

## An excerpt from THE FUTURE FOR CURIOUS PEOPLE by Gregory Sherl

### Chapter One: Evelyn

#### The Break Up

I'm breaking up with Adrian on the corner of Calvert and Lexington where he's passing out half-sheet advertisements for his band, The Babymakers. He's pale and weedy-looking, permanently anxious. His cheeks are flushed, his boxy nose red. It's cold and has just started to snow. The snow is partly the reason I've decided that today is the day. The air has taken shape, and everything suddenly seems like it's in motion, full swirl.

He shouts into the wind, "You're breaking up with me because I'm not a successful guitarist, and because I seem like I'm just a guy handing out pamphlets on a street corner! You're disgusted." This is why Adrian is disgusted with Adrian and has nothing to do with me. Very little of our relationship has much to do with me, which is one of the *actual* reasons I'm breaking up with him. He loves me but doesn't really understand me – so, in effect, does he really love *me*?

"No! Listen to me!" I circle around him, my wool coat flapping at my knees. "We both need to look forward with new eyes again."

"You want to look forward and see someone else. I get it." Adrian pushes his knit hat back and scratches his forehead. "You know, it's really superficial and judgmental of you to break up with me because I don't meet your standards. I expected more." This isn't about my standards -- although should I date Adrian because he meets someone else's standards? But now

Adrian has just called me superficial and judgmental. He's not usually the type to throw stones. This attack comes off as desperate. Both kind of embarrassed for a moment, we look off in opposite directions like we're standing at a shoreline. In some ways, his attack is so last-ditch that it's really an admission of defeat.

"Seriously," I say softly, "I love you." I do love Adrian. We kind of grew up for a while together – not entwined but side by side. We've been good to each other. There's an undeniable accumulation of tenderness. "But..." I breathe into the air not wanting to say the rest. "I think we're just holding onto something that can't endure." And then I whisper. "I've seen what's going to become of us, and..."

Adrian looks at me sharply. He knows I'm talking about having seen our future together at Dr. Chin's office. He'd refused to come, calling all of these new-fangled romantic envisioning offices new age-y, bourgeois bullshit. But in Chin's office I saw our sad future – the two of us singing "Happy Birthday" to a Chihuahua in a Hawaiian shirt and pointy hat. "Don't," Adrian holds up his flexed hand; he knows I'm about to launch into the session and he hates hearing about it.

For his sake I summarize, "We were old and tattooed and had a rusty space heater, and we sang to that dog in Spanish." Because the dog was a Chihuahua, this last detail feels slightly racist or something. We were also wearing baffling T-shirts that I assume will be provocative in the future: *The Justice Cure? Park it here!* and another outraged about moped rentals.

Adrian says, "I just don't believe that's our future." He turns away and then back again, turning a full circle. "Even if it is, how do you know we weren't happy, deep down?"

Here's what I know about possible futures: They're limitless, and all potential. They

aren't messy like the past and the present. As soon as I was wearing the paper gown and that weird helmet in Chin's office, staring at the screen, I knew the future seems like it has clearly marked forks in the road, but there are forks within forks within forks until each choice -- whether to bring an umbrella or stop for a donut or break up with Adrian -- is a fork. "Most people choose their futures by accident," I say. "They don't even know they're making choices. They don't even know that there are forks in the road -- much less forks within forks. The future no longer has to be messy. It can be tested out. It can be *known*."

Adrian has a measure of professionalism, I'll give him that. A swarm of commuters charges the intersection, and he's shoving wind-flipped half-sheets at their chests. "The Babymakers," he says. "Get your ass off your sofa on Saturday night and live a little." He goes largely ignored.

And then there's a lull. "Almost two years we've been together!" he says to me. "A total waste!"

"It hasn't been a waste," I say. "Time isn't something you put in hoping for a return on an investment. It's experiencing life -- both good and bad and occasionally tragic. It's the tragic I'm trying to avoid."

"There are worse tragedies than a Chihuahua in a Hawaiian shirt, having his birthday celebrated!" Adrian says. "At least we know some Spanish in the future!"

A woman pushing a stroller has stalled, reading the half-sheet. She might want to ask a question. The baby is wearing a draw-string hood that cinches up its face, which is placid except for darting eyes. Adrian is glancing at the woman expectantly.

"I'm trying to do what's best," I tell him. "I don't want to end up two hateful old people

who fight about cheese.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I won’t fight about cheese?” During the Chihuahua’s birthday party, we squabble about whether or not melted brie is uppity.

“The cheese is a metaphor for minutia,” I say. “It’s just an example of how we will become bitter.”

The woman with the stroller looks at us with some obvious pity and walks away.

Adrian sighs and puts his hands on his skinny hips. “Are you being instigated by your mother?”

Both of my parents seem to dislike Adrian, but at the same time, I get the feeling they think he’s too good for me, which is the kind of contradiction they’re practiced in. “My relationship with my parents is based on reading a language of passive-aggressive sighing. I don’t know what they think about me – much less you.”

“Dot doesn’t like me either.” He sighs. “She’s a weird bird.”

My best friend Dot is a little odd and steals things, a nervous habit, really; she just wants me to be with someone who’s right for me. “I’m a grown up, Adrian. Come on. I make my own decisions.”

Adrian starts jostling between commuters again, lunging at them, one after another. I look up at the sky, growing dark. The snow is light and dizzying – and new. That’s the thing about snow. It’s all about promise. It’s nature’s do-over.

Suddenly, Adrian is standing right in front of me. He looks a little teary. Maybe it’s just the cold wind. He’s so close I feel his warm breath; this is possibly the most exercise he’s gotten in weeks. I imagine his ribs, rising and falling, after sex. I’ll miss his hands on me and the way

he says I'm the best God-damn librarian in the world, even though he's never understood what I do at the library exactly. There's something sweet about how he loves me without knowing me -- a blind love, which is almost like an unconditional love, but not quite.

He hands me a half-sheet, and says in his rough voice, "Get your ass off your sofa and live a little, Evelyn Shrinier." He nods, a series of jerky chin-up nods, meaning: *I'm saying one thing but I mean something bigger.*

And he means: *I'm letting you go.*

I look at the half-sheet -- THE BABYMAKERS in bold letters and beneath that "Get your ass off the sofa and live a little."

I fold the half-sheet and put it in my coat pocket. For a split second, I try to memorize everything -- the rattle of his papers, the cold shock of wind cutting the thread of my stockings, the exhaust rolling up from idling traffic, and Adrian's wind-chapped cheeks. I'm going to lose him. I feel a pang of panic and remorse. I miss him already. I start to tear up, but refuse to cry. I have to stand my ground. I hold the lapel of Adrian's pea coat, curling my hand under the itchy wool. "Adrian," I whisper so softly I'm not sure he can even hear me.

"Evelyn?" he says, tilting forward like he wants something from me, something important.

And I think of my sister -- I don't know why. She died a year and a half before I was born, as a replacement. But what's worse is that I never met the original. I never smelled my sister's hair after a wash or whispered with her in a tent made of bed sheets or talked to her on the phone. I know I should be over this. There are things that grown-ups must put behind them, but here it is -- a loss.

I've never told Adrian about my sister, and I think of telling him now. Is this what he wants? Is it my fault that I feel like he loves me without really understanding me? Because I never confided this, he never had to rise to the occasion of what a secret – especially a sad secret – demands.

It's too late now – much too late.

I say, "Tell your mom and dad to call me." This is a segue that only makes sense in my own head; I never was the child my parents wanted so I keep trying to create other families to slip into. Adrian's parents still belong to a bowling league and eat popovers.

"They're my parents, Evelyn. I get full custody."

Right, of course. I miss about Thanksgiving. "I'll miss you, Adrian."

He touches my face, gently, with his finger tips, and says, "You can't fire me. I quit." But he says it in the saddest voice possible – I love him with a flash that's deep and unmistakable. Each person you love leaves their own stain, and the way you remember then is like a smell, a taste, a color – indescribable but distinct.

I almost lean forward to kiss him, but I turn and start walking fast.

Still, I expect him to run after me. Adrian would never run after me. Inexplicably, I put my hands in my coat pockets and both of my elbows are waiting to be the handle that Adrian will use to spin me around, and then he'll kiss me, and say, "Don't go."

This doesn't happen. My elbows just poking out at angles, I walk on. Because Adrian is the kind of guy who lets you go, it's best that he lets me go.

I ball my fists in my pockets, feel the crinkle of the half-sheet, and I'm saying no to one fork. I'm doubling back and choosing another forked path. And what will I find down this forked

path? I don't know -- not yet.

## Chapter Two: Godfrey

### The Proposal

I find myself walking around the four pinched aisles of Fontana's Super Mart and Pawn Shop twice before stopping in front of the smeary plate glass of the deli meats not far from the cash register. Mrs. Fontana is perched on a nearby stool, stuffing quarters into stiff brown paper sleeves from the bank, her fat fingers disappearing up the tubes with the resignation of a bitter proctologist. And Mr. Fontana, a narrow-headed man with blunt features, is hovering next to her, wiping his hands on his apron.

"What can I do for you?" Mr. Fontana asks. He knows my girlfriend Madge and me, but has never given the impression that he likes us. I don't have a cart. It's a Tuesday night in January. Aside from Mr. and Mrs. Fontana and me, the place is empty, which is normal for a Tuesday night in January. The lights flicker.

"I don't know," I tell him. "I was really just out for a walk around the block. I got cold." Mr. Fontana looks at my mittens, the ones Madge bought me last Christmas. I already feel idiotic

in them, like a four-year-old. They're attached by some ancient device that Madge found on an antiques website -- rusty clips connected by yarn that bite the mittens, stringing them together. Wearing them is a romantic concession. Madge presented them as a joke in front of our friends at Bart and Amy's Christmas party. *Godfrey loses things -- ha, ha, ha -- like his wallet, like his girlfriends.* I guess that's true enough. For a year now, I've had a hard time keeping track of wallets, and there'd been a spate of ugly break-ups just before Madge that became part of my *charm*. At the Christmas party, Madge grabbed my coat off of a chair and laced the mittens through my sleeves. *He won't lose me*, she said, and she unclipped one of the mittens, attaching it to her own sleeve, and fell onto my lap, drunkenly. Madge is a weighty drunk -- always hefting herself around. I often wonder where all that weight goes when she's not drinking. When sober, she's thin and light as balsa wood. That doesn't sound as loving as it should. Truth is, I love Madge drunk and weighty because her face goes soft, her lips are fuller, sweeter, and I love Madge sober because her mind is quick and she looks at me sometimes like she sees some great unfinished work of art, my potential, something to live up to.

“You using up my heat? That's gotta be worth something to you. What are you going to buy?” Mr. Fontana says.

I want to tell Fontana to lay off, and to confess that I'm a man on the verge of proposing! Seriously, it's a fact that a man about to propose is cuter than a basket of kittens or a squirrel jet skiing in an above ground pool. (Why am I proposing now? Does it have to do with the fact that Bart and Amy -- at the aforementioned Christmas party -- announced the details of their envisioning session in which they are destined to be rich boat-owners? Maybe that was the start of it -- a wakeup call. Their announcement's subtext seemed to say: the future is out there -- and

are you and Madge going to face it together?)

I don't know why I want the Fontanas to like me. It's got to be a character flaw on my part. But I'm not confessing to the Fontanas. They're both the type to make a sad joke, sour the whole thing. "Okay, okay," I tell him. "I'll get something."

I glance down at the racks – mini-flashlight key-rings, Chap stick, Lifesavers, Bubblicious. Sometimes it hits me that this is what the world's made up of – the little crap that binds the seams of the universe together. Without this stuff, surely the universe would come unglued and we'd glide off in bits and parts into dark, infinite space. That's how fragile it all seems; maybe I think of this now because what if Madge shoots me down? Only a vulnerable man would think that Bubblicious and Chap stick keep the universe glued, right?

I pull off a mitten, letting it dangle, and put my hand in my pocket just to double check on the velvet box. It's still there. It's been sitting inside of a dress sock in the back of my underwear drawer -- the spot I used to hide my weed as a teenager.

I pick up a pack of Certs, set them on the glass counter. Beneath the glass, there's a variety of second-hand weapons and jewelry – the Pawn Shop part of Fontana's – and it's a little disconcerting how many hocked engagement rings there are on display.

"You sure I can't interest you in a little something more?" he says, tapping the glass. "Other people's desperation makes for good deals."

"No thanks," I say. "I'm good on weaponry and gems." I pull my mitten back on.

Mr. Fontana rings up my stuff and shoves the mints at me -- no bag -- rips the receipt from the register and slides it across the counter with two double-jointed fingers.

"Maybe you're a winner," Mrs. Fontana pipes up.

This is the part that I've come to hate. Fontana has recently started up a Lucky Receipt promotional. One out of every ten receipts has "You're a winner" printed on the bottom, giving you a 20% discount on your next food purchase -- but the other nine have "You're a loser" printed on the bottom, which has always been included with my purchases.

I pinch the receipt through the mittens and read the faded print: *You're a loser*. I look up at Fontana.

"Well?" Mr. Fontana asks.

"You know," I say, still pinching the receipt, "this might not be good for business. You might want to word the loser sentiment a little more gently. Maybe something like: *This receipt is not a winner.*"

Mr. Fontana rubs his nose, a little angry gesture. "Hey, the cash register calls 'em as it sees 'em."

I want to reach over the counter and shove Fontana in his chest or at least make him give me a shopping bag for my package of Certs. Instead, I let it go, give him smile and think, *Poor fucking Fontana, penned up in that shop all day with his pruned wife*. But honestly it's not comforting to pity that dickwad even though I've been taught that that's the right thing to do.

I ball up the receipt and put it in my pocket with the Certs. I walk out of the store, bell jangling, and slowly head up the sidewalk. Walking by the storefronts I catch glimpses of myself in the windows. My pants, my jacket -- they already appear rumpled. I'm not sure why I rumple so quickly. My mother and father both often look rumpled. Since retirement, my father has always worn wrinkled button-downs. My mother wears wrinkly silky puffed sleeve shirts, and her mascara always daubs off with each blink, leaving little smudges around her eyes. By the end

of the day, she always looks like a fatigued musketeer. They're an exhausted rumpled pair.

Maybe it's a permanent condition: The Burkes family curse, rumpling.

And then for no reason I think of the weekend just last summer when they met Madge for the first time. They were wearing terrycloth bathrobes, drinking cocktails by the pool. I was doing laps when my father said, "There's a golf game on the mini-TV. Come watch." But I said, "No, thank you," and dipped down underwater. Madge was sitting on the pool's edge. I could see her thick ankles, blurred by chlorinated pool water, kicking back and forth. I hate these little memories. Why do certain ones pop back up?

And now I feel a little wheeze inside of my chest cavity -- the inching in of a cold, pneumonia, something tubercular? Can the heart wheeze? I remind myself, as I'm slowing down, that I also have great memories of Madge -- like how we met. It was in this little coffee shop. I was waiting for a blind date, drawing pastries in the margins of my notebook. Madge walked past me then doubled back and stopped in front of me. She said, "Vaginas?" and pointed to my pastries.

"No. They're pastries."

"Really, Freud? So you're telling me that this little bit here is like a cherry? Look again."

Some did have cherries -- and they were all clearly vaginas.

"Vaginas in the margins," Madge said, "I guess that would be vaginalia."

"Nope, they're pastries," I said, trying to stick it out. "This is obviously pastrianalia."

"You're Godfrey," she said then.

"If I'm Godfrey, then you're Madge." And that was that.

She tilted her head and sighed at me as if seeing a current failure of some kind, but one

with promise. And, in that moment, my pencil mid-clitoris, I don't know if I fell in love with her, but I know I wanted her to take me on. I wanted to fulfill that promise. I loved the tilt of her head and her sigh and the fact that she called me on my bullshit. I needed Madge and that was the start of love. I think that's how it sometimes goes.

Home now. In front of the fourth floor walk-up I've been sharing with Madge for nearly six months. I raise my arms over my head. Coach used to suggest this for cramps. I bend over, stick my head between my knees. I try to count slowly to twenty-five, but I keep losing my place around twelve. I look up, directly at our fourth-floor window, but I only see blinds, blips of light peeking through. Why isn't Madge looking for me? Is anyone thinking about me right now? If not, do I exist just a little less?

A woman walks by pushing a stroller. She's staring at my hands as if looking for what I might be holding. *Just bulky mittens with mitten clips that are more appropriate for a 4 year old in the 1950s!* I want to tell her. I nod politely, look into the stroller. The baby is so packed in that I can barely make out a face squinched up in puffy drawstring hood. All babies are just pudge until they're not. It's a disturbed little face, so red and puffed it could be choking, but then the face twists and begins to wail. I flinch. My heart stutters. *This is just the kind of thing that happens to all men before they propose*, I tell myself. But then, for a moment, I'm sure I'm dying. This is it, I know, squeezing my eyes shut.

A second later, I'm not dead. Fifteen seconds later, still not dead. My heart still beats. My lips still inch open to let air in. The moment passes. Another moment passes.

"Why are you standing out in the cold?" It's Madge's loud voice, which carries like a soccer coach. She's overhead. Her hair is blowing around her beautiful face, her whole upper

body is sticking out the window. Some women's breasts can remind you of the singular term bosom, but not Madge's. She has great breasts, ample and buoyant, and independent of each other.

I've been expecting her, wishing for her, but I didn't realize how not ready I was for the reality of her. This is going to be my wife. Wife! It's disorienting.

I look away at the gargoyles perched on the corners. One is stuck in an indiscreet position -- is he scratching his balls or protecting them? You can never be too sure. The sky is a gusty gray. It snowed earlier and might snow again.

"Godfrey!" Madge yells again.

I'm stuck on the idea of proposing outside. It strikes me that I might pick Madge up and spin her around -- if she says yes -- that I might actually yawp. I look up and down the street, shout back, "I'm not sure why I'm out here still! Are you ready?"

"I'll be down!" She sighs. It's a gusty sigh, the kind you give a child, and slams the window shut. Standing there in my mittens, I shift my weight from one foot to the other, feeling tall and galumphing. I'm on the tall side; nice little league coaches told my parents that, one day, I'd grow into my body and become, suddenly, coordinated. That never happened.

I shouldn't have worn the mittens. I should feel more manly right now.

But here's something I love about Madge: she's quick to get angry, but also quick to get over it. When she appears on the stoop in her red coat, she's over being annoyed with me, and she looks fantastic. She's wearing frosty lipstick, as if she's just kissed a cake. Madge is good to me. She really is. She once made homemade matzo ball soup for me when I was sick and she's not even Jewish. She looked it up online.

I want to yell out, *Madge! I! Love! You!* I am happy. There's so much blood in my head, I'm top heavy. She walks up and kisses me on the mouth. Right there, full mouth. Her lips are warm. Her lips are a heater and when I hug her, perfume gusts up from her coat. This has been my problem since I've started growing hair where there never used to be hair: I love women. I should stand in the middle of a group of men sitting in chairs shaped in a circle: *My name is Godfrey and I love women*. I'm completely susceptible to them. It's a difficult way to go through life, constantly falling in love. I don't wear love very well. And, because of my weaknesses, I'm dangerous. I have to keep myself in check, always. Madge helps keep me in check mainly because she's enough. Madge is so full of life, so vigorously alive that I'm rapt every time she walks into a room – or out of a building... to meet me.

“Why were you lurking?” Madge asks, jokingly. “You shouldn't lurk. People will think you're a serial killer. Are we going to the sushi place? It's my turn, you know.”

And that's how quickly it changes. Taking turns. This is my future. Life doled out simply: Madge's turn. Then: my turn. Everything in this moment seems suddenly permanent. Everything in this moment *is* permanent.

Fact: I hate sushi. Rolls too big for your mouth, but you don't dare cut them with a fork. I don't trust raw fish. Normally I might say, “I only eat sushi that's well done.” Or I might say, “I'm not feeling suicidal enough for sushi today.” But this would encourage Madge to give me a speech on living life to the fullest, and I'm never in the mood for that, much less now, on the brink of such emotional risk. My hands feel too hot for the mittens and now I'm thinking of the wallets I've lost and the girlfriends I've lost, too – Tina Whooten, Liz Chase, the Ellings Twins. I look up at the buildings around us, hundreds of windows. How many women are in there? How

many could I fall in love with? How many would let me fall in love with them? Am I choosing the right one? Does it mean something to even be thinking this?

“Why are you just standing there, Godfrey?” I stop and look at Madge. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Jesus, I’m just standing here, looking at her like that. To be honest, I’m not really sure what *that* is. “I’m sorry,” I say, glancing at my shoes. How is it possible that my *shoes* look rumpled? If I were holding an ironing board, that would probably look rumpled, too. “You know,” I tell Madge, “If we ever had kids, they’d have a fifty percent chance of rumpledness.” I look back at Madge.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “You aren’t making a lot of sense. Are you drunk or something?”

“I mean,” I say, “I’m sorry about not having a better job. I should have paid better attention in college, taken harder classes. You know, really hunkered down with something like pre-med.” Madge talked me out of being an elementary school teacher, explaining how much money they make when they hit their salary ceiling.

“Are you going to throw up? You look that same way you did on the subway that time.”

“Just listen,” I say, trying not to raise my voice. “I’m not going to throw up.” Now that I say it, though, I’m not so sure. I feel shaky. I finally take off the mittens. They dangle on the strings. Slowly, I reach into my pocket. “Madge.” My chest tightens. I feel a fiery heat, a certain lightheadedness. “Look, I mean,” I manage to say. “Here.” I hand her the box.

Madge opens the box and then shuts it. She’s smiling.

“I was planning on picking you up and spinning you around.” I want to tell her,

*Sometimes I wish I could reverse time and start over, from the very beginning – my first wail.* “I feel like passing out.” I sit on the stoop.

“Godfrey,” she says, “listen.” She sits down next to me. “I think we should look into this. Go forward carefully.” She draws out the *carefully*, all three syllables. “You know?”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a yes, kind of. A slow, careful, looking-into-it approach.”

“Okay.”

Madge smiles and puts her arm around my shoulder like a fellow sailor. We are out at sea together, hunting our dinner: giant whales, kraken. Maybe we are in a submarine, sitting on tons and tons of nuclear warheads. Madge finally says, “I thought you’d say no. Funny, huh?”

I am baffled. “Say no? To what exactly? I mean, *I* asked *you*.”

“To looking into it first.”

“Looking into what?”

“Well, I don’t think we should use the same envisionist. I mean it’s like sharing a therapist or something. I’ve heard a lot of good stuff about Dr. Plotnik and you should see Dr. Chin. I hear he’s very good at giving the total experience. I almost made appointments but decided I should at least wait until you asked first.”

Madge hasn’t put on the ring. It’s still in the box. The box is pretty, but nothing should *stay* in the box. “You’re talking about those *envisionists*?” There’s a billboard on the beltway: Dr. Chin’s Envisioning Services, Now Offering: The Future -- for Curious People. At the bottom it says, “It’s easier to choose the future, when you’ve seen the options.” And that actor who does all that sci-fi stuff has started doing commercials for some conglomerate that offers discount

rates. “No. No way.”

“What? You just said yes!”

“I didn’t know you meant going to envisionists!”

“It’s actual science. You know that right?” And then Madge napalms me with data. She’s got an incredible ability to memorize stuff. There’s nothing I can do but sit back and take it.

“Each human being has vast untapped mental abilities. Our eyes take in some 12 million pieces of information every second while in that same second, our ears are processing one million pieces of information, touch is bringing in 500,000 data points per second, smell is only bringing in 70 bits of information and taste is only registering about 15 info bits per second, but look, Godfrey, do you know how many pieces of sensory information that is per second?”

“You know I don’t know,” I say. Does she think I’ve been running a mental calculator? Are we still even talking about marriage?

“That’s approximately 13,500,085 pieces of sensory information per second. And those are just the senses alone. There’s also all the deep tissue of long-term memory and the chemical processing of short-term data and the processing of intangible information as each of these senses is synthesized to produce thought, action, reaction.”

“That’s a lot of knowledge.” If I agree with her, maybe I can reroute the conversation back to marriage more quickly.

“And then that Scandinavian researcher figured out that if we could process information without the interference of the subconscious's absurdism and emotion -- vengeance, greed, hope, faith, hatred, and most of all *love*, which blurs *everything* we perceive,” she seems really

annoyed by the blurriness caused by love, “and add that to what we know from the past -- we could predict our own future outcomes, in minute detail.”

“Uh huh,” I say, feeling a little like crying.

“We know,” she says. “Our brains know so much more than we ever let them!”

“I get it.” I barely get it.

“The drug cocktail that Merch created puts the patient into a short kind of awake-REM state, cuts out the white noise of emotions and allows the person to predict a specific potential future. And then, this is the best part, Godfrey. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” I say, a little defensively.

“This guy named Bacon figured out how to digitize that dream-like state -- capturing the synapses -- for viewing. See how perfect it is? It’s a real tool, but it doesn’t come from out there, Godfrey.” She straightens her arms and waves her hands at the world. “It comes from in here.” She taps her forehead and then Godfrey’s forehead. “Each of us is brilliant, Godfrey. See? So don’t sell yourself short.”

“I’m not selling myself short! I asked you to *marry* me. Remember?”

“Look. This is my one request. Envisionists. It’s the only smart thing to do.”

“If people can really tell the future, why do the muck around with people’s relationships. Call the next Super Bowl! Put a fix on the stock market!”

“Godfrey, envisioning is overseen by the F.C.C.. Do you really think that they’d let people broadcast futures that would infringe on commerce? There are tons of regulations.”

“Really. The F.C.C..” I didn’t know this.

“They only have the matchmaking software at this point, but they’re working on the

regulatory issues around other futures, like career paths. They worry it might have unforeseen ramifications on the economy if everyone suddenly decides to ditch med school and go in to investment banking for the cushy lifestyle.”

“Right. Investment banking. I probably should have considered that more closely. And we need doctors, too. I mean, who will outfit the investment bankers with pacemakers when their tickers start to fail.”

“Don’t be caustic.”

“I’m not being caustic! Doctors are important! Pacemakers save lives!”

“Well, it really worked out great for Bart and Amy! You can’t deny that. They both saw fantastic futures. Incredible. I mean, I don’t know how they come up with all that money. I told my parents and my father was like, wow, you should invite them to the cabin.” Madge’s parents own a ski-in ski-out cabin in Colorado I’ve yet to be invited to.

“Like I want to hear about Bart and Amy right now.” I mean, I’ve already heard all of this from Bart. Their future entails tennis whites and healthy grandchildren, plus a thick head of white hair for Bart. Before I met Madge, Bart met Amy and dominated his spirit. I love Bart and I always will, but sometimes I worry he’s turned into a gossip who sometimes wears various kinds of facial hair -- with irony. I shake my head. “I *proposed* to you. Doesn’t that mean something?”

“Don’t get all heated up,” Madge says.

“Don’t get all heated up?” I am on my feet. “I asked you to marry me, and you want to look into it first? Look into it first?” Everything’s sinking in.

“You’re the one with a father who isn’t your biological father because your biological

father was a married man at the time he and your mom --”

“I don’t want to drag Mart Thigpen into this.” This is no secret. At age eleven, my mother sat me down and told me that my real father was not Aldo Burkes, the father I’d known all my life, but this other man named Mart Thigpen. A married man. A married man who was a connoisseur of thighs, who had sex with many women including my mother, but always went back to his wife, which meant he left my mother high and dry! “High and dry, Godfrey!” she said and I imagined her on a hill in the desert in a boat. She warned me that I was doomed to become a man like Mart Thigpen – a man I’ve never met. I’m his son, his animal son, and that I had to fight against it.

My mother now rescues bunnies that people drop off at animal shelters. She has a yard full of hutches hand-built by the Amish. Her saving once-loved pet bunnies that have been abandoned is an obvious metaphor for Gloria Burkes saving Gloria Burkeses.

“You bring up your dark fear of your animal nature all the time!” Madge says.

This is true, if overstated a little. I do have this fear that I might become an alcoholic who might even do cocaine in a public restroom, which is one small detail that my mother told me about Mart Thigpen. Lord god, how many years did I have a fear of public restrooms because of my weak predilection for cocaine? How many months did I spend as a sophomore in high school, practicing rolling single dollar bills my mom gave me for morning milk into sniffable straws because I figured I should prepare for the inevitable. “Is that why you’re afraid to say yes? Because you’re afraid of what I might become?”

Madge smiles. “Oh, Godfrey. How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not afraid that you’re going to turn into a wildly lustful seducer of women? You’re no animal. You’re no

Mart Thigpen.”

“Thanks,” I say. I know Madge is mocking me, but, truth is, I can trust Madge’s opinion which is important because I can’t trust my own – half-Thigpen that I am. “This is about you and me. Marriage is a leap of faith. Don’t you believe in leaps of faith?” I ask.

Madge shakes her head. “I love you. You know that.”

“And I love you too, Madge.” Here are more things I love about Madge: The way she talks with her hands as if carving air and laughs so hard she snorts and believes in helping others hence her job at the downtown clinic and how she knows all the lyrics to The Kinks and talked me out of a bad tattoo.

“We love each other,” she says. “We can survive taking our time.”

“You’re not going to put the ring on, are you? This is conditional. That’s what you’re saying. I do it your way or it doesn’t happen.” I swing my arms around angrily and the mittens come flapping after them. I try to pull the mittens off but the clips seem permanently clenched. I use the voice I usually reserve for customer service personnel. It’s the only way I can stop myself from further losing it. “If you aren’t going to put the ring on, you should give it back. That’s customary, isn’t it?”

She tightens her grip on the box in her hand and refuses to look at me. She looks at everything but me.

“Do you know how ridiculous we look right now?” I am saying this but my mouth is barely moving.

She doesn’t answer, doesn’t move.

“What? Do you want me to wrestle that box from you?” I’m trying to joke now, but it’s

not going over.

Madge is breathing hard. The steam is rising from her mouth into the cold air. It is her pre-cry panting. I am softening or melting or both. *Don't cry. Don't cry.* Once when Madge's parents were in town, they pulled me aside and her mother said, "Madge has had a very affirmed childhood. We want her to spend her life with someone who truly appreciates everything about her. Everything."

"Everything?" I said.

Her father then said. "Madge's affirmed childhood was her mother's idea. It makes her a force of nature. All that affirmation and no real failure for her to apply it to? Well, it's all bottled up. It's a force field, Godfrey. Good luck."

I don't want to give in. I stiffen up and try to sound definitive. If I had a necktie on, I'd straighten the shit out of it. "I'm not going to look into our future, Madge. I'm not. It goes against everything I believe in."

She looks up at me. "You have a belief system?"

I nod weakly. "I think I do." I look around the street, the row of trees buckling the sidewalk. "I'm pretty sure I do."

## Heartbeating Books

My boss, Mr. Gupta, walks over to me behind the desk in youth services. He's typically bookish. His shoulders slope toward a doughy center. The fuzz of his sweaters seems to have molded to his body. His nose is bulbous as if designed as an end-stop for bifocals. He's wearing bifocals, et cetera. He was raised in India and therefore has no tolerance for whining of any kind -- even the completely valid inner-city Baltimore variety. Much less if you try to tell Gupta that you don't want people eating out of the take-out box you put in the communal fridge for lunch on the grounds that it's unsanitary to co-eat from take-out boxes; he'll say, "Oh, please. Afraid of a few germs? In India people just die on the streets. You step over bodies. It's just how it is!"

But today he doesn't have his normal bravado. "Evelyn Shiner," he says, as he often refers to me by my full name. "The woman in the bathroom on the third floor is dying her hair in the sink." Fadra is a homeless woman who's been living in the library -- for all intents and purposes -- for a couple of years. She has the strange habit of bringing up the fine art of taxidermy -- at certain moments when she feels attacked and with a glint in her eye that makes me feel like a muskrat about to be stuffed and boxed in a small display case. "I just feel like dying your hair is really bold," Gupta says. "A new *level* of bold. I need you to go talk to her." Gupta shrugs apologetically and then makes a shooping motion with his hands, flipping them forward on the hinges of his wrists.

"Mr. Gupta," I say politely. "Wouldn't that be Cherelle's area?" The library is a carefully organized landscape of territories drawn by a group of carefully organized human beings. I reside in youth services. (I should note that I'm the whitey minority in this library, which means

I sometimes don't get the jokes.) It's as if the third floor is an arctic region clearly out of my domain. Plus, I'd like to pawn this off on Cherelle because I'm scared of Fadra. This is why Gupta himself isn't going in after her.

Gupta shakes his head vehemently. "There was the incident..." Gupta says, pushing up his glasses, "as you well know. And Cherelle has become a little nervous, you know. I'll never understand it, but she can no longer confront others. Personally, it strikes me as an American privilege to suddenly claim your nerves are shaken. Still, I have to be *sensitive* or they will send me back for another training session. I deplore sensitivity training sessions, Evelyn Shriener. They make me completely insensitive!"

A few weeks ago, Cherelle, who grew up in this area of Baltimore -- which isn't the safest part of town -- is very tough and officious woman, but she accidentally aided and abetted a criminal who'd just held up a liquor store and was looking for the best way to catch a bus to Philly. Cherelle was exceedingly thorough, the man was truly grateful, and she'd felt good about the whole thing until the cops showed up.

I look around at my little protected area of the library -- my nest of youth services. I point to the group of teenagers, a brilliant group of kids, all in all -- the oddballs that gather, as I once did and then stayed on... "I can't leave now. We're about to start the book club meeting." I say. This is actually a ways off. "Right, Keisha? You need me to be here, correct?"

Keisha says, "If it weren't for you, I'd be doing meth in an IHOP bathroom. Of course we need you here."

I wasn't expecting this. I feel all warm in my heart. "Really?" I say.

"No, of course not," Keisha says. "That shit short circuits the pleasure part of your brain,

but it's the thought that counts, right?"

I turn to Gupta. "It *is* the thought that counts. Clearly." I lower my voice. "And she probably read about the bad effects of meth here in the youth services area of the library."

"This is a beautiful moment," Gupta says, just lightly laced with sarcasm. "I'm choked up."

"Can't Chuck go?" Chuck is our deputy sheriff, a sweet man with an overly large head. He has to special order his cop caps. His young offspring are similarly large headed.

"He and I would both go, but it is the *women's* room," Gupta says. "Look, I will stand here while your book club starts to talk about the book and you won't be gone long."

"Okay, okay," I say, feeling screwed over by my own gender.

Gupta smiles, chin to chest. "May the force be with you, Evelyn Shriner."

I head to the elevators, wringing my hands. This wasn't what I thought my job would entail when I first went into library studies, but I love my job. I truly do.

Libraries are my homeland. So, yes, I tried to make Adrian's family into my own – one popover at a time – and his family wasn't the first, but I also chose a career that would land me in a place I could call home. When you grow up in the deadened air of loss, you get used to quiet, but you never get used to the loneliness of living with parents who are despairing. As a kid, I went to the library because, in books, there were people really living lives and, *unlike* my parents, they talked to me about important things. My own house was austere, hushed, and dusty like a library, but once you understand that each book on the shelf has a heartbeat then you'll want to stay. I don't tend dead things – paper, ink, glue bindings. I tend books the way someone in an aviary tends birds.

Bookstores, on the other hand, can make me nervous. All those books and I can't possibly buy them all and tend to them properly, love them enough, give them the eyes they deserve. But, here, at the library, the patrons take the books out as a kind of foster care program – into the world and back again.

If they don't come back? Well, some books are meant to live in the wilds. There's not much you can do about that.

But nowadays, libraries are in many ways the last public space. Robert Frost defined home as “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Ditto public libraries. Our doors are open – to everyone. In the summer, kids are dropped off here to spend the entire day. Some really little ones manage a city bus route. They don't have anywhere else to go. It's sometimes overwhelmingly sad, and yet they're here. They aren't on the streets.

Just this morning, I got to help an old woman trying to find a book that she'd read in her childhood. She didn't remember the title or the author, but knew it was about a panda. When I showed her the cover on my screen, she said, “Yes, yes, that's it! My father read it to me once and cried at the end. It was the only time I'd ever seen him cry.” Books can break a man open, even ones about a panda, maybe especially so.

I love the smell of books, the dust motes spiraling in sun. I love shelves and order. I love the carts and metal stools on wheels. I love the quiet carrels and the study rooms. I love the strobing of copy machines, the video and audio bins. I love the Saturday morning read alouds for kids and how they try to hush when they come in; all these books can still demand a bit of awe. I love the teen reading groups, clutching books to their chests, little shields protecting them from the world's assaults – those are my people. I even love the homeless shuffling in – it's warm here

with running water, safe -- and the couples who make out in the stacks – brave souls, I don't blame them. Books are sexy, after all.

If Chin's office did, in fact, bring in career envisioning, I wouldn't need it. I'm happy here. One day, I could have Gupta's job, overseeing the place – like head zookeeper of all the bookish heartbeats.

As the elevator sends me up, I imagine Fadra as an auntie of mine – the eccentric kind that my family doesn't possess.

I pause in front of the women's room door on the third floor. I hear the hand blower going and Fadra singing what sounds like Janis Joplin. Was Fadra a hippy at some point? I steel myself, brush back my bangs, and walk in.

Fadra is in the final stage of the process, her bright red hair flipped upside down under the hand-blower, which she must have pushed on many, many times because the entire bathroom is warm. She doesn't hear me walk in. Her hair dye box and latex gloves are in one of the sinks, its basin tinged a pinkish red.

"Fadra!" I call out.

Her head snaps around then she flips it over. It's impossible to tell how old she is. Her face looks old and her teeth make her look ancient – meth? Her new brash hair color makes her face, by contrast, look older still. But her body moves quickly – like her bones are young.

"What?" she says innocently.

"You can't dye your hair in here."

"That's not written down anywhere."

"I think that's because no one ever thought that someone would dye their hair in here."

“People dye their hair at the bus station bathroom.”

“This isn’t the bus station bathroom.”

“Well, I can do it!” Fadra says. “I already did it.”

“I’m not saying you don’t have the ability to dye your hair in here. Obviously, you’ve proven you can. I’m saying you’re not allowed – in the future, okay?”

“I don’t like it when you talk to me like this.” She curls her hands in and looks at her fingernails and I know what’s coming.

“Don’t,” I say. “Don’t go to your dark place.”

“I used to have bone cutter forceps and ear openers and gooseneck hide stretchers and --”

“I’m serious, Fadra! I do not want to hear about your previous life in the world of taxidermy!”

“I once created a little scene of Canadian squirrels having sex in a little handmade canopy bed,” she says, which strikes me as oddly tender for Fadra, borderline sentimental. “Taxidermy is Greek for arrangement of skin.”

“I know. You’ve told me this before. And I don’t like the way you talk about taxidermy because I think you’re purposefully giving the impression that you want to kill me and stuff me and stitch me up and put me in some weird display. It gives off a very creepy vibe and it feels like bullying.” We talk about bullying all the time in youth services and I can’t help that it pops out of my mouth, but as soon as I see Fadra’s reaction, I know I’ve gone too far.

“You’re going to kick me out. Aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not kicking you out.” We had to kick her out once. She had a screaming fit in the audio section, in which she told Gupta that she’d stuff his “Gandhi ass”. Gupta did not like

the reference to his ass looking like Gandhi's.

"I don't touch the books, you know," Fadra shouts. "I never do! I never mess with your stuff!"

"You're supposed to touch the books, Fadra. We've been over this. This is a library."

"I don't like to read because it takes me to other places. I'm trying to just be where I am. Inside my own self." I can appreciate this in a Buddhist kind of way. "You can't *make me* read the books!"

"You have to clean up in here. Okay? And don't do it again. Gupta really wasn't happy about it."

"Gupta can poop in a hole!"

"No, let's not rev up again, Fadra. Okay? Just calm it down."

"Okay, okay," she says, "but I'm going to be me. You know that. Nothing anyone can do. I'm going to be me. You're going to be you. Gupta's going to be Gupta."

This feels like a compromise that I can accept – like the terms of some abstract peace accord. I say, "Agreed!" and I'm about to leave because there's not much more I can do here, but then I stop. I say, "Question: do you think that our nature defines us or is it just our circumstances? Or is it something else? I mean, what did you mean that each of us is going to be ourselves?"

She looks at me like I'm a child. "All I got is who I am. You have any more than that?"

I think of Jose Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish philosopher. "This famous thinker once said 'Life is a series of collisions with the future; it is not the sum of what we have been, but what we yearn to be.'"

“Ha!” Fadra says, looking at me sharply. “Are you still yearning? I thought you’d grown up already.”

Is that what it means to grow up? Is the payment for adulthood an end to yearning? I’m flustered suddenly. It’s like someone’s lifted up the dirty wall-to-wall carpeting of life and revealed some ugly truth. “Uh, just don’t dye your hair in here anymore,” I say.

“I’ll try not to,” she says, but, she is who she’s going to be, I guess.

“And no more taxidermy talk, okay?”

She stares at me. This she can’t promise, and I have to respect that.

“Okay,” I say. As soon as the bathroom door swings shut behind me, I hear the hand blower rev up.

I’ve signed up to volunteer to record books for the blind in the back room of Special Collections. After my shift ends, this is where I’m headed.

The visitors to Special Collections are as rare as the collections themselves – boxes of African American sheet music, war posters, rare books sheathed in protective wrappings, and my favorite – postcards, thirty-three boxes full of them, taking up twelve linear feet of shelving, most of them inscribed by the dead to the dead.

I have to borrow a key to get into the Special Collections room by Jason Binter who’s only here as a sub because Rita fell in love and joined the Peace Corps. Binter’s no genius, and how he ended up in library work is a ponderous mystery. But he has a lightly aged frat boy look - without the date-rape vibe – and I’m eyeing him for a Future.

He sits in the sign-in room in Special Collections – a little glass room – as if Binter

himself is the true rarity on display. I knock on the glass and he looks up a little dumbfounded – is it because he was deep in thought or surprised to find himself in his surroundings as if his life is a process of finding himself places he doesn't expect to be – a kind of perpetual *This is not my beautiful life* thing? Hard to say.

I smile and wave the apologetic sorry-to-interrupt half-hand crumple wave.

He nods and waves me in.

“Hi,” I say. “I’m here to volunteer. You know. Reading to the blind.” I lift my digital recorder and paperback as proof. I’m not going to lie: I want the points that come along with being the type of person who volunteers to record books for the blind.

“You’re a good citizen,” Binter says – and it strikes me as the kind of thing that might only be a hot come-on to a Communist, speaking in a boozy Russian accent. Could this be Binter’s attempt at flirtation? I know, I know, this is a stretch, but librarian flirtation can be very subtle. He pulls a key from a desk drawer, unlocks the door for me. Sometimes I wish Binter’s frat boy look had just a little, *weedle* bit of the date-rape vibe.

“Zank you , comrade,” I say, in a pseudo Russian accent, even though the Russian thing is a segue that only existed in my head.

“Comrade?” he says, very seriously. He cocks his head for a second and then, hurriedly, leaves me alone in there. For a moment, I wonder if he’s going back to his desk to add me to a blacklist to be used against me at another date – like mid-McCarthyism circa 1954?

I sit at a desk, find my place in the book, and take a moment to collect myself. I’m supposed to pick books that haven’t been masterfully recorded already, but I always end up recording another version of a classic. Look. I’m a volunteer so I figure I should be allowed to

read what I want – if not here, where? Today, I’m working on *The Great Gatsby*.

I’m reading about Mrs. Wilson at the party – after she changes her dress and how she seems to almost balloon into a different person. She expands and the room shrinks until it’s like she’s “revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air.”

I stop the recording right there. My hand shaking a little because I know she’s going to die. She’s going to be hit by a car. And then Gatsby’s going to be shot to death in his swimming pool.

And, again, I think of my sister on her bicycle with its banana seat – Megan. A twelve-year-old girl I’ll never know. I imagine the car – though I don’t know what kind it was. I imagine a large bulky automobile, something that’s slow to start, slow to stop. It careens toward her. Her death will kill something inside of my parents. Figuratively, they’ll float like two dead bodies in a swimming pool. My birth, my childhood, my being is meant to revive them. But I know I’m a failure at this. It’s too much to ask of a little kid – of anyone.

I hear Helen Keller whispering in my head, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” My parents tried to overcome suffering. I’m the result. Why am I thinking of my sister so often these days? Is it that I now believe that the tragedies that await us can be avoided – if fully envisioned?

Maybe the classics are chock-full of tragedy because the world is full of tragedy. Maybe they’re full of tragedy so they can also be about overcoming tragedy. But that’s not the case, really, is it? So many classics end tragically, with no overcoming at all. Why does that have to be the case – again and again? If we can pick futures – with envisioning – why does literature have to remain fixed?

I know that it's a terrible thought. You can't change classics. One small bit of erosion could bring down the pillars of literature, which are the pillars of culture.

I push the paperback open, feel the slight give deep in the binding.

And I know what I'm going to do, and I know that it's wrong. But just this once, just this one tiny recording ... I'm going to change the ending of *The Great Gatsby*. Myrtle Wilson will have quicker feet. It doesn't matter who was driving the car -- Myrtle will be out of the way before Gatsby's car is even close. In fact, they'll wave. Daisy will put down the window, and they'll have of those awkward hugs where the driver half leans out the window. Myrtle likes Daisy's dress and Gatsby will agree.

It's not easy to put away the past even when you're making up the future -- your own or Gatsby's. But right now, I think of Adrian and his boxy nose and I miss him so much I could cry like Daisy over a bunch of shirts.

I try to remain positive about some future. It's hard, especially at home when it's quiet and my bed is empty. So it's better to be here, with twelve linear feet of postcards, reading about Myrtle Wilson who is *not* doomed, reading about Gatsby who will *not* float in a swimming pool amid ribbons of his own blood.

I read some more and as I do I feel a quickening. I'm going back, I decide. I'm going back to all the other classics I've read -- and I've read plenty -- and rerecording the endings and uploading them again to the volunteer site. I feel powerful and helium-light.

At just this moment, the doorknob jiggles. Binter peeks his head in and says, "Someone's here to look for 'Kiss Me Honey Do.'" He nods toward the African American sheet music.

"I can save Anna Karenina," I tell Binter and then I start counting on my fingers. "Plus

Beth, Piggy, Madame Bovary, and Charlotte.”

“Um,” Binter says. “‘Kiss Me Honey Do’ is kind of urgent right now so...”

“Oh, you want me to leave?”

“Well, that or you’ll have to just sit there and not be, you know, weird.”

“Right,” I say. “I can do not-weird, short-term.”

“Good.”

“Good-good.”

He frowns at me because that was slightly weird.

Binter walks into the room with a tall pale scholarly man, his bald pate shining. As he and Binter discuss sheet music, I walk to one of the boxes of postcards. I can’t be noisy – or weird – but I’m allowed to rummage.

I pick up a postcard from Wildwood, New Jersey’s boardwalk. The date is June 3, 1931. It’s written to a Helen. The sign off reads, “I’ll only miss you more tomorrow.”

As soon as I read it, I know I’ve memorized it. It seems like a definition of love.

## Chapter Four: Godfrey

### The First Appointment

My appointment at Dr. Chin’s office is at eleven, just like Madge’s appointment at Plotnik’s. We’re hoping to have a celebratory lunch together at the Rib Shack before heading

back to work.

But I'm still sitting in my cubicle. The Department of Unclaimed Goods is lodged in a grim building with an old world heavy-on-the-asbestos vibe. Bart and I sit in adjoining cubicles and spend our days discussing our ruination while eating stiff vending-machine sandwiches. I can't tell Bart that Madge has talked me into seeing an envisionist. I don't want to hear all the gloating -- tennis whites, boating, full hair, etc. My ruination has gotten lonsomer. I work as a labeler at the Department of Unclaimed Goods. My fingers have grown numb from the constant rummaging through of abandoned safety deposit boxes. "One day I'll no longer have fingerprints," I say to Bart. "Like a mobster."

I don't like the job. In fact, I can feel it chewing at my soul. But if I move up and one day take over that prick Chapman's job, the pay is actually decent. It's a war of attrition really. Each of us in the general pool, combing safety deposit boxes, battling the sheer boredom, it's a last man standing kind of promotional system.

Inside the current box: some faded bonds, a dowdy pear-shaped brooch, a silver dollar. This box was registered in 1927 by a man named Wickham Purdy. Sometimes the contents of abandoned safety deposit boxes are so lifeless and sad that they make me feel like my heart is small and coated in enamel. I pick up the brooch. Was it Wickham Purdy's mother's, wife's? And suddenly I remember a dream from the night before. I was at work, sifting through the contents of a deposit box -- it's cruel that the brain sometimes makes you dream about what you don't enjoy doing all day long -- when I found a baby tooth. With a surge of necessity, I tried to fit the tooth into a gap in the back of my gum-line because I had a feeling that I'd lost this tooth. The tooth fit, perfectly, and I knew that this was my own deposit box. I found the velvet box that

I'd given Madge. I opened it and it was empty. I saw a folded-up note, too. I unfolded it, and, in boxy letters, read: I love you more than you love me, Doug. I don't know a Doug, not really. I woke up with a jolt, feeling disoriented.

I forgot about the dream until now, this brooch.

What if the envisionist supplies a pale, grudging future that looks like the contents of this box? I see my parents in my mind, so clearly, eating breakfast -- their whole-grain porridge -- as silently as two people ice fishing in separate shacks. Even if it's bad like that, I'm going because I love Madge. She's strong and sharp-tongued and she sees in me something I can't even see in myself. She loves some unseen quality -- a better Godfrey -- and she makes me want to live up to it. When she's disappointed in me, it's only because she believes in me with such conviction. No one has ever believed in me the way Madge does -- no Little League coach, no Boy Scout troop leader, no friend, no enemy, no teacher, not even my parents. God, it feels good to be around someone who knows you can do better, be better. With Madge, I *am* better -- or at least getting there.

I look up Wickham Purdy in a nationwide database of obituaries and, sure enough, he's dead. In fact, he died the year I was born. He was married to a woman named Netta, who'd died two years earlier. No survivors. His name will be announced on our public records web site, and after a 60-day waiting period, it will be confiscated by the U.S. government.

I pick up my oversized UNCLAIMED: HOLD stamp into the red ink pad. I can hear Bart stamping away. Lately, I've grown suspicious of Bart's stamping speed. Does he really investigate the goods for clues or is he a blind stamper, just assuming that no one is coming for this stuff?

I check the time. “I have to cut out for a bit,” I tell Bart.

His face pops out from behind the partition. Bart was a great golfer at one point, but he gave it up because it made him nauseous to putt in front of people. He looks like a golfer still -- athletic with a paunch, mostly ordinary. “What for?” he asks.

I pick something below the waist, figuring it’s private enough not to beg questions. “Um, I may have something wrong with my gall bladder.”

“Really? My family’s full of gall bladder issues. What’s the problem?” Bart looks at me like a concerned physician.

Perfect. “What? You’re a gall bladder expert all the sudden?”

“Like I said, it runs in the family. That’s all.”

“Well, I’d prefer not to dwell on it.” I shove my arms into my coat sleeves, hoping the gesture ends the conversation.

“I was just asking what kind. There are many different types of problems.” Bart is reaching around my cubicle, picking up my can of soda, still mostly full. He takes a sip. “I was just expressing my sincere...”

“Don’t do that,” I interrupt.

“What?”

“Don’t drink my soda. That’s disgusting.” I’m trying to knock Bart off topic.

“What? Since when is that a big deal?”

I glare at him before walking angrily out of the office. Now I’m the asshole who gets pissed off over soda.

To get to Dr. Chin's, I have to go through some arcane tunnel that I've never even heard of. It's wet and murky, a sewer for humans. Workers slush around in yellow rain gear hauling tubes and climbing curved interior ladders, flashing hand-held stop signs every ten feet. It takes so long that I wonder if the tunnel isn't pressing in a little. I wouldn't be surprised if this isn't a tunnel with aspirations of becoming a giant colander. *At least it has aspirations*, I tell no one.

I find Dr. Chin's office in the center of a strip mall, wedged between a Bagel Hut and a Nail-A-Rama. I sit in my car, the motor still running, and stare at the plate-glass store front window. Its drawn red velvet curtains make me think of prostitution. I've never been with a prostitute and suddenly that seems shortsighted. I can't now. I'm almost engaged -- Madge still hasn't put the ring on, but she is still in possession of it. I think this means we're more engaged than not engaged, but I'm not sure.

Chin's placard reads:

Dr. Chin, PhD, MD, ESQ, CPA

Now Offering:

The Future -- For Curious People

(Also inquire about: minor surgeries, overseas adoptions, mail-order bride services,  
pet euthanasia, notarization, and medicinal herbage.)

This is all very disconcerting -- though I'm intrigued by 'medicinal herbage'. Chin used to be a lawyer *and* an accountant? What's the PhD in anyway? Home decor? Psychiatry? What

kinds of minor surgeries? And is that “curious people” a play on words – curious as in full of questions or just plain weird? *Is he messing with us?* I am trying to make a mental list of things to ask him but the list is getting too big, and Madge still hasn’t put the ring on.

With the motor still running, I contemplate slamming into reverse, driving back through the tunnel of sludge and just standing up to Madge. I could tell her I simply refused to go. I still don’t buy that my participation is necessary. Madge explained, in great detail, how, even though the future is only slightly malleable, we might have two very different perspectives about whether it’s positive or negative. In bed last night, Madge said, “I could see two old farts on a beach with metal detectors, and think, *How dismal*. And you could see two old farts on a beach with metal detectors and think, *Wow, we finally made it!*” I didn’t like my portrayal in her example, but we’d just had sex and I wasn’t thinking straight enough to get into a fight. Fighting with Madge requires top form, and, even at that, I’m used to losing or, at the very least, coming out humbled. Sometimes I think people date too long before they get married. We end up being old married couples before we ever say, *I do*. It’s not our fault. It’s generational. Sometimes I wish Madge and I had gotten married two weeks after the whole vaginalia conversation, on a tide of optimism that might have really buoyed us for a long time. Why can’t I just say what I already feel sure of: my future without Madge as messy and depressed, like a dingy boat at sea.

I lean forward, flip up the sun visor. I squint at the plate glass more intently. I see a glint of something there -- red paint melting into the backdrop of red curtains. Is it a dragon? Is there faded lettering overhead?

In what seems like slow motion, I cut the engine, climb out of the car, and walk up to the window. I can now make out the chipped lettering over the dragon: Chin's Chinese Take-Out. "Shit," I am saying to no one, but I still say it. "Shit on this."

If envisionists had existed when I was a kid, like four or five or whatever, I could have seen this exact moment -- me, standing in the cold, in front of Dr. Chin's ex-take-out restaurant, bullied by my fiancé-to-be, and wouldn't I have been disappointed in myself? I would've punched myself in the fucking face. "Where's the highest ledge?" I would've asked anyone who would talk to me. The envisionist could have shown my parents their awful future of detachment interrupted by bickering. If envisionists existed before my parents got married, they may have decided against it. And if my mother had been warned by an envisioning session that Mart Thigpen would knock her up and leave her "high and dry", I wouldn't exist at all. Maybe that's a big part of why this whole thing doesn't make any sense. It's tampering with the notions of my own existence, and the flimsy, dubious imaginary existence of my own offspring.

But, really, it's bullshit. Why didn't Madge just put on the ring? "Madge," I say to no one. "Shit on Madge." Will we one day be two old farts on a beach with metal detectors? The possibility of lost buffalo nickels, wrinkles under more wrinkles? Fuck that. Chin is a failed Chinese take-out guy and a failed lawyer and a failed accountant and a failed PhD in who the fuck knows. Why couldn't I do what Chin does? Hell, I haven't failed at anything, really. I know this is directly related to the fact that I've never really tried to succeed at much of anything, but it's easy not to think about that. I want to give Madge a big speech about love, true love, and the way you have to have enough faith in it to say yes to the unknown future of your life with someone. Or maybe Chin will fail so obviously that I will return to Madge with proof of just how

stupid all of this is. That's why I'm out of the car and walking into Chin's office, opening the door -- jangling some bells strung to the interior handle -- but the bells are the same type of bells as the ones on the front door of Fontana's Groceries and all I can think of is the faded lettering on the bottom of my receipt: *You are a loser.*

Dr. Chin's waiting room is small and packed, much like the greening, overstocked fish tank in the corner where slow fish do laps. I hang my coat on one of the last available hooks.

The good news is that there's nothing very weird (or curious) about the people waiting. They look a little curdled, maybe, definitely bored, a little downtrodden, bruised, slightly repulsive. But aside from one woman singing, a little teary-eyed, to an aged, wheezing schnauzer in her lap, they're unremarkable. I wonder if Chin is going to off the dog, and if so, is that illegal? The other patients wear Polyblends, flip through magazines -- an elderly man dozes. I wonder what each of them is here for. Notary seals on mortgages? Root canals or to see if their moles are cancerous? A mail-order bride or child from a third world country? A bag of pot? Or, of course, a glimpse into the future -- plain and simple? In any case, their ordinariness is comforting.

The office smells like Chinese take-out and incense -- a combination that reminds me that I probably got stoned too much when I was younger. The incense is so sweet, though, I can't find any heartfelt regret. Those were fine days. I find the sudden onslaught of nostalgia frustrating. I

don't want to lose my edge. I don't trust Dr. Chin or the incense or the overpopulated fish tank or even the ordinariness of everything around me.

At the frosted drive-thru style window where you check in, I get in line behind a woman about my age. She's frantically rummaging through her pocketbook, which looks cavernous. She's saying, "Hold on, just a sec. It's in here." She turns to me without looking at me. "Hold this, will you?"

"Um, okay," I say.

She hands me her wallet and a tube of lipstick and a pocket-sized Chinese-English dictionary, which I can only take as a bad sign -- Does Dr. Chin even speak English? -- and some crumpled bills. Noticing, with a quick glance, that she's completely filled my hands, she puts a small stack of things -- a train ticket of some sort, some cards and receipts -- between her lips.

The receptionist is highly annoyed. She's Asian. Her nametag reads: Lisa. Her eyebrows are pierced with dainty hoops. I'm expecting a foreign accent but hers is more Paramus, New Jersey, "Could you sit down? There are other people to check in."

The woman stops and looks at the receptionist and then at me.

The phone rings. The receptionist picks up. "Dr. Chin's now offering the future for curious people," she says, and then firmly states policy. "Chin only does notaries before nine a.m."

The woman tries to say something, but it comes out all m's and tiny b's, what with the things she's holding in her mouth. It's only now I notice that she's completely beautiful -- unruly hair, deep brown eyes, skin the color of sun, and those pretty lips clamped around a few flimsy earthly possessions.

“What are you looking for?” I ask her.

“Her license,” the receptionist says. “You’ll need yours too, sir. What’s your name?”

Clearly she wants to move the line along.

“Godfrey Burkes,” I say, eyeing the small stack of paperwork in the woman’s mouth. I dip down and look underneath. I think I see the license -- a bit of laminated stuff sticking out from behind a receipt. “Here,” I say, pouring her stuff back into her pocketbook. I point to the stack. “Can I?”

She nods her head, her eyes roving around the room as if she’s suddenly realized that she’s in public. I pinch the stack, and she opens her mouth a little. “Right here,” I say, showing her the license.

She smiles. There’s a fine gap between her two front teeth. I am immediately enamored by the gap and everything below and above it. “That’s such a bad photo,” she says, her eyes pointing to the license. It’s surprising how clearly she speaks when she has full use of her mouth.

I hand it to the receptionist, who’s finishing up a call. “Try the balm,” the receptionist is saying into the phone. “If it doesn’t clear up in two weeks, he’ll lance it.”

“See,” the woman says to the receptionist, “I told you it was right here.”

The receptionist rolls her eyes and hangs up the phone. She looks at the ID. “Thank you, Evelyn,” she says, sarcastically.

I step back behind the woman in line. I’m waiting for her to turn around and thank me, but she doesn’t. She’s trying to get an appointment and she hasn’t called ahead. “I’m looking for someone,” she says. “That’s all.”

“You think they aren’t all looking for someone.” The receptionist nods wearily at the waiting room. “Take a seat. If there’s an opening, Dr. Chin will call you back. Sometimes he takes a special interest. You can’t predict these things.”

This seems funny to hear that you can’t predict things in an envisionist’s office. I raise my eyebrows -- as part of this little interior conversation -- and pull out my own wallet, found, just days before, by a gas station attendant.

The woman smiles apologetically at some of the other patients in the waiting room then sits down next to the woman with the elderly schnauzer and starts reading her Chinese-English dictionary.

“Next!”

I fill out the paperwork -- checking the box “Romantic Future” on the form, the only option, though one day, as Madge explained, Americans of the future will all be day traders. And soon I’m asked back to one of the seven examination rooms. I change into a paper dressing gown, which seems unnecessary and humiliating, but what part of this whole thing hasn’t been? And I sit on the edge of the examination table, the tissue paper crinkling each time I shift my weight.

There’s a television in one corner, sitting on a shelving unit on wheels. It reminds me of the ancient AV equipment from high school and the small arthritic nun in charge of it. There’s a cable box on one of the shelves, too. I haven’t seen a cable box since the dawn of MTV when I

was a kid. None of this inspires confidence, but what's truly disturbing is the metal helmet overhead. It's attached to hinged legs that spring outward, spider-like, and then rejoin at a dome on the ceiling. Red and blue wires reach from the dome to a metal box on the counter and then the wires swoop up to the back of the television. It's all old-world cartoon -- the kind of thing used to transfer brain waves from the hero to the villain.

I try not to dwell on it. Instead, I pick up the information sheet and start to read the list of rules.

I'm most curious about the first one: *Addictions to envisioning are rare, but have been known to happen. In case of addiction, you will be blacklisted, and we ask you seek professional help from our list of providers. We will not stand for any abuses of our personnel, premises, or equipment. Breaching our orders can result, in extreme circumstances, in a restraining order, lawsuit, and possible imprisonment.* If Chin can produce the future -- which I highly doubt -- could someone get addicted to it?

One of the other rules further down suggests alternating alternate futures -- *a Rotation Service: See price list.* There is no price list attached. My visit is only thirty dollars with my insurance co-pay. Evidently, my insurance company has never seen Chin's flaky store-front take-out paint job.

One rule sadly states that if you don't actually believe you have a shot at being with someone in the future, romantically, your brain won't either. It's a sad bastard who tries to envision a future he can't even envision. There's mention of friend and family envisioning sessions, which I glide right past, but my eyes catch on the final clause. *Look, if your pet is dead, it's dead.*

Madge had been right on one point. #6: *Because of the highly supportive and biased work of an envisionist -- who is working toward the best possible future for you -- we suggest that couples go to separate envisionists to avoid a conflict of interest.* I like that someone would be on my side, for once.

#8 is easily the most interesting rule: *If a couple is not headed for a bright future, we will only allow three sessions of future envisionings -- between which they can try to influence the future. Three is the MAXIMUM. Studies show that more sessions have proven futile. It's better to move on. We offer follow-up counseling to assist you toward a better future.*

And this rule is the shortest: *In the case of true love, there can be system failures.*

I'm in a supposed doctor's office where there's a mention of true love? This strikes me as simply embarrassing, an affront to science, really.

And then there's a long paragraph of disclaimers as well. *We do not guarantee clear pictures of your future. In fact, images of lovers in the future are often blocked and/or blurred, as are brand name items. Usually patients report that they can see themselves clearly, however. And If you are having problems with listlessness, blurry vision, recurring unwanted guests in your dream life, or nausea, please report it to a healthcare professional. If you are prone to seizures, envisioning may not be the right choice for you. Consult your doctor.* But Chin is a doctor, right?

I've always believed that the future was ultimately my own. I haven't really taken advantage of this way of thinking, of course. I've been pretty passive. I mean, I found out that Madge had been the one to pursue me. She'd found me through Amy -- just rumors, and we had that forced blind date at the coffee shop -- the vaginalia incident. I had gone grudgingly to get

Bart and Amy off my back, but when I was with her I understood that she could save me. Save me from what? A life of lonesomeness. A life where I'd have a one-night stand and feel really awful about it. *Bad, Thigpen. Bad.* But Madge, with her glowing smile and her upward mobility and her affirmed childhood, well, I could glom onto that and ride – for a lifetime. She's prettier than I am handsome – by more than just simple gradations. She even tells me I could be really good-looking if I owned my curly hair and awkward height and my bulky shoulders. And sometimes, when I'm with Madge, I have moments when I do almost own it all, almost. Bart and Amy know Madge saved me. And they've been smug about introducing us ever since. I'm uncomfortable with the idea that there are set futures all locked up in front of me, a maze with multiple endings, a videogame I can never beat.

Sometimes I just want to pause myself.

There's a brief knock on the door before it swings open.

"I'm Dr. Chin," the man says, but I'm not sure I believe him. Briefly, I wonder if someone on the staff is playing a joke on me.

A. He isn't Asian. He has graying blond hair and a small sporty build and a slight tan. He looks windblown and smart, but not too smart -- like an ivy league football player.

B. He isn't earthy or herb-y. There's even a chance he's church-going -- albeit something liberal, maybe Episcopalian.

C. He's wearing slippers and has a newspaper folded up under one arm as if he's just done his morning business on the can. This casualness gives him an air of confidence I find disturbing. Still, I can't help but like the guy. It's as if Chin was designed to be liked -- not loved,

not hated, just liked -- but thoroughly liked -- someone you'd be pleasantly surprised to run into at the supermarket.

I glance around for hidden pranksters, a camera in the corner of the room.

"And you're," he looks at his chart, "Godfrey Burkes." He says my name with such authority that I have to assume, at least for now, that this is the real Dr. Chin.

He shakes my hand. He smells old-school medical -- like tongue depressors and rubbing alcohol from like when Technicolor was brand new. I don't want to give into him too easily.

"You don't look like a Dr. Chin."

"You know," he says with a laugh, "a lot of people say that." He's staring at my chart. "I was adopted."

This answer doesn't quite satisfy me, however, so I continue to press him. "Didn't this place used to be a Chinese take-out by the name of Chin's?"

"I lease this place from my brother, Earl Chin. It's too bad the restaurant went under. Best damn egg rolls I've ever tasted."

"Really," I say. I can still smell the egg rolls.

"You're here to look into your romantic future. Correct?"

I nod. "Are you also a lawyer and a CPA with a PhD in something?"

"I've packed many lives into one life," Dr. Chin says and suddenly he seems wise in a particularly Asian way. "It's a nice way to go through, if you ask me. I recommend it. But you're here to make a choice of some kind. Correct? Have you ever done this before?"

I shake my head and stare at Dr. Chin's slippers.

“Okay then. I see you’ve chosen the Single Future Glimpse. You’ve written in the name: Madge Hedgeworth. You want to see your future with her. Correct?”

I nod and point at his slippers. “Did you just wake up?”

“I have corns. Listen,” he says and then he takes a deep sigh, and, with ultimate patience, he says, “I’m adopted. I lease the place from my brother. I’ve worked in a number of fields and I have painful corns. Is all of that okay with you? You seem nervous. Are there any other questions I can answer?”

I glance at the newspaper still tucked under his arm. “Nope,” I tell him. “Nothing else.”

Dr. Chin reaches in his pants pocket and pulls out a handful of change. He sorts through them, picking out quarters and feeding them into the slot on the metal box.

“Is that coin-op?” I ask.

“Don’t worry,” Chin says. “All of it is deducted straight from your insurance.” This does not address my concern.

Chin pulls a lever, and the spider-like helmet lowers from the ceiling. “This is all based on neuroscience – our brains’ vast underutilized capacities, but it’s got a foot in physics. I mean theories of alternate realities. The world’s future iterations are endless. Am I right?”

“You’re the doctor, doctor.”

He turns on the television. It snaps and buzzes to life, but the picture is filled with snow. He starts pressing buttons on the ancient cable box. Finally, he gets a black screen. “There we go. You’re on station sixteen. That’s rare.”

“Is it?” Godfrey asks. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing really. It’s just rare.” Dr. Chin places the helmet onto my head and then attaches leather chin straps. I think of my mother tying a winter hat under my chin. I think of Madge’s woolen mittens.

With his back to me, he messes around with some pill bottles, then hands me a Dixie cup with three little pills in it. “How far into the future would you like to go? Ten, fifteen, forty years?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, I think beyond fifteen would be greedy don’t you?”

There’s a pause as Dr. Chin seems to contemplate this. “Not for me to judge. Let’s go with fifteen. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He fills another Dixie cup with water and puts it on a tray beside me. “You and Madge Hedgeworth.” He types into the computer, mumbling to himself. “Fifteen years.”

I’m suddenly terrified. In fifteen years, I’ll be older than the age Mart Thigpen was when he seduced my mother. “Dr. Chin,” I say, “I have this one problem.”

“I hope it’s not seizures.”

“No, no,” I say. “I have an animal nature, deep down. See, my biological father, Mart Thigpen, a man I’ve never met, is the kind to cheat on his wife with other women, and not really have regrets about it. I’m a little worried that I’ll be like him, fifteen years from now? Maybe it’s irrational, but do you think people are kind of genetically programmed to become their parents, on some level?”

Chin sighs. “I believe in free will.”

“Huh, I see. Is that a no? You don’t think I’m going to turn into my biological father, right?”

“I think you’re you, for better and for worse.”

I nod, but wonder if Chin put just a tiny bit more emphasis on *for worse*. Should I feel insulted?

“Can we proceed?”

“Sure,” I say, “of course.”

“Okay then. After you take the pills, you’ll get very sleepy. You won’t actually fall asleep, but your emotions will no longer affect what your brain conjures. You will still react to the images, but those emotions won’t block your brain’s power. Images that appear in your mind will appear on the screen.”

“Why no brand names?” I ask.

“Some people were using that information for financial gains that lead to legal battles. It was ugly.”

“Why don’t the future lovers come in clearly?”

Chin shrugs and goes on, “Audio will pipe into the headgear. There will be a little intro.” He puts a joystick into my hand. “Control the volume by pressing here.” It has a thumb button and is wired to the wall. It would be easy to pretend I was on a quiz show.

“What if you don’t believe in all of this?” I ask.

“I don’t understand your question,” Dr. Chin says in that way that Ivy League types can not know an answer and make you look like the stupid one.

“Is this one of those things where you have to believe in it to have any results?”

“Are you asking me if this is like pixie dust and that you have to repeat ‘I can fly’ so that you can fly?”

“I guess I am.”

“You don’t have to believe in anything,” Dr. Chin says. “It’ll work. Unless, of course, you have no future, then the screen will stay blank.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, if you’re going to die young, the screen will stay blank.”

“Jesus Christ!” I say loudly before I whisper it again and again.

“And sometimes you only die young in certain futures and in others you live a long life. But sometimes death is death.”

“Holy shit!”

“That reminds me. You’ve signed off in triplicate, right?”

“Signed off?”

“The last page. Here it is.” He shoves his blond hair off of his forehead, boyishly, and pushes the papers at me. “We really aren’t responsible for any trauma caused by this process. But we will refer you to a professional, if you happen to, well, become troubled by anything you see here today.” He hands me a black ballpoint. “Seeing futures, well, as you can imagine, it’s tricky business.”

“Tricky, sure. I can understand that.” I pause, the pen frozen over three dotted lines.

“Are you okay?” Dr. Chin asks. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Do you look into your own future?” I ask him.

Dr. Chin claps me on the shoulder. “No. Of course not.” He says this while smiling broadly. It’s the kind of smile that makes me think of the expression *a winning smile* and then immediately I wonder if there’s such a thing as *a losing smile*, and suddenly I’m sure there is. In fact, I’m sure that I’m smiling a losing smile right now -- a smile that turns down at its edges and the eyes well up, nervously -- but I can’t help it. I’m still smiling while I sign my name -- once, twice, three times.

The screen goes blue and the words *Godfrey and Madge’s Alternate Future* pop up like the low budget video production of a shitty wedding -- the union of two people with criminally awful taste. A rose, lying on its side, underlines the title, and then a dubious copyright symbol, the year, and *A Dr. Chin Production* in cursive letters.

My thumb is poised on the joystick. This has been a waste of my co-pay money, my insurance company’s money, and my time-off from Unclaimed Goods. But I can imagine how I’ll tell it, that I was in it for laughs all along, the blond Dr. Chin, the signing in triplicate, the idiotic leather straps on the metal helmet. My parents will say: *Oh, Godfrey, you’re such a wonderful storyteller!* And Bart and Amy will have to concede that their envisionist was pretty hokey too, worthless in fact. Bart might say, *I’ll probably be completely bald in five years!* And *We don’t even like tennis and boating!* Maybe even Madge would laugh along and then cup my face in her hands and say, *Poor Godfrey, I can’t believe I put you through all of that.*

I start to feel a little loose and dreamy just as the first image appears on the screen – a small green car pulls into a driveway. A teenage girl gets out and starts across a front yard to a

house. She's pretty with pale eyes and dark hair. She looks barely sixteen. She's wearing a skirt and a jean jacket -- it surprises me how jean jackets refuse to leave the culture.

And that's when a man appears. He's holding a watering can. It's me, of course. I recognize myself. I'm forty, wearing what my father would call *trousers* -- those almost high-waisted pants with pleats down the front. I wonder if I have a better job now; the pants seem to indicate a higher function in life. At forty I appear relatively fit, but the problem is that I have gelled hair, which is, obviously, lame. The first thing I realize is that in this alternate future I have very little, if any, personal dignity. My future self says to the girl, "Hey, there."

"My mom wanted me to tell you that she dropped off some seed packets. They're in the back yard, under a pot."

"Great!" future-me says.

"I'm sorry about your mom," the girl says.

I look down at the watering can. "Thanks, but it's okay. I don't like to talk about it." I shake my head and stare at the ground. I recognize this as my sympathy pose; it's the one I strike when I'd really like someone to feel sorry for me. I hadn't realized until this moment that I have such a pose but I can tell that this is a fake little moment.

The two undeniable facts of the situation are these: One. Something awful has happened to my mother. Two. In this alternate future, I've taken to hitting on teenage girls.

"Where's Madge?" the girl asks.

Future-me raises my eyebrows. "Just calling her Madge now?"

The girl nods.

“She’s taken her latest dog to a restaurant. She’s, you know, *socializing*.” What in the hell does *this* mean? Is Madge openly cheating on me? Do people in the future openly cheat and call each other’s latest lovers *dogs*? The girl doesn’t seem surprised by anything future-me is saying.

“Well,” the girl says. “See you later!” She walks to her tiny car, hops in the driver’s seat, and waves through the open window.

“See you later, Lib!” *Lib*? This name means nothing to me. Future-me watches the girl, this Lib, ride off, then I plod on. Future-me walks like now-me walks, with a small bounce forward with each step. I can’t deny that this is, in fact, me. A forty-year-old man about to water his wife’s flowers while she’s out possibly cheating on him in broad daylight with his full knowledge. And is my mother really dead? What’s happened to my mother?

Future-me stops suddenly. He looks down the street, watching the car drive out of sight. But then something else catches his eye. Someone’s legs are pumping a bike. A woman’s legs. Her skirt is flipping up on her thigh, six houses away or so but heading toward future me – it’s a close-up on the legs and the skirt and a big blue bike – its brand blurred out. The legs are beautiful, but not really young. They strike me as the legs of a woman my age now. Where did the bike come from? The legs? I want to will myself to look at this woman’s face but I don’t. She glides on by. Future me turns around and walks back to the front of the house. He plops the watering can, a prop after all, down on the stoop. Evidently I had no intentions of watering Madge’s flowers or finding some seed pack.

Do Madge and I get married and stay in the Baltimore area? Could be. The houses are boxy, older. A few are strung with Christmas lights although, by the looks of the small green

yards and the sunlight, it's late spring. I watch myself walk into the house. It's design is all Madge, retro and antiques.

As future-me walks through the kitchen, which is unremarkable, the screen fades and then there's a picture of a tall, blond woman standing at the foot of a hotel staircase. I don't recognize her. She's gorgeous though, looking busty in an angora sweater. She introduces herself as Svetlana and explains that she's a "vivacious Russian woman, looking for a strong American partner." I feel immediately deflated. Svetlana isn't part of my future. This is a fucking commercial. Dr. Chin's voice pipes up in the background while the screen cuts to footage of Svetlana walking through a meadow. Chin says, "The future can take many forms. Please talk to Dr. Chin, offering the future for curious people, to see your future with Svetlana or one of her many friends." Svetlana is now sitting alone at a lovely picnic, beckoning to the camera. I am disgusted; this whole interruption seems intentionally cruel.

The screen fades and my own future starts again. Future-me opens a door which leads to basement stairs. He claps and the lights flip on. He claps twice and then there's music -- it's the first few chords from The Cure's "Love Song," one of my favorite songs from high school. The basement is awful. Lined with boxes and paint cans and an extra roll of brown shag, there sits my old furniture -- an old sofa, coffee table, lamp, and surf board -- in the same pitiful configuration that I had as a bachelor, the same configuration that is now likewise arranged in our cramped spare bed. Has Madge forced me to recreate my old life in the basement of this new life because she just won't give me one square inch? All this while she's out with some *dog*, *socializing* in restaurant bars? I watch myself sit down heavily on the sofa, open the drawer in the coffee table and pull out a pump bottle of lotion.

“No,” I say aloud in the small waiting room. “Don’t. Jesus. C’mon.” There’s no way I’m not pressing the button on the joystick if I start to masturbate. But if I press the button on the joystick, will the screen freeze-frame? Would some nurse waltz in and see me on the screen -- a close up on the action? That would be worse.

I close my eyes. But then there’s a knock on the audio, some scrambling noises. I open my eyes. Madge is at the top of the stairs. I can only see her ankles -- which reminds me of seeing them in the pool, underwater, last summer. But this time she’s wearing her ultra-suede comfortable shoes -- the ones she’s just started buying. They’re expensive and bulky and unattractive.

“I’m home,” Madge says.

“How did it go?” Future-me asks.

“She’s doing well,” Madge says. “I figure she’ll be ready for the intensive training in two weeks or so.” Madge doesn’t walk down the steps. She’s frozen up there. I lean forward on the examination table, as if I can see more with an upward angle. I am tempted to ask Dr. Chin if he has a magnifying glass, maybe a high powered telescope. Madge says in a hushed voice. “Good girl. Stay.”

And now I can hear the nails clicking on the kitchen linoleum. Madge is training *an actual dog*. She’d mentioned this once a while back -- something about seeing-eye dogs. We’d seen a woman with one at the movies. Madge isn’t cheating on me. She’s turned into a good person. And I’m a masturbator, possibly a chronic one. Lovely. The worst part is that Madge refuses to walk down the stairs to actually look at me.

“Godfrey,” she says. “Are you okay? Do you want to talk about it?”

Future-me shakes his head; his eyes go wet. This isn't a fake moment. He presses the tears out of his eyes with the heels of his hands. He clears his throat. "What?" he says. "I'm fine. We didn't even really get along. You know that." I know that this is about my mother again. She's dead. I can feel it.

There's a long pause and then Madge quietly says, "Okay then. Okay." Her ultra-suedes turn on the stairs and disappear.

The screen reverts to snow. I am sitting there in my paper gown, all of the gear still firmly in place on my head, holding the joystick midair. My future with Madge is worse than metal detectors on the beach -- at least in that scenario there's a beach. What am I going to say to Madge at lunch? What is she seeing at Plotniks? Does she know that I'm a chronic masturbator who hits on teenage girls and has gelled hair? I wonder if Madge will cry. I hate it when she cries. Is this the end of our relationship? Are we calling off the engagement? Were we even engaged to begin with? She has the ring but she's not wearing it. Is it possible to be halfway engaged? Would we be calling off our almost-engagement? I feel relief over not telling my parents about the proposal. I'd hate to have to explain this. *This*. My mother is going to die fairly young. She only has fifteen years. No one needs to know that.

But now that I know that my mother is going to die, there's a tender swelling in my chest -- an undying love for her. *All mothers die*, I tell myself, trying to stop the ache, but it doesn't do any good. In spite of the bad news of Madge in her hardy shoes and me in the basement with

lotion and my mother's death, or because of it, I feel alive – awful but fully alive. My skin is warm, fresh. The hairs on my neck are standing up. My heartbeat has made it all the way up in my ears.

I push the button on the joystick to call in a nurse. Moments later, the examination room door flies open. But it's not Dr. Chin or a nurse. It's the woman from the waiting room who lost her license. She snagged an appointment after all. She's barefoot, wearing her own paper gown -- one hand on the knob, one hand holding together the gown in the back. "What in the hell are you doing in my room?" she asks.

I look around. "This is my room," I say.

She glances over her shoulder to the exam room door: #3. "Oh," she says, "I have a lousy sense of direction." And then she glances at my spread legs and short paper gown. "You might want to..." And she makes a little gesture like she's closing a book.

I bring my knees together, trying not to blush. "Well, if you weren't in here..." I say.

She looks like she's about to burst with laughter. She's wearing the paper gown, but also a dainty silver choker with a little doodad that's bobbing with choked laughter. "So sorry," she says, showing the thin gap in her two front teeth. Then, recovering, she points to the television. "Addictive, isn't it?"

*I think it might be*, I want to tell her -- my knees pressed so tightly together I can feel my blood clipping quickly through my body. But the woman has already shut the door. I miss her immediately, and then I think of Mart Thigpen. My love of women is an animal love.

I push the button on the joystick again and wait.

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