. I hope it's nice. Sunny, maybe. Quiet. If it's not then, well, I guess I hope it doesn't last forever like what people seem to think. And that there aren't a bunch of mean skeletons yelling at you, or poking you with hot spoons, or something like that.'

Since Tripdoe'd left on her walk, Fenny's hat had gotten sucked halfway into the pond's intake ventilation tube that cycled oxygen through the water, and the tiny motor that kept the water gurgling had shut down. The water's stagnant surface held the newly dumped ashes. Tripdoe used her bare right foot to stir the solution around until the ashes that sat on top of the water had either clumped together in soggy wads or sunk to the bottom.

Tripdoe went inside to rinse off her foot and find a nice spot in her room to keep the black box.

The stagnant pond sat calm and free of gurgles. Lawnyawn's powder heated in the sun that clouds passed over and off of, over and off of, and sank to the bottom, settling wetly over the brim of Fenny's Gullah Bowl hat.

Chapter Thirteen – In Which Erethizon Misinterprets Yet More Stimuli

On bright days, the sheet metal roof on the shelter in the porcupine pen behind Bozeman's house looked white from its reflection of the sun. Erethizon, on whose forehead Tap rode sleepily, caught a huge eyeful of white light as he crested a hill some two-hundred yards from Bozeman's property, having honed in on it with his nose, using the day's lazy breeze heavy with musk as a lead. He stopped at the top of the hill, a shiver running through him as he blinked the bright square out of his one good eye. The burnt-in image of the day he lost his other eye came out in relief as he turned away from the reflection, reminding him.

Tap's eyesight failed him in the daylight. He drifted in and out of sleep as he bounced atop Erethizon's head. The two had communed behind the shed after Tripdoe had fallen asleep, allowing Tap to slide away. Tap transferred thoughts into Erethizon's mind, introducing himself. Erethizon recognized the sound of Tap's thoughts immediately; Tap was a widely-known traveler in the forest. He often found his way into other creatures' dreams and communicated with them that way, though the content of his communications were often difficult to hold onto after having woken. What remained was the bright remnant of an important truth that lit up the day, but couldn't be entirely grasped. Mostly every creature living in the forest for long enough met Tap in their dreams at some point, but none could be sure he actually existed outside of them, for he failed to exist as any single entity in the dreams, at once a

mollusk, the next a black bird, and then a bear, a goose, a finch, a fungus. He resisted recognition in the real world. Though now, with him sleeping on top of his head, Erethizon knew that the elusive presence he'd met in his sleep was also a living, breathing animal, a salamander, but he felt that if he were to lose sight of him, he might return as something else, though immediately recognizable.

Erethizon had given Tap all of what he knew of the musk, and of the moral drought it seemed to be causing for his brothers. He showed him the jagged quill that had lodged in his eye and blinded him, and explained how he saw that final moment of his full vision constantly, though most clearly before more instances of inter-porcupine violence. He told fully and honestly of his self-directed task of locating and identifying the musk, and of the reclamation of peace he thought it would allow. Tap sat quietly and unmoving in the night and listened, the symmetrical yellow splotches on his back and head glowing. Tap's lack of tail gave Erethizon the odd impression of familiarity, as if he might roll around on the grass and produce the missing appendage from in between his quills.

Tap then flooded Erethizon with a dream, or a series of interrelated scenes, of his last few days. The bonsai grid, Larry's death, wind of the highway, seeds, the beach. Erethizon didn't so much as *understand* it as *completely inhabit* it. In the dream he became Tap, and only when Tap pulled him out of it did he regain himself fully, while simultaneously retaining the experiences he'd been given as a gift by the small amphibian. They understood, in some inexplicable way, their place, and Tap climbed onto the flattened quilled head of Erethizon who aimed his nose into the air and walked off toward the wind that carried the musk like a heavy bag.

Morning had broken open like a hot egg by the time they'd found Bozeman's house. Erethizon's nose swelled with the musk's proximity, but in the overwhelming thickness of it he felt in control of his urges. A cool serenity fell over his like a loose silk curtain. The enclosure, still too far for either of them to identify, winked in the morning light in between the trees that framed the meadow that sloped down beneath them, and the house was a white pillar block stuck in the waving green summer grass. Between them the treeless green field waved in the wind, the grass light green and dry from having grown through the summer. A mowed oval encapsulated Bozeman's house from the tall grass and the paved road that wound from the closed garage came in and out of view from behind the sloping rising meadow as Erethizon and Tap walked through it. Erethizon sat up on his back legs to see above the grass every twenty yards or so to make sure he wasn't walking in circles. The proximity to the source drove him nearly to tears, and the inside of his head felt like a runaway Ferris Wheel.

Eventually they passed from the tall grass into the mowed oval, Bozeman's house a white box cut out of the sky and field, its rhombic shadow fallen on them.

Inside, Kandy sat on the kitchen counter cross-legged eating a strawberry with a fork. She dipped it into a small white dish full of honey and brought it to her mouth. She hummed to herself as she chewed and thought she might watch a movie, or maybe go on a walk into town, or around the property, or play another super-glum tune on her accordion. She felt disappointed that Bozeman hadn't found the porcupine's body before he rushed into the office. Someone had called him, and without saying anything to Kandy he'd thrown on clothes, combed his pompadour into full attention and zoomed off down the road to, presumably, the office.

She hadn't gotten dressed, and planned not to unless she did actually walk into town. Oftentimes she walked loops around the house, the loops getting progressively larger until she skirted the edge of the woods, rarely clothed, never shod. The plastic container of strawberries sat open by her right hip. They'd been grown underground in a production facility, never having fed on actual sunlight, and didn't taste anything like wild strawberries, which Kandy'd never eaten anyways, so she didn't care much. She forked another from the container, chewed off the green cap and spat it into the sink behind her.

Watching Bozeman drag the dead porcupines out of the pen when he invariably found them filled Kandy with opaque happiness, mainly because of how he puffed and panted, and how his forehead's fleshy crumples formed as he wracked his brain trying to diagnose yet another of them. He interrogated every corner of the pen, as if in some hollow he might find a nest of poison-toothed vipers. He even took water samples and sent them off for analysis to Dr. Sassoon, who's conclusions Bozeman had a hard time understanding the details of but always seemed to offset the possibility of contamination. 'However,' typed Sassoon in an email, 'there is a possible solution, if the females continue perishing in such mysterious and unsolicited manners. I must warn you though. It isn't pretty, and hasn't been done in a few decades. If the issue persists, contact me and I'll discuss the procedure in further detail.'

Kandy listened to him hypothesize, usually over dinner, as his accusations became increasingly paranoid and grandiose...falcons dropping out of the sky with cyanide syringes instead of talons, vicious little tunnel people who lived beneath the pen and were after his porcupines as a means of destabilizing his self-healing efforts, thereby tightening their plan to topple Bozeman and take control of Penobska forever. His forehead looked like a public park after a terrible storm, sitting there working himself up over the fanciful possibilities behind the dead porcupines and his own personal inability to come to terms with life outside of his fertility ritual, despite the fact that he hadn't the least bit of evidence that it did anything for his erectile issue whatsoever.

Inside her own head, Kandy laughed and laughed and plotted the next mysterious death, while outwardly chewing her meal quietly, taking little puckered sips of white wine every other bite or so.

She thought he'd find the lettuce-glass-sliced porcupine that morning, but after Bozeman rushed out like he did, Kandy resigned herself to waiting for him to return to get her glum fix. Bozeman would figure the whole plot out eventually, Kandy knew. It was only a matter of time before he started rightly accusing her, and then he'd catch her sneaking into the pen during the day, and who knew what would happen then. Kandy didn't really care. She'd probably just take off alone into the woods, naked, and walk and walk. Or at least that's what she always told herself, but she knew nothing about living alone outside, which was all for the better. At least for her fantasy's sake.

Kandy had gotten weirdly famous as a television actress. Her most renowned role was as the unnamed protagonist in Bozeman's self-directed *Prickly Menace* films that he made in the early days of his porcupine obsession as a way of "edutaining" the Penobskan people about the dangers of extra-Penobskan life. The films weren't what you'd call tasteful, or particularly educational or even halfway realistic, featuring a lot of semi-nudity, gory violence, swear words, and scenes where porcupines had inexplicably

hijacked vehicles in order to wreak havoc with them. Their sentience and ability to pilot vehicles has never been explained. But he wrote and filmed them frantically for a few years and paid Kandy exorbitantly in order to keep her around as the running star. Bozeman had a strong feeling that Kandy was the main reason people kept tuning in for each new chapter of the *Prickly Menace* saga.

Public funds pulled from the infrastructure budget financed the televised films. They aired on public access channels, which had essentially become the Prefecture's private porcupine-themed propaganda network. But after *Prickly Menace* got going, people barely noticed that they were being subtly influenced into fearing anything outside the fence, just so long as Kandy's one-liner spewing character kept delivering climaxes via violence and flashes of cleavage that Bozeman had become adept at sneaking artistically into almost every shot. But the over-the-top plots and violence, not to mention scenes that suggested porcupines being responsible for the common cold, slipped little fragments of fear into the pockets of viewers until, gradually, they could hardly cope with the thought of anything outside the safety of their hometown.

The two of them hooked up for the first time during *Prickly Menace IV: Hell Quill's* extravagant unveiling party that Bozeman hosted, once again via diverted public funds, at his house. Anybody who was anybody attended; Roge DJ'd and Tripdoe set up multi-colored dance lights before fleeing into the depths of Bozeman's house to avoid interacting with anybody, a swiped bottle of chardonnay tucked under the zippy part of her sweatshirt and a devilish twinkle sitting in the corner of her eye like a severed buoy bobbing in the corner of a lake.

Bozeman and Kandy had both jabbed at the same cube of cheese with their toothpicks at the hors d'oeuvre table at the same time. Being as drunk as he was, Bozeman jabbed with more vigor than was perhaps necessary, accidentally piercing Kandy's right thumb. She bled all over the cheese, and Bozeman rushed her into his bathroom where he sloppily applied pressure to the wound with wadded-up toilet paper. When the bleeding stopped, they looked into each other's glassy eyes, really *seeing* each other for the first time as individuals, instead of as director and actress. Seconds later they were rolling around on the bathroom floor disregarding their laboriously-assembled outfits, diamond rings and earrings and bracelets flying left and right, some to land in the toilet, others down the bathtub drain, and falling into a brief bout of half-clothed lovemaking. It was the first full erection Bozeman had found himself in possession of in several years, and would prove to be one of few before sagging back into another lapse of flaccidness.

Afterwards, they lay in each other's arms, curled at the foot of the toilet, the little bathroom rug wadded uncomfortably up in between Bozeman's sweaty shoulder blades, but he couldn't have cared less in the moment, blissed-out as he was on the fragrant post-coital humidity they languished in.

Eventually they fell asleep, and when they woke up a few hours later, the party had ended and the house was empty. Downstairs where all the guests had been, sat the remnants of their good time: shimmering balloons with the *Prickly Menace* logo printed on them, half-drunk glasses of clear alcohol, syncopating lights without music, plates with hunks of bitten, expensive appetizers. Bozeman and Kandy skipped naked through the aftermath, flinging paper plates at each other like Frisbees and throwing huge mouthfuls of abandoned wine down their throats. They staggered close to one another

and again made love on a pile of guests' coats that had been inexplicably left behind in a heap by the entrance to the kitchen. They didn't – and never would – know that Tripdoe'd passed drunkenly out in the basement workout room, half-reclined on one of her favorite treadmills.

He would always regard that night with nostalgic hopefulness, and after Bozeman fell back into frustrated sexlessness, he and Kandy tried to re-enact the exact scene in an attempt to spur an identical blend of excitement. But something just wasn't right each time, and they ended up storming out of the bathroom half-dressed, embarrassed, and exhausted with each other. Bozeman accused her of not trying her hardest at acting as her past self, and Kandy yelled back, saying he'd never stopped thinking of her as the star in his movie, only now he was the sole cast and audience member, a creepy weirdo jerking off in the abandoned theater of his own dreams and getting upset when security came to kick him out.

This caustic routine deflated Kandy a little more each time, until she finally just stopped responding to him, or really paying much attention to him at all. They were never destined for true love, so settled for true disinterest instead.

In due time, Bozeman cancelled the *Prickly Menace* saga in order to devote all his time to the miniature Penobska, and Kandy was once again out of a job, though kept living with him in the unspoken limbo of lover/stranger. He liked having someone around to talk about the evolution of Mini-Penobska at, and Kandy tolerated it for access to the small recording studio in the basement that Bozeman recorded the broadcasts for the Porcupine Preparedness Program in. Kandy was trying to record an album of accordion music, and once she finished editing it she planned to hit the road and play her accordion wherever she found herself, selling CDs out of the back of the truck she was planning to steal from Bozeman.

Around the fourth strawberry, Kandy watched as a clueless Erethizon and sleepy Tap came waddling into view by the side of the pen. The skewered, honey-shiny strawberry stopped in front of Kandy's teeth like a nervous salesman at the door of a haunted shack whose address had showed up on his list. Erethizon's nose was pointed up into the air as he stepped cautiously up to the pen. The females started acting funny, moving around in quick circles and exhaling forcefully, keeping one eye on the rare visitor. Kandy had a weird feeling that rose up from the bottom of her stomach. She rushed into the laundry room and dug around in the closet until she found a huge thick quilt with symmetrical multi-colored stars arranged in a grid all up and down its front that she had no idea Bozeman's long-dead grandmother had made while his own mother was five years old. She ran back to the window with the quilt bunched up against her bare breasts, clutching the corners with her hands, and watched as Erethizon gently leaned his head into the pen's fence. The females slowed down, and eventually stepped closer and closer to Erethizon until they formed a kind of dense triangle with their bodies. She couldn't be sure, but to Kandy it looked as if they were having some kind of conversation, or prayer. She gripped the quilt in her hand as she reached for the door.

Sniffing the brows of the female porcupines, Erethizon expected deliverance. He refused to answer their questions, barely-intelligible as they were to him. He thought he'd find some kind of ark at the center of the musk, or a holy egg spun with clouds and gold thread, that he'd be able – because of his chosen status – to crack into

and drink truth from. But here he was, on the other side of yet another fence, through the diamond gaps of which seemingly deaf, mute females stared back at him with a kind of raw, insensate curiosity.

He pressed his quills flat against his back and warded off the arousal the proximity stirred within him and waited for something to happen, for some infusion of the place to insist action or revelation upon him. The porcupines on the other side of the fence sniffed and puffed, pawed the pressed earth.

Tap tried to speak into their minds, but his attempts filled empty space somehow, as if in thinking to hear an echo he heard only silence. He looked deeply at them but could hear nothing. He strained his small black eyes to see the packed earth of their enclosure, the mottled steel drum that held their water, the sparse patches of brown grass that shot up in tufts around them and for once in his very long life felt a voiceless absence that he entreated with more and more attempts at communication.

Erethizon, whose self-imposed sexual asceticism was in the process of dissolving through its own vicarious will to resist itself, lost control of his actions and began clawing at the ground in an effort to tunnel under yet another fence. His head bobbed frantically as he attacked the earth, and Tap struggled with his little fingers to maintain his grip on the quills he'd been using as handlebars of sorts. His back legs gave out and he flipped forward over himself, still barely holding on with his front hands, onto the bridge of Erethizon's nose. Without his tail, he had a hard time staying balanced, and after a few more good jostles he had to let go, dropping to the ground with a little thud. The dry scraping of Erethizon's digging filled his head, and he tried to fill Erethizon's with calmness, even going so far as to aim his beady eyes up into his that Tap could tell were filled with their own self-consuming content. His digging went nowhere in this hard soil that had been tamped down by years of Bozeman pacing around the pen's perimeter, a far way from the ease he'd felt going under the outer perimeter fence into the Phan's backyard, but he raked his claws over it desperately anyway.

And then Kandy, emerging from the house in a full sprint, charged Erethizon with the quilt held forth like a sail or shield, letting out an improvised battle-howl as she leapt toward him to catch him in the quilt. She braced herself for a tussle by jamming her bare heels into the ground.

The last thing Erethizon saw were the quilt's multi-colored symmetrical stars filling up the sky around his head. Time slowed as they closed in and tightened around him. Then only darkness. *This*, he thought he heard himself say, *this is deliverance!* It had to be...right? All these stars, flooding his vision, abstracting and geometricizing his known world. Although a small suggestion in the back of his head told him that it wasn't him thinking this, but Tap, who'd fled behind a tuft of dry grass as Kandy wrapped Erethizon tightly into the quilt, though he couldn't be sure, and didn't know how to find out. The crowd of stunned, oblivious porcupines watched unaffectedly from inside the pen, and had resumed chewing on what they found nearby.

Kandy took very little time wrapping Erethizon up tightly so that his quills wouldn't rise, but was surprised at how little struggle he gave her. In fact, she loosened her grip on his torso to see if the quills moved, and when they didn't she worried that she'd scared the poor beast to death. But no. Through the thick quilt she felt his lungs rise and fall, the steady quick beat of his heart. She kept the quilt wrapped tight around his head as she sat on his back, trying to think clearly. Here she was in the mid-morning straddling an adult male porcupine wrapped like a burrito in a handmade quilt, naked. She had nowhere to go, no one who expected her to do anything, just the skin and sun

on her body and this poor, disoriented creature in between her legs. Briefly, she imagined Bozeman coming home seeing her like this, all her petty attempts at concealing the hollow core of her days exposed in such a way, it all became too much for her. She started laughing, and laughed for quite some time until tears ran down her face and dripped onto the quilted back of Erethizon's head, who, feeling the vibrations of Kandy's laughter felt warm, welcome, his shaky determination to become holy momentarily justified, bolstered. He thought himself walking through the entrance to heaven, and that Kandy's laughter was the song of arrival, and the moisture of her tears soaking through the quilt some kind of anointment. A single shiver seemed to travel from the center of the earth up into his feet, turning his brain and eyes into pure light. When this feeling subsided, the imprinted scene that had been burned into his right eye since he'd had it stabbed and blinded by his brother's quill faded and dissolved into darkness. All he was left with was darkness and the vibrations of Kandy's laughter – he took these as signs of new freedom.

Which was, however, an opinion that fell very far from what was actually going on, being that Kandy was already, though still straddling the poor awakened Erethizon, planning how to best use him as an implement in her never-ending quest to drive Bozeman insane. Sensing the creature's slack willingness, she led him inside, keeping the quilt clamped tight around his head, down into the basement, and into the treadmill room Kandy knew Bozeman never set foot in.

Chapter Fourteen – In Which Souvenirs Are Acquired

After washing off her ashy bare foot, Tripdoe cleaned up the kitchen. She didn't know what to do with all the crispy toast Lambo'd made so she ended up just cramming it into the plastic containers they kept to left of the sink, and stacked those inside the fridge. Then she swept up the broken glass by the window and the curls of her father's hair that he hadn't managed to stuff into his pockets and tossed it all – glass and hair – in a bright and tangled pile into the trashcan. Roge was still sleeping soundly on the couch. Tripdoe didn't yet know that he would now be thinking of himself as Dr. Sassoon. Standing there watching him sleep she decided to go into the Office of Prefectural Command to ask Bozeman to give Roge a week of paid vacation time. He looked like he needed it. She showered in the upstairs bathroom, scrubbed the crusty gumbo from yesterday off herself. She brushed her hair and braided it in two dark ropes, one on either side of her head, that hung down and fell over the front of her shoulders. She tweezed her eyebrows and brushed her teeth. All in all she looked like a reasonable young lady, and she gave herself a curt, self-approving nod as she stared into the semi-steamed mirror before flicking the light off.

Back in her room she put on her nicest pair of jeans – the ones with rhinestone butterflies stitched onto the back pockets – and a light blue sweater she'd forgotten about in the bottom back corner of the third drawer in her dresser. It smelled like rain and soil as she pulled it over her head. As she took one step out of her room, she remembered a bottle of old rum she had under her bed. She flipped the light back on and rooted it out, unscrewed the cap, and took a huge gulp from the little less than half

of a bottle. She shivered, went downstairs. Roge was still agape on the couch, snoring as she shut the door gingerly behind her.

As always, the glass front doors of the OPC were unlocked, and all the lights – except for the spotlights that shone down like midday suns on the sprawling mini-Penobska – hung darkly in their unlit caves in the ceiling like smooth white bats. Nobody sat at the little reception desk to greet her.

Tripdoe strolled around the diorama a few times, finding her own house, noting the spot in the fence Nikosi had ripped through. She knelt down and poked a little hole in the side of the cardboard fence with the point of a ballpoint pen she pulled from her pocket. She squinted one eye to look into the little windows. A small carved statue of herself stood in the living room of her shrunken home. It didn't look much like her – jumbled yolk of a face, careless coiffure of black paint running in a stripe halfway down her back ending in an abrupt swipe above her flat buttocks – but the wonky wrench in-hand, the navy-blue slacks, the angle of the head and placement next to what Roge and Bozeman had obviously tried to make look like that old wood-paneled treadmill of her youth...it was definitely her. She knew it, and couldn't help but take the minor unmistakable details they managed to translate onto this replica as a compliment of their, either Bozeman's or her father's, attention. She thought she'd ask Roge next time she saw him which of them had carved her out like this. A rounded, awkward Nikosi sat in a blocky chair by an unpainted TV. Outside the house, beyond the paper fence, the Prefecture dropped off the edge of the table into darkness, maybe Bozeman's hint that everything beyond Penobska might as well just evaporate. Tripdoe knelt there imagining how dead her mother would be if this was how things really were – hovering over a paper-covered oblivion-carpet. Her mind trailed off for the three-hundred-billionth time in the last five minutes to her mother. Nikosi's absence terrified her in a new, particularly unsettling way.

She located the model of the OPC and started to pull the roof off to look inside. But as her fingers gripped the overhanging edges, a thought stopped her. What if, in the tiny uncovered interior, she found a smaller diorama sitting on a scaled wooden platform with scuffed brown paper taped around its border, flooded in light? This small world's own small world. And worse, what if kneeling there by the side of the diorama's diorama she found herself peering down into the opened roof of the OPC that, oh, had *its own* maniacally small diorama? Surely, they couldn't have gotten that far into this thing...eh...right? She thought of her father's dark curled hair mixed with the broken glass in the trashcan. The possibility balanced in the air and very lightly brushed each one of her fingertips as they released their slight grip on the roof. Close that door and lock it, the possibility seemed to say. She stood up and swiped her hands against her jeans and looked around the lobby, over at Bozeman's office doors.

No light cracked under them. Though the portraits of past Prefects that flanked and stretched from either wall by the doors occupied a dim glow that made her feel like they were watching her. Their painted eyes didn't quite stay still in their sockets. Tripdoe went over to the office doors and knocked softly, then pressed her ear against the cold, smooth wood. Bozeman wasn't here.

She tried the handle and was surprised to find that it turned with a satisfying amount of resistance; she opened the door just enough to squeeze into the office and flip the lights on before shutting the door behind her. Everything sprung up at her from this mess of a room, one of the last three frequently-used rooms besides the staff

lounge and the huge room in the back where Roge's cluttered cubicle sat amid the labyrinth of other empty cubicles.

Blueprints that could've been for the diorama or for actual structures scattered everywhere, askew photographs from Bozeman's various public events and announcements from his time as Prefect, what looked like a rotting strawberry in the shadowy underside of the coffee table in the corner of the room, old wrinkled documents with thick lines of inked-out sentences and paragraphs that someone had dunked into an unplugged and waterless fishtank, frantic cartoons that Tripdoe couldn't and quickly realized shouldn't decipher, and behind it all the strange smell of curry mingling with nail polish remover. She figured that snooping around in here for long enough would probably yield a rag covered in those two specific substances.

The office's lack of a window made it feel like a broken refrigerator or a converted garage, and as she sifted curiously through the paper piles on his desk, floor, chairs, a thin sheen of sweat formed on her forehead. She found nothing of any particular value beyond the items and articles that piqued the ghoulish, rusted portion of her curiosity. But then, off the corner of a notepad that sat on top of a pile of half-carved miniature homes that hadn't made it to the final Prefecture for the flaws Bozeman found in them, the name Larry Lawnyawn jumped out at her in Bozeman's juvenile pencil penmanship. She grabbed the notepad and scanned it carefully.

By Lawnyawn's name, Bozeman had scribbled and then underlined two nearly-illegible words.

'Huh,' she said, squinting. 'Bonsai guy?'

Under his name and the barely-legible bit, there was an address, but the street name wasn't familiar, and she wasn't sure if a few of the vowels were *e's*, *o's*, or *a's*, but she figured that wherever it was, it was probably *outside* of Penobscot Proper. Then she remembered what the gumbo-eating cop had told her.

She scanned the office a little more, scratching her left shoulder through the itchy blue sweater. The sudden and violent urge to rip it off her back flooded her as she spotted some little fake trees made out of brown and green pipe cleaners that had been tossed to the side of the room. They were lopsided and sad, sitting there on their sides, like real trees at the bottom of a hill after a mudslide. She picked one of the trees up and brought it out to the side of mini-Penobscot. She crouched down by the edge, where her miniaturized house was, and wrapped the wire roots of the tree over the scaled roof of her home so it looked like it had grown out of the ceiling. Six frazzled, interloping shadows bloomed darkly out of the fake tree growing from her fake home, the spotlights in their varying placements six fake suns. And the pipe cleaner tree so full of light that not a single shadow sat on it. It was fully illuminated, shedding all its shadows off in six directions. Tripdoe sat down and looked at it for a while.

Then, exhaling, she carefully removed the roof of her small home. The wood glue gave way easily. She grabbed the little wooden caricature of herself between her thumb and forefinger, twisted it loose, and put it in her jeans pocket with a pat of the hand. The tree-topped roof found its way back onto the house, albeit somewhat off kilter. Tripdoe stood up, nodded at the diorama, and left the building.

Meanwhile, Bozeman was speeding and weaving down the crumbling highway in his flatbed, avoiding potholes and debris, rusted-out cars and flocks of birds that scattered into the road-flanking trees as he hurdled towards them. A green plastic visor

fit snugly around his pompadour to keep the sun out of his eyes, and the windows were open channeling cool streams of wind into the car.

He'd been on the road for some thirty minutes and expected to see the weathered exit sign for Pixie Town II around the next curve. He expected to see the sky fill with haze as he approached the ocean, the trees to become slightly fuzzier and less distinct, and to smell the damp salty air floating in off the shore. He'd opened the window just a mile ago for this very reason.

Wheeling down the highway brought him back to the few years he'd gone to PTII once every month for the cleansing rituals that Sassoon had recommended he attend at the dancehall that offered them. Ah...those long few years that nearly exhausted him completely...the otherworldly rush that flooded him, minimized him, in the dim flashing corridors, the vaulted ceilings, of that bizarrely constructed dancehall the rituals took place in: the cool blue cups of sweet water at the door that turned him into a hummingbird, the small electric musical group sitting on brown stools picking slowly, meticulously away at instruments two times taller than anyone in the room, the interludes of stillness where everyone hushed like thrushes about to take flight, how he felt he might just fly into the metal rafters to roost, or expand into a cloud of striped feathers to adorn the wing of the soaring planet that had, only during the rituals, become a magnificently speckled owl.

None of the visions, not a single bird of them, made any sense to him now, of course, after years of avoiding anything that might catapult him back into that unproductive and neon nightmarish headspace, back into that aviary. All he *really* remembered were the drives back into Penobska Proper, frazzled and paranoid, when loping neon porcupines lunged out of each pothole in the road and threatened to eat him, the poor mechanical hummingbird that he had so recently, vulnerably, become.

The sharp edge of those years had worn off since, though driving down the highway through these woods brought a small bit of it back up to Bozeman's throat, as did the notion of actually returning to and wandering through PTII. He adjusted the visor. A wavy green shadow drooped down onto his face as the turnoff sign materialized from behind the trees. He turned off the highway and went down the last few rutted, forested miles until he reached the bridge that spanned Katabasis River and led into Pixie Town's grounds. The river became the ocean to his left.

From across the bridge the grounds were a mound of tangling green snakes: the buildings had grown over and sagged, the lightbulbs once flashing now burned out and long since shattered, grown over with twining roots and branches. The trees once kept round as globes by Lou and his team now expanded wildly in their many directions and swayed hugely above the roofs of each building.

Bozeman slowed down as he rolled over the bridge that arched grey over the dark rolling water. He continued slowly into the heart of it all, people watching him from the side of the path as they bent up from their work. He waved at them, trying to muster and actively exude a warm confidence of belonging, but most of them stared back hesitantly, being unsure of visitors, especially visitors who displayed such rigorous, unaccounted-for enthusiasm. Bozeman glanced nervously at the back of his hand where he'd written Lou's address, which only then did he realize (of course, how could he have thought it wouldn't be?) was the very same as the dancehall he'd gone to so many times to become a bird. He drove by the little communal garden at the center of town. Off

against a dilapidated fence, tucked in the back corner of an overgrown lot, a wooden cart sat alone, a little light cracking around the edges of its single small window. Finally, he came upon Lou's spot, and his old roost.

He parked his truck out front, the engine going quiet, and went inside. As he stepped in he heard a group of children gathering on the low roof of the building across the street from his truck to stare at and heckle the newcomer as he entered their old friend's place. Their calls dissolved as he walked inside. Bozeman found the switch for the lights and disco ball, and went breathless as the lights flickered on, illuminating the full grid of bonsai trees. Bozeman hardly recognized the place. He'd only ever been at night while most of the lights were syncopating through their revolutions of color. It smelled like underneath a log.

'Hello?' he called out. Sure enough, nobody.

He half-skipped, half-walked down the ramp that led from the entrance onto the dance floor, ran a few excited laps around the grid of bonsai trees, dropping low in a kind of terrible running-crouch that allowed him to brush his thick hands along the rows of leaves. There were probably about one hundred of them total, all in varying stages of development, some just barely leafing, others in complicated twists of root and trunk, all looking, at least in Bozeman's amateur opinion, healthy and in need of inclusion in his elaborate miniature paradise. Along a black brick wall fifteen extraordinary small trees in shining ceramic. Lawnyawn's personal favorites. These, he thought as he paced by them in survey, would be planted in the key parts of town: around the OPC, near Bozeman's house, and in the public park, bringing every little thing an unforeseen vibrancy. He might even keep one for himself to set on the kitchen table. He started giddily packing and stacking the youngest trees into the bed of his truck, ignoring the small crowd of roof-kids hooting at him as he emerged from the dancehall with armloads of saplings.

After about an hour, he'd filled the bed of his truck with carefully-stacked planters and pots and secured a blue tarp over the load. He was drenched with sweat. The day had heated up considerably, and without much ventilation the dancehall had turned into a sauna. The roof kids pointed and laughed at the dripping, tree-toting, red-faced, stranger with the lopsided pompadour; he bit his thumb at them, swearing robustly in his head.

He went back inside to make sure he'd gotten everything he could. He'd positively ransacked the place. Lawnyawn's elaborate grid system looked like a castaway chocolate wrapper now that its occupants had been removed. Bozeman scratched his left haunch triumphantly and went behind the bar to take a long, gurgling cold drink of water from the faucet. It was metallic and sweet. After he'd refreshed himself and splashed a few handfuls of water onto his neck and face, he peered into the aquarium tank that sat on the countertop by the sink. He tapped on it with one of his thick fingers. Nothing moved, and without the red heating lamp the inside of the tank looked accidental, something found in a roadside culvert. He unbent himself to leave, then saw something pushed back behind the tank. A small glass jar. Inside, a single black seed. The tilted jar that had found its way into Bozeman's hand deposited the seed out into the wet palm that went toward it open and unsure. The room held its hot breath. He rolled it around the contours of his palm with his other thumb, then dropped it carefully into his shirt pocket.

Some latent thing germinated in him suddenly. Here in this empty dancehall he broke a few bottles of vodka on the ground and hooked some old clothes out back from the sleepy cube Lawnyawn had used as a bedroom and piled them up on the puddled vodka behind the bar. Feeling mean and full of red memory, he crouched down with a lighter he'd pulled from his pocket and lit a dusty shirt on fire, made sure it caught some of the others until half the bar was in flames. He stood by the door and looked at the empty rippled grid, gazed up into the rafters where for a very short second he thought he saw something glide through the thickening smoke before he flicked the lights off, leaving the disco ball to flick jagged orange reflections back into the growing fire. Outside, he got into his truck after having waved a sarcastic farewell at the roof kids who hadn't seen or smelled the first of the smoke. They threw tiny rocks at him as he backed away from the dancehall, turned around down the street, out of and away from Pixie Town.

By the time he'd crossed the bridge and pulled back onto the potholed road he could already see black smoke pouring out into the sky. He imagined the roof kids clambering recklessly down, clinging to the wall of ivy and running to get their helpless fathers. He drummed a steady rhythm against the steering wheel with the flat palms of his hands as the road back to Penobska opened up in front of him.

Chapter Fifteen – In Which Fears are Confronted

Lambo woke up on his Gramaw's couch, a stitched river of a quilt flowing down his body from his face. He sat up and pulled the quilt off himself. Dusty afternoon sunlight slanted through the gaps in Gramaw's curtains, and a dream he'd had during his nap sat there next to him, invisible. It was only when he sat up that he saw it, and when he did, he remembered that he'd gotten thirsty, and went to the fridge to pour himself a glass of milk. As he stood there scanning the dim shelves for the carton, he heard a slight rustle from above. He looked up. A nearly-reflective dark snake coiled on the fridge. Its shiny head looking right down at him, its flicking tongue whiffed Lambo. Slowly it began uncoiling itself, knocking over a few empty mayonnaise jars Gramaw insisted on storing up there. They rolled slowly away from the snake until they fell down off the fridge and shattered all over the ground, glass strewn every which way. The snake uncoiled more and more, knocking more mayonnaise jars onto the ground. It hovered there in front of Lambo's face, moving closer in toward him slowly, until it was about six inches away. In their orange pools, vertical pupils squinted and its mouth yawned open. The span of its open mouth aligned almost perfectly with Lambo's head. It came closer still, though refused to shut its mouth onto him. He could see far down into the snake, and far down inside the writhing muscle he saw another smaller snake climbing toward him, its two orange-pooled eyes trained on him, mouth opening. It stretched forward until he could see down *its* throat another snake stretching toward him. This went on for what felt like hours, snake after snake, mayonnaise jars shattering around him.

Laying there on the couch, he thought about how he hadn't felt the least bit scared in the dream. But as it sat there on the couch next to him, as he looked at it as part of the room, he felt scared, his reality intruded upon, but remembering the feeling of the dream itself, he came up with nothing more than mild curiosity that felt like a slightly damp rag. Stranger yet, he had the strong urge to get up and pour himself a nice

cold glass of milk, which he did without even looking up on top of the fridge to, he suspected of himself, prove a point.

The house was quiet; Gramaw must've been dozing in her room, or quietly sewing together more patches in the back. Lambo sat at the table sipping his glass of milk, recalling all the little details of the snakes and kept impressing himself with how little he'd been afraid. Sitting there, he kind of pumped himself up. *Usually, you'd've woken up wet with tears, ya know? I mean those weren't no little gardener snakes. Those were some big poisonous suckers, fangs 'n all. And you just stared them right down and waited them out till you woke up. Maybe you've turned a new leaf, eh?* He finished the glass of milk bravely and got up. He felt good. Well rested, now full of milk, he might've even said he felt heroic. He'd been thinking anxiously about Tripdoe all day, ever since he'd bolted out of her house after Roge pulled his afro out in front of them. She'd always been a pretty stable girl, in fact the constancy of her cool composure is what drew Lambo to her back in high school, opposites attract and so forth. But now her coolness seemed displaced, what with her family crumbling to freaky pieces all around her, it made her seem kind of heartless, demented even. He'd felt relieved somewhat when she crumpled into his arms weeping when he'd come over the previous night to find Tap tailless and Nikosi nowhere, and just because it made him feel like the hero for once. Her weeping like that showed him that she actually *did* feel one way or another about her life and all the senseless chaos unfolding all around her, though thinking about it now he couldn't help but see the breakdown more as a result of exhaustion and emotional overextension than a sudden bursting-forth of her true love for her family or something. And not to mention the unsympathetic synopsis she'd given him in the truck yesterday, of Tap's guy's death she'd witnessed so personally...to put it simply, he worried about Tripdoe a lot, but didn't know the first step in breaking through her crystalizing shell she didn't even seem to realize she was putting up.

Gramaw shuffled sockless into the doorway holding some individual quilt squares out in front of her like things for sale. She still had on her dark green flannel nightgown, and her white hair was tousled around like a photograph of a snowstorm. 'Lambo? I need you to take a look at these for me,' she said, holding up the squares. 'What do you see?' She always asked him this about her quilt squares, even though he knew *she* knew damn well what he'd say, for she'd designed them herself and had felt every last stitch find its place along the fabric she'd cut, never a single stitch out of place or unintended. 'The one in your left hand there is a kind of angular airplane propeller full of green, blue, and yellow flowers, outlined with a zig-zagged ribbon sorta, and that's black, the ribbon I mean. It's all rotating counterclockwise. The one in your right hand is a crosshatch of red and yellow stripes, orange at their intersections, with dark green dots in the squares between.' She smiled and shuffled closer to him, groping for the edge of the table. When she found it, she felt her way around it until she touched a chair and sat down. He figured she asked him about the squares so that she could get another sense to solidify whatever constituted the images she held of them in her head. She could feel them all day long, trace every bumpy line of stitches until her fingers went raw, but until she heard Lambo tell her what he saw in them, she didn't quite seem to trust her own touch. That, in a nutshell, was why he put up with living with her. He knew that if he didn't stay around as an extra-sensory cross-reference to the world she traced with her wrinkled, calloused fingertips, she'd just drift off someplace else and never come back, and probably wouldn't regret going to. The twenty dollars a week didn't hurt either.

She sat staring directly at him, *through* him it felt like, as he moved the empty glass of milk around the table like a checker. 'What's wrong with you today, huh?' she said, laying the two squares out flat in front of her. She pushed them around too. 'I can almost smell the something that's wrong on you, so don't go and say anything stupid like "Nothing, Gramaw, I'm fine" cuz I know too well you ain't. It's that girl you're seeing, isn't it.'

Lambo sighed. He liked how she put it, *seeing* her. She was right: he couldn't hide anything about anything from her, and he knew this would all be over sooner than later if he just gave her the full and honest truth. 'You guessed it right, per usual. I'm worried sick about her, you know. Her dad's always been kind of a nut case, you know, always running around with Bozeman doing whatever the hell until all hours of the night, coming back looking like somebody threw him in a microwave, but now I think he's totally lost it. And, well shit, now her mom's just disappeared backwards into the forest. And meanwhile here's Tripdoe just twiddling her thumbs like nothing much's going on at all, and talking to a salamander she pulled out of her pants at the damn hospital.' Gramaw's eyes shifted so that she was looking somewhere just above Lambo's head, as if trained on an invisible bird that had landed there to peck at his grease-bright scalp. 'And I wanna help somehow, but, it's just so far out of *my* range of business that I just don't know where to start. I mean, I could go wading through the forest calling out for her mom, but what happens when I find her, huh? *If* I find her? Would Tripdoe even care, or worse, notice?'

Gramaw pushed the squares around on the table gently, her hands resting in the center of each. 'I give you permission,' she said quietly.

Lambo looked up. 'Wha?'

'I said I give you permission.'

'For what?'

'Going into the woods to find the girl's mother. Someone's gotta do it, don't you see? We can't just have people's mothers go disappearing on us all of a sudden. Years this place's mothers stuck around til they died, now they're gonna all of a sudden start erupting out of the house? There's more at stake here than just one girl's mother, Lamb. You've gotta see that.' Her eyes stayed glued to the invisible bird on Lambo's head.

'You always talk to me like you know everything. Truth is, Grams, I don't think you know the half of it. No offence.'

'Slide that glass over here,' she said, again barely audible, but firmly, something new residing in her voice.

'Why?'

'Lambo.'

He slid the glass over so that it stopped just in front of her right hand that sat flat on the quilt square. She moved her hand to pick the glass up. 'Now Lambo. I want you to close those eyes of yours. I'm gonna mix these quilt squares up and set the glass down on one or the other. If you guess which one it lands on right, you don't have to go lookin for her. If you get it wrong, you do. You get the rules?'

'Gramaw this is ridiculous. What do you care if...'

'Shush it. Close those eyes.'

He shut them, and could hear the slight *whishing* sound of her dragging the quilt squares around. Then a quiet *thud* of the glass finding its spot. 'Alright,' she said. 'Which is it.'

He opened his eyes halfway and thought of the snakes. The glass sat on the yellow-red crosshatch full of green dots. He shut his eyes again and sighed. The fridge's motor whirred on, filling the room with a full, dull drone, over which he said, 'Propeller. It's on the propeller one.'

'Good boy.' He sat there with his eyes shut, even after Gramaw had gotten up and shuffled into the back room. Just sat there in the darkness of his head, the fridge whirring behind him.

After what felt like an hour he finally opened his eyes and got up. He'd been afraid of his own life for long enough. Those snakes, broken glass, loud noise. He went back into the room he stayed in and stuffed clothes into his old backpack. Some pairs of socks, an extra t shirt, a flashlight he'd forgotten about. When he turned to go back into the kitchen, Gramaw was standing in the doorway holding a bulky olive-green bundle about two feet long. She started in saying, 'This was your grandfather's. You never met him, and I'm glad you didn't. He's the reason I'm blind, mostly, and the reason your mother turned out the way she did. But I know if he was still alive he'd want to give this to you before you head out there. It's what he would've wanted.' She held the bundle out in front of her, an offering. He gathered it up into his arms. 'Well shoot Gram, thanks.' It was about twenty pounds, and straps of fabric flapped out of the folds. 'Uh...what is it, exactly?'

'It's his old tent. He slept more nights in that sordid flapper than he ever did in our bed, I'd say. He wasn't much for marital life, though he did provide for me and your mother. That's most of what we'd expect from such a man back in those days. The rest was filigree.' Water rimmed her red eyelids and her milky pupils hovered over that bird again.

'Well I'm just going to look around for her for a little while. I'm not planning on *moving* out there or anything.'

She shrugged. 'I didn't think anything that ever happened to me would happen. Keep the goddamn thing, will you?'

He set the bundle down and flung the backpack over his shoulders, then wrapped his arms around Gramaw in a big hug. 'Grams, you sure you'll be alright here all alone?'

'Psshaw. I've been foolin you this whole time. I can see more than you think. I was just keepin you around so that I wouldn't have to make my own meals. Or maybe so that I'd be able to say goodbye like this when I had to. A premonition I guess. A blind impulse to keep you around till you actually needed me.'

He took a deep breath and hoisted the bundle up into his arms and turning toward the door asked her, 'Do you ever see stars? Like, phosphene stars or anything like that?'

She thought for a few seconds before saying, 'No need for all that stuff,' standing there in the light, and waved him out the door.

Lambo fumbled around by the side of the Phan home trying to bend over to find a suitable pebble to toss at Tripdoe's window. Not too big not too small. He found a just-right pebble the size of the tip of his pinkie finger under the shadow of another

larger rock. He picked it up and heaved it at her window. *Tap*. He waited, then rummaged around for another pebble and tossed it, too. Waited. Nothing.

He went around to the front of the house, past the stagnant pond that a thick green sheet of algae had spread over, set the tent down on the white wicker rocking chair that sat there under a thin brown layer of dust. He knocked on the door. Waited. Nothing. He opened the door and walked through the dark front room toward the stairs, and as he grabbed the wood handrail and put his foot on the first step, a tingling feeling turned him around. Roge, shirtless and glistening, balanced on his head by the couch with his eyes closed, a serene silken look pasted over his face, his torso wobbling ever so slightly. Lambo didn't want to disturb whatever the hell was going on there, so he crept upstairs trying to avoid the steps he knew creaked the most. He tapped lightly on Tripdoe's door before walking right in. The Phan house seemed especially unlocked and loose today.

She lay there supine, staring up at the ceiling in no particular state of awareness that Lambo could discern. All the lights were off. 'Eh, Tripster? You ok?'

Only her eyes moved. She stared at him angularly before sitting up like a doorhinge, grabbed each braid and ran her hands over them to smooth their frizzed ends. 'Lambo. Lambo. I missed you.'

'Are you...? Do you, uh, know what's going on with your dad down there?'

'The headstand thing? No idea. He's been doing it since I got home. Pretty sure he's permanently zapped. You see the strawberries?'

'Uh...'

'He's got strawberries on his feet. They're just sitting there. I got close to, like, touch one, and he started humming at me.' Her cool, even tone.

'Humming at you?'

'Yez. I think his mind broke.' Then she scooted over to Lambo and wrapped her arms behind his knees. The side of her face crammed into his crotch. He wiggled his way into a crouch and she adjusted her hug so that her face buried itself between his neck and shoulder.

'Come with me,' he said, trying to talk from his throat. 'We'll find your mom.'

She loosened her hug and uncrammed her face from his shoulder, looked at him sideways. 'My mom, huh? You wanna *find* my mom? What makes you think she's out there to find?'

He took a deep breath and faced the fact that he had no idea. Finding a lost mom seemed like the obvious thing to have to do. 'Fine. Let's go walk the path of your mom's rolling body looking for...berries, or squirrels. However you wanna spin it.' Lambo was 20 already. He didn't know that once Bozeman put his new legal restrictions into effect that he'd be excised from the Prefecture. Living with and taking care of Gramaw didn't fit into Bozeman's category of lucrative occupations. None of that mattered much to him right now though, sitting on the dark floor.

Tripdoe bit her thumbnail, sighed. 'Well. Let's think it over a glass of juice, eh?' She patted him on the cheek and got up to go downstairs. The puff of courage those venomous dream-snakes had filled Lambo with back at Gramaw's began to leak slowly out of him, Lambo the pale balloon. Soon, he felt, the heroic part of him – hunkered down next to his pumping heart, a bold swollen cockroach – that had expanded with each emerging serpent would shrink back down into the tiniest resemblance of itself. He got up shakily to follow her.

He had to walk past Roge to get to the kitchen where Tripdoe was already pouring two glasses full of cranberry juice. Roge was still on his head, the horizontal drawn blinds behind him railroading across his glistening ribcage. There, sure as those strips of light, were the strawberries Tripdoe was talking about, balanced on the smooth slopes of his feet's soles. The improbable khakis bunched around his calves that gave way to his shirtless, shapeless torso. His exposed skin looked slippery. A stick of butter's waxy wrapper sat crumpled to Roge's right.

Tripdoe was gulping down the juice as Lambo came into the kitchen. He put his hand on her back, but before he could say anything, Roge slid like an ancient cave fish right up next to the droning refrigerator.

'I sense some distraught youths,' he hummed. His shiny mouth barely moved, and his outstretched hands held one strawberry, each having been so recently balanced on a sole. His eyes sat like buried coins in the smooth excavation site of Roge's bizarrely serene face. In the light Lambo could tell he'd rubbed that stick of butter all over himself, especially all over his raw head. He smelled a little bit like a roasted turkey.

'Dad. Roge. Please. Uh,' Tripdoe managed while trying to look casual as she backed up against the edge of the counter.

'Here. Take one. Eat.'

They stood there silently staring at each other, the three of them. Lambo, always trying to defuse social tension, slowly reached out and held his hand over the westernmost strawberry. He picked it up and looked over at Tripdoe who was now staring very intensely at something on the floor. A crumb from the morning's toast perhaps. Lambo nudged her with his bony elbow. Without looking at Roge she quickly grabbed the other strawberry and pawed it like something soon to be deposited in the garbage. 'Why the hell should we eat these?' she barked, looking up intensely at her forlorn father.

Roge smiled. 'These aren't normal strawberries, dear.'

'Dad. I bought these at the store three days ago. There's nothing special about them.'

'Well. These have been purified through the process of anthroinversion. You can read about the process in a book I published a few years ago. You see, the human body is nothing more than pyramids stacked one atop the other in succession, and by inverting them – the energy usually blasts upward out of the crown of the skull in an incredible torrent right toward the energy house of the sun – a pure stream of invisible energy is released through the usually energy-starved soles of the...'

She popped it into her mouth and chewed. 'Tastes like normal old normal to me,' she spewed between bites. 'In fact, kinda bland.'

Whoever metaphorical archaeologists were in charge of excavating Roge's eyes did their job; they glimmered frighteningly. His eyelids twisted. 'Some day, you will understand that your senses are the ultimate pranksters. They are not gates, as they would have you believe, but guards. Beyond them, past their fortified restrictions, sits the nest of health, the gem of your *particular* balance. But you say what you cannot taste you cannot know, hm? A beam of light pours into you from that strawberry, though you cannot taste it. Nor shall you, at least not yet. You must taste *around* the strawberry. Everything that it is not, you must have sit on your tongue, and you must taste it. Every beam of sunlight that poured into the leaves, and which pours forth from that single berry now, still, despite that day having elapsed, that light having flown,

those leaves' veins having even goldened and split, even now. Some day you might taste it. Perhaps then...you will know...its true *Nature*.'

Tripdoe burped, then looked over at Lambo. 'Hey Lambo, didn't you say you got tickets for that, uh, movie?'

He hesitated, but Tripdoe's glare basted over him like hot gravy over a turkey. 'Yeah, yep. Uh, *Calypso Comet II*, I think...supposed to be pretty awesome. Lots of drama, I guess. Explosions. Starts soon, right?' He looked over his shoulder as if expecting some poster with movie times to materialize on the Phan's wall behind him, then at his naked wrist to check its flesh's time. 'Yeah, jeez, didn't think it was so, uh, late?'

The two of them weaseled past Roge, who stood there beaming in the kitchen, all his gathered years amassed there at the tip of his vibrating tongue. Tripdoe ran upstairs to cram some clothes in a bag and met Lambo out on the lawn, where he stood gripping the tent to his chest against the world, against all it had gripped against itself, all of its tangled garlands.

In order to make sure they hadn't lied to Roge, who by all appearances seemed to have found something of a truth amid the unfolding chaos of his life, they walked to the drive-in movie theater. They pitched the tent on one of the graveled rectangles next to the steel thing that looked like a parking meter and crawled inside. The day grew old as they lay together in the musty canvas talking about Roge, about funny things from school, about each other. Each exhaled hugely there in the humid square. Small holes in the fabric worn through by the untold happenings of Lambo's dead grandfather let coins of light pass through, and they traveled along the floor as the day descended behind the massive grey-white screen. One coin of light balanced on Tripdoe's nose like a joke spoon, and Lambo kissed it sheepishly like it might break. By the time *Calypso Comet II* came on, they'd both fallen asleep curled around each other, and they slept through the whole movie, explosions and all.

When it was over, the old guy who ran the place came around with a flashlight to wake them up and move them on. Not a damned campground after all. But seeing them curled up as they were, he thought better of it. He flicked the flashlight off to go home, thinking about some faded day in the past that, as he drifted off into his own sleep, blended seamlessly into a dream he wouldn't remember when he woke early up the next day.

Chapter Sixteen – In Which Three Penobskan Youths Find Themselves Outside

Fenny squatted next to the huge cedar he'd decided would be his nest, command center, homey bosom for the new phase of his life to nestle up against. And if all the plans he'd come up with since he'd settled on this spot two days ago went smoothly, if nobody from Penobaska who was undoubtedly looking for him found him, it would eventually become his super-cool super-safe party palace made out of wood and rocks and grass and stuff, complete with defense turrets that would shoot deadly-fast acorns at potential intruders human or otherwise, and a natural spring water hot tub with room for like twenty chicks, and a full workout studio so that he could stay fit for all the other stuff he'd be doing basically all the time, and his own still for distilling his own

special brand of liquor that nobody could tell him not to drink. He hadn't come up with a clever or mysterious name yet for the liquor – every kind of booze he'd ever drank had names like *Captain Switchback* or *Creaky Boat* – but there was plenty of time to decide the little details such as these. As he scratched some rudimentary schematics into the moist dirt he'd found under some nasty old decaying leaves, the grey beak of a yellow and black bird settling its claws onto a branch high above his head loosened a casual chirp that made Fenny jump. A lot of stuff out here, he'd found out, made him jump. And to make things all the jumpier, he'd smoked his last cigarette that morning for breakfast, and kept habitually reaching into his pocket for the pack, only to be reminded of the reality its absence brought him fully into.

A few months ago, after work, he'd watched a documentary that his stepmom Wei rented from the library. On the front of the DVD's laminated case that he'd consulted halfway through to find out how many minutes were left, two human silhouettes stood hand-in-hand and were backgrounded by an incredibly bright, zoomed-out image of the planet. Fenny had no idea how anybody could get a picture of the planet like that. The documentary's title – *Let's Get Busy! How to Move Forward in the Midst of Social and Environmental Transformation* – sat above the image of the silhouettes in blocky yellow font that Fenny thought looked kind of cheesy, and which led him to expect an equal or greater level of cheesiness from the movie itself.

From what he understood, the documentary was about people who moved out into a forest to live like Neanderthals because they couldn't find real jobs in the city, or at least that's what he figured they were out there for – he'd missed the first part of the movie on account of a frozen burrito that needed microwaving in the kitchen, and when he came back into the darkened living room with his burrito on a paper plate, Wei silently refused to rewind to the start. When he reached for the remote that balanced on her thigh she swatted his hand away like a fly.

Most of the people in the movie had long ropy hair wrapped up in funny scarves; some had tattoos on their shoulders, or backs, or forearms that reminded Fenny of a geometry class assignment he'd paid one of the smarter kids to do for him; some of them didn't wear any clothes at all and didn't seem to care one bit if the camera people filmed their whole bodies, which made him squirm inside; some talked real slow and quiet while they described how they lived and how they'd started living, as if their lives depended on the slowness and carefulness of their words, and one guy yanked the biggest carrot Fenny'd ever seen out of the ground and threw it to one of his friends like a football. It was pretty funny, even though the friend guy didn't even get *close* to catching it. A lot was being said by the people, but Fenny couldn't keep track of much of what they were talking about. It sounded like another language to him, even though he knew every word of it.

Along with how weird they all looked and acted and sounded, they all had this dirty glowing energy that he could almost feel through the screen, and pretty much every single one of the people the movie showed smiled at one point or another – either at each other, or at the camera, or at the people behind the camera, or at something going on behind the people behind the camera – in a way that made Fenny feel like he wasn't really sitting at home watching a movie at all, and their kids ran around without shoes or rules or much of anything, climbing way higher into these huge trees than Fenny had ever seen anybody – kid or not – climb.

'Idiots,' Fenny remembered hearing himself say as he peeled his once-white socks off his sweaty feet. He threw them into the hallway. 'I bet if those kids stepped on a thorn or a sharp stick or somethin, it wouldn't've made its way into the movie. Not even the deleted scenes or anything.' Wei, who sat next to him on the couch with her legs crossed under herself and her arms wrapped around the huge steel water bottle she brought with her everywhere, turned to glare calmly at him. He pretended not to notice, but made sure to keep the rest of what he felt compelled to say unsaid.

But the part of the movie that kept playing over and over in his head since having fled Penobska Proper two days ago was the final scene. It was a long shot of the whole village the people the movie interviewed all lived in and built together. The camera people must've filmed it from pretty far away, cuz you could see mostly the whole village – all the little earthen mounds of houses and group buildings made of saplings and twigs – situated on the edge of where that forest of great trees met grassy foothills. Even though the village itself wasn't really even *that* big, the shot still absorbed him. The most impressive thing to Fenny, though, or at least what his memory had felt compelled to retain in such detail that even now, months later, all he had to do to watch it was squeeze his eyes shut, was that the shot included the very tops of the trees they lived among. Where the tops of the trees stopped stretching the sky began: deep purple with a smooth gold band of clouds stretching and slowly disappearing across it into nowhere. The shot went on and on, no music or anything, for almost ten minutes as the sky's purple deepened and the evening creatures started singing their sharp semi-rhythmic songs, and little smoking bubbles of firelight started popping down where now you couldn't see the rounded shapes of the scrawny mud homes or the windows that sat in their walls or the people that lived in them, for the fullness of the overlapping trees and their cast shadows and the approaching evening that cast them had merged it all into a single indistinguishable darkness. But those bubbles of firelight, exhaling torrents of wild smoke that, too, disappeared into the sky, expanded as people gathered around them until you couldn't tell the people from the fire, the fire from the people. And then the screen went black, and the credits made their smooth climb upward into the nowhere of the screen's top edge.

Squatting there beneath the huge cedar, thinking about all those happy bright tired people in the movie gave him a little bit of hope. No friends to throw carrots at of course, no ears to spill ideas into, no Big J to stir pots with, but still. He'd find out how to get where the movie people were. Bright health, defined muscles, wholesome values, self-sufficiency, a rounded diet, that energy. Where else did people start trying to get all that shit besides out here? In the forest? Alone? And, oh yeah, on the run? Well.

After bolting faster than a startled finch through the forest for what felt like hours after the incident with the ghost peppers yesterday, he'd gotten incredibly hot. He took all his clothes off and tried fanning himself with fern fronds he yanked out of the ground, but the heat of the day refused to climb off his skin. Finally he ended up biting the lower parts of his black slacks off with his teeth to make into shorts so that he wouldn't have to traipse around the woods naked – he never thought he could be self-conscious around a bunch of fucking *plants* – but when the night and its cold blanket fell over him he used the floppy torn tubes of fabric to start a fire. Sometime in the night after he'd drifted into a fitful shivering sleep the fire went out, and he woke up huddled in a ball wearing his torn-up shorts. What the hell was he doing out here again? Oh, uh, yeah...

Well, yeah, shit. That morning after he smoked his last cigarette he'd had a pretty acute panic attack. Huddling there on a lopsided patch of old needles he squeezed his eyes shut, watching that one scene over and over. It calmed him down, and by now, a day later, he felt fully resigned to his exile and all the responsibility it teetered on top of. He didn't need those clowns in Penobska anyway. A bunch of go-nowhere, lazy-assed fools, a...and power-hungry tyrants...

Having consulted his fragmented memory of the movie for future party-palace compound design ideas, and having drawn out a fairly comprehensive top-down outline of the space in the damp dirt, he got busy dragging big half-rotten logs over to the huge cedar and making a squeaky pile of sticks and branches. But no matter how much he rearranged it all to match the vision in his head, no matter how many times he dragged his muddy sneakers back over to the dirt-scratched outline to consult the schematic, it just looked like a bunch of sticks and logs cast there haphazardly by a storm. He tilted his head up to look at the wavy, rhombic patch of sky he could see through the trees and determined it was probably around noon. Stretching and yawning recklessly, he crawled underneath one of the softer-looking piles of sticks for a nap, using a lump of moss as a pillow and some old leaves as a blanket. Home sweet home, he thought.

That same chirping bird as before, though balancing on a different perch, chirped some more, mocking Fenny with its smooth untroubled confidence. 'Just wait, winged rat. I'll be eating you for dinner one of these nights,' he wheezed, trying to spot the bird through the crooked fingers of this rudimentary palace of his.

After what could have been either six hours or twelve minutes, loud twig-branch-snaps cracked into Fenny's sleep. He woke nearly choking on the sound. Terror tiptoed into him through the ears. His lungs were on fire. Sun still streamed through the breathing patch of sky. Another snap, and all his years of porcupine preparedness programming and the *Prickly Menace* movies, all that cinematized violence and officiated anxiety, oozed up from the soggy pit of his stomach until it suffused each last one of his brain's misfiring, nicotine-haunted synapses. Thick hot fearsome sludge petrifying him totally. Not even the little hairs on the tip of his pimpled nose moved as he lay there staring up into that blue fuzzy hole of atmosphere above him.

An oval shadow slowly filled the patch of sky and darkened the area around Fenny as his brain's reptilian remnants released a chaotic howl and twitched his muscles into spasmodic flurries of terror-combat. He exploded. Twigs flew as wild sidewinders as he lurched thrashing up from his palace, loose fists swiped the air aimed blind for vital soft tissue of whatever enemy had cast the shadow that had touched him. Not colliding, he wrenched his adrenaline-shot eyes open, and saw the wide pale terrified face of that goofball from high school Lambo backtracking clumsily nearly tripping away from him behind a tree. He held a kind of canvas tube out in front of him like a personal cannon. And there, a bit further back, was Tripdoe Phan, looking unfazed as ever as she poked her head from behind a thin young deadlooking tree. Fenny stopped, dropped and unclenched his fists and started shaking with an uncontrolled gush of laughter that, to Lambo huddling behind the tree, sounded like a heat stroked hyena. 'YOU NEARLY GOT YOUR STUPID FUCK SELVES MURDERED TO DEATH!' Fenny heard himself scream between the laughter that gushed out of him painfully, his brain venting the now-useless adrenaline. Lambo peeped out from behind the tree just as the surge of energy

fizzled from Fenny. He crumpled into an exhausted heap onto the ground violently weeping and vibrating.

Lambo looked back at Tripdoe who, with greenish shadows playing over her face, shrugged and clomped toward Fenny. With the tent clutched close to him, Lambo followed her as she passed him. 'Hey. Hey. Hey. Fenny. Hey. Stop that,' Tripdoe said to the weeping pile. She knelt down and gave him a firm, crisp slap across his damp dirty cheek. The sobbing lurched to a halt and Fenny looked up at her with a wet twinkle in his eye, his mouth sagging in disbelief.

'You...you came for me. I knew you would! Dear god I knew you would!' He sprung up and tried to wrap his arms around her, but she scooted back so that he grabbed the air and nearly tripped over himself. Lambo came forward, hoisting his tent like a javelin. 'Hey, jeez, take 'er easy there Lamb Stew.' Fenny'd called Lambo that ever since either could remember. 'I just wanted to thank you, is all. Uh, er, not that I *needed* any help from anybody or nothing. Just nice to see some folks again, I guess. I'm doing fine out here, I really am.' He gestured elaborately at what both Lambo and Tripdoe had failed to recognize as anything even close to being purposeful, let alone constructed.

'We didn't come here for you anyway, Fenny,' Lambo said sharply, looking around the scattered branches, trying to figure out what Fenny was trying to show them.

Fenny sunk into himself. 'What'ya mean? Don't people wanna know where I am out here?'

They both looked at him fatly, Lambo under the olive weight of his canvas tube, as if to say, nobody cares about you. Fenny nearly swallowed his own thickening tongue. 'We're out here lookin for Tripdoe's mom. She rolled through here a couple days ago. You seen anything?'

Then in his old lashing ways, 'Tripdoe's mom out in broad daylight, huh? Well there's something new. Hyuckhyuckhyuck. Guess lot's changed since I been around, huh. I ain't seen nothing of the sort.'

'I see you still have the brain of a tadpole,' Tripdoe said looking around. 'Good place for someone with the brain of a tadpole. Though I might suggest going a half mile west. There's more stagnant water over thata way,' motioning Lambo to follow her, showing half of an iota of interest in Fenny's grand schema scratched into the dirt that she stepped directly onto as she paced away from the site. 'I guess if you got everything all figured out here we'll just be getting a move on. Good luck.'

They weren't joking, and kept on walking. Fenny waited huffing for about a minute until they blended into the forest, then took off in a quiet desperate run after them. His dirt blueprint dejected there in the afternoon's blue shade. He stumbled over a root and said a nasty word under his breath before Tripdoe and Lambo jumped out from behind the trees they'd been hiding behind. He nearly shit. They laughed, clutching their sides. 'Damn, Fenny,' Tripdoe squeaked between giggles, 'You sure you're alright out here? You seem a little jumpy.' She leaned and grabbed him under the arm and hoisted him to his feet, brushed some of the dirt off his back. They took off again, Lambo leading the way. In their steps the implicit suggestion for him to follow behind.

That night they set the tent up in a clearing. Short stubby grey-green shrubs surrounded the three of them and chopped the hot wind up into mild bursts. Tripdoe unplugged some of the dry loose ends that rigid white dead leaves clung to in bunches to wad up and start a fire with while Fenny and Lambo went off in opposite directions to

crack some old wood out of the forests airy underbelly. By the time they had it going, the sky, an incredible speckled drumskin pulled tight over their beating camp, cooled into night. Stars pierced the dark like quills through a blanket. Lambo came back first and unloaded an armful of clattering stuff down by the little sandy pit Tripdoe'd filled with tiny dry piles. She started cracking the stuff into a triangle and held her hand into the tangle with her fist closed tight around a lighter she sparked into a fire. Fenny got distracted by the wild uncovered dark and forgot to get anything to burn, so he stumbled back into their camp with only his left hand full of grass, face pressed upward.

Their small fire grew in heat and sound as the three of them stripped their shoes and socks off, the three Penobskan children now rubbing their raw feet in the strange commune light they didn't expect to know so well. Tripdoe pulled three granola bars – *Raspberry Protein Crunch 'Em's* – out of the first pocket in her backpack and passed one to each of the boys. Fenny almost hurt himself trying to get the thing open, he was so desperate for calories. He fumbled with it like the thumbs of a nervous virgin trying to unclasp a lover's stiff brassiere, then gave up and took a bite out of it – wrapper and all. He chewed judiciously and then cough the strip of wrapper up and spat it into the fire. Tripdoe reprimanded him with her quiet eyes. He had been acting like a child since they found him, and both Lambo and Tripdoe regarded each other with looks that suggested their differentiation from Fenny in this regard, though in light of these stars and these cracking segments of dead shrub they themselves were nothing more than children, if. They both knew this, and found it hilarious in a very solitary kind of way, though didn't quite understand why.

Night deepened. They made up ghost stories. Fenny pulled his scabbed knees in to his chest and cradled his chin where the two bulbous nodes of his caps met. Tripdoe had the air. Lambo tended the fire thoroughly.

'Once, about one million years ago, there was a salamander who had the power to turn people into clouds. This salamander liked rain so much that whenever it stopped raining for a few days, he would go to where the people lived and turn two of them into clouds at a time until it started raining. Then he would go back to his hollow stump where he lived, and sleep contentedly all day long in the loud rain. When it was night, and the rain had stopped but the ground was still soggy, he would go and dance in the bog with the fireflies. When day returned, he would go back to his hollow stump and go to sleep, only waking when it got too dry or when the sun went down. One hot day, a little girl was playing out in the field that the salamander would go through on his way to where the people lived to turn them into clouds. Because it was so hot, he had decided to go and do just that. Seeing the salamander, the curious girl followed him quietly until he stopped at the edge of town. She kept watching him as he used his magic to turn two of her parents' friends into clouds. Then the salamander went back through the field and disappeared. When the little girl got home, her parents were crying to each other about their lost friends. Wanting her parents to stop crying, she told them about how she had seen the salamander use his magic to turn their friends into clouds. Her father's eyes lit up, and he stormed out into the center of all the people and told everyone what his daughter had seen. The people grew furious, and marched into the woods where the girl had seen the salamander disappear and began stomping on everything and lighting things on fire. Then the rainclouds above opened up and the people went back to their homes contented that they had put an end to the treacheries of the salamander. Luckily, the salamander had crawled extra deep into his hollow

stump and had avoided being stomped or burned. In fact, he had fallen into a deep sleep before the people got there, and slept through the entire ordeal. He crawled out yawning right as the rain began pouring down and found everything destroyed. The little bog where he danced with the fireflies had been trodden and splattered, the bark on the trees had been stripped and piled in huge blackened heaps, and his favorite patch of mushrooms had been yanked and shredded. Beside himself with anger, and knowing the bumbling, clumsy people to be at fault, he went as fast as he could through the rain to where the people lived. He could see them through the windows in their homes, and went from house to house turning everyone inside into clouds until the sky was black and churning. His anger subsided, and he went back to his hollow stump and fell asleep, exhausted. As he slept, the sky burst into the largest storm the world had ever known, and rain fell in unending torrents. The exhausted salamander didn't even notice when his stump started filling up with water, and eventually the merciless rain flooded everything completely. The salamander drowned without ever having woken up. Now his confused ghost wakes up every night trying to find the bog so that he can dance with the fireflies.'

She leaned back, pleased by the silence folding in behind her words, balancing on her haunches with her feet pointed at the fire. Sparks helixed up away from them. Lambo poked a coal and said, 'Not bad. Though not really much of a ghost story.'

'Oh. Ladies and gentlemen. Distinguished expert on ghost stories here with the blackened stick. Let's give him a round of applause.' Fenny clacked his knees together smirking.

'Just saying. The ghost didn't come in til the end, and didn't really do anything. Just kinda bumped around the forest like a mapless tourist.'

'He was there the whole time.'

'How d'ya figure?'

She looked up. 'He was just there.'

They crawled into the tent after the fire exhaled itself empty. No sleeping bags, just wadded up sweatshirts as pillows, pants and shirts draped over their legs and chests. Fenny huddled himself in the corner, periodically a string of sleep babble loosened from his dreaming head. Lambo and Tripdoe sprawled the middle of the tent, two stretched planks side by side fast asleep. The wind ran its open palm against the canvas.

Tripdoe found Tap in her dreams. She was sitting alone by the fire and he crawled out from under one of the burning logs. He coughed sparks and spoke to her in his low groggy voice like some sound out of a deep hole in the earth. They weren't exactly words though, like the wind outside wasn't exactly a hand. As he crawled further out of the fire he left tiny, faint glowing prints where his hands had pressed. In his slowness she followed him out of the pulsing radius of firelight, away from the ruffling tent and up a lazy incline patched with islands of stonecrop, raised here and there by bending eruptions of dry grasses. Not so unlike the hill Tap and Erethizon had descended earlier the day before.

In the dark, Tap's body blended into its surroundings. Tripdoe could only distinguish him from it all by the faint glowing prints his hands left on the stones and the yellow splotches up and down his back that now seemed kindled from some spark inside his skin. Cresting the hill, Tap stopped, and something like the moon but not exactly the

moon caused the night to find itself a silver light. Again Tripdoe could see him, but as he stopped and spoke to her, his form, once the dependable outline of an amphibian self, flickered around the edges, becoming indistinct. As he spoke, they detached from themselves, and he showed her the path of her mother, that cracked and flattened road of hers leaving a tangle of detritus as its only marker, that went far into the forest, through the Katabasis River, on to the other side and beyond. Many glowing things came to walk by their sides. He made it known to her that this path was an endless one by bending an already-sagging bough of cedar Nikosi had snapped with her passing. It arced in the night, and Tripdoe knew, finding senseless evidence of her own life in each crosswise branch, in the wild proofs of each star-shaped leaf hanging, bobbing above her skull, as white-blue as the deepest ocean's lowest fish.

She didn't wake up til morning, but she also never stopped moving. Tap, revealing quiet places full of magic, led her through this world as nothing more than a shadow, until at last she couldn't tell him from the forest and its flickering edges. With the first diamond of sun, the two worlds merged and Tripdoe opened her eyes, peering through the holes in the canvas.

After having struck camp, eaten a few more *Protein Crunch Em's*, and discussed briefly their plan for the day, they continued walking the path of Tripdoe's mother's rolling body until they came – as Tripdoe had in the dream – upon the Katabasis River. Only a few coiling clouds churned in the sky's deep blue pot. Tripdoe looked up and watched one gradually disappear, unreal in the slowness of its fading. The three of them stood elbow to elbow on the smoothed stones that led down into the rolling water. Both Tripdoe and Lambo had their thumbs hooked under their backpack straps like it was their first day of school. They stood there for a while silently trying to gauge whether or not Nikosi's path picked back up on the other side. The far shore was dense with undergrowth, and a few pockets of shadow could have been spots where Nikosi had broken through, but none of them could be sure from as far away as they were. Fenny, hamming it up to get on Tripdoe's good side, swore and cursed the evil forces of fate for doing this to her mother. He kicked a big stone and nearly broke his toes. Tripdoe laughed to herself before swinging her backpack off and setting it in the stones. She sat down, untying her shoes.

Lambo was crouched down trying to loosen a cool-looking rock from its imbedded spot among the others, and when he looked up Tripdoe was mostly undressed, peeling her t-shirt off to bare her skin to the bank. Fenny was standing there slack-jawed staring at her naked body as she inched into the river inch by inch. Goosebumps rippled over her as she nearly slipped off a slick stone, splashing as she bent to catch herself on the surface of the running water. Lambo, singing to himself, had already started taking his clothes off by the time she glided unhindered in the river, paddling hard with her arms to stay in the same spot. The first few paddles, gliding the ever-running flow of the river, felt like a watery treadmill. 'C'mon in, you geeks! It's only cold for a second!' she shouted between huffs. Lambo, bare-assed, high-kneed his way in a goofy run until he belly-flopped into the water just beside Tripdoe who laughed floating on her back, now letting the current pull her its way only to splash her way back upstream. Fenny stood there, bashful and unconsciously erect, staring at Tripdoe's breasts until she caught his eye and spat a mouthful of river water in his direction. 'Quit staring, perv-o, and just get in already!'

Not a chance in hell was he taking his clothes off. He forced out a laugh and said, 'Yeah, and get hypothermia out here? You all can have a death wish but I sure won't.' The wet sounds emanating from his two companions dripped into Fenny's ears. He went and picked up Tripdoe's clothes and piled them up on top of her bag so they wouldn't get wet, then paced around for a while trying to look busy. The erection he was trying to hide from Tripdoe and Lambo led him wandering upstream a ways. He eventually found a barkless log that had drifted here when the river had swollen in the winter. He hunkered down on it. The spot was under a low canopy of leaves, and sitting there on the trunk he was mostly obscured from the river and the two nudists. He tried to ignore Tripdoe's hoots of laughter, tried to think away the erection, tried to get the burnt-in shapes of her river-wet nipples off the insides of his eyes, but found them imposing themselves ravenously onto the lusty forefront of his thoughts. Before he really knew what he was doing, his shorts were around his ankles and he stood there bow-kneed cranking himself in a flurry of horny automation, elbow cast out at a jagged angle nearly blurred with the desperate speed of his effort to cast out this electric rumble in his lower gut. His eyes were closed, and as he reached the end of his task a snap broke his eyes open, and he found himself masturbating directly toward a quill-baring female porcupine that advanced toward him. It was too late though, and as he spurted in a gasp of pleasure and pain, the porcupine jolted backwards and turned around, arcing its back to bare its quills toward Fenny, and let out a strange scream. Then Fenny screamed, spewing semen all over the stones in front of him before lurching away, dick in hand, crashing with a huge hop through the canopy back toward the river, terror pouring from his eyes.

Tripdoe and Lambo had been trying to synchronize their paddling before Fenny came hopping back, gripping his penis in a furious fist. 'Porcupine!' he yelled. 'Porcupine over there, oh fuck!' He stopped, let go of his member, and frantically yanked his shorts back up around his waist, running up to the shore just by where they swam, looking backward to see if the thing followed him out. The wind batted the branches around, but nothing quilled came out from under them.

'Fenny,' back-floating Lambo called out from the river, 'Take it easy fer shitsakes. Tryin' to get a good splash in here.' He fountained an arch of water into the air.

'No, seriously though! There was this huge spiky fucker over in those bushes, I swear! I was just, well, lookin fer some berries is all...but anyway we gotta get the hell out of here!' He'd only ever seen one live porcupine in his whole life – not counting all the ones on TV of course – and he regarded them all as devilish menaces. Now that one had caught him jerking off he felt a particular red fume burning in him. 'I'm dead goddamn serious, you all, we gotta move!'

Tripdoe sighed theatrically and waded slowly back in, emerging clumsily and shinily, holding her arms out to let the sun dry her off. Fenny turned around, saying, 'You folks aren't too bashful are ya?'

Dressed, the triplet balanced their way downstream, Fenny leading frantically, stumbling every third foot over rounded artifacts of Katabasis' patient, toothless gnawing. He kept a teetering eye cast behind them.

Back in the canopy where Fenny'd tugged himself loose onto the rocks, the porcupine sniffed and brushed low against the stones flecked with Fenny's ejaculate.

The humid odor hung to the windless cone under the tree, and how would Fenny or Tripdoe or Lambo ever know if the porcupine brushed too close to the stones, and lifted from them the viscous material incumbent to the formation of some mutant spawn? And what manifestation would the product of such mingling take on, here in this borderless region occupied by the wild strangeness of nature?

The porcupine, perhaps laden, padded east toward Penobska.

That night they camped tentless in all the world's warmth near the river in a wide sandy bank guarded on its sides by rakes of dunegrass. Lambo yanked a few blades to chew while staring into the perfunctory fire. Katabasis hummed its endless riff just over the sandy hump. They were getting acclimated, in their few days, to the rhythm under their soles and to the flickering watchfire, to the as-far-as-they-could-see perpetual lean of the winded greenery, to the high fully-visible curve of the sun from its pale emergence to its dull descent, unhindered by panel or roof but by the slatted shade of leaf, branch, cloud.

But growing, nagging hungers tinged their reverent observations: as they'd come to learn, *Protein Crunch-Em's* only went so far. Even though Lambo and Tripdoe had nabbed a decent stock of food from the Phan kitchen, they hadn't expected to find Fenny, and the rations that didn't amount to much in the first place dwindled. Not to mention Fenny's loud-mouthed, red-eyed paranoia disrupting some of the quieter opportunities for peace.

After they'd fled the bank of Katabasis after his encounter with the porcupine, Fenny'd asked Tripdoe for the red-handled pocketknife she'd swiped from a drawer in the kitchen before her and Lambo left town for, he said, security's sake. She handed it over suspiciously and watched him out of the corner of her eye whenever he fell behind to slash with the unfolded three-inch blade a low-hanging leaf, or bury it a few centimeters into the bark of a tree.

Now, evening, he sat hunched near the fire with it clutched in his shaking fist, clumsily transforming a thick branch into fluttering white curls that piled up around him like snow. The branch was coming to a point. His arm curved in huge sweeping, carving gestures that rocked his whole body, and his eyes, mostly lost in the complex emotional furrows of his face, lifted briefly whenever some small noise came from the world outside their firelight bubble. Although she nor Lambo had said anything to Fenny about his masturbatory emergence earlier that day, Tripdoe privately considered the way he wielded the knife similar to the way he had been clutching his penis as he lunged from his nearly-private canopy. She'd already decided to take it away from him after he fell asleep. The knife, that is. But for now she leaned back on her elbows and let her head flop backward so that the night sat on the bottom of her world like a deep black pond. Blood seeped into the top of her head, and its warmth brightened the colors of her upturned view.

Lambo sat crosslegged chewing on his grasses, feeling a unique contentedness. The jumpy mouse that he'd always thought of as his true self had calmed down since being out here. Despite the new aimlessness. Despite the inevitable admittance of hunger. Despite the return they all quietly acknowledged they'd have to make. Despite Fenny's constant aggressions. Walking, stopping, starting fires took all that he thought he was and kindly, gently reduced it to the simplicity of movement, observation, attention, sparks, an occasional gesture. He'd never been away from home for this long.

Having watched both Lambo and Fenny gradually lean farther and farther back into sleeping piles, and after having slid over to Fenny to pluck the red knife out of his sleep-limp fingers, she lay on a folded-up pair of pants drifting off. A sense of expectancy, a feeling in her that knew more than it would reveal, came over her, and before she could tell if she was asleep or awake, Tap crawled out from the flickering embers.

He led her southwest along the bank of the river for what felt like hours. Along the way he stopped to dig into the earth to show Tripdoe blue-white bulbs buried beneath the soil. He lifted them out of the little pits he dug and told her take a bite. He was a shadow of himself – at once a yellow-orange-black salamander, then the edge of some peripheral blur. She held the bulbs up to her mouth and ate, the sweet, loamy taste radiating through her. They stopped incrementally throughout the dream, each bulb taking on different shapes, forms, consistencies, though always the same taste and all buried the same depth under the surface of the earth. Edible markers, nodes.

Then they found the ocean. Katabasis closed its throat almost to a trickle before widening into the bay that rose and shrunk with the tides. In the middle of the bay sat the island delta that held Pixie Town II, but instead of the bridges spanning the water, instead of the buildings and paved paths and plazas, it sat as Tripdoe imagined it would have sat five hundred years earlier, bridgeless and wild. They drifted in the way of dreams over Katabasis, and hovered in the air looking straight down on the island. Tripdoe made out a few flickering lamps hanging from a tree near the center of the delta, and Tap suggested in his edgeless way that they descend to see.

There in a flat meadow surrounded by unpopulated growth, a great oak. Its wide trunk dotted with glowing alcoves all up and down the entire height of the tree. Tripdoe, who now could not disjoin herself from Tap's shifting dream-presence, approached the base breathlessly. The fallen silence seemed to have its own ears. Looking closer at the glowing alcoves, she saw that they were upsidedown human skulls that the tree had grown around, merged with. They – their jawless, gray grins – had been set like jewels in the body of the oak, and in the hollow caverns behind their eye sockets sat white tallow candles, burning. One skull, the only one at exactly eye level and the only one right side up, sat darkly, unlit. Tripdoe stepped up to it, eye to eye. With some old wind guiding her that could have been Tap, she pressed her forehead against the smooth, cool bone, and stayed there, closing her eyes, until she found herself staring out eyelessly at what the skull must have been staring at for the entirety of this tree's life. She and the upright skull mirrored.

After what could have been weeks like this, staring out into the whirling cycles of days and nights without blinking, a wooden cart, yellow light seeping from the cracks of its interior, led by some blurry beast, pulled into the flat meadow, its little door opening. A gnarled, swarthy old man stepped out, leaning precariously off to one side. Through the open door of the cart she could see bizarrely patterned rugs and blankets draped over the interior walls, covering everything. Each step he took with his right foot seemed to stick to the ground, causing him to limp, as if something on his sole leached into the earth and wanted to hold itself there. He limped slowly toward Tripdoe's steady spot in the tree, a long straight stick with a bobbing flame at the end of it held out in front of him like incense. He stopped in front of her, mostly filling her field of vision, the deeply-creased, dark wrinkles on his face making it nearly impossible to tell what he once looked like, if he had ever looked like anything else, and his twisted body loosely garbed in the same style of fabric that covered the interior of the cart. Then, slowly, he

brought the tip of the flame up to her face, and into her empty eye socket, lighting a small fire inside her head.

She opened her eyes to the mauve sky, to Lambo squatting on his haunches stoking the fire in the sand back to life. Sand stuck to the backs of her legs where they had shifted off her makeshift pants-mat. She stood, stretching and bewildered, swiping the sand off and inhaling the cool morning and the tired smoke that went up into it. She pressed thumbs of each hand onto the firm globes of her eyes, phosphene lighting up the neural grid of her blood vessels. Such far meanderings, and yet here she stood, feet pressed in the sand, fully rested. More than fully rested.

She went over and sat on Lambo's back, squatting as he was, facing the opposite direction. 'Hey. Uh, hey. Not a stool,' he said before lurching his back to shift her off him. She laughed and kicked him on the dirty ass of his pants. 'Keep moving south?' he asked, sweeping around playfully at her with the glowing end of the poking stick. He dug around in his backpack and held up a cloudy plastic bag with a few brown wads weighing it toward the ground. 'Almost out of bread. Almost out of *Crunch Em's*. What's a amateur band of wandering ex-high schoolers to do, I wonder...? Don't see many drive-thru's around here, or gumbo joints...'

Fenny was still curled by himself near the opposite side of the fire snoring lightly. He'd apparently rolled around quite a bit last night; sand stuck to every inch of exposed skin, hair a tangled nest of tiny pieces of grass and river-stuff. Tripdoe expected some kind of mammal to ruffle out of his hair as he rolled angrily to his other side, then lurched up into sitting, eyes flailing the world they found themselves in. How could he still be out in this fuckin bastard wilderness? Gumbo rattled around, the echo of a foul dream.

'The fuck did you just say?' he lipped toward Lambo. He got up in a creaky lean without waiting for an answer and teetered over to a tall grass-tuft to piss.

'South,' said Tripdoe, biting her thumbnail. 'I know where some food might be. I'll lead today.'

Lambo looked at her sideways and swung his poking-stick into the air, writing some alien alphabet with the glowing end. 'Uh-huh.'

'Really. Let's pack it up and get outta here. I'll find us breakfast in an hour, tops.'

Which, yeah, is what happened. She traced the dream-path right down to the very tree, a nearly identical landscape, and dug down half a foot in the richness to find plump clusters of sweet bulbs that she distributed to the two ravenous boys. Their hesitant thumbs ran over the veined, near-translucent grooves trying to thin the slick of dirt that clung to them. She stood, wiping the bulbs off with a corner of her floppy t-shirt, and ate one whole. The taste did not feel familiar, but something in the sound they made as she chewed them did.

They continued along the same meandering route for hours, stopping every few miles to kneel and dig into the yielding earth for the plump stores. Lambo cast a smirk at Tripdoe, something of a question he knew not to ask, while Fenny's insensate hunger overlapped any curiosity such coincidental discoveries might otherwise prompt. As long as the bulbs kept appearing, what need was there for questions? They all got their fill, and had even found enough to pack up for later. The proof, Tripdoe sang to herself, is in the pudding.

Their slow pace led them along the river for several days. They harvested plenty of the bulbs to stay fed and happy, and the trio once again sunk into a kind of glowing reverie that intensified and sharpened the days they floated through. Even Fenny calmed down enough to where he wasn't asking Tripdoe every thirty minutes if he could 'see that knife again', and slept without fit or threat of fit, and had even laughed a few times at something Tripdoe or Lambo didn't see. The three of them formed an acute triangle at any given moment, mentally and physically. Linked, tuned, joined to their common route and diet and urge, they walked step-in-step but never equally, each fulfilling their necessary angle in either speech, action, or silent mental attitude. The forest seemed to fix them in this equation, and they all silently accepted this so far as they travel down this river together. Lambo's wordless, pale ponderings gave way to Fenny's red bursts of temper, and as Fenny sunk into his own quietude Lambo spoke and kept speaking until the substance of their interactions leveled and adjusted. Only Tripdoe seemed at all fixed in herself, the point the other points of the triangle traveled to or away from through their own decisions and calculations. But none of it so sterile, none of it so mathematic. They simply walked, and the walking sorted it all out. Kneeling to dig a bulb here, stopping to tie a shoe there. An endless calibration.

Tripdoe's vivid dreams never completely subsided – Tap came to her every night in varying degrees of intensity or purpose – but the extensive voyages like the one that had planted her near-vacant skull in the thick membrane of that oak had almost fully ceased after their first week. Sometimes he led her through the forest, sometimes he simply sat on Tripdoe's knee while the two of them stared at the embers in the dream-fire until the sun came up. The more dreams like this she had, the more she realized she hadn't actually fallen asleep, or that the bridge between the two worlds had grown over with some kind of moss or ivy, obscuring the direction she travelled and on which bank she might find herself after having stepped off. And the question – usually drifting in with the morning dew – of whether or not the distinction mattered became equal parts irrelevant and unsolvable. She had the bulbs as proof – each savory bite – of whatever it was Tap was trying to prove to her in that other space.

Then, after miles of river-walking, marked by even wisps of black smoke that cumulated billowingly a half mile up, Pixie Town II drifted from behind the forest's curtain until it sat smoldering, in full view, off in front of them. From their distance it looked like a boat near sinking: the buildings sagged off bowing into dark heaps, the delta an uneven wreck of itself, blackened and blackening yet. They couldn't see any flames, but figured by the island's steady stream of smoke that some low fires must be burning there in their own measured heaps.

They found river boulders half-submerged to sit on – each their own throne – while watching the strange, silent, and still voyage of the destroyed vessel. The summer wrung its hands dry as sun shone straight down on them without the softening of clouds. The river a ribbon of blue lightbulbs flickering off and on, the edge of it clapping against their seats like some weary audience. A beautiful day, made alarming by the presence of this artificial shading.

The three of them knew what Pixie Town II was, what it had been. And they knew what it had been before that, even though the original Pixie Town – weekend destination for honest families trying to find ways to enjoy time together – closed down and had been converted into its more hedonistic version long before they were born, and then mutinied and converted once again into its unadvertised, rehabilitated and

repurposed isle only a few years later. Except no one in Penobska ever talked about how Pixie Town II had been reclaimed and salvaged by its workers. In fact, most parents just pretended it was still an adult theme park, the alternative of acknowledging the takeover and conversion of it into a lawless agricultural zone harder to embrace or understand.

Elementary school introduced them to crude humor sourced from the rumors of what went on there, and when parents of friends said they were 'going out of town' for the weekend, everybody snickered into their fists, their son or daughter curling into the corner discomfited. But none of them had ever actually *seen* this place, its bridges slightly, gracefully almost, arced from the paved bank over the current and down into the rolling entrance lot; the grounds' meticulously cared-for arbor and museum-like reverence for its shrubs and other ornamental growers. The lazy pathways of booth after booth, crying vendors gathering an unbalanced congregation of sloppy inebriants. There'd been no reason for them ever to be here, steeped as they were in youth, as their parents had been in denial. And if they ever, somehow, *had* gone, they wouldn't've even found any of the old Pixie Town II hedonism anyways. The whole island was a shifting blip of uncertainty to the people of Penobska, the children especially, so they kept it in the safe trunk of myth, and tiptoed jokes around it as if its true nature might someday come awake and bare its teeth at them.

Which now, walk-weary legs bowed out over boulders and worn-down sneakers dangling barely over the thinnest edge of water, they saw wake in all its currency: a ruin heaving its hotness into the sky. And, Tripdoe noticed, a few slowly-moving blips moved away from the burning landmass over the bridge. People. People leaving in groups of three, four, five, slowly, nearly ashamed in their slowness. Tripdoe slapped both hands down on her knees and coughed. 'Shit,' she said. 'Let's go check it out.' A flash of that burning stick slipping into her eye socket.

She hopped down into a splash and thumbed her backpack up onto her shoulders and set off. Neither of the boys budged off their boulders. The sound of her own feet slapping the water made it sound like they were following, but when she cast a sidelong eye behind to check, she saw them perched on their rudimentary cairns like a pair of waterlogged crows. Fenny was open-mouthed, his hands held in some kind of prayer on his lap, and Lambo rolled a bulb between his fingers before throwing it back into his mouth. She waved them on, trying not to look frustrated, but the two looked to have reached some mental limit. Smoke and strange vagrants crossing the mythic bridge. Too much.

She splashed back over and spoke to them, attempting to bolster them with simplicity. Just fifteen minutes more. Two more miles. She promised. They didn't know what was going on there anyway, just a peek and we'll turn back and find some other route. We don't have to go on the bridge or even near it, just up a ways ahead to get a better, higher view of the island.

The boys silently disagreed. Fenny laughed to himself, slapping his bulb-swollen pockets, and said, 'I'm happy here, thank ya.'

Lambo raised his shoulders into the air, an easy answer. Trouble up ahead on the river was too much, his gesture seemed to say.

Tripdoe sighed and splashed back to her boulder where she stared out at the island. A bead of sweat rolled down her neck, and she tried to imagine what the faces of the people passing on the bridge might look like. As she leaned further back on the

stone a painful tinge poked at her right buttock. She sat up and dove her hand into her pocket. There she was, little wooden her, staring up at her with those smudged eyes.

Chapter Seventeen – In Which Penobska Panics

Tap – the physical salamanderly-manifestation version – had found his new home inside the scale-model Phan family home that sat near the abrupt drop off of the OPC’s raised diorama. Mini-Penobska was nearly the exactly perfect size for him to pretend that he was actually a human being. A strange hominess overcame him in his solitude. He slept in Tripdoe’s clunky wooden bedroom. He pattered quickly down the sidewalks like he had somewhere important to be. He went to the Office of Prefectural Command to map out on its own extremely tiny, detailed diorama where he should walk to that day. Soon, the ratios between himself and his new perfectly-scaled environment melded, and he felt dizzy looking up into the six lights that shone down on him at all times, remembering the larger world and its scale that excluded and threatened him. But he was able to contact Tripdoe still, though he could feel his link to her growing weaker and weaker.

He’d found his way to the OPC after Kandy had quilted and kidnapped Erethizon. Alone outside of Bozeman’s house, getting gradually more and more depressed being around the caged throng of female porcupines, he wandered into the garage where Bozeman eventually pulled into. Bozeman, smelling like expired salami and slick with what appeared to be sweat, slammed shut his truck and stomped inside where he stayed for only a while before homping back out. His knit brow was clearly a product of him being pissed off. Tap had meanwhile clambered into the bed of the truck and laid down among the bizarre stacks of little trees where he fell asleep under a maple.

Bozeman unlatching and swinging open the bed woke Tap, who snuck out in between Bozeman’s unloading trips. He eventually found his way inside the OPC through a damaged ventilation grate and scampered around the air ducts for what felt like hours before finally slithering through a slat down into the main lobby where the perfectly-scaled Penobska beckoned him. His home. He quietly coughed vent-dust.

Bozeman was already digging up little piles of Penobska and replacing them with the bonsai that he’d stacked up next to the edge of the diorama. He worked with the fervor of a religious zealot, eyes trained on their task. Tap watched from a dark nook on the other side of the lobby. He sat on the floor and could see all the way under the diorama to Bozeman’s shuffling boots. A strange apparatus jutted out from the miniature’s underbelly, maybe having to do with the sewer or electrical system, a blocky reversal of the tiny world on the other side of the surface.

Eventually Bozeman, halfway done with the planting, shuffled into his office where he passed out on the floor, which was when Tap took his first tour of his own Penobska, and settled into the Phan family’s clunky home.

Bozeman woke up eventually, and resumed his frantic work in the same wrinkled outfit he’d had on since driving in to the OPC with his load of trees. Tap simply snuggled into bed and slept while Bozeman worked, the rhythmic spooning of the Puny Prefecture’s soil a kind of lullaby, and wandered around town when Bozeman slept.

Because the lights were always on, Tap's internal sleep cycle got all jostled loose, and he always had a lethargic tinge to his wanderings, and couldn't wait to hear the sound of Bozeman trundling out of his office so that he could scoot back home and fall into a thick sleep.

After a few days of this, and after the stack of bonsai had diminished, Tap was tiptoeing outside Gullah Bowl. He ended up going inside to take a look at the place that killed Lawnyawn, and got caught up looking at and reading the detailed menu. He didn't hear Bozeman come back out and start planting the last few trees around town. When he'd bend down to hoist another bonsai from its pot, roots exposed, Tap darted out of Gullah Bowl and tried to find a better hiding spot. As he continued further into the heart of diorama, he got closer to Bozeman's model home. Mostly obscured in a lush grove of bonsai, Tap found his way inside and started looking around, catching his breath, admiring the gilded sconces and baroque wall-hangings. Something smelled weird. He inhaled wetly and followed his nose-holes to a half-painted door that a winding staircase dropped out of. He had basically forgotten that he was inside a model of the real world, the detail was so exact and full. The stairs opened out into a corridor lit by flickering LED sconces, with doorways set on either side opposite each other. The smell grew thicker as Tap went slowly down the hall. In a room to his right, treadmills sat in a row facing a wall of mirrors, and Tap could hear a faint bizarre scratching or humming coming from beneath him. He could make out a rectangle on the floor with a latch poking up out of the ground. He hooked his teeth around it and swung around to the other side to lift the rectangle swinging from its hinges. It flipped open with a stale wheeze, the hot odor seeping in a quick cloud into the stuffy room. Tap gagged, letting the latch go and backing up deeper into the treadmill room. He bumped into one of the machines, and felt it had been carved out of lightweight balsa wood.

The scratching noise was louder now, and a low glow crawled up from the open rectangle. Tap peeped around the edge and looked down into it. More stairs led into a featureless room. What looked like mounds of mud or shit rolled along the floor and wet, stinky heat swam up into Tap's eyes. He inched down a few steps and bent his head low and saw rows of patchy, red-eyed rats running mindlessly away on shit-spattered exercise wheels. Each rat wore its own canvas harness that a thin metal wire connected to the ceiling. A patch on each of their guts had been shaved and the skin was mottled with flecks of blood, tubes with clear liquid punctured in a puckered scar, fluid pumping through them. The floor was thick with their piling, liquidy shit.

The air felt charged, and Tap realized the frames of the exercise wheels were grounded into a grid network of copper wiring that gathered at the end of the room in a fat bundle that disappeared through a hole in the wall. One rat blinked and slowed down, seemed to stumble and then simply went limp, its body tossed in a wiggle, loosely dangling a few millimeters off the ground from where the harness prevented it from going completely down. The lights in the room jumped and dimmed. He backed his way upstairs and swung the rectangle closed before climbing his way back up to the main floor of the house where he peeked out of the back windows that showed a view of a makeshift pen filled – not with rats – but with wooden porcupines. They all had strange smiles painted onto their heads.

Then a booming swear word cracked the air like a thunderclap, and Tap sunk low to the ground as the house jolted away from its foundations and hovered over the town and then found its way onto the scuffed brown paper of the floor. The flatness of

the non-Penobskan carpet landscape reminded Tap of the largeness of the world, and ran to the other side of the house to look up at Bozeman, flopped over the diorama, up to his shoulder digging the dead rat out of its subterranean generation room. He wormed his way back to standing, rat held in his meaty fist, and strode over to the front door to throw the body out into the bushes, swear words bubbling up out of his throat. Tap made a break for the edge of the diorama, and scampered up the leg of one corner before Bozeman came back around to go into his office. He skirted around the Prefecture's security fence until he found the hole Tripdoo had poked through behind her house, clambered through it, and into the back door. From the front window he caught a glimpse of Bozeman shaving a bald patch onto the side of a fresh rat with a pocketknife and some spit before lowering it down into the chamber.

For the next few days, Tap made an effort to communicate with the rats to try and see how their minds functioned, but, like the porcupines he'd found so disheartening outside in the full-size world, he couldn't penetrate their thoughts or dreams, for they never slept and their sole task of pattering away on the exercise wheels occupied their entire field of attention. Once, he even went further down into the room than before, tracking footprints in the shit, to try and speak with them directly. But his presence coaxed nothing more than a disinterested glance.

Because of Tap's inability to break through it, their enslavement became just another feature in the town, not unlike the red and yellow Gullah Bowl, or Penobskan Public Park with its lush grove of trees. They blended into his day-to-day routines, his gradual sinking into the structures and solitudes of this fake town whose life he fabricated out of boredom, and sustained through sheer delusion. And eventually the sound of the rats' running and the electrical residue of their efforts became nothing more than the facts, and Tap forgot to communicate with Tripdoo except in the very deepest hour of slumber, which even then he had a hard time mustering enough interest to do anything more than sit beside the fire with her.

Meanwhile, Bozeman had almost totally completed mini-Penobskan. All the bonsai were in the earth, the sewers and electrical system functioned exactly as he had imagined it, and for the most part the thing looked, smelled, sounded, and felt incredibly life-like. He had yet to taste it, though... Looking down on the array of his Prefecture, Bozeman couldn't help but feel somewhat omnipotent. As he stood there surveying his final product, he felt a slight jitter in his groin. His testicles twitched and a heat spread out from them. Something was coming to life down there, and he rushed into his office to grab the keys to his truck and burnt rubber all the way back home where he rushed to find Kandy to coax her into a bout of lovemaking. What a beautiful co-occurrence! The founding of the scaled Prefecture, and the raising of his limpness!

He thundered around the house trying to locate her, shouting her name and throwing doors open frantically, afraid all this movement might have already disrupted the stirring he had felt in his loins. He ran into the basement where he whipped the door to the treadmill studio open. Kandy was in there, kneeling in her nakedness, next to a huge male porcupine that appeared to be having some kind of conversation with her. She looked up in a startled haze at Bozeman whose horror went unguarded at the discovery of a male porcupine loose in his basement. 'Fucking crap,' he whispered through terror-clenched teeth.

She explained – making it all up as she went of course – that she had talked with Dr. Sassoon, who had recommended the most extreme solution to Bozeman’s sexual lapse: the sacrifice of a fully-grown male porcupine and the subsequent removal and consumption of its gall bladder. She said that Sassoon was sure of this remedy, but had neglected to inform them of it due to its controversial nature, but that Kandy had insisted, wanting the sacrifice to coincide with the unveiling of the diorama. She thought – liar – that the act would be a gift to Bozeman, a token of her appreciation for all the hard work he’d been doing for the Prefecture by making its own model. By making a model partner out of her, too. She stood up and padded over to Bozeman and wrapped her warm arms around him in a hug that felt all too fresh on account of the act’s rarity. He closed his eyes and melted into her embrace, nearly forgetting the porcupine that stood there nearly immobile.

Erethizon didn’t move, had in truth already accepted his status as martyr, though didn’t yet know this is what he would become.

Weeks pass.

Dr. Sassoon, convinced by Kandy that he’d endorsed the plan to sacrifice Erethizon during the unveiling ceremony, prepared the lobby of the OPC for the event. He hung huge chandeliers everywhere and draped the space in deep purple velvet fabrics and found a huge metal bowl to pour all of Erethizon’s blood into. He dragged a two-foot mini-stage in for Bozeman to stand on while making his address, and stitched together some ceremonial robes out of the piles of porcupine pelts they stored in the OPC’s broom closet. He designed some pretty catchy fliers for the event and sprinted around in the dead of night wearing all black sprinkling them in front of people’s doorsteps and under their cars’ windshield wipers, in public restrooms and in the menus of restaurants.

The Prefecture buzzed with the upcoming event. The Unveiling Ceremony, it was called, where the townspeople would finally discover where all the diverted public funds had been going for the past three years. Some expected a new outline for public schools, some a different tax system. None guessed that they would be treated with a scale version of their Prefecture.

Since the completion of the diorama, Bozeman had been drinking more to fill the time he usually spent working on his perfections. He woke up and drank orange juice with vodka, and kept drinking all varieties of booze until he crumpled into a shivering ball somewhere around seven in the evening. All he had to do was wait for Sassoon to finish his preparations.

Bozeman was too drunk to realize Sassoon was actually Roge, though lurking somewhere in the fatty folds of his brain was this knowledge. He didn’t much care, and wouldn’t even if he had been sober enough to acknowledge it head-on. Since the completion of the mini-Penobska, he felt like his purpose had dissolved, and was now floating through his own life as if in a dream, the scams and fraudulences of the past and present a simple hazy reality that he didn’t need and wouldn’t look at. He just wanted this prolonged phase of shrunkeness to pass, and to fully occupy his own pride once again.

And on the morning of the event, tangled up like nervous barbed wire, he decided he would get rip-roaringly drunk for the ceremony. After all, he was expected to eat the fresh gall bladder out of a male porcupine. So in the kitchen of his home he

gulped down a glass filled halfway with milk, halfway with vodka, with a shot of porcupine secretion for old time's sake, and stumbled into the laundry room to cloak himself in the bulky garment Sassoon had stitched together. Wearing the cloak he looked like a massive bipedal porcupine with a human head and glassy, drunk-shiny eyes. He laughed into the mirror at the terror the sight of himself exposed, and at how good the naked lumps of his body felt pressed up so close to the raw skin of a porcupine. Somehow, in the blurry reflection he gazed at, he knew how the day would end.

He shouted upstairs to Kandy who had been bathing since the previous evening to get ready. It was time to leave.

When they got to the OPC after having dangerously swerved all the way from Bozeman's house, banners flew from huge bamboo poles, and the exterior of the building had been elegantly transformed. Erethizon had been caged and placed in the bed of Bozeman's truck, and they nearly dropped him several times while carting him in through the front doors.

Instead of coffee, Roge/Sassoon had been injecting himself with the fluid Bozeman used to feed and reward the rats and the porcupines that powered his small town and the larger one. It was essentially a careful blend of liquid aminos and proteins, along with morphine and amphetamines. His left arm was a canvas of red polkadots where he'd made the injections, and his wired eyes sat unblinking in the rookery of the pale head that Sassoon and the corroded remnants of Roge circled around like starving vultures. When Bozeman and Kandy – each garbed in the same porcupine pelt cloaks as Roge/Sassoon – carefully carried the cage in through the front doors, the muscles in Roge's face tightened in the correct areas in order for a smile to appear there, like a tired magic trick. 'Welcome, Prefect Bozeman, to the Unveiling Ceremony.' He knelt down by the caged porcupine and wiggled his finger in Erethizon's tired face. 'And welcome, old friend.'

Tap had been observing the whole mess from his lazy kingdom, unsure of what to do. He'd been able to tap into Tripdoe's dreams a few nights ago and knew they would be returning that day. The only thing he felt like he could do in the midst of all this lunacy was wait for her and her two companions to arrive.

The general populace trickled into the OPC's lobby a few hours later, milling about in a strange semi-hush that masked the encroaching nervousness of the event. Most of them had no idea Prefect Bozeman had essentially gone completely insane, and whose only aide was now a drug-addled lunatic as well. The air of expectancy wavered as the lobby filled up for the event.

Roge had draped a huge velvet sheet over the diorama, and for the first time since having moved in, Tap sat in a full darkness. He paced up and down the darkened streets, in some places almost able to leap up and brush against the low-hanging velvet atmosphere. It was pleasant in its own way.

A hush fell over the crowd of Penobskans as Roge/Sassoon dimmed the lights and switched on a record of groaning organ music. Kandy glided out from behind a few velvet drapes, dragging a smooth cart also covered in a velvet sheet. Erethizon, too, sat still in his Purple night, waiting. Kandy placed the cart behind the podium and next to

the huge metal bowl and, looking out into the crowd of awestruck Penobskans, whipped the sheet off to unveil the massive porcupine. A startled gasp rippled through the room, one woman nearly fainted. Bozeman, followed by his attendant Roge, stumbled out into the room, and a single spotlight opened up on the podium that he somehow managed to clamber his way onto without puking or falling over. He swayed up there in the electric silence in his sharp brown cloak, sipping casually from a large chalice.

'People of Penobaska. It is I. Prefect Bozeman. We have gathered here today to bid the past goodbye, and usher in the future of progress and plenty. I'm sure you're all wondering what's going on beneath this sheet here.' Kandy was busy unlocking and shutting the dazed Erethizon out of his cage. He was held by a porcupine-leather leash that trailed from her forearm down to his neck. They waited behind Bozeman for the cue.

'I know that the town has been struggling with a variety of woes as of late, namely the violent intrusion of creatures such as these,' he said, gesturing backwards at Erethizon. 'But as of today, those woes shall diminish in the light of a new age of self-consciousness!' Kandy yanked the leash, Erethizon coughed and his quills perked up for the first time in a long time. He couldn't help it – the leash was too tight and when Kandy yanked on it again, it caused his periphery to blur and blacken. 'And with that, I unveil to you all the world as we know it, to scale, for the sake of better understanding the world and its many...uh...functions!' Roge whipped the velvet sheet off in a theatrical flourish and flipped the overhead lights on. Tap, who had found his way to the lawn of the mini-OPC, was dazed by the sudden brightness, and sat there blind and shuffling trying to find his way inside not to be seen.

A sound of admiration bubbled from the Penobskans, but Bozeman, from his heightened perch, was the only person who saw Tap's frantic pacing. The deep rich yellow and black of his skin flashed light back at Bozeman like coins at the bottom of a wishing well, and the amphibious bending of his torso looked river-like, or that of a snake. Drunk and terrified, Bozeman lurched backward and slipped on the trailing edge of his cloak, falling backwards, directly onto the now-perfectly-erect quills of Erethizon. The two exchanged each other's quills – Bozeman's cloak's into Erethizon's only remaining eyeball, piercing and popping it before jamming and disrupting and scrambling his brain, a gush of blood lifting out of the wound, and Erethizon's almost completely filling Bozeman's back and arms, puncturing deep into his spinal cord and muscle, filling the back of his head up with their sharp points. The two quivered in their spasmodic exchange, blood spreading now beneath them in the fraction of time it took for both of them to completely kill one another, and as they separated from themselves their departing spirits mingled in the huge column of light that came to gather them, and they couldn't tell the light from each other, or their own curtailed lives from that of a porcupine, a man, a salamander. Then they changed completely and forever, and found themselves on the bank of some new stream, wide-eyed and blinking in their newness.

The crowd unhinged, and unhinged further yet as a horde of demented, stringy, and shit-covered rats spread loose around their ankles – the impact of Bozeman's falling body caused the shit-soaked, rotting floor of the exercise wheel studio to give way, dropping out from under the rats that fell, snapping their cords, and sent scurrying in blind terror throughout the lobby. Penobskans screamed in terrifying crescendos and ran in a flailing mob through the bottlenecked doors of the OPC, crushing rats underfoot like spilled popcorn and shoving each other aside to flee the terrible unveiling. Kandy

and Roge, too, had taken up shoving, and Roge curled his head into his cloak and ran at full speed at the crowd baring his quills, slamming into neighbors and filling their skin with sharpness.

Outside, Tripdoe, Fenny, and Lambo stopped in disbelief as they watched Penobskans flee in droves from the OPC. They had finally decided – after having met up with a party of wanderers who had abandoned the burning wreckage of Pixie Town II – to return to Penobaska Proper in order to seek out Bozeman’s permission to allow the displaced peoples a place in town. They were surprised by how empty the streets were, but had found a flyer blowing down the sidewalk that told them where everybody had gone.

They didn’t realize they looked like wild people, hair littered with twigs and leaves, dirt caking their knees and cheeks, clothes torn and smudged. The terror-blind Penobskans took one look at the trio and fled from them as if from some specter. The three of them – unbeknownst to each other – glowed with a kind of green luminescence from all the bulbs they had eaten. It was faint, but in the day’s full light and in the eyes of the townspeople, it was all too apparent.

She saw Roge running down the street on all fours, wearing a spiky cape. She yelled his name and he looked up, a brief but definite gleam of recognition filled his eyes before descending back into the terror he was full of. He continued in this way until he skirted the edge of the forest – half man, half porcupine – never to be seen in his old form again.

Lambo had gone on ahead, climbing the steps up to the entrance of the OPC. Bloody wads of crushed rats dotted the floor, and the two others youths followed and came up to the intertwined pile of death that had replaced Bozeman and Erethizon. A bitter wave of grief passed over Tripdoe, then Tap’s voice filed her head. *Hey. Over here.* She turned to see her guide sitting near the entrance of the mini-OPC. Submerged in the town as he was, he hadn’t seen the unfolded horror, but had heard it plenty well. He then communicated to Tripdoe that she had to go to Bozeman’s house, and check in the basement there for a rectangle on the floor. She put her hand down in front of him to see if he would climb onto her. He simply wagged his head, gesturing to the town around him. She nodded, and explained to Lambo and Fenny that she’d be back in a little while.

Their eyes were blank, but when she pried the cables out of the wall that hooked the treadmills she’d repaired over the years up to the electrical grid, the endless images of baby porcupines that the female porcupines chased after on the screens in front of them zipped into darkness, and they stopped in their tracks. Tripdoe went around one by one unhooking them from their harnesses, chasing them one by one up the stairs, through Bozeman’s house, and into the light of day where they took off in a blind sunlit ecstasy through the streets where they unknowingly brought pure terror into the hearts of the Penobskans. As Tripdoe released more porcupines into the town, the more Penobskans ran against their every instinct into the forest where they disappeared, merged with, perhaps, the tangled trees and their undergrowth. Their world had turned inside out, and Tripdoe emerged from the basement full of something she had never felt before.

There on the counter, next to a bonsai in an iridescent green pot that Lawnyawn had made with his own hands and that Bozeman had kept for himself, sat a little black

seed in a jar. Tripdoe picked it up and brought it outside where she unlatched the pen and let the crowd of young females loose. She stooped in the dusty, shit-caked pen and dug a little hole in the musty earth. She placed the little seed there, covered it, and stood, baring her face to the sun, and waited for the dust the porcupines had raised to settle over her.

Afterward

What we have here has its origins in a ten-page story that I wrote for Anna Keeseey's Fiction class in the Spring of 2015. In that story, Tripdoe is an amateur bean plant enthusiast; Roge is the foreman of a brick factory; Tripdoe has an older brother named Muritiv who gets crippled by Bozeman after he makes a mockery out of his high school graduation; Erethizon is essentially intact, but there were no salamanders; wealthy people who lived in flying McMansions floated down the Katabasis River in huge glass orbs made from the melted windows of Roge's incredibly-hot brick factory in order to get to Pixie Town II, which has been what it is since the very beginning. Most of the details have changed, but the core of this story has always been the same, and is what kept me writing this whole time: some well-meaning youths having to navigate their way through a series of absurd expectations, only to find in the end that the expectations are founded on yet more absurdities whose causes can be traced to personal vanity, greed, distrust, and a lack of imagination on the part of those who set them. Huh.

The story originally floated into my head because of a song called "Penobska Oakwalk" by a musical group known as Quilt. My favorite lines of "Penobska Oakwalk" can be found as an epigraph to this story. In that song, there are another few lines that, to me, sound like "Oh the bricks they fall, the bricks they fall on Penobska". Apparently this mentioning of bricks really stuck with me, because I originally based the entire story around the goddamn things. Care for a joke? What's red and bad for your teeth? A brick. Well, ok.

The not-so-complete product you have before you now is something fairly different, but at its most basic level the exact same. The process of writing all of this has spanned well over a year, and looking at it now, it seems more like an artifact of my own struggle to figure out what to value in my own life, and how to navigate the expectations of my family, my society (oh boy), and myself. This, I suppose, is why I always felt drawn back to writing it: I was coming up with the answers to the characters' predicaments at the same time as I was coming up with those to my own. And as we all know, now that I've nearly graduated from college I have all the answers to these predicaments, completely and absolutely. So please give me a job.

Well, yeah, la-dee-da. I think about Lex Runciman's sagery when I try to imagine what it is I've learned by writing this story. He's standing in front of me at his retirement party in the lobby (?) of TJ Day with a mostly full glass of white wine, saying, "You teach yourself how to write it as you're writing it." He probably chuckles after this. But, like most of what Lex ever said to me about writing, this is certainly true. As I wrote more and more, the more I felt capable of writing, and the more I trusted the strange relationship between time and the construction of narrative. I would come to a fork in the road and not know which way to go, so I would simply let the story sit for a few days. Then, voilà, while microwaving an old plate of noodles or locking up my bike, the next part of the story would be sitting there on my shoulder whispering a joke into my ear. This kind of a relationship requires a lot of marinade time, which is something, here at the last tick of the semester clock, I have basically none of. Hence the (current) lack of a conclusion. Sorry about that. Maybe someday in the semi-near future I'll sneak into the library archives with a stapler and the finished remainder of the story, and splice the two together.

But my process was a slow one, and I don't regret a second of it. If for some strange, inexplicable reason any students of writing happen to be reading this, just know that marinade time is the best solution to your writing woes. I know it may not seem like you have much of it, but you do, or at least you can always pretend like you do in order to stave off the feelings of panic that may well up within you. Writing hurriedly because you have to turn something in is the cause of all of humanity's current woes. All of them. Just start early and be honest with what you want to say, and all will be well, and you will be happy. I think

letting one's expectations and plans for a story marinade is essential to it becoming exactly what it needs to be, and although there were times that I felt like I had begun something too elaborate to ever actually finish, I knew that if I simply practiced patience and kept the story in the back of my mind, that the little tale-spinner inside each and every one of us would sort things out and give me the abridged versions of his notes so that I might proceed.

The largest influence of my writing style, and my love of fiction, and my decision to pursue, it is Thomas Pynchon, whose writing I love dearly and who I wish health upon wherever in the world he may dwell. Other authors that opened up the world of possibilities for me are Ken Kesey, Denis Johnson, Edward P. Jones, Deborah Eisenberg, Anne Cameron, Haruki Murakami, on and on and on. But how can I qualify all the influences over the course of my writing this story? The salamanders I found inside that irrigation control-valve box that became Tap? The fateful day my freshman year where my INQS professor Theierry Durand paraphrased the Schopenhauer quote that largely inspired (along with the Quilt song) the initial trajectory of this story (located as an epigraph)? My friend Jonah's mom who told me during a séance that I would be successful? The patient and infinitely encouraging readings of draft after draft by Joe Wilkins, Alex Dinh, and Sarah Stark? The legions of bizarre observations that managed to weasel their way into this story? The gallons of Viso that are to blame for the longer, more elaborate paragraphs that seem to linger for a bit too long? All of these and so much more goes into the lengthy process of trying to articulate the strange stimuli that prompts me to write all of this down in the first place.

My next step then, simply, is to keep writing this story until it's done (which it obviously isn't, if you take note of some of the plot gaps, eh, Nikosi for instance). And then to move on to the next one. And to shut that little voice that says this isn't worthwhile up. My worst habit as a writer – and for I would guess most writers – is to listen to this voice, and to deprecate myself as a pointless rambler. Which perhaps we all are at heart anyway.