

Falling Leaves

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Falling Leaves



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Falling Leaves

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For Paul and Erika --
my inspiration and my everything

Acknowledgments:

I first need to offer my thanks to Chris Baty and the people behind nanowrimo.org. This book would not have been possible without their countless efforts. I've lost count of how many of these things I've started. This is the first one I ever finished. I also need to thank Tod Trexler and my wife, Erika. They were my partners in crime for this year's novel writing frenzy. Their dedication to hitting the 50,000 word mark spurred me on during the times when I was sure I didn't have anything left. I also need to issue a second thank you to Erika for putting up with the stacks of dishes and pile of laundry that resulted from both of us spending every free minute on writing.

I'd like to offer a final word on the quotes I've included in my chapter breaks. All but a handful of these are from songs most people have never heard. I highly recommend searching them out if you have the inclination and the energy.

Each quote presented was typed in as I contemplated the content of the chapter – and most of them before the chapter was written. Some of it is obviously related. Some is not. Either way, the songs listed played like a soundtrack in my subconscious while I worked my way through this story. I don't know how the book will unfold for you, but for me – kind of like with a movie, it doesn't feel the same without the music.

Your conclusion's drawing near – certain, austere
Yes, only the circle's unending
At life's eve our flames will cease
Eternally, unavoidably
Eventually all paths will lead to the cemetery

We are but falling leaves in the air, hovering down
Unaware we are spinning around
Scattered fragments of time, like blinks of an eye
We are
That's all we are

-- Sami Lopakka

People tell me A and B
They tell me how I have to see
Things that I have seen already clear
So they push me then from side to side
They're pushing me from black to white
They're pushing 'til there's nothing more to hear

I want out

-- Michael Kiske

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the first part: flashing

Standing still when it's do or die
You better run for your fucking life
It's not over till you're underground
It's not over before it's too late

- Billie Joe Armstrong

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Loomis felt the images ripping through his mind like pages torn from a magazine. He was unable to control the flow or the content as his subconscious streamed intertwining memories and fantasies.

A lot of the flashes concerned the sexy yet ludicrous image of a woman's leg wrapped in a cheap, sheer thigh high stocking. The top was ribbed with elastic to keep it up without the need for a garter belt. However, the girl had decided to up the sex factor by clipping her garter belt to it despite this fact.

Another flash lit on a thin carbon blade illuminated by bare incandescent bulbs which surrounded a gaudy bathroom mirror. The blade pressed firmly into the tender inner arm flesh enough to produce a single bubble of blood at one corner.

He kissed the soft warm flesh of the girl's thigh just above where the ridiculous stocking top ended. Her scent was intoxicating – everything he had ever dreamed a woman would smell like and more.

The blade cuts deep, leaving a sparkling red trail under the harsh light. He pulls the blade all the way up to the crook of his elbow in a slow but steady straight line.

A few cans jump and scatter as he pulls the trigger on a shotgun – a SPAS-12 semi-automatic 12-gauge just like the game warden used in the movie Jurassic Park. Just as the day it really happened, he has a brief spark of curiosity concerning how that blast would affect human flesh.

Again the girl in the stockings. He had paid the main in the flannel shirt all of eighty dollars and a few minutes later she had come walking down the sidewalk to his back door. She stood about five-three and wore short strappy heels which clicked in the cold night air.

He lifts the blade and looks with wonder at the fact that it actually has no blood on it.

The world spun as his beat-up old car spun on the ice. He bounced off the wall a few times and ended up facing the wrong way looking dead into the approaching lights of a tractor trailer.

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He rushed out into the coldness and quietly asked the girl to take off her shoes so she wouldn't wake anyone else in the house. She smiled a bit of a crooked grin and happily agreed.

Another trigger is pulled. This time on a Chinese assault rifle. The group on the regulation target is tight. Very tight.

He pushes the girl away from him and guides her onto the butterscotch loveseat. He parts her thighs and runs his fingers through her pubic hair, probing for what lies beneath. As he leans in closer

The alarm beside his bed went off.

It was playing something twangy about a front porch and everyone being happy and friendly. Loomis was pretty sure the hick singing this wasn't visualizing the people he saw every day in the ghetto on his way to work. They were all sitting out on their front porches – or the stoop, if that's what you want to call it. He was sure they all got along just fine so long as each and every crack rock got sold by the right people.

He reached over and slapped the off button with a practiced lunge. He knew there would be hell to pay if he let the twanging box wake up Mary. If she was aroused she would make a point of letting him know how hard it was for her to go back to sleep, or worse she might even get up and then he wouldn't have the peace and quiet of the morning to get ready to face the day. She rolled over and farted as he got out of the bed. It sounded all wet and slappy, kind of like a walrus giving birth. Whoever said girls don't fart had never met Mary.

He stumbled into the kitchen and rinsed out the coffee pot. He ground up some fresh Columbian dark roast and set it to brew. He fished a couple of pills out of the army of bottles lined up on the window sill by the kitchen sink and washed them down with a glass of cold water.

He set the glass down next to the fancy little filter faucet thing just as the cat hopped up onto the counter. The cat gave him a "piss off" glance and sauntered up to the filter faucet. A drop of water glistened on the tip of the thing and the cat licked it as if it were his own personal fountain. The surface tension or air pressure or something changed and the cat was rewarded with a trickle from the faucet. The small grey and black cat continued to lick at the faucet long after the water had stopped coming.

Loomis wandered into the bathroom and brushed his teeth then started the shower. It was the same thing every day. Turn on the water, let it hit the drain and knock away yesterday's clump of Mary-hair, then grab it before it gets

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tangled in the drain again so he can toss it into the toilet. Same deal. Different day. The hair in the drain and her inability to ever put things away were just some of the little things on the surface which irritated him. He wasn't able to recognize the irritation for what it really was.

If you had asked him, he wouldn't have been able to say he felt depressed. He knew he was depressed, but he felt it more as a tired ache which he could will away by occupying his mind with something he enjoyed. The trouble was, each day his ability to discern between things he enjoyed and those which pissed him off was slipping away. He had long ago lost any rational understanding of where his free time went, but he had no problem blaming it on Mary.

Loomis felt that as long as he could get out of the house and get away from the irritation his wife's behavior caused him he could be happy going to his job. There wasn't anything at his job, save Marleen the busy-body, which caused him the level of irritation he felt when he was home, so he was able to hide the fact that he despised every level of his day to day existence even from himself.

Once dressed, he put his coffee into a silver "Club Mom" travel mug and he set off on his way to work. Their current location had blessed him with nothing but back roads until he hit the parkway into D.C., so the twenty mile drive usually took about an hour. It took a little more if some asshole decided he wanted to park his pickup truck in the trunk of a Subaru. The drive to work today was jam-packed full of assholes. There was a light mist which fogged the air around the roads. The rain was actually very light. Most of the water was spray from car tires. Any time the weather turned the slightest bit sour, he could be sure the drive would take longer. It seemed to him that none of the people making this commute had ever seen rain before, so they had to slow down and admire the beauty of the falling drops. He passed three fender-benders in the first four miles of his drive. All of them had been rear-ended – most likely by someone captivated by the glistening dew rolling down the windshield of their giant SUV.

The only good thing which came out of the rainy commute was that once he was near the city, the traffic was lighter than normal. Since the rain brought out the worst in everyone, a wet day sent a lot of the commuters to the Metro. This freed up extra parking spaces in town and made the end of his drive through Georgetown almost enjoyable.

His office was a short walk from the Foggy Bottom metro stop, but lately he had been driving in. He parked across the street from the office in one of the garages which was a little more inconvenient to get out of at the end of the day, but it was ten dollars cheaper than the other ones.

He took the elevator up from the parking garage which put him into the lobby of some hotel. He followed a neatly dressed brunette as she clicked her way through the tiled lobby and out the door to K Street. She held the first door for him and smiled as he got the second door for her. She turned and headed the opposite way down the street. Loomis turned toward his office and promptly forgot about her.

He crossed the street and went into the semi-secret side door which was supposed to be the service entrance. It was right by the mail room and he had to pass by the x-ray equipment that was used to scan all incoming packages.

The company he worked for was international in scope – not just in their operations, but in their legality as well. When he walked into the building which occupied an entire block of one of those fancy triangular corners that resulted from the “State” avenues running diagonally across the city, he was no longer in the United States. Since it wasn’t an embassy, he always figured he was in a sort of political limbo, but he did know the rules and regulations of the U.S. government didn’t matter here. The first thing he’d noticed in that regard was that some people smoked in their offices. Most of the smokers went out and polluted the air around the back entrance, but some still clung to the notion that if they’re going to blacken a lung, they might as well do it in comfort.

The building itself was 11 floors. It had a cylindrical atrium that opened through the center of the building all the way up to the glassed roof. That, coupled with the odd shape of the building, could make finding your way around just a single floor a bit of a challenge.

He scanned his badge again at the front desk and then made his way to the elevator. He took it down to level 1 and headed for the cafeteria. The cafeteria was one floor below the main entrance with the atrium and occupied the space just below the huge open area on the rest of the floors.

Loomis scanned the bagel cart then checked the grill area. He opted for a pile of bacon and some scrambled eggs and cut a huge slice off of a fresh roll of some kind of heavy Italian bread. He cut some mozzarella off of a giant block of fresh cheese to go with the bread, then he took it all to the cashier and checked out for less than two bucks.

Back in the elevator, he pushed the button for floor 2.

Half of the second floor was office space and the rest was split between the help desk and the computer data center.

He slipped through the security door to the help desk as it clicked open. He made his way down the short hall toward the computer lab where he and a few of the other technicians worked. Even in the secure computer operations center, they liked to hide the business end of tech support since it tended to involve a lot of beating, banging, scraping and cursing.

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He scanned his badge once again at the door to the lab. The lock clicked and he pulled it open and started up the padded ramp into the raised floor lab area. He was about half-way down the ramp when he noticed that the back wall was missing and he could see right out into cubicle-land.

“Hey Loomis,” a tall blonde lady said.

“Renee, what the hell is going on here?” Loomis asked.

“They decided to move us to the 5th floor. They want to make the space the programmers are in more congruous or some shit like that. We’re going to be in the conference room upstairs until they get the new lab built,” she said. “Oh – and we’re going to get to share it with a couple of new development guys who they’ve brought in to design a new standard computer setup. It should be a real blast.”

“Yeah. I bet.” Loomis said. He looked around and noticed that his desk was completely bare. At about the same time, a burly mover came in and tilted it onto a dolly and wheeled it away. He had nowhere to put his breakfast.

“They’ve already got the conference room set up for us. It’s first class all the way. Cardboard boxes taped to the tables so they don’t get scratched. Cardboard runners on the carpet – I guess so we don’t track the place up with our muddy shoes. Two power strips in the middle of the room for twenty computers and – the best part – one air conditioning vent,” she said.

“Christ, it’s going to be like a sauna in there if the weather heats up.”

“Well, they’re saying we’re going to be in there for three weeks tops. So that puts us at the beginning of April and we’ll have a new lab with all the latest and greatest. And it should beat the heat,” Renee said.

“You know it’s going to take them longer. I bet we’re still in there in September.” Loomis said.

He spent the rest of the day setting up his new office space. This was even worse than the people out in the cubicles had it. No dividers at all. Just conference tables set up in a circle with a couple of servers parked in the middle and techs and programmers lined up two per table. The cardboard was a nice touch, especially considering that within five minutes of sitting down and typing an e-mail he had goo from the packing tape they had used to stick it to the tables gunking up his hands. By lunchtime he was sweating. The computers were really doing a number to heat up the room.

He found himself constantly glancing up no matter what he was working on. The people on either side of him could easily see what he was working on and it bothered him to think his level of privacy could vanish so quickly. He tried tilting and swiveling his monitor this way and that but still he felt like he was on stage being observed by an audience. The only time during the day he managed to lose this feeling was when one of the guys next to him left for a few hours.

He gave up and decided to leave early. He stuck a few notes into the shoulder bag he sometimes used for bringing CD's and books and things to work. It also served to take work home when the need arose. He caught the elevator down and rode in silence, beating the 4:30 rush by a wide margin.

At the lobby, he walked past the security guard who was busy watching people scan their badges and walk through the turnstiles. He was well past the security station when the guard noticed his bag.

“Laptop?” The guard asked.

“No. Just papers,” Loomis answered.

“OK,” came the disinterested response.

He had learned long ago that the guards had been instructed to log any laptops entering or leaving the building. He hadn't heard anything specific, but he assumed their portability increased theft. The guards never asked to search your bag and never questioned when you told them you didn't have a laptop – even if your commuter bag said “DELL” on the side of it since it was left over from someone who decided they wanted a custom laptop bag, as Loomis' was.

His drive home usually took less time than the drive to work. He either managed to get out early because he had to visit another site to fix a problem or he got stuck doing something overtime and missed rush hour entirely. Today he had to swing by one of the outposts which was near his house so he ended up getting home before Mary left for work.

Mary was a classically trained pianist. As far as Loomis was concerned she played better than anyone he had ever heard – even people who got put on records and TV. Mary, however, felt otherwise. She was never good enough, and it was never worth playing if other people could do it, too. No matter what he did, he couldn't convince her of how good she actually was and there was no way he could make her enjoy playing music. She had tried for a long time to get by as a music teacher but the stresses of dealing with other people wore her down so much that she had to quit. These days she was working as an inventory specialist – one of those people you see in Home Depot with the scanner and the tags going through all the shelves and counting this many hammers, that many pallets of shingles.

He walked into the house just as she was finishing up packing her lunch. He could see that she had packed a couple of yogurt smoothies, pomegranate juice, and a sandwich. He hoped that would satisfy her so she wouldn't call him halfway through her shift asking him what she should eat.

She kissed him goodbye and told him she would be home at ten. Then she left without any fuss at all.

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He didn't complain.

Loomis was tired. He was tired of his job. He was tired of Mary. He missed his son and he missed the life that he thought he should have had. He spent these afternoons staring into space daydreaming about the very same things that haunted his sleep. In the daylight the memories were happy, glorious times that he wished he could relive again and again, relishing every moment.

At night, however, he realized that most of these memories reflected the bad choices he had made in his life. His subconscious grasped that the things and the times he longed for would be great to go and do over – but do differently. Therefore, his daytime yearnings turned into sleepless nightmares. But it didn't stop the train of thought every day.

He had been nineteen. And he wanted to die. After all, his best friend had taken the easy way out, so why couldn't he? He did fear the consequences his soul might suffer if he took his own life, but sometimes life got him so down and depressed that he honestly thought ending it all was the best answer. Even so, he still tried to rationalize with himself. He had never been popular – especially with girls. At nineteen he was still a virgin. He'd never even kissed anyone other than a quick smack on the lips and even that had been years down the road.

Somehow, he came to the conclusion that he couldn't kill himself without experiencing sex first-hand. Sex with another person, that is. After all, he did have quite a bit of experience with sex involving the hand. He wasn't sure how to go about this until he overheard a conversation at his college job.

He was working a few nights at the college radio station playing Jane's Addiction and Alice in Chains for the "alternative" crowd. On one occasion he had to suffer through his show while the office witch carried on outside the broadcast booth with someone who had a different shift.

The office witch was a giant of a woman. She had long curly red hair springing off the top her head like crabgrass. She waddled around in long flowing dresses and skirts all the while posting sign after sign and notice after notice about what you CAN NOT DO AT A COLLEGE RADIO STATION or what you ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO DO AT THE TOP OF THE HOUR. If there's a decorating style known for its artistic use of scrap paper, different color magic marker and all capital letters then she was its all time master.

She wasn't paid by the university. In fact, she held a volunteer position which had somehow grown from doing an afternoon classical music shift to being supreme monitor of everyone's daily actions. And, as if the signs weren't

enough, she would poke her big round freckled face in and make sure you had noticed and were aware of exactly why she had posted the latest round of edicts.

On the night in question, she was laughing like a lunatic about something and he was trying to drown her out until he heard the words flow out around the giggles.

“Escort Service.”

He perked up instantly.

“Can you believe it?” she asked. “Someone is running an escort service in Cumberland. It’s right in the newspaper in the classifieds – Discreet Escort Service.”

“No way.” The other person said.

“Yeah – my brother called last night to get the details. They said they have two services available. For forty dollars you can take a nice lady out on the town and have a nice dinner or date. Then, for the more liberal customer, they offer an additional service. For a fee the lady will gladly go to your home or a hotel and provide you with her pleasure services.”

He instantly drowned her out again. But he knew what he had to do.

Back in the present, in his living room, his thoughts started to derail and go on to something else but he forced the memory to come back and play through.

He had called the ‘Discreet Escort Service.’ They told him exactly what he had overheard at the radio station. Only when they described it he understood that you didn’t have to partake of the first option. He understood that they didn’t really expect anyone to do so. The fellow on the phone laid it out for him.

“It’s a hundred and twenty for an hour with the lady. Eighty for a half hour. The fee goes to the service so you should also tip the girl. We can come to your house or if you prefer we can come to a hotel. The choice is yours.”

He had thanked the man for the information and hung up.

His mind had raced wondering if he could spend the eighty dollars and still make his car insurance payment. It was the only bill he had since he still lived at home with his mom and step-dad.

Come Friday, he got his paycheck for \$126. The car insurance was \$175 so that clinched it for him. He couldn’t pay the car insurance anyhow, so what could it hurt to give eighty dollars to a whore?

He called again and tried to figure out if they were offering a hotel somewhere which he didn’t have to pay for or if he was supposed to get a room, too. They didn’t seem to understand what he was asking – they just kept saying he could go to any hotel and they would be happy to come there. He

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knew he couldn't afford a room as well as a whore, so he waited until everyone was asleep for the night. Then he had called the guy at the service. Of the choices offered, he picked a 24-year old brunette and asked that she come in heels with a garter belt and black stockings. The man informed him that stockings were standard issue. He gave the address and hung up.

The next hour was one of the longest of his life. But, finally, someone showed up. A Chevette parked in the alley behind the house. He watched from the window as a man got out and made his way down the walk.

Before the man could knock, Loomis had opened the back door.

A scruffy fellow in a plaid flannel shirt stood at his door. He had long grey hair and a full beard and moustache.

"The girl is in the car. Give me the money and I'll send her in," the man said.

Loomis handed him four twenty dollar bills.

"I'll be back when you have five minutes left to let you know your time is almost up," the man explained further.

The man hurried back up the walk to the Chevette. Just as he turned to get in the car, Loomis heard a thump from upstairs.

"Shit," he said.

He listened closely and heard the obvious sounds of his step-father getting out of bed for his nightly grazing.

Loomis scrambled out the door and up the sidewalk to the car just as the man was getting in. He knocked on the window. The man opened it a crack.

"I know this sounds stupid," he said, trying not to look at the girl in the passenger seat, but noticing that she was pretty cute, "but my step-father just got up. He's a light sleeper until he has a midnight snack so can you guys hang out for a little bit and I'll come back out when the coast is clear?"

The guy in the car tried not to laugh.

Loomis stood in the cold November air, shivering without a coat.

"Sure. We'll hang out," the guy said.

Loomis went back inside and found his step-father elbow-deep into a box of Cookie Crisp, standing by the sink and wearing nothing but a pair of white briefs.

"Who's that," his step-father asked.

"Trevor needed his movie back," Loomis answered. The lie rolled off without a thought.

“Tell him to walk over next time. He needs the exercise,” his step father said.

“Sure. I’ll mention that.” Loomis had said.

His step-father polished off the box of Cookie Crisp and washed it down with some flat root beer.

“Keep it down to a dull roar,” he said as he traipsed back upstairs.

Loomis waited what seemed like an eternity for the sounds of his step-father snoring. It was probably less than five minutes before they came.

He quietly opened the back door and went back up to the idling Chevette.

“Everything’s OK,” he said when the man rolled down the window again.

The man had rolled up his window and leaned over to say something to the girl. She opened her door and got out then gently shut the door. She walked over to Loomis and they both started toward the house. Her heels clicked on the cold cement and Loomis cringed with each step she took. After about three steps he couldn’t take it any more and he asked her to stop.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want anybody else to come down. Can you take off your shoes so they don’t click?”

She smiled at him. Her smile was a little bit crooked and she bit her lower lip on the right side.

“Sure. No problem.”

She slipped her heels off and continued down the sidewalk in her stockings. Loomis opened the door and showed her inside to the TV room which had been added onto the back of the house. It had a sliding door with no lock but he figured it was safer than taking her up to his bedroom. If his step-father got up again and heard anything he would hopefully assume that any noises were coming from a porno tape and he wouldn’t interfere. He and his step-father had an unspoken agreement regarding pornography which fell along the lines of “don’t ask don’t tell.” His mother did not approve of either of them watching “filthy movies” so they did their best to coordinate hiding spots and steering clear of each other.

His head was racing with a thousand different thoughts. He spotted images from movies and scenes from books. He heard Julia Roberts explaining that she wouldn’t kiss because it was too personal. He saw a thousand different sexual acts from porn movies and a dozen names of diseases all racing through his mind.

“I’m April. What’s your name?” the girl asked.

“Charles. But everyone calls me Loomis.” He replied.

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“You look pretty young, Loomis. How old are you?” April asked.

“Nineteen.” He said.

“Do you go to school over there?” she asked, gesturing to the high school behind his house.

“No. I graduated last year. I go to FSU now,” he said.

“Oh. OK. I went to Allegany. Class of ’86. But no hard feelings, OK?” she said, and let out a quiet little laugh.

He stood looking at her, taking in the overall softness of her.

“I guess I should tell you I’ve never done this before,” he said.

“What – you mean this is the first time you’ve used the service?” she asked.

“No.” he said. “Any of it. I’ve never...”

“Relax.” She cut him off. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of you. Just take off your shirt.”

He began to unbutton his shirt and she did the same. He felt his eyes get big as she let it slide down her arms to the floor. He reached to start undoing his pants but she reached out and pushed his hands aside.

“Let me help you,” she said.

She knelt down and unfastened his belt. She undid the button and gently slid the zipper down. With a soft caress she slid his pants and underwear down in one fluid motion and at the same time leaned in and took him into her mouth. He shuddered as she ran the warmth of her tongue around him.

She drew back for a second and he reached down to her, gently pulling her back up to a standing position. She was shorter than he was so he found himself staring down into her green eyes.

“Do you kiss?” he asked.

She answered by pulling his face into hers and prying his lips open with her tongue. As she kissed him, he reached around her and unfastened her bra and let it fall to the floor.

They kissed and fondled for a few minutes but the thought of the ticking clock hurried him along. He pulled away and watched as she stepped out of her skirt revealing that she wasn’t wearing any panties.

He also noticed that she was indeed wearing a black garter belt and stockings as he had requested. The stockings, however, were the thigh-high stay up kind with a series of rubber bands at the top. They didn’t stretch up in a “V” shape at the top since they weren’t really designed to be worn with a garter belt.

Loomis gently nudged her over to the couch and she sat down with her legs spread open. He knelt down before her and caressed her stocking clad legs and leaned in to discover in person the thing he had longed for and had looked at for so long in magazines and videos.

“Where, exactly, is your clitoris?” he asked her.

She took his hand in hers and guided his index finger to the spot.

The sex they had was hurried and rough and gentle and kind. He came with her on top and he stared open-mouthed when she stood up from him and his seed came spilling out of her. He pushed her back to the couch and dove into her wetness with abandon tasting the mix of their two scents. He was instantly hard again and they continued, switching positions every minute or two until he found himself on the bottom again.

As he looked up at her knowing that his time would soon be up, he was no longer concerned with the time limit. He was able to take in all of the sensations and enjoy the moment for what it was. He looked deep into her eyes, knowing full well that she was doing her job and really didn't care one way or the other about him, but he looked anyway and tried to show her just how much he appreciated what she was doing for him.

She responded by giving a twitch and rolling her eyes back into her head. He had his hands on her waist as she rode him and she now raked her fingernails down the front of him, clawing at the light hair on his belly as she shook and moaned.

The first one was amazing. He was in tune with her and able to feel every contraction as she came, riding him harder and harder. She opened her eyes and looked down at him and smiled, but just for a second before another orgasm rocked through her. This one was twice as powerful as the first one, but not quite as big as the next two.

“Can you come again?” she asked him as she tried to regain her breath.

“I'm close, but I don't think so,” he answered.

She only nodded then switched to a different motion, swirling her hips. Her stockings massaged his thighs and he lost himself in that silky sensation as she came again, this time falling forward and kissing him, forcing herself into him as she wrapped her arms around his head.

“How was that for your first time?” she asked.

“Very nice,” he answered.

Loomis heard a knock at the back door.

“That's Gary. He's going to tell us we have five minutes left. I'll go tell him I'm OK.”

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She pulled on her skirt, grabbed her shirt and slid the door open. She walked toward the kitchen and Loomis grabbed his pants. A second later she came back in and quickly slid the door shut.

“Somebody – I guess your step-dad is in the kitchen. I just heard him tell Gary that he must have the wrong house.”

Loomis thought for a second.

“Well, you can go out the front door and head around the side of the house.”

He noticed she had left her bra on the floor. He hoped for a second that she wouldn't notice.

“That'll work,” she said as she put her coat on over her unbuttoned shirt. She grabbed her shoes and her bra.

Loomis opened the door to check the situation. His step-father was on the back porch watching Gary go back to his Chevette.

He took April through the dining room and out to the front door. He let her out and quickly called her back.

“I forgot your tip. Here.” He said as he thrust a twenty dollar bill into her hand.

“You really don't need to,” she said.

“No, really, I just wish I had more. Thanks for this. Really.”

She gave him a quick kiss then dashed down the front porch steps and around the side of the house.

“And out of my life,” Loomis muttered as he sat in his darkening living room.

He knows every sexual encounter since has been measured against that one. Plenty of them blow it away, especially the sex he and Mary used to have. But it's always this one that sets him back the hardest. Maybe it's because of the circumstances – that desire to taste sex before killing himself, but when he dredges up the full-fledged memory complete with taste and smell he knows he's back in a downward spiral. But this isn't really the first sign. After all, he got the rifle shells out of the lockbox earlier this week.

He was roused from his introspection by the sound of his wife coming in the back door. He grimaced and shook his head in disgust.

“Hey! I'm hungry. Where's my dinner?” she asked, even before setting her keys on the table.

Falling Leaves

the second part: departing

No way out of your misery
Alone in pain and agony
Lay depressed and hollow
One thought in your mind
-No Tomorrow

-- Sami Lopakka

Falling Leaves

By the second week in the conference room, things were totally unbearable. The development guys had managed to finagle cubes somewhere else because the heat from the computers was so bad. It was down to Renee and Loomis in the stuffy cardboard confines, and even that was too much since there was nothing they could do about the servers which had to run 24/7.

The machines had starting having problems earlier in the week that were most likely due to the heat. The company knew they had to do something but they were in a bind – the construction contractors had just informed them that it would probably be the middle of October before they had all the materials in place to start construction on the new lab.

All Loomis knew was that something was going to be done about the air conditioning. Renee didn't know anything either. She just sat at her spot working on a machine which could no longer detect hard drives. It was only 11 A.M. and she already had sweat rings growing on the arms of her blouse.

Loomis went home that evening and deviated from his normal routine. He didn't fall onto the couch and dream of better days. Instead he wandered into the bathroom and stared into the mirror. He did have a brief flash of remembrance of a college photo assignment. It had been a black and white study in contrast. He had used the naked bulbs of his mother's bathroom vanity and the white formica countertop to blank out all but the shadowy silhouette of his forearm and the Hershey's syrup he'd used for blood to make some portraits of suicide.

He reached into the medicine cabinet and pulled out the box of razor blades. He slipped one from its thin cardboard sheath and flipped it a few times into his palm. So light, yet sturdy. And sharp. He cut into the callus on his thumb with it to test the sharpness.

He hated his life. He was sick of his wife, sick of his job. He felt cold and empty and alone – the same as he'd felt twenty years ago when he called the escort service. Only this time, he didn't have any regrets. He was done and he had done it all. He had fucked whores and willing lovers but had never found any satisfaction other than with Mary.

Remembering the college photo, he rolled up his sleeve and touched the cold carbon steel to his wrist. He pulled it across the taut flesh of his inner forearm, but it barely grazed the surface. It didn't even leave a mark.

He felt a tear on his cheek as he dropped the blade into the sink.

“Why can't I do it?” he silently asked himself.

He threw himself onto his bed and cried just as he had done every other time he'd managed to bring himself to the brink.

Ryan Adam

But Mary had turned to stone (*ive?*) when Jeffy died, and she withdrew even further into herself. She studied mental health books and convinced herself – then managed to convince doctors – that she had various syndromes and disorders. She was medicated day and night and was just drifting through life concerned only with what she was going to eat for her next meal and making sure he was always around when she needed him.

He had made more money than he could spend, even still had all of Jeff's college fund still invested and making money. But nothing made him happy. When he tried to do the things which used to make him happy, he found they hurt too much. Either they reminded him of his son, or they forced the reality of his failure to be more than an office drone into his perception.

Jeff Loomis had been born after an uncomplicated pregnancy. Mary had gone through a miscarriage before so everyone was worried, but Jeffy came without a hitch. He grew faster than Loomis ever imagined was possible, and was reading and talking and running around the house before he thought a week had gone by.

Star Wars toys and Legos were scattered all through the house and the back yard was full of swings and tree houses and forts. There were birthday parties and soccer games and seven years of bliss.

Everything he had hoped and dreamed – the bands, the book writing, some sort of fame – all dissolved the moment he first saw his son. He had more reason than ever to live and be happy and all his depression vanished in a heartbeat. And came back just as fast.

Falling Leaves

the third part: flashing back (november)

Drunken time bombs set to detonate
When happy hour's over they're off to celebrate
Their vision's but a blur, they barely see the road
Been drinking for so long they're starting to erode

-- Steve Souza

Beneath the grass my treasure
Under the sand my sweet one

-- Pasi Koskinen

Falling Leaves

It was a Friday in November. Just like the last time. Only this time there weren't any guns. Just cars.

He had gone to pick Jeff up at school. It was afternoon. The date was November 5th. He could never forget that date. Would never forget the day.

It was a beautiful autumn day. The rain from earlier in the week had begun to dry up. The rain had been heavy and had already knocked most of the leaves from the trees. He clearly remembered the slick patches they left in the yard where one wrong step would plant you firmly on your ass.

It was chilly but bright and sunny. He had spent the afternoon outside working on his beater-mobile. All by himself he had replaced the cylinder head on the old Chevy van and he had the thing back together just in time to wash up and go pick up Jeff at school.

He didn't take the van. Mary didn't like him taking Jeff in it since it didn't have modern conveniences like airbags. In fact, it only had lap belts but he had modified it by installing the shoulder harnesses from a Volkswagen Beetle. He still wondered to this very day if things would have been different if he had taken the van. It certainly stuck out like a sore thumb with its faded light blue paint and noisy exhaust. Maybe the guy would have noticed an eyesore like that. Then again, maybe not.

Jeff had been sitting on the bench in front of the school waiting for him. Loomis pulled up to the curb and Jeffy hopped up and ran over to the car. Unconcerned with the paper in his hand, he grabbed the handle to the Volvo and tore open the door.

"Daddy! Daddy!" he yelled as he jumped into the car.

He threw his bookbag into the back as he knelt on the seat and leaned over and gave Loomis a big hug. Loomis hugged him right back, lifting him off of the seat and swinging him around in the car.

"Sit down and put on your seatbelt," he had said.

Jeff sat right down and pulled the belt around him.

"Daddy lookit, lookit Daddy," he said, holding out his now mangled paper.

"What's that, Jeffy?" Loomis had asked.

"Remember when you helped me with my spelling words?" Jeffy asked.

Loomis nodded as he pulled out of the loop in front of the school.

"I got an A on my spelling test." Jeffy smiled as he held up the paper.

Loomis noticed the big red "A" and the smiley face drawn on the paper. He had time enough to register the similarity between the teacher's smiley face and the grin Jeffy had on his own face before everything came crashing down.

Loomis found himself twisted at an odd angle. When he opened his eyes he saw red glazed asphalt. He blinked a few times and realized the red was clearing. The asphalt, however, was touching his cheek. It took him a second to realize the car was on its side. He tried to look over at Jeffy but he couldn't move his head that far.

It was only a few seconds later that he heard people moving around the car.

“Are you OK in there?” someone shouted.

He managed a hoarse reply, “I'm pinned under the steering wheel. I can't tell if my son is alright.”

“Hang in there mister,” came the reply. “The cops are on the way.”

It had taken them two hours to pull him from the car. They first had to untangle it from the motorcycle and the remains of the rider before they could set it down on its mangled wheels.

It was months later before he was able to put the whole thing together for himself. It had happened so fast, and the impact had wiped some of the memory but it did come back to him. It didn't really help matters much since what he remembered pretty much fit with what everyone had described to him.

Vernon Stotts, a kid only nineteen years old, had been the one who hit them. He was in his father's Lincoln Town Car doing about 95 on the school road. He had been drinking all afternoon and he tore up over the hill to the right of the school driveway like a bat out of Hell. He missed three stop signs and clipped the back corner of Loomis' car just as he was pulling out of the school. A second later and the asshole would have just missed them.

The car slid sideways and the force of the impact was so hard that the right side tires managed to grip just long enough to start the car flipping sideways. On the second flip, it slammed down on the guy on the motorcycle. It flipped twice more before coming to a rest against a tree. The roof was hammered in by the impact with the tree. If he hadn't been pinned against the side window by the force of the first impact he would have been crushed by the roof where it hit the tree.

He just barely managed to escape the wrath of the tree. Jeffy wasn't so lucky.

Loomis had been a devout Catholic all of his life. He attended mass for his son, but he hadn't been to church a single time since. He had been furious at God for taking his son. His fury had eventually dissipated, subsiding into an active disbelief in things religious. Even so, he had never been able to fully shake the indoctrination and mind bending he had been raised on.

Falling Leaves

Whenever he lifted the gun or the razor, thoughts of eternal damnation always prevented him from following through.

Today, Loomis decided to go back to the church where they had attended services for his son. As he pulled into the parking lot, he felt his chest tighten up and he could feel the depression get heavier, weighing him down even more. He sat in the car, trying to brush away the memories of the pint-sized coffin and all the crying.

He walked to the ornate double doors and gave a tentative tug on one of the brass handles. Despite its weight, it came open at the slight touch.

Inside the chapel, the light was much dimmer than the bright sunlight outside. The sunlight did stream in through the stained glass windows, but its brightness was muted by the thick colored glass. Ahead of him, a solid beam of white shone from a clear pane set in the front wall just above the image of Jesus hanging on the cross. The beam reminded him of the part in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where crossing the light caused a bed of spikes to shoot out of the wall.

As he walked down the aisle, he was careful to step around the sunbeam. He wasn't even sure if the priest would be in at this time. It had been so long since he'd been here that he had no idea what sort of schedule the church kept. He did remember where the confessional was, however. He made his way over to it and wondered if the lack of anyone waiting signaled that this was a bad time or if he was just fortunate.

The door to the little booth was open a crack so he went in and knelt before the screen. A second later the partition was drawn back.

"God bless you and keep you, my son," the priest said.

Loomis hesitated, then genuflected more out of habit than anything else.

"Forgive me father. It's been," Loomis paused. "Christ, it's been eleven years since I've even set foot inside a church."

The priest nodded behind his screen.

"Even so, the Lord is still with you. He knows you have shouldered a great burden and does not hold anything against you," the priest said.

"Father, I need your help," Loomis said.

"I am here to serve God's will," the priest responded.

Loomis shook his head in disgust. They were still just as pompous as ever.

“I’m finished. Done. I can’t do it anymore. My wife is intolerable and goes through life like some sort of robot, just eating and watching television. There is no intimacy, no physical contact, no conversation unless she decides to start an argument about something stupid. I can’t take it anymore,” Loomis said.

“So, are you desiring to get a divorce?” The priest asked.

“No,” Loomis said. “I need absolution. I want to be forgiven for sins I have not yet committed.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” the priest said.

“I need clean slate so I can kill myself,” Loomis said.

He continued.

“I have nothing left. My marriage is a shambles. My son is dead. My job is intolerable and I just want to be done with it all.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way, my son,” the priest said.

“But...”

“No, listen to me,” the priest interrupted. “All of God’s children think that their situation is the worst, but God works in ways we don’t understand. It’s part of His great mystery that there is important work for you to do, even if you can’t see it. You were given life through Christ’s sacrifice and it’s blasphemous to compare the toils of your life to the suffering of our Lord and Savior. You must listen to me and trust what I am telling you. There is a reason, even if we don’t have the power to comprehend His glorious intention.”

“I was afraid you might say something like that,” Loomis said as he stood up. “Thanks for wasting my time, Father.”

Loomis stormed out of the confessional, slamming the door behind him.

the fourth part: flashing back again

Just take those old records off the shelf
I'll sit and listen to 'em by myself
Today's music ain't got the same soul...

-- Bob Seger

Falling Leaves

The next morning, he woke up alone. He had been taking the day off every other Friday since he had accumulated more personal days than he could figure out how to use. The company policy on days off was “use it or lose it” so he figured it was best to use it. He threw on some sweat pants and a t-shirt and went to the kitchen to find some breakfast.

After checking the contents of the refrigerator and the cabinets, he settled on a box of Cocoa Pebbles. He had no idea how old they were. He couldn't remember buying them recently but they seemed fresh enough when he crunched a few of them. He poured a hefty serving of the Cocoa Pebbles into a double size bowl and splashed some 2% milk on top. He set the milk jug back onto the shelf in the refrigerator door next to Mary's glass bottle of designer skim milk.

When he finished his breakfast, he decided to work on the bookshelf he had been building for the past few months. He felt like he never had enough time to work on it so he went to his shop in the back of the garage and tried to unearth the various components of the bookshelf now that he had some free time.

He'd been building bookshelves for as long as he could remember. He was always getting new or, more accurately, new-to-him books and he always needed more space for them. His latest batch of books had come from his Grandmother's house. The house had been empty for only about a year since one of his cousins had decided to move in and try to keep the place in the family. He wasn't sure when his family had first moved into the big old house, but he knew that his father and his aunts and uncles on that side had all grown up there, so it was probably going on fifty years that it had been part of the family.

Ever since he was little, he could remember venturing down into Grandma's basement and wandering around for hours, getting lost in the maze of narrow aisles between the towering stacks of cardboard boxes and rickety shelves. He could also remember that as he grew older, the spaces between the aisles grew narrow faster than he grew bigger since his Grandma was on a mission to fill the place up. He didn't know when she had been assigned this mission, or who had dispatched the order. He just knew that she was dead-set on maximizing the use of all available space. It had gotten to the point where, in recent years, she refused to allow anyone to go into the basement at all.

But, like all good things, the basement stacks couldn't last forever. When Grandma had decided the house was getting too big for her to handle on her own, she had moved into a retirement community where she had a nice private room all to her self and she was surrounded with pictures and furniture from her house.

And that left it up to his father and his aunts and uncles to tackle the monster that was the basement.

Loomis had missed the first cleaning session. He heard about it at Thanksgiving dinner when his dad's side of the family somehow managed to coordinate all of their schedules and converge from all points and places in the country into one of his aunt's houses. He was amazed that all but one branch of the family tree was present. Only his Uncle David hadn't made it in from Texas. The rest, coming from Ohio, Florida, Kentucky, and assorted parts of Maryland had made the trip. The various children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren took up every available space in his aunt's house, and she ran the thing like a buffet in a decent restaurant.

There were tables everywhere. A table in the kitchen, a big one in the dining room, then two folding card tables in the living room, another card table in the foyer. At least one actual table was set up in the family room downstairs and there were spots on the couches around coffee tables as well.

The food, which consisted of at least two full turkey dinners, brought in from all corners of the continent, was laid out on the kitchen counters and everyone lined up and grabbed what they could and ate until they were sick. The only snafu with the dinner came when some people got confused by a big crock of hot, thick, brown liquid on the counter. The lineup started with turkey and stuffing. Next came some sliced homemade bread. A jump across the sink brought you to sweet-potato casserole, green beans, macaroni and cheese, two different batches of mashed potatoes, and the crock of hot brown goo. There was a spoon in the goo and Mary had picked it up and given the stuff a gentle stir. Loomis could see the liquid was partly separated and had thicker parts morphing around in the lighter, outer layer.

"Is this gravy?" Mary had asked.

Loomis gave it a stir himself to check the consistency of the stuff.

"Looks like gravy to me," he said.

Mary took the spoon from him and ladled the stuff all over her plate. She hit the stuffing, the turkey, the potatoes – all of it. Loomis spooned just a little bit of it onto his pile of homogenized potatoes – he'd gotten some from both bowls so he didn't miss out in case one was better than the other. He made a crater in the pile of potatoes and spilled in some of the gravy, then found his way to the kitchen table.

As he was sitting down, he heard the next batch of people when they encountered the pot of gravy.

"Is that gravy?" someone asked.

Mary took a bite of her turkey.

"I think the gravy is on the stove," he heard someone else say.

Loomis looked over and did indeed see a pot of thicker brown goo on the stove. This pot seemed to have actual chunks of turkey in it, as well.

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He looked over at Mary to see if she had heard this latest news but, as usual, she was in her own world and hadn't heard the gravy conversation.

She did come out of her shell when she tasted the gravy, however.

"Sue, is this gravy over here by the potatoes?" his aunt Leslie asked.

"I think that's apple cider," someone replied. "The gravy is on the stove."

Loomis looked at Mary again and couldn't help but laugh at the pained look she had on her face. She looked like she wasn't sure if she should scream or cry.

"You can go get a new plate. There's plenty of food," he said to her.

"No," was all she said.

Loomis spooned the apple cider from his potatoes and slurped it up. He managed to get most of it out of the potatoes without actually getting much potato into his couple of apple cider sips.

"I'm going to get some real gravy," he said.

"Oh," Mary said. "If you're getting up can you get me some, too? Just put a lot of it all over everything.

He got the gravy sorted out and when he returned, his father and his Uncle Paul were talking about Grandma's basement.

It turned out that several of his aunts and uncles had begun cleaning out the house a few months earlier. They had rented a twenty-foot roll-off dumpster and armed themselves with several rolls of contractor-grade garbage bags. They had somehow managed to clean out over half of the basement already and were all planning to go back down the day after Thanksgiving for round two. This time, his Grandma would be there and she would be allowing people to take mementoes and things they could use from all parts of the house since she couldn't use most of it anymore.

The whole thing struck him as being odd. Here they were, taking it upon themselves to divvy up possessions and throw things away and the lady was still alive and kicking. Everyone was being extremely nice about the whole thing, being sure to mention that they would like to have any particular item, "only if no one else wants it." Still, he knew how his grandmother was. She hadn't accumulated the towering piles in her basement by willingly giving things away.

Loomis and Mary had gotten to Grandma's about 10:30 the next morning. His dad and some of his cousins were already there, but no one had a way to disarm the security system. They waited around outside, dredging up old memories, until someone with an alarm key showed up. Once inside the house,

Loomis followed his father downstairs and had to grab the banister of the basement stairs to keep from falling over.

The place had walls. And a floor. He had never seen them before. He turned left into the middle section of the basement and was awed to see an open door in the back wall and sunlight streaming through a grimy window. There had been an entire workshop hidden behind stacks of boxes. He was certain he had never seen the small tool-shop before.

Back in the larger basement, he saw that one corner was still stacked to the ceiling with boxes of all shapes and sizes – although a large proportion of the boxes were the same double-shoebox size with the same “AVON” lettering on them. They added just a bit of sanity to the chaos, both in the corner and under the steps where more boxes still hadn’t been touched.

He and his father and his uncle Paul started sifting through the corner stack. They came across things he had never imagined could exist. Things like a counter-top electric dishwasher, inflatable clothes hangers, giant Christmas lights and candy canes strung together on a frayed electric line which easily predated WWII. He grabbed up whatever still looked usable – antique crocks, silver plated candle holders, games, glasses, toys – and put them into the middle basement room so they could be examined later by the whole family. The broken mirrors, cracked plastic jugs, boxes of old coupons, bags of pen caps, and half-evaporated Avon cologne all went into trash bags. They happened upon one whole box of assorted mens’ cologne in the most hideous containers he had ever seen.

There was cologne in a rack of bull horns – one horn held the cologne, the other the aftershave. There was cologne in a C.B. radio microphone – complete with a “Breaker 1-9” sticker across the grille. A Viking ship with a red and white striped sail, a race car helmet, and the thing which made him gape, open-mouthed, in disbelief. It was still new and in the box. In a hideous sci-fi font, the box proclaimed, “Electronic Calculator.” He pulled it out of the packaging and found it was a very accurate reproduction of the old calculator his mother and father had when he was growing up. It was palm sized and could run on batteries, but most of the time you just plugged it into the wall. This one, however, didn’t take batteries (but the two-speed electric blender his Uncle Paul found under the steps certainly did) since it was full of cologne. And it didn’t matter what flavor the sticker said the cologne was. It didn’t matter what fancy name they assigned to the contents, every single decorative bottle held the same stinking crap.

They filled a trash bag a third of the way full with cologne bottles. When he lifted it, Loomis was amazed that the bag held under the weight of the liquid and the bottles, but he managed to tie it shut and get it outside without breaking anything. His father wasn’t so lucky. A stray bottle, probably from another box, had broken inside one of the other bags they were filling. When he got back into the basement, he was assaulted by the burning reek of the stuff

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which had finally been unleashed into the world after more than three decades of sitting in darkness. It was bitter and sharp. It was sweet and musky. But, most of all, it was harsh and invading, seeming to want to tear out the soft tissue of his eyes and nose.

Luckily, the stuff evaporated quickly. Before they could rip some paper towels off of an ancient roll, the puddle was already half its original size. His dad threw the towels onto the floor and wiped the remaining mess up with his shoe.

“At least my shoes will smell pretty,” his dad said.

A little while later, they were clearing out the boxes under the steps. Most of these boxes held Christmas decorations, so Loomis took them out to the pile of stuff they were saving. On one of his return trips from the save pile, his dad held out a small blue cardboard tube.

“Know what this is?” he asked.

Loomis took it from him and his eyes grew ten sizes, just like the Grinch’s heart.

“It’s a phonograph cylinder,” Loomis said. “These are from the turn of the century – the last century.”

“You want ‘em?” his dad asked.

“I certainly do if no one else wants them,” Loomis answered.

Loomis knew his Grandmother had been born in 1921. He was pretty sure phonograph discs – records as people today knew them, had been the main format for recorded music from about 1915 up until cassette tapes and compact discs finally took over in his generation. That meant that these records – little round tubes of wax – were from his Grandmother’s family and had somehow been preserved in the darkness underneath the basement steps for who knows how long. Based on his experience with his father’s cleaning methods –which he knew stemmed from his grandfather’s same methods, he hadn’t dared to hope any kind of family history older than a few decades would still be in the house.

He was doubly surprised by what Mary found when they started going through books in the library upstairs. They had started at the top, working through Readers Digest collections and second-rate book club editions to find things worth hanging on to. They had filled up about six of the Avon boxes with lots of twentieth century fiction, some Time-Life picture books, and a collection of National Geographic magazines, all of which was now the reason for his new bookshelf. In the back corner, next to a ukulele filled with mouse turds, Mary found a book and called him over.

“I don’t think I should touch this. Come here,” she said.

“What is it?” he asked.

He came up behind her and she pointed to a thick book bound in red velvet. It had a brass clasp holding the covers together, a huge decorative brass emblem in one corner, and a cracked heart-shaped mirror in another.

Loomis picked it up, surprised at the weight of the cushioned velvet book. He undid the brass latch and carefully opened the cover. Inside were pictures. Two to a page, big 5x7" photos. He noticed a copyright statement on the bottom of the first page. The date was 1894. He gently flipped through the pictures, stopping at one which looked like an older version of the photo above the mantle in the living room of this house. He was sure it was his great-great-grandmother. He flipped through the book noticing family resemblances in all of the photos, but none of them were labeled. In the back of the book, he came across some pages which held three smaller pictures. Some of these were small metal plates with beautiful images on them. He thought they must be daguerreotypes, or tintypes, but they looked much better than the images he had seen in Civil War books and museums. The detail was stunning, and they were as crisp and clear, if not more so, than any modern photo he'd seen.

He got his grandmother to identify some of the photos for him and he placed a slip of paper with these names on each of the photos she could identify.

He had left the house that day with a new sense of purpose. He felt like it was up to him to catalogue and assemble some sort of family history using the photographs and the recordings. He had made it as far as scanning some of the pictures into the computer and e-mailing them to some of his aunts and uncles. His grand scheme of making a video with his Grandmother narrating parts of her life, interspersed with photos of family members and music from the past never came to fruition. Up to this point, he had never found the time for it. And, as always, he was too pissed off about losing the time to realize that his own depression was the cause for it all.

It always amazed him that even if only a few days passed between sessions in his workshop, somehow a huge pile of crap completely unrelated to woodworking made its way onto his workbench. Today he had to move two clothes baskets and a bunch of bike parts before he got down to the actual surface of the workbench.

Biking was another thing Mary had talked him into. She had a knack for finding hobbies and activities which always required a large initial investment to get started doing. There had been the swimming pool at the gym, bowling and tennis, and of course, once the initial thrill wore off, the hundred dollar bowling balls and expensive tennis rackets just sat collecting dust. He was sure the swimming pool wasn't collecting dust – someone was probably using it, just not either of them. The biking had been different, somehow. The

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two of them rode bikes for the entire summer, but Loomis found he had a natural love for the bike and he rode his all the time. Mary only rode on the weekends with him and she got discouraged when her own biking abilities didn't bloom as fast as his had done. This caused her to stop participating all together, and Loomis was convinced that she got upset whenever he brought up the fact that he had gone for a bike ride.

It had taken a bit of work to find a bike suited for him. He was tall and he'd managed to put on some weight over the years. His frame carried the weight well, but it was clear when he started riding the bike that he would do much better if he dropped some weight. To his surprise, he found that biking was self-perpetuating. The more he rode, the more weight he lost and the faster he could go. Before long, he was back down to his pre-college, pre-beer drinking weight and he was taking part in long rides with established bike clubs. Also, the more he rode, the more he felt Mary's discontent. As with his depression, he didn't recognize this for the guilt that it really was.

He finally got started on the bookshelf over an hour after he'd come downstairs. He felt like it was no wonder he felt like he never got time for anything he wanted to do.

Loomis glanced up at the clock, frowning as he noticed that another fifteen minutes had already ticked past. He desperately wished he could slow the thing down or make it run backwards. Somewhere in the back of his mind, thoughts of removing the battery from the old wooden clock hanging on his basement wall so that it could somehow manage to affect all the clocks out there and stop them dead churned around unheeded.

Mary was due back at two o'clock. She might even call him before she got back and that would certainly eat up some more of his time. Although, recently she had withdrawn so much that she didn't spend every free minute she had talking on the phone.

Friday was her day to visit the doctors. Today she only had the headshrinker, but sometimes she was out all day getting her every ache and pain checked out by specialists. Loomis was glad he had good insurance because otherwise they would have gone bankrupt.

In addition to talking on the phone, Mary's only other serious hobby was researching various maladies, both physical and mental. She spent considerable amounts of time reading the DSM-IV casebook, which was some sort of textbook for psychologists to test their ability to diagnose crazy people. Throughout all her researching, she was constantly convinced that she had whatever condition it was she was reading about. The worst part of it was that she did a very good job of convincing medical professionals that she had these

things just because she had such a firm grasp on the intricate details of whatever problem it might be. The thing that got her in trouble was that she didn't retain a lot of it, so when she focused on some new sickness she would let her guard down on one of the other ones and the doctors would stop prescribing or treating for it with no ill effect.

All of this had come about after their son had died. Before then she was just as happy as could be. But, since she couldn't deal with the grief, she put her energy into treating things with which she could better identify.

The one constant in all of her self-medicating was Aspergers Syndrome. As Loomis understood it, Aspergers was a mild form of Autism. As far as Autism was concerned, the only thing he knew about it was what he picked up watching Rainman. And, of course, once Mary picked out some trait of Aspergers which she felt she manifested, then they'd had to watch Rainman and a presentation by Dr. Tony Atwood, who was a leading specialist in Aspergers research. Throughout it all he'd had to respond to her constant questions of, "See – don't I act just like that guy?" "Yeah, I do that, don't I?" He remembered there may have been one or two things which matched her behavior, but overall there was overwhelming evidence that she was simply reading too much into it. In the end, she used all of his protests against her having the thing as just another tool to perfect her display of symptoms and she'd sold the whole thing to the psychologist. What had started as monthly psychiatric visits had quickly blossomed into weekly life-management sessions which allowed all of her current behaviors to bloom.

She had felt the lack of light in the house was causing her to have severe depression, so he had installed all new lighting in the areas where she tended to go. She decided over the course of a weekend to redecorate the whole house, so all of the things he had collected over the years were relegated to boxes in the attic while he was assigned to hang up all the new apple-themed crap she collected at Wal-Mart, Target, and whatever flea markets she came across. Now there were apples everywhere. An apple clock over the stove in the kitchen, apple burner covers and apple dish towels to match little apple placemats and napkin rings. In the living room were framed pictures of apple orchards and an antique churn for making apple sauce occupied the corner by the window where his display case had been.

He didn't mind the apple-decorated salt and pepper shakers or the baskets and dish towels with apples embroidered upon them. The thing which was determined to drive him crazy, however, was the giant apple which was now perched on the counter next to the sink. It sat between the cutting board (which had a porcelain apple inlaid into the middle of it) and the canisters (which were plain white, and featured "wood" spoons, according to the packing list which had been enclosed with them.) This apple was about the size of a large adult head. It was very red and had a fake green leaf sticking right out the top of it beside the equally artificial stem. As far as he could tell, it served no

Falling Leaves

useful purpose at all. At least the apple clock and the apple rugs were doing something. This was just a big fake apple sitting and taking up space.

Every time he came into the kitchen now, he had an irresistible urge to pick the thing up and examine it. The apple was light for its size. It appeared to have been made from one half a giant gourd and painted red. He wasn't sure if it was hollowed out or if there were still gourd guts inside of it. Either way, the thing creeped him out and every time he saw it he had to curb his desire to smash the thing onto the edge of the counter top just to see what kind of red-on-the-outside / green-brown-on-the-inside mess he could make of the thing.

Glancing up again he was relieved to see this particular train of thought derailment had only cost him a few minutes, but still the panic was there. She was going to be home in less than an hour and a half. Maybe earlier. After all, she did drive like a bat out of hell. And there it was. That black streak he hid so far down deep he didn't even really know it was there. The thought flashed out like a gunshot in church.

"Maybe she'll have an accident."

God, he fucking hoped so.

Jack-knifed trailer truck. Speeding ambulance. Meth-fiend on two-wheels. She was bound to have a wreck. She never paid attention to the road and always had at least fifteen on the posted limit. She was due for a crack-up. Trouble was, he'd lost count of the actual crackups. What he really felt was that she was due for a big one since she'd always managed to wiggle out of the little ones she was in. Always the other guy's fault. Never her that did anything wrong. No, never her that slammed on her brakes at the last second for a light which had been red for a minute and a half – she just hadn't noticed all that stopped traffic since she was talking into her cell phone even faster than she drove.

Therefore it couldn't be her fault that the guy behind her parked his car in her trunk.

It was these moments, when he lost the ability to keep control of the time, that he dropped deeper into depression. If he couldn't manage to enjoy the time she was away – if she had the power to affect him even if she wasn't around – then he lost the ability to forget how tired he was.

Tired of the routine. Tired of the drudgery. Tired of the same old thing day after day after fucking day.

Seeing now that even more time had ticked away, he gave up on the bookshelf. He went upstairs and poured himself a glass of iced tea then flopped onto the living room couch. He didn't turn on the TV or the stereo. He just sat and enjoyed the silence.

the fifth part: a new path

Cold and loaded
I know I haven't got the balls to pull this through
And therefore I'm laying all my faith in you
Raise the gun, take aim and shoot me
Put a bullet through my head

-- Ville Laihialla

Falling Leaves

The CD player in his minivan died on the way to work the next morning.

“He’s not the kind you have to wind up on Sund...,” Ian Anderson managed before it clicked over to the radio.

Loomis hit the eject button and the face of the CD player slid open to present the disc slot. But no disc emerged. He hit the button again and the face slid shut.

The fact that he got to listen to his own choice of music, and not the same twelve pre-programmed, corporate approved commercial rock radio staples, on the way to work was one of the few things holding him together these days.

When Mary was in the car, she would drive him crazy by telling him to turn off the music which meant there was no way he was driving in silence unless he had to, so he hit the SEEK button on the tuner. It skipped up for a second and found some twang.

“OK for the alarm clock but not anything else,” he mumbled as he hit the button again.

He got the Baltimore rock station with the dorky morning guys. He wanted music, so he hit the button again. He got the D.C. rock station and that guy was even more annoying than the other ones, so he gave it another bump. It wound up and flipped around the horn coming back around to the D.C. alternative station.

“More like Corporate Bullshit station,” he again mumbled to himself.

But instead of whiny college music, he heard trumpets and guitars. And people singing in Spanish.

“What the fuck? I must really be out of the loop.”

He hit the button again and it landed on some big corporate sponsored Pop station. They were currently blasting the latest from Britney Spears and it turned his gut inside out.

He reached out and turned the thing off, vowing to fix it before he headed home.

He got to work in a foul mood which lightened just a bit when he found that Renee would be out for the day. At least he could turn off her computer and monitor to curb some of the heat in his crappy office.

He got some coffee and started in again on the software package he had been assembling yesterday. He was barreling along figuring out how and where to put user input screens when his concentration was suddenly torn away.

The sound was maddening – like that feeling in your head when the dentist drills. Sure it’s numb, but he’s in there grinding away parts of yourself and you can feel the vibration and the grating in the nearby parts which didn’t benefit from Novocaine.

He looked up to find the source of the crunchy buzzing noise and was shocked to see a latino man on a short step ladder sawing a hole in the ceiling. The ladder was parked right in the doorway. White gypsum dust rained down like new fallen snow, covering the tables and computers and dusting the expensive custom carpeting.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Loomis shouted.

The man kept sawing, coming around the back side to make a jagged egg shape in the pristine white surface of the ceiling.

“Gotta put a vent,” the man grunted.

“Veent.” Loomis heard in his head, although that’s not even how the man said it.

“Veent? We doan need no steenking veent,” he thought to himself.

“Actually, we probably do,” he muttered.

Loomis shook his head in disgust. The drywall dust was already all over his coat which he had left by the door.

He grabbed his coffee mug and slipped past the man on the ladder, hoping more than a little that the fucker would fall off.

At the coffee counter he ran into Marleen. Marleen was a carbon copy of the office witch from his college radio days. Marleen had a sign at her desk stating, “Lack of proper prior planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part.”

She also had ones about TEAMWORK and ACCOMPLISHMENT and ACCOUNTABILITY but his favorite was the one she kept on top of her computer monitor. He didn’t know where she got it, but he wanted to give the fellow who made it a medal.

“JESUS IS YOU’RE SAVOUR,” it said, hand-inked on a block of cedar.

Every time he saw it he nearly burst out laughing. Not only had they used the wrong version of “your,” they had also left an “I” out of “saviour.” Taking it literally, he was pretty sure that Jesus isn’t, and he was positive that he himself wasn’t savour. He didn’t think anyone was.

Marleen squealed when she saw him pouring his coffee.

“Did you see! Did you see! They’re putting an air conditioner in your conference room. It’s industrial.”

Falling Leaves

“Yeah, I saw a guy tearing a big hole in the ceiling if that’s what you mean.” He said, eyeing any way he could manage to slip past her and make it back to the safety of his chair. He didn’t think she would follow him into the “lab.”

“They decided yesterday to rent an industrial air cooler. It’s rated for 75,000 BTU so it should be able to handle those computer machines you have in there,” she said, oozing up to him and trying to shine her big round smiling face at him. He dodged around her to grab some sugar and headed out the door.

It dawned on him as he walked back to his room that the giant air conditioner they used to cool the whole first floor of their house was rated for 10,000 BTU and it produced a hell of a chill. He wondered how much this new unit was going to make his office feel like a meat-locker.

When he walked back into his room, the man was gone. The ladder was still right where it had been in the middle of the road. Loomis sat down and tried to pick up where he had left off, but the sawing man soon returned.

This time he had help. The new man was a little shorter than the first. This shorter fellow climbed all the way to the top of the step ladder and stuck his head up into the hole in the ceiling. He slammed his shoulders against the uncut portion, creating two huge dents on either side of the egg shape.

He shouted several things in rapid Spanish. The man on the floor shouted back.

Loomis tried his best to ignore them.

New man came back down the ladder and went into the hallway.

He came back into the room with a cardboard box. He grabbed a razor knife and slit the box open. The cardboard cracked before the knife was down the last side and a giant brown spring flew out like a jack-in-the-box. It slammed into a chair next to the door and knocked a hole in the wall.

The short guy grabbed one end of the spring loaded snake and hauled it up the ladder and stuffed it up into the ceiling.

Loomis caught a giggle and couldn’t stop. Extended, the twenty-inch diameter brown duct now looked like a big turd coming out of the hole in the ceiling. It snaked its way over the top of the air conditioner, down onto the table, across the floor and out the door. The way the light from the windows reflected off the semi-glossy vent material made it shine just like a turd sitting in the bottom of the commode. His giggle quickly turned to a belly laugh and it was all he could do to keep himself upright in his chair.

The short guy held the big turd up in the ceiling hole while the other guy climbed partway up the ladder. He had a huge roll of duct tape which he

used to seal the gap around the vent turd. He certainly had his work cut out for him.

The ceiling was doing a pretty good job of holding the duct in place at the center of the jagged hole, but either end around it left a six-inch gap thanks to the accuracy of the rapid drywall sawing.

With a quality of work rivaling that of the original saw job, the two guys quickly finished taping the big brown turd into the ceiling.

Loomis marveled at the five foot wide swath of duct tape and vent that now occupied most of his field of vision.

The two left the room again but they must not have gone far because he could still hear them.

After a few minutes of clanging and banging, they wheeled a giant silver machine into the room and set it down right between the ladder and the door. Then they left.

He welcomed the silence provided by their departure and he set back to work on his project. An hour or so later, he got the urge to use the bathroom and that's when he realized he was blocked in. The guys had parked that giant contraption right in middle of the doorway.

The entrance to the conference room was a double – two doors that opened wide to allow easy removal of tables and other conference goodies. The machine was now sitting mostly on the left side of the doorway – which is where the open door was. But enough of it was blocking the right side that there was no way to open the door.

He stormed over to be certain he couldn't get past the mess the workmen had left behind. When he found that his first impulse was correct, he kicked the ladder. It tumbled over and hit the chair which had banged into the wall earlier. The dent in the wall got even bigger, forming into a crack that ran over to the window.

With the ladder removed, Loomis grabbed the handles on top of the giant machine and tilted it toward him so it would rock up onto the wheels built into the back edge. He got it tilted but he misjudged just how heavy it was and it came crashing down. He jumped aside and managed to get out of the way of the toppling monstrosity, but the computer and chair on that side of the table didn't fare as well. He stood staring at it for a minute, realizing that he had just missed his chance. If he hadn't moved, the big air conditioner would have smashed him flat and he'd be done once and for all.

The chair was splinters and shards of plastic. Its bits and pieces mingled with the crushed computer tower which belched a little tuft of smoke then fell silent.

Falling Leaves

Loomis grabbed his coat and stormed out of the office by way of stomping on top of the toppled machine. He didn't acknowledge any of the curious glances and stares as he strode down the hallway.

He got into his car not worrying about leaving work early and just happy that he could get away without killing one of those workmen.

He realized he hadn't peed at the same time the car started and the radio came on playing some kind of crap he couldn't stand. He punched the stereo right square in the LCD panel, but it kept playing for a second then cut off.

"Hey hey!" the DJ screamed into the mic and out of the speakers.

Loomis punched the power button with his finger while the DJ went on about Insane Corn Biscuit or whatever the fuck. He had to hit it three times before it went off.

He waited. He knew he was far too wound up to try to drive home in silence. He was likely to run a van of old people off the road in his current state. He needed to calm down and he knew music was the answer. Summoning his courage, he turned the radio on again.

The DJ was winding up his sermon.

"Next up we have a massive thirty minute commercial free rock block! Kicking things off is the newest track from Bitch Slap!" the over enthusiastic DJ shouted into the mic which was at best an inch from his face.

"Why can't they play something tolerable?" Loomis wondered aloud.

The song started up but the DJ kept talking. He was blathering something about a spectacular electronics sale right up to the moment the singer started up.

"Commercial free, my ass." Loomis said to the dented CD player.

Feeling a little better after hitting the radio, Loomis put the van in gear and started slowly out of the parking lot. As he headed home he started to feel a little better.

The song on the radio was actually halfway tolerable and even had a guitar solo. Just as he was getting into the last part of the song, it cut off.

"That was the latest from Bitch Slap! Song's called, uh, 'Penny Pincher.'" Go on out and get it at Waxie Maxie while you can." The DJ dragged the last three words out and then started up some antique Van Halen song.

"You didn't even play the whole fucking song and then you read me another commercial you asshole?" Loomis screamed at the stereo.

Ryan Adam

He was almost home, stopped at a red light with Robert Plant screaming the Immigrant Song, when the whole thing unfolded for him. The idea hit him with such a force that he jerked in his seat and made the van lurch forward about two feet into the intersection.

He realized with a sense of dread that this was it. A sure-fire way out. And a way out with a good cause, too.

The sixth part: defilade

a bullet
is the only way you'll learn
-- Phil Rind

Falling Leaves

The van screeched into the driveway and he barely managed to get it into PARK before he scrambled out. He ran into the house, thankful as always that Mary wasn't home. He ignored the cat as it rolled around on the kitchen floor. Normally, he would scoop the cat up onto his shoulder and pet it for a while, enjoying the calming effect of the gentle purring the cat made when it was happy. Instead, he made a beeline for the hallway. As soon as it was within reach, he had the trapdoor to the attic open and unfolded then he bounded up the rickety stairs two at a time.

He only had to move one pile of boxes and then he'd found it right where he thought it would be. The long plastic case was covered with dust and mouse turds and one corner even looked as though something had tried to gnaw through the dense black shell.

He popped the latches and flipped back the lid. The gun rested on a couple of foam blocks which made little compartments for the various boxes of shells and accessories. He hadn't held it in years, but he still remembered the comforting pressure of the refinished stock pressing into his shoulder.

He'd gotten a pretty good deal on it because someone had taken it upon himself to sand off all the cosmoline and cruddy brown lacquer. Underneath was a fairly decent piece of wood with a beautiful flamed grain pattern. Every care had been taken to get the surface as clean and smooth as possible. And then they'd dyed it green. Like lime Kool-Aid, or that gallon jug of green punch you can get at your neighborhood convenience mart. Bright fucking green and no one wanted to buy it, so he got a pretty good deal.

As far as guns went, he was amazed at how accurate it was. It really was a testament to the Soviet system that something so crudely constructed could fit together so perfectly. The very first time he shot with it he had the tightest grouping he'd ever managed. And he never adjusted it. Never changed a thing. And it always fired true and shot straight.

It was one of his buddies who had talked him into the gun. The world was scared to death at the time and everyone was stocking up on batteries and water. Surplus MRE's were in scarce supply for the first time ever. He figured he didn't have anything to lose, and it's always better to be safe than sorry, so he got the gun. It seemed like fate, anyhow, since he'd come close to owning the same model gun before but backed out of the layaway when his closest friend at the time had decided to take the easy way out. So that fall he took the gun out for a few target practice sessions and the winter wound it's way through until, just as he'd predicted to everyone who pestered him about it, Y2K came and went with nary a whimper. He couldn't remember specifics, but he knew he'd shot some more targets with the gun in the early years of the new millennium. He recalled at least one time with Mary and she actually turned out to be a decent shot, but it wasn't something that caught on – just like swimming and

tennis and bowling and bicycling and whatever other hobbies they were perpetually spending money on to get all the necessities for and then actually going to do it two or three times before the interest waned. With vivid clarity, he could recall the last time he'd actually fired a round through the Chinese SKS.

They had actually managed to find time and money for a vacation so they took a cruise for two weeks in the Bahamas. Mary loved the water and it was one of the few times he could remember her being content to just sit and relax. They had been gone for two weeks and had made arrangements with a neighborhood boy to take care of the yard and the cat.

Luckily, the kid had bothered to feed the cat. But, he didn't bother with the yard. In fact, when they came home from the trip they had caught him in their bedroom trying on Mary's lingerie. Seemed the kid would rather feed his soft fetish than sweat for a few bucks. Loomis had sent him on his way without bothering to pay him for his services.

He had gone out and fired up the lawn mower and spent the rest of the day wrestling with the thigh-high grass. In one back corner of the yard, after wrestling through a particularly dense tangle of mower-stopping grass, he saw something move.

In the next mower-row over, he saw a small area of grass matted down and quivering.

"Caterpillars," he thought, and pointed the mower right at them. He plowed right straight through and pulled the mower back toward him when he felt the blades thump against something solid. As he pulled the mower back he heard a tortured scream come from underneath. The scream set his hair on end and the sight before him made his stomach do a somersault.

It wasn't caterpillars at all, rather a mother rabbit had created a little nest in a hollow spot and covered it up with chewed up grass. The mower had sawn two baby bunnies neatly in two and there was enough fur and guts left over to account for at least one more. Still in the hole were two baby bunnies. One looked to be perfectly fine, but a closer look revealed that one of the poor thing's rear legs was hanging on by a shred of skin. The other fared about the same, just at the other end. The mower blade had sheared off one side of the little rabbit's face, leaving one ear and two blinking eyes staring up at him from inside the blood-streaked skull.

Stunned, not really knowing what to do, but knowing he couldn't let the animals suffer, he stumbled inside and found the gun.

"Kinda like shooting fish in a barrel," he thought to himself as he leveled the gun at the hole.

Falling Leaves

The fellow with the leg problem seemed to be fading fast, but the other guy with the head injury just sat blinking at him. It was really too much for him to take, so he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

He opened them in time to see a little puff of fur as the blinking bunny's head disappeared. He pulled the trigger again to set the other one free and as the bullet hit, the bunny jumped sideways.

It scared the shit out of him and he dropped the gun, which in turn scared the actual source of the movement.

The little brown bunny which had been hiding under his brothers just sat at the edge of the hole staring up at Loomis.

"How you don't have a couple of holes in you is beyond me, varmint," he said in his best Yosemite Sam impression.

He bent down and the little bunny hopped over to him. He reached out to see if it was actually as okay as it looked and it hopped right into his hand.

"I'll be damned," He muttered.

Thoughts of the rabbits vanished as he remembered the task at hand. He grabbed the clip out of the case and filled it with the shells he'd been carrying in his pocket all week since he'd taken them from the lockbox. He slammed the clip into the assault rifle and checked the chamber. It was empty. The pull of the lever would chamber the first round.

He ran back out to the van and set the rifle on the floor on beside him. He fired up the van and roared out of the driveway, letting the force of his acceleration shut the door for him.

The rock block must have ended because now there was a beer commercial on the radio. As soon as it was over (Hooray beer!) the non-stop asshole was back.

"Comin' atcha from the heart of Carroll County – This is Rick Rodgers, rockin' it up for you ALL. DAY. LONG," the idiot screamed.

"God I hate that guy," Loomis screamed right back.

He drove the van at breakneck speed down the twisting back roads. Before he knew it, he was at the top of the hill and turning into the radio station parking lot.

Knowing he shouldn't arouse suspicion, he slowed the van down and parked in a corner of the small parking lot in a space just out of view of the broadcast booth window where people could come for a "bird's eye view" of the action. He was pretty sure there were very few radio viewers these days – or any day, for that matter.

He got out of the van and crouched down beside the front fender, putting the van between himself and the building. He had a clear view into the window and he could see the balding geek in there right now, screaming his head off into the microphone.

“Baby can you ever get enough Van Halen?” the voice shouted out of the van speakers. “I know I can’t. Maybe we should have us an Eruption.”

The guitar started up as Loomis shouldered the rifle. It felt very comfortable as he pulled it tight and rested his cheek on the stock. He peered down the open sights and centered them on the DJ’s forehead.

The guy was just sitting there, staring at the control board in front of him. He was completely oblivious to the world on the other side of the window.

Loomis took deep breaths to calm down and became a steady platform for the gun. He felt his concentration flowing into the gun as it leveled out, and over the next few minutes while he let his tension ease, he reflected on his revelation.

He didn’t understand why he hadn’t seen it sooner. Maybe he would have if he didn’t try so hard to insulate himself from the stuff in the world he hated, but now he had it. He couldn’t kill himself. But he knew he could kill someone else. He had done it before, although then it had been sanctioned by Uncle Sam.

But, this time was different. If he killed some poor, innocent bastard then he would go to jail. If he admitted that the only reason he killed the guy was because his CD player broke and he thought the guy on the radio was stupid and annoying then any jury in the world would give him the death penalty.

A thin smile crept across his face as he pictured it all unfolding. The world around him faded away and he focused on that leering face in front of him. Again it was screaming into the microphone but the words were lost to him. He was zoned in. The only thing getting in was a low-level buzzing which he couldn’t identify, but it didn’t matter.

The man on the other side of the window let out some sort of frenzied shriek which Loomis couldn’t hear. He raised his hands and slammed them on the desk in front of him and when they came back up Loomis caught the slightest glimpse of something glinting in the guy’s left hand.

But before anything else registered, he gently squeezed the trigger. He’d stopped breathing a minute or more before, and the only motion was his right hand gently squeezing around the unmoving handle of the gun.

The shot was loud, as was the sound of the shattering glass.

Falling Leaves

His shooter's trance evaporated with the cacophony caused by the raining glass shards. Loomis stood up and looked over to the open window.

He saw the bald DJ standing, mouth agape, and framed dead center in the window. The fat bastard toppled backward and left a deep red smear on the wall behind him.

At the same time, Loomis realized the buzzing he had heard before was the sound of sirens. Sirens which were now coming closer.

This really puzzled him since the radio station was a bit off the beaten path and even if they heard the shot on the radio, there's no way they could already know what had happened.

Before he could puzzle it out any further, he realized he could still hear the asshole screaming on his van radio.

"Do they have a tape delay?" He asked aloud.

He looked around and noticed the sign beside the building.

It lit up in sequence, faithfully as it had done ever since he was a little kid.

W

T

B

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WTBO

WTBO

WTBO

He opened the van door and looked at the remains of the radio display. The station indicator was working for the one he had tuned in. It said, "WKGO."

Ryan Adam

He hit the AM button on the radio and found the WTBO band. It was dead air.

“Fuck.” Loomis said, and then he dropped the gun.

the seventh part: sanity check

We'll not fade out too soon
Not in this finest hour
Whistle your favorite tune
We'll send a card and flower
Saying

It's a mistake, it's a mistake
It's a mistake, it's a mistake

-- Colin Hay

Falling Leaves

Police cars streamed into the parking lot. Six or seven of them all piling in and swooping around the building. A trail of dust rose above the treeline as the cops tore up the gravel and cinder covered hill to the radio station. One did a power slide and came around stopping right next to the van. Before they were all stopped, there were cops milling around. Some were staring at the broken window. Others were on their radios. None of them even noticed Loomis standing next to his van.

He heard one of the cops shout.

“Hey! They said there was a loud noise and the guy dropped dead,” the cop yelled.

“Yeah. I’ve got another report of a shot fired,” said another cop, who finally noticed Loomis and the van in the corner of the parking lot.

“Back away from the vehicle, sir,” the police officer commanded.

Loomis stepped back into the grassy area next to the pavement.

“Are you in on this? Are you responsible?” another cop asked as he approached Loomis’ position.

Loomis was still too stunned by the sudden arrival of the police to manage a response.

There was a rustle behind him and a woman stepped out from behind a tree. She walked over to the crowd of police officers which was growing around Loomis.

“He saved the day,” the woman said.

He didn’t know why it happened when the situation seemed so serious, but he felt a giggle building as he pictured Tom Green swinging a baby over his head and shouting, “I saved the day! I saved the day!” The gravity of the situation allowed him to stifle the grin before it appeared on his face.

“What do you mean, ma’am?” one of the officers asked.

“Well, that madman was in there raving on-air and threatening to kill everyone. I called you guys over an hour ago but couldn’t even get anyone to believe me,” she said.

The cop just nodded.

“I was hiding in the front office of the radio station when I called, but then I managed to sneak out. Just after I did, I saw this man pull in and get out of his van with a rifle. He was incredibly calm, and I could hear his radio blaring – he must have heard what that madman was saying and he decided to take action,” she finished.

One of the cops came out of the radio station and over to the group around Loomis.

Ryan Adam

“One shot to the head, sir,” the officer said. “Clean through. The women inside say the bald guy was just picking up his gun to shoot one of the hostages when the shot was fired and took him out.”

“Well, looks like you’re a hero, Mr. uh...”

“Loomis,” Loomis said. “Charles Loomis.”

He didn’t contradict the woman’s story. They wouldn’t have believed him anyway.

He still couldn’t believe his luck, even when he and Mary watched it on the news that evening.

The talking head on the TV laid it all bare in that blood & guts sensationalist style that only an on-location dizzy blonde with wind-blown hair can manage.

“I’m standing here in front of WTBO, atop Radio Hill here in Carroll County, where just earlier today a most intriguing turn of events took place.”

The TV image switched to an overhead helicopter shot from earlier in the day when there were still police cars in the parking lot.

The news-bot continued her story in voice-over.

“At approximately 2:30 PM this afternoon, Thomas Burl Compson stormed into WTBO and took four female employees hostage. He held them in the broadcast booth while he launched a tirade against the County and Federal Governments over the air.

“It seems Mr. Compson’s teenage son was sentenced to 40 years in prison earlier this week for alleged terrorist activities. Greg Compson and two others were convicted of attempting to detonate an explosive device earlier this summer. We reported then about the attempt to destroy the WTBO sign with pipe bombs.”

Loomis remembered when that had happened – after all, he and his friends had always used to plot some way of blowing up that stupid sign when they were in high school.

The TV continued.

“Using provisions from the Patriot Act, Greg Compson and his two accomplices were charged with treason, subversive activity, and terrorism. Additionally, they were classified as foreign combatants. They were sentenced and ordered to serve their terms in solitary confinement with no visitation and no chance of parole.

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“Mr. Compson was demanding the release of his son and had threatened to kill a hostage every hour until his demands were met.

“County police began a dialogue with Mr. Compson at 3:10 P.M. and had officers en route at that time. None of the officers arrived at the scene until after the 3:30 deadline Mr. Compson had set for his first execution.

The TV camera cut back to the wind-blown windbag.

“At what police estimate to be 3:25 P.M. a local citizen, Mr. Charles Loomis arrived at the radio station. He drove around the back side of the building and parked in the lot in a spot just out of view of Mr. Compson’s broadcast booth window.

“Christine Chakshi, an eyewitness describes what she saw.”

The TV image changed to one of the woman who had declared Loomis a hero. She was standing in front of the radio station earlier in the day with a WMAR microphone jammed up in her face by our friendly reporter.

“The guy pulled up in a van. I heard the tires squealing as it came down the road, but he had slowed down before he pulled into the parking lot. He let the van just glide past the building and stopped it just short of where the people inside would be able to see. I watched him get out of the van and I could hear his radio blaring whatever that madman in there was spouting off about.” Christine Chakshi said.

She looked straight into the camera now, seeming a little bolder than before.

“That man got out of the van and I saw he was holding a rifle. He moved with such grace that I couldn’t do anything but stare and watch. He knelt down and aimed the rifle at the window. And then he waited. I don’t know how long. It seemed like hours, but he waited and was just as still as could be. Then, just as that crazy man in the radio station stood up and started yelling – which I could see from where I was hiding – I heard the shot. The window blew out and the guy fell over. If that Mr. Loomis hadn’t arrived right when he did then there could have been a lot of innocent people dead here today.” The woman finished.

The TV switched back to the nighttime view of the reporter in front of the deserted radio station.

“We were unable to talk to Mr. Loomis, but we’ve learned that he is an ex-Army officer and a Gulf War veteran. Police verified that his rifle is registered and he has been cleared of any wrongdoing. It turns out he is a certified marksman and I guess he was just in the right place at the right time today. Good for all us that he was. Back to you Chuck.”

Mary turned the TV off with the remote.

“What in the hell are you doing driving around with a loaded gun in your car? And why weren’t you at work? What business do you have killing people? Who do you think you are, Spiderman?” she asked.

“Spiderman doesn’t shoot people,” he said.

He had worked on his story on the way home, so he was prepared.

“I had to leave work early,” he said. “They’re working on the lab and they were installing an air conditioner so it was pointless to be there.

“I left and headed home and my new CD player stopped working so I was scanning through the radio stations when I heard that guy ranting and raving and threatening to kill people. I didn’t even really think about it, I just acted automatically. Since I was almost home, I stopped and grabbed the gun and drove straight to the radio station. I hoped the cops would get there first, but I guess I was going just in case since it was getting close to 3:30.”

Mary just sat and stared at him.

“I knew he had to be sitting in front of that window,” Loomis said. “I remembered it from when I went there on a tour with Boy Scouts.

“When I arrived, there was no one else around. I just got out and did what I had to do without even thinking about it.”

Lying to her now to cover up his true intentions was bringing his earlier tension back. He could feel his neck tightening up as he thought about how angry and frustrated he had been this afternoon.

“You could have been killed, Charles,” she said. “Then what would I do? Who would fix me dinner or tell me what I should do when I get confused?”

This caused his frustration to grow even more considering that had been the plan in the first place.

“Well, I didn’t get killed. I saved the fucking day,” he said as he stood up.

He stormed out of the living room and through the kitchen, pulling himself together enough to avoid kicking her pile of crap that she always left laying in the middle of the floor when she came home. He battered the back door open and went downstairs to his shop. He thought he would try working on his bookshelf to calm down.

Loomis measured a board and made some marks. He set the ruler down and then picked it right back up. He couldn’t remember if he put the mark on the right spot. In fact, he couldn’t concentrate at all.

“I should have let that stupid fucking air conditioner fall on top of me today. That would have been a sure-fire way out of all of this bullshit,” he said to himself.

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He doubled checked his mark and then ran the board through the router table. It shaved just the right amount off the front edge and left a nice bevel. He cut a few more boards this same way and then sat down to check his plans to see what he had to do next. He continued working on the shelf until well past midnight, running power tools on and off and not caring a single bit who he might be keeping awake.

When he went to bed, Mary was sound asleep. He didn't disturb her when he slid into the bed, even when he had to wrestle a corner of the sheets from out of her grasp. This night, his sleep was free of any haunting memories. Instead, he faced a show of things that might be.

He saw himself pulling his van across the railroad tracks just as the crossing gates came down.

He saw police shooting him out of a second story downtown window as he picked off Christmas shoppers with his rifle.

He saw himself gambling away his life savings in a desperate attempt to achieve just that one shard more of self loathing which would push his suicidal urges over the edge.

He saw a thousand ways to end his life, but none of them showed him anything which he could actually manage to go through and complete.

the eighth part: visiting windows

Small fries, pie, large coffee

You got that in there, godd buddy?

-- Mr. Anderson

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Loomis pulled up to the first drive-thru board so he could examine the wares being offered.

The stupid woman from the TV commercial was in several of the pictures with her big stupid-ass grin. In one of them she was holding that ridiculous thing she was always spouting off about on the TV.

Loomis figured he couldn't lose with a cheeseburger, so he pulled around to the next board which actually had a speaker in it.

The voice from the speaker was somehow the same as the TV woman.

"Welcome to Cheetah! Where you can get burgers and chicken done fun!" the TV pitchwoman said in her new AM radio quality voice.

Then the speaker crackled and a new voice came on. This one was decidedly less enthusiastic than the previous personality.

"Welcome to Cheetah. Would you like to try our new Cheese Chicken Value Combo for only \$4.99?"

That was when it hit him. He recognized the woman from the endless TV commercials that were always on whatever Mary was watching all day long. Now, as he pictured the dancing housewife with her baby in one arm and a Cheetah! bag in the other, he could also hear the song she was singing.

"What would you do (do... do... do... do...) for a Cheese Chicken?" she asked in that oh-so-fucking cheerful voice with the saccharine (and unseen) background vocals.

"What would you do (do do do do-do-do) for a Cheese Chicken? Would you go a mile and run? Would you bake yourself in the hot, hot sun? Would you like it on a really fresh bun?"

Thinking of that dumbass song made him want to tear out of the parking lot at a hundred miles per hour – but that thought was at least a little nicer than what ran through his head whenever he saw the commercial.

Once she got through rhyiming all her crap so she could give you the tag line – "Come to Cheetah! where we do FUN!" the camera froze her face on the screen and they overlaid the Cheetah!(tm) logo and told you where the nearest Cheetah! was located.

Everytime the picture froze on her stupid grin, Loomis imagined the thing had just skipped for a second, and his brain filled in the end where she kept singing.

"What would you do for a Cheese Chicken?" she sang, then gave a wink.

"I'd suck a dick a mile long for just one bite of your Cheese Chicken," she wheezed.

Stepping toward the camera she said in a very serious voice, “Just what _would_ you do for a Cheese Chicken?”

“Would you stick one in your dirty ass?” she continued as she dropped both the Cheetah! bag and the baby to the ground. “What would you do? If I stuck one up inside your ass?”

Now he was laughing at himself and the guy inside the speaker box was getting impatient.

“Would you like to try our...”

“Yeah, what the fuck,” Loomis said. “Gimme the damn Cheese Chicken combo thing. I have to find out what the hell it is.”

“Oh, it’s pretty good,” the speaker said.

“I hope so. I’m hungry. And it better not be like that sticky Gold Rush piece of shit they have at Roy Rogers. That always gets all over the car.”

Loomis realized he’d never had a conversation with a drive-thru speaker that was this friendly.

He instantly recalled the Wendy’s in Gaithersburg. He couldn’t even remember when that had been. Shortly after he and Mary had started dating was all he could recall.

He had been out with some friends and they decided to stop at the Wendy’s since it was open late. They pulled around the building into the drive-thru lane and were shocked to find ten or fifteen cars in front of them. Before they could even discuss whether to back up and just go home or stick it out, they were blocked in by two or three more cars.

They inched closer and closer to the drive-thru speaker and Brian, one of the people he had since lost all track of, was getting worried since the place was probably going to close soon.

“Don’t worry,” Loomis said. “We were in line before the cut-off. They have to serve us.”

He became a little less sure of himself when they finally made it up to being just one car shy of the speaker. At that point they could hear the guy in the car in front of them screaming at the speaker. They rolled down the windows to hear better, but they couldn’t make out what the speaker was saying. They only heard the guy in the car yelling.

“I want a goddamn Single with fucking ketchup. Small Fries. Pie. Large Coffee. You got that in there good buddy, goddammit motherfucker?”

“Isn’t that from Beavis?” Brian asked. “Small fries, pie, large coffee,” he said, imitating Mr. Anderson.

Before anyone could respond, the car pulled forward and Loomis pulled up to the speaker.

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“We’re closed,” the speaker said.

Loomis looked around acting hurt and surprised, despite the fact that the speaker couldn’t see him. It could only talk.

“If you’re closed you only just now closed,” Loomis said to the heartless speaker. “We’ve been in line for over a half an hour.”

“This is not San Diego. We close 1 o’clock,” the speaker said in its Hindu-Croatian accent.

“I don’t know what San Diego has to do with anything. You were open when I pulled up. If you were able to work faster I would have been served well before your closing time,” Loomis explained to the static-ridden speaker.

He continued, “I’ll take a number 3 with only ketchup. Biggie size it with a Coke. I also want two chicken sandwiches with lettuce, tomato and mayo. Two large fries. Also, a medium Frostie and two garden salads with Italian dressing. Oh, yeah, and a baked potato. Sour cream and butter.”

“We don’t have any chicken sandwiches. We’re closed,” the speaker said.

“How about the other stuff?” Loomis asked.

“Why don’t you just come to the window and we’ll make a deal for whatever we have left,” the speaker offered.

“Sure. OK. Whatever.”

Loomis pulled around to the window. The man in the speaker leaned out with his headset and tried to stick his face right into the car.

“We close at one. This is not San Diego,” he said.

“What the fuck do you have? We’re hungry,” Loomis responded, trying to maintain his composure.

“We have Big Bacon classic. We have fries. That’s all,” the man said.

“If you have a Big Bacon classic, doesn’t that mean you can make any sandwich which comes with a meat patty?” Loomis asked.

“Already made. You want these last Big Bacon classics or you wanna go hungry?” The speaker dweller asked.

“Just give me something. Whatever. Enough for four people,” Loomis said, exasperated.

The man disappeared into the Wendy’s and came back a few minutes later.

“That’ll be twenty-five ninety-five,” the man behind the speaker said.

“What the fuck? Oh fuck it. Just give me the goddamn food,” Loomis said, handing the guy thirty dollars.

When the man reached out to hand him his change, Loomis grabbed the change as well as the man’s hand.

“You need to learn some manners, fuckhead,” Loomis said. “You’re in a service industry and your job is to make me happy – not actively try your best to piss me off. Now the next time I come here – if I ever do – you better treat me with respect and serve me the fucking food I order,” Loomis said in a calm and firm voice.

Mr. Wendy only nodded, wide-eyed.

Loomis dropped his hand and put the car into gear.

“This is not San Diego!” Mr. Wendy screamed. “You fuck me I fuck you back! Asshole! I got your driver’s license you fuck! I got it on my camera!”

Laughing, Loomis pulled away from the Wendy’s, silently wishing the next carload of people the best of luck.

Back in line at the Cheetah! drive-thru, Loomis pulled up to the window with his money in hand.

The fellow in the drive-thru booth looked like he had the chicken pox in the worst way. Loomis was sure the kid’s poofy red hair was doing much for his self-esteem, either.

“Twelve fifty-two,” Super Freckles said from his perch in the window.

“I’m telling you now, if this Chese Chicken isn’t the bomb I’m coming back here and letting you know about it,” Loomis said.

“Oh, you won’t be back,” the kid said, grinning wide to show off his soda-stained teeth.

“I can only hope that means this thing will kill me dead,” Loomis said, only half-joking.

The kid stuck a flabby arm out the window and handed Loomis his change.

“It’s good. Really. I eat them every day,” the kid said.

Loomis bit down on his lower lip to keep the derogatory remarks internal. After all, the kid hadn’t done anything to piss him off yet.

Freckle Boy handed a bag of food out the window and then passed along a drink carrier with the one cup inserted into one corner.

Loomis knew better than to try it, so he wrestled the cup from the holder and put it into the heavy-duty plastic Godzilla cup holder he had hanging on his glove compartment door. Godzilla had come from Taco Bell and knew how to

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hang on to a beverage. That cardboard contraption was designed for four cups. Any less and your seat was the only one getting a drink. Well, the carpet would probably get some, too.

He handed the cardboard drink holder back to the kid in the window so it wouldn't clutter up the car, then he drove off.

Before he could try his Cheese Chicken ("what would you do?") he remembered he had to stop and get some Tylenol for Mary. Christ knew he wasn't going to deprive the woman of pain medication – the slightest headache would set her off for hours about how much pain she was in, and he knew he couldn't handle that kind of bullshit today.

He saw a convenience store up ahead and pulled into the lot.

"What the fuck is Catt Traxx?" he wondered aloud as he got out of the car. The grinning bobcat on the sign was giving him a wink and presenting a giant paw with a thumbs-up. Loomis resisted the urge to give the happy bobcat the finger.

He followed the big yellow bobcat footprints across the parking lot and into the store. The first thing he noticed was the woman behind the counter. She was offering some sort of special to the guy who was checking out with a bag of Depends. Loomis imagined that the last thing the guy with the Depends wanted was any extra attention, so he just kept walking ahead trying to discover where amongst the candy and toys and coffee makers and Halloween decorations they might have some Tylenol.

At the end of the first aisle, he came across a couple of guys who were wrestling with a sno-cone machine of some sort. It was the sort of thing where you put crushed watery ice into your cup and then added a few squirts of colored flavor on top. It was also the sort of thing which was usually operated by a store employee – or better yet – some automaton inside of a circus trailer. Loomis had dealt with the same kind of setup when he was in college, so he knew what they were in for when he noticed they were pumping a ton of the colored flavor crap into each of their cups. As he got closer, his shoes started sticking to the floor and he remembered just what it was like when the clear frozen stuff – which was actually the part with the sugar – got all over the floor. He could also see that the machine had a steady drip. The two guys had not fully closed the lever which let the frozen syrup ooze into the cup. They stood in front of him, blocking his way, so he waited as they pumped each of their cups to the bursting point full of blueberry and grape and cherry.

One of the guys gave him a stir and took a big suck out of the long red spoon/straw. As Loomis expected, the look on the guy's face was priceless. The colored jars of flavored stuff were full of some of the most bitter shit he had ever encountered. If you did it right and followed the directions, then the bitter was offset by the overly sweet frozen syrup. If, on the other hand, you got greedy, you were awarded with the sourest taste imaginable.

The guy's face puckered up, squinching his right eye closed. A second later, he recoiled, and sprayed the Icee-Freez all over his buddy. His buddy dropped his cup, which splattered all over the already sticky floor. The fellow who had just sprayed the place took the lid off of his cup and dumped the contents into the small catch-drain in the bottom of the Icee-Freez machine. Since it was just a small catch pool, and not an actual drain, the drink spilled all down the front of the machine.

Loomis stood there, chuckling to himself, as the two guys squeezed past him to leave. Somehow, they had managed to only get the stuff all over them selves and the store. He had made it through unscathed and didn't have any of the sticky stuff or the bitter flavor on him. He rounded the corner and continued his search for pain pills.

Down the second or third aisle, next to a pantyhose display, he found the Tylenol. He found the biggest package available, which was a 550 count bottle of Extra-strength gelcaps.

"Extra 10% FREE!" the label said.

"Fine with me," Loomis said to the box.

He picked up two of them and headed for the counter. He could see as he rounded the end of the aisle that the dumpy blonde lady wasn't at the register. Looking around, he spied her at the front door.

"You kids gotta get out of here with those dang skating boards!" she yelled.

She opened the door wider.

"Don't you talk back to me, young man. Can't you see the signs all over the parking lot. They say, 'No Looting' right on them. So I don't want you looting in my parking lot."

Shaking her head, she came back to the cash register.

The woman was short and stocky. Her face was caked with makeup and her blonde hair was teased out in all directions. Her shirt and pants were covered with drips and drops from the Icee-Freez machine. Loomis felt it was a safe bet to say she had to wrestle with that thing more than once a day. The tag on the front of her stained shirt read, "Espie."

"You'd think they were illiterate," she said to the guy in front of Loomis.

"Mrff," he replied, in a deep mumble.

The guy was tall and strange looking. He had a full beard which spewed out from the bottom of his face like someone's hair would do if they touched the static generator in physics class. Only this guy didn't have the benefit of static. He was running on some sort of natural flair for the unkempt. Beardy was wearing baggy sweat pants and a thick flannel shirt. His feet were adorned with a thick, clunky slipper which Loomis didn't recognize.

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She rang up the bearded man's items – a couple of cans of Pringles and a bottle of Dr. Pepper.

"Three seventy-seven. You need a bag for that?" she asked

The man handed her exact change.

"No thanks," he said with very short and sharp words. "I'll take it. As is."

The bearded fellow grabbed his chips and soda and made his way out the door. Loomis stepped up to the counter and set down his boxes of pills.

"zat all you need?" she asked, pointing to the Tylenol.

"Yes, that's all," he replied.

"How about a special? We have a new introductory price on these Nestle Hundred-thousand Grand bars," she said.

Loomis was pretty sure now who the illiterate one was. He remembered them being called "Hundred Thousand Dollar Bars" when he was little. Now they were called "Nestle Hundred Grand."

"A do-what?" he asked.

"Hundred-Thousand Grand bars. They're really good. I eat 'em every day."

That got her the same lip biting nod that the Freckle kid at Cheetah! had gotten.

"No thanks, ma'am. Just the Tylenol," Loomis said, wishing these people would leave him alone so he didn't have to try so hard not to laugh at them.

"O.K. Have it your way then."

Back in the car, he unwrapped the Cheese Chicken he had gotten at the Cheetah! drive-thru. The thing wasn't at all what he expected. He didn't really know what he had expected – maybe a cheesesteak of some sort, or a chicken sandwich with a slice of cheese on it like a cheese burger. Instead he had something which resembled a giant chicken nugget or a misshapen chicken finger. The thing was a good six inches across and had an exclamation mark (!) embossed into the breaded covering.

He bit into it and was rewarded with a mix of chicken and mozzarella cheese – kind of like what would happen if you took a McNugget and hid it inside of a mozzarella stick. Only it was better than that. A lot better, in fact. He wolfed the Cheese Chicken down and tossed the fries after it.

He wiped the grease off of his face and sat, marveling at the utter ridiculousness of the whole thing.

“Cheese Chicken. Fuck me,” he said. “Hard enough to believe I got the damned thing. Who would have thought it would be any good.”

The truth was, he was a fast food junkie. Mary hated the stuff. In fact, she refused to eat it. She insisted on eating healthy, well-balanced meals. She liked lots of organic things and vegetables. She like to make Loomis eat better, too. So, he made up for it with a few drive-thru stops every week.

He was a sucker for Chick-fil-A. Anytime he saw a sign on an exit ramp for one he had to fight the temptation to get a number 1. The Chick-fil-A combo meal was almost perfect. If you value-sized it and got the sweet iced tea you almost got enough. He always wished the fries were just a little bit bigger – or better yet, that the server would fill the fry sleeve up until it was spilling back into the fry bin. But they never did it that way. Sometimes he would order an extra large order of fries – after all, it was only a buck-fifty extra. Chick-fil-A did have a down side, though. They were closed on Sunday for some odd reason and it always pissed him off when he pulled in craving a box of waffle fries and he was greeted with an empty parking lot.

The only thing which ranked higher than Chick-fil-A was Chipotle. Whoever invented Chipotle was a man after his own heart.

Chipotle did not have a drive-thru and that was just the first place where they got it right. Everything else followed along perfectly.

The menu was brilliant. They served three things – tacos, burritos and salads. They offered different meats, beans and salsas. Fresh lettuce, cheese and guacamole rounded out the choices. There was nothing to decide, nothing to figure out. You just went down the line and told them what you wanted and they made it right in front of you. You want more beans? You say so. Less beans and no rice. You got it. There was no possibility of not getting exactly what you wanted because you had complete control.

Once all the stuff you picked was stacked up on top of the fresh tortilla, the magic man behind the counter somehow managed to wrap it up neatly. Most of the time. Sometimes the double-meat monsters with extra cheese got a little unwieldy. Sometimes the shredded beef juice just couldn't be contained.

And that was it. No fries. No hassle. Just a pound and half of fresh burrito and it was all yours for less than a combo at McDonald's.

He got home twenty minutes later. He opened one of the packages of Tylenol and extracted the giant cotton ball from the neck of the bottle. He took two of the pills out and grabbed a small glass. He filled the glass at the filter faucet and took everything out the living room where Mary was camped out on the couch. She was watching something on the television about bubonic plague.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “You are nice. You know, I really like you sometimes.”

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Yeah, he thought. She liked him just fine as long as he was doing something for her. The minute he wanted to go do something for himself if he ever had a free minute she accused him of abandoning her.

“Don’t you think it would be nice to go on a vacation?” she asked as he sat down on the other end of the couch. As always, she sat facing his position, with her feet curled up under a blanket on the middle cushion.

“What sort of vacation?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe to the beach. But it’s too cold. Or a cruise. I never went on a cruise. I bet that would be fun.”

He thought about it, trying not to pay attention to the display of pustules and death on the TV.

“I’d have to see about getting some time off,” he said, right about the same time as she stretched her leg and kicked him a good one in the hip. She didn’t seem to notice that she had kicked him. “I don’t think it would be a problem. After all, they’re just tearing the place up.”

Falling Leaves

the ninth part: more back-flash

... too much action
may leave you in traction
so you better get insurance
no matter your endurance
flailing round and round
and you're injury bound

-- Steve Souza

The next morning, Loomis got up a few minutes early so he would have time to check out what was wrong with the CD player in his car. Once again, he tried the eject button but it only made the front flap open and close. He also tried to insert a new disc but the only already in the player prevented any such workaroud. He even tried prying on the inserted disc with a CD-R he was sure he already had another copy of in the glove compartment. Nothing worked.

Then, remembering what used to happen with his old CD player whenever he worked on the car and had to disconnect the battery, he grabbed the manual for the new van. He found the fuse listing and discovered that the fuse for the radio was located under the dash. Then he stopped for a second, furrowing his brow and staring at the entry next to the radio fuse. It was labeled "Power Windows."

His new van was a Pontiac. That meant it fell under the GM locus of design and as such had come equipped with a Data-bus radio. He had found out the hard way that the radios in these new GM vehicles didn't have a switched power wire. They were always on and they relied on a signal from the car's computer to tell them when to turn off. This was part of the nifty feature set that allowed the radio to stay on when you parked the car and took the key out of the ignition. The power windows and the wipers also worked with the car off until you opened one of the doors.

He had checked online and found that the radio was controlled by some sort of accessory power relay and to interface properly with an aftermarket stereo meant he had to pay a hundred dollars for some sort of interface. He also saw that he could buy an adapter to retain the steering wheel radio controls and that one seemed useful to him. The other one struck him as a scam, so he just wired the radio up to the constant power wire.

Then, when he turned the car off the radio stayed on. When he opened the door, the radio still stayed on. Every time he parked he had to manually turn off the radio then turn it back on when he got back in the car. That got old fast, but it allowed him some time to contemplate the problem. One afternoon, the solution hit and he started tearing the car apart the minute he pulled into the driveway.

That was the last time he had checked the car manual. It stated that the breaker for the power windows was rated higher than the radio needed, so he ran the switched power wire from the stereo under the dash and over to the panel on the passenger side of the console. He fished the wire up inside and wormed into the protected side of the power window breaker socket. Then he had inserted the breaker into the socket to hold the wire in place.

He shut all the doors and turned on the van. He turned on the stereo which started blasting right away. Then he turned off the van. Still the stereo played. He tried the drivers side window. It went down then back up. He

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opened the door. The stereo turned off. The display folded neatly flat just like it did when you turned it off with the power button.

What he hadn't done that day was to completely disconnect the stereo from the battery so he wasn't sure if it worked the same as his old one, but it was worth a try.

He had paused when he realized there were two different power wires to deal with. But he was sure the radio fuse was the one to try first.

He popped the cover off of the fuse panel and located number 19. He pulled it, then put it right back.

Leaving the hood up, he reached in and turned on the van. The radio lit up but asked for a security code.

"Hmm." He said.

He punched in the code – "7-3-8-3," which spelled "PETE" on a telephone keypad, same as he always used.

The LCD display flashed "Code Accepted," then slid open and flipped down. He heard it whirr inside and then the CD ejected.

"Yeah!" he said.

The CD player worked like a charm the whole way to work. It didn't skip a beat. He had the Scorpions blasting "No One Like You" all the way to work, and everytime he bumped the "<<" button to send it back to the beginning of the song, the CD player worked just as it was supposed to.

He parked in his usual lot and made his way up to the conference room which now constituted his office. When he opened the door, he was assaulted by a fierce arctic blast of air which rustled papers on a nearby desk. The woman working there gave him a scowl before turning to retrieve whatever had blown across her desk and onto the floor.

The air conditioner in the round conference room was certainly working now. The workmen had rigged up a 220-volt line by drilling a hole right through the floor. He supposed someone should have told them the floor panels were individually removable to facilitate network wiring. That thought caused him to wonder if they'd actually managed to find a clear spot to drill without hitting any of the existing wiring.

The machine had a loud hum to go along with its vibration. And it was cold. He wandered over to it to see if he could figure out how to turn it on and off. It didn't seem to have any sort of automatic thermostat, but he did manage to locate an on/off switch. At the very least they could turn it on when it got unbearable. And, of course, they'd have to leave it on overnight to prevent any further harm to the servers. He turned it off and the silence was marvelous.

His work pace almost returned to normal. He had to get attuned to recognizing the heat before it became unbearable, and he had to deal with all the looky-loos who wanted to see the fantastic Coolerator 3000 in action. They were all amazed at how much noise it made and how you could toss stuff into the jet stream it created and it would fling them against the door hard enough to make it shake in its frame. The whole thing was almost as bad as when they had knocked down the building next door.

At the beginning of the year, someone had decided that the building across the street from his old office location needed to come down. It had seemed like a fine enough building. Loomis even like to go over sometimes and get a sandwich in the ground floor deli, but one trip he had found it was boarded up. The next week the trucks rolled in and pretty soon a crane was sitting between the two buildings. The crane just sat there for weeks with its heavy wrecking ball dangling from the end. A steady stream of gawkers made their way past his desk all day long, but it was tolerable since he was in his cubicle and they just blipped into his peripheral vision when they swished by.

That all changed when the destruction actually got underway. It was the week after they all got back from holiday vacation, and Loomis was the first one to hear the ball hit the building. It wasn't loud enough to bother anyone, but it was very clear that something was going on. He had risen from his chair and walked over to the window. The crane was pulling the ball out of the side of the building. It had left a gaping hole into someone's empty living room. Loomis was surprised that such a small ball could tear out an eight foot section of wall with one punch.

He watched as the crane operator wound up another swing and this time the ball tore through the wall into a bathroom. As the crane dragged it back out, it got caught on a claw-foot bathtub. The crane tugged and the whole works came free. The ball hung in the air at the end of the cable and the bathtub pulled free of its moorings and tumbled through the air and impacted on the sidewalk. Now Loomis understood why the sections where they were still letting people walk had covered walkways.

From that point forward, no matter what time of day, there were always people congregating outside his cube. They were chatting and drinking coffee. Sometimes they grabbed the cube next door and three or four piled in for lunch.

The air conditioner wasn't quite as exciting, and it didn't attract people from other parts of the building like the wrecking ball had.

He got his project finished at 3:30 and decided to take a break.

Falling Leaves

The converted conference room was located on one corner of the triangular building. The circular room was built wide around the edges to give its occupants a view of the outside world. One side of the room – the side closest to the Coolerator – faced 21st Street. The window curved around past the corner of the block and the rest of the windows faced Pennsylvania Avenue. Directly across the street was a TGIFriday's, a Kaiser Permanente clinic and a whole host of Foggy Bottom pubs and eateries. Also in view was the Tower Records where he and a buddy had checked out a rather lackluster Everclear in-store concert.

At lunch time the room attracted a host of men with time to waste who were happy to spend it gazing at the half-naked GWU co-eds as they made their way to and from class in short skirts and halter tops.

Loomis walked past the Pennsylvania Ave windows and noticed a cavalcade of police motorcycles stream past. Dark blue Suburbans blocked access to the avenue on either side of 21st Street. Moments later, a long black limousine flying small American flags screamed down the street. Another Suburban was just in front of it and more motorcycles flanked the limo and brought up the rear.

As soon as the presidential convoy passed, the roadblocks were cleared and everything returned to normal, just life in D.C. He noticed the people on the street, most of whom seemed more upset at being held up than they were impressed by how close their president had just passed.

Loomis headed downstairs and got a Pepsi from the drink machine. He scored the last slices of fresh bread and cheese from the cafeteria and sat alone at the huge central table in the quiet of the afternoon.

A few minutes later his boss came past and noticed him.

"Hey, Loomis – did you finish that new interface?" Mr. Hooterman asked.

Hooterman sat down at the table leaving a chair between them.

"Yeah. I just got it finished. I'm taking a celebratory break. Everything works and I've tested it on all the different machine configurations."

"Great, that's just great," Hooterman said, oblivious to anything Loomis had actually said.

"Mr. Hooterman, do you think I could get a week off? Things have been pretty hectic lately..." Loomis started.

"Oh yeah – holy shit. I saw that thing on the news about the radio station. How you managed to blow that fucker away like that is beyond me. That's like the coolest shit I ever heard of," Hooterman said.

"Well, I just kind of found myself in the heat of the moment. I suppose it was mostly training taking over," Loomis said.

“Hell yeah, man. Take a break. If you have that interface done we’ll be cool here for a week. Hell, maybe I’ll even be able to get you a real office by the time you get back.” Hooterman stood up and started to walk away. He turned back after a few steps.

“And hey, make sure you tell your wife I said, ‘hello,’ OK? It’s been a long time. You should bring her to the Christmas party this year,” Hooterman said.

Loomis spent the rest of the afternoon surfing for vacation deals. He was distracted by memories of one of the trips he and Mary had taken when they were first married – back when things were happy and carefree.

Loomis lead Mary to the front of the line. He quickly walked past a couple of kids hanging onto the railing at the entrance and mostly dragged Mary down through the turnstiles.

There’s wasn’t too much of a line so they decided to wait for the first car of the roller coaster. There were four or five people in front of them so they watched as the people got in and out of the ride and Loomis made a mental note of how the bigger people were faring with the lap belt and the leg harness thing.

When their turn came, Loomis took Mary’s water bottle over to the storage cubicle then came back over and helped her get into the car. He could remember the sweet smile she gave him as he did that for her, as if she marveled at anyone doing the slightest nice thing for her.

He sat down in the seat next to her and tried to find a comfortable position for his feet since the front of the car didn’t offer much room. He managed to get the lap belt around his belly without much trouble, then he grabbed the restraint bar and pulled it down toward his lap. The bar wasn’t the normal sort of safety device he was used to seeing where there was usually a side bar on a pivot point which then bent at an “L” to go across your lap. Or, sometimes there was a “T” bar which pivoted in the middle and had a bar for you lap as the cross piece of the T.

No, this ride had a modified “T” bar where someone had decided to attach metal straps to the ends of the cross piece so you had to stick your legs in between the metal sandwich and then manage to keep them straight as you brought the thing forward into your lap.

He had been worried about this since the moment he first saw it in action while he was waiting in line. He hadn’t noticed anyone as tall as he was but there had been a couple of really hefty guys who didn’t seem to have a problem. Nevertheless, he was hoping for the best.

Falling Leaves

Loomis didn't consider himself to be a fat person – sure, he was a bit overweight, but he was just large overall. He stood about six-five and was pushing 280. This, of course, had made Mary worry about him earlier when he'd been determined to ride the Batwing and she noticed the sign said you can't ride if you're over 250 pounds. He adored her for the concerned look she gave him while he tried to explain to her that they always over-engineered these kinds of things and there was nothing to worry about. He had reason to doubt himself during their wait for the Batwing since it seemed to break down just about every other trip.

Now, in the front car of this supposed mega-coaster, Loomis pulled the lap restraint toward him. He got it to go about three inches before he felt the metal side braces binding on his calves. Another tug brought the braces past his calves and gouging into his thighs. He managed to get the thing snug so that he wouldn't be able to move, and he was certainly unable to move it any further, so he sat, waiting for the ride attendant to come and check. He figured they were just going through the motions and everything should be OK, they'd be off in a flash up to the top of the steep drop in just a few moments.

The attendant came past and jammed his hand on the lap bar. It moved another half an inch, seeming to carve off small sections of thigh meat as it budged just a little closer. He leaned forward to make like the thing was touching his midsection where it was supposed to.

The attendant went past and checked the other cars. Loomis breathed a sigh of relief. He knew Mary needed a nice relaxing weekend, so he didn't want her to worry about him not going on a ride. Even if it didn't matter so much to him, it would concern her if she thought he wasn't enjoying himself. She was overly sensitive that way and it was one of the things he had always loved about her. It gave him a nice sense of purpose to try to protect her from the things she was sensitive about.

The ride attendant called the all clear and Loomis looked over at Mary. She looked excited and happy, just as she had on the other rides they had gone on so far that day.

On every one of them, she screamed like a banshee – some of them right from the get go. It filled him with elation to think he was able to take her somewhere and give her a chance to feel so free and fun.

In front of him, the ride operator called out. "Check 1A," the kid said.

The ride attendant came back to the side of Loomis' car. He jammed on the bar again but it didn't budge.

"Not making contact," the kid in the operator's booth said.

"Release it and let me try to move my legs a little bit. It's getting jammed up because I'm so tall," Loomis said.

There was a click and the bar released. Loomis stood up and changed the position of his feet, trying to make it so there would be more clearance for his thighs when the bar came down on its squeezing quest.

Loomis pulled the bar down and it came farther than before. It still hurt like a sonofabitch, though.

“Nope,” the kid in the booth said.

“Just pound on it,” Loomis said to the operator. “I’m not gonna fall out.”

The kid gave it another hit but it didn’t move.

“I’m not supposed to do it. The rules say you have to be able to get yourself in. Sorry, but you’re not going to be able to ride,” the attendant said.

“Yeah, OK,” Loomis said, giving up.

The operator released the bar and Loomis extracted himself from the ride.

“Should I come with you?” Mary asked.

“No – go on. Have fun. I’ll see you in a minute,” he told her.

He followed the attendant to the exit gate and watched as the ride started up. He saw it reach the top of the huge climb and he didn’t have to listen hard to hear Mary screaming as it plummeted down the steep drop. He smiled thinking about how much fun she was having.

“I’m sorry I’m too fat to ride the Superman,” he said.

She smiled at laughed at him.

“It’s OK, but not that great,” she said.

He was sure she was just saying that to make him feel better. He actually didn’t think the thing looked like all that. It was supposed to be spectacular, but it didn’t have any loops or tight twists so he didn’t see what all the fuss was about.

Even so, he found himself obsessing over it the next few days. He read up on the ride at online roller-coaster sites. He discovered why there had been such a big deal about the lap restraint.

It turned out there had been someone on the same ride at a different park who had fallen out and died. The fellow had Cerebral Palsy and probably shouldn’t have even been on a damn roller coaster, but the park had now taken all the steps they could to ensure that even if you were as limp as a ragdoll there was no way you could come out of the seat. He had also read that there was a test seat at the beginning of the ride which you could use to see if you fit. They put it there so you didn’t bitch about having to wait in line for two hours, but he hadn’t noticed it since there wasn’t really a line when they were there.

Falling Leaves

The next weekend, they went back to the park and got there early. Loomis made a beeline for the Superman ride.

“You want to try it again?” Mary asked.

“Yes. I’m determined to fit in this thing. I have to know what the big deal is,” Loomis said.

In fact, he was pretty excited about it. The descriptions about the ride and what it did had really revved him up and he wanted to know if it actually lived up to all the hype.

When they got to the ride, he saw why he hadn’t noticed the test chair before. It was what the kids had been climbing on, and since had tried to ignore them, he hadn’t noticed it.

He walked over to it and sat down. He noticed that without the front portion of the car, he had a lot more room to put his feet. He was able to get in with no trouble at all and got the lap restraint to click against a metal retainer.

“Well,” he said, “I fit when all that crap isn’t pushing my feet to the sides.”

He tried it again, trying to approximate the way he remembered the machinery at the front of the car made his legs fit. He still got it to work without any problem.

“Let’s go,” he said to Mary.

She gave him a beautiful smile which lit up his day and then followed him to the front of the line.

When they got to the front, there were no people waiting. They got into the first car and Loomis positioned himself perfectly. He fastened the lap belt and again didn’t have any trouble with it. He pulled the restraint bar down and it was much tighter than the test seat.

“Oh, c’mon,” he said, getting frustrated.

He pushed on the bar until it was almost there then he reached up over his head and brought his elbows down on top of the bar with all of his might. The bar clicked into place. His thighs felt a little red.

“All clear!” the operator called. “Enjoy your ride on the Superman!”

And they were off.

The ride climbed to the top of the launch hill. 175 feet is what he remembered reading. The drop was even bigger since it went down into a cutaway section. The ride crested the top and they found themselves facing straight down as the last cars were still attached to the drag chain. Loomis was very glad he got the bar to lock into place.

All of a sudden, the thing let go and they were plummeting straight down. Mary screamed beside him and he felt his face break out in a grin. He looked at her and smiled even more seeing how much fun she was having.

They rode the Superman several times that day, everyone of them feeling a little bit special due to the extra effort required just to get into the damn thing.

At the end of the day, they found themselves in line for the front seat of the last car. They had ridden toward the middle the last time and they thought that was even more fun than the front. This time they got as close to the back as they could.

But Loomis wouldn't fit. Everything was supposed to be the same, but the stupid bar must have been adjusted just the slightest bit tighter.

The operator said, "The back seat has a little more room."

He looked to the couple in the back.

"Would you guys mind switching with these folks?"

They didn't mind, so everyone quickly rearranged themselves and got locked in.

"Alright, everyone," the ride operator said into his microphone. "It's 9 o'clock and Six Flags is closed. This is it, last ride."

"Awww," the people on the ride said in unison.

"If you scream for me loud enough, I'll let you go two in a row," the operator said.

Half the people on the ride started yelling random stuff.

"Now, hang on," the operator said.

Everyone stopped yelling.

"My name is Bruce. When I say so, I want everyone to scream, "WE LOVE BRUCE!"

Everyone on the ride nodded.

"Alright, now, " Bruce said, "SCREAM FOR ME LARGO!"

"WE LOVE BRUCE!" nearly everyone on the ride screamed.

Loomis was laughing too much to scream. He wasn't sure if Mary had screamed or not. Either way, it must have been good enough because they got two rides. And they were the best ones of the day.

When they got off the ride and back out to the park, Mary grabbed his hand.

"I love you," she said.

Falling Leaves

“I love you, too,” Loomis replied.

He leaned down and gave her a kiss.

He wondered when things had started to go wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on anything at all until after Jeff had been killed. They always got along and always managed to have fun, even in the tough times when he had been between jobs. The arrival of the baby had signaled a new period in his life when he finally got his act together once and for all. He had set aside the hobbies and daydream activities and focused on getting a job with decent benefits.

Everything fell into place during the first few months of the pregnancy. He got a job with a contracting company doing computer repairs and he was soon on the fast track to high paying network consulting jobs like the one he had now.

Looking back, he was amazed at the almost fairy-tale quality of the way things had worked out. And, just as in a fantasy, things took a turn for the worse.

When Jeff died, he stopped going to work. They excused him and allowed him all the time he needed. He did his best to hold everything together and made all the necessary arrangements. Mary just withdrew. She hardly talked to anyone the week of the funeral and would only sit and hold his hand during any of the necessary functions they had to attend.

She screamed in agony when they lowered the small coffin into the ground and he could still remember the bitter taste of bile that had brought up into his throat because the scream made his heart break even that much more. He had held her tight and cried with her, but no matter what he did – either that day or any other – would allow her to get through the grief. She never dealt with it as a process, which Loomis had learned early in life is very necessary in these situations.

When his best friend had committed suicide it was like a bolt from the blue. No one expected it and no one knew how to deal with it. He did the best he could by exploring what he was feeling in writing. He remembered college professors who were amazed at some of the stuff he came up with in that time, but he had never pursued it with any real sense of becoming a writer. It took him years of writing and dealing internally with the grief process before the anniversary of that week stopped sending him into a spiral of depression. He had even taken a “Death and Dying” class in college which he was deeply in tune with since he was still in the throes of the process. He was somehow comforted to find that the bargaining and hate that he was alternately feeling were all normal for the process.

Ryan Adam

Mary never reached the bargaining stage. She never offered herself in exchange for her son. But she certainly got to hate. Loomis was pretty sure that's where she stopped, too. She hated him with all of her being and he could feel it whenever he walked into the room.

Somehow, she believed he was at fault for Jeff's death or that he should have been the one to die in Jeff's place. Whenever she voiced her thoughts on the matter it was always that he should have gotten there earlier and the kid would have never hit them. It did no good to explain to her that you can't think of things like that. That if he had gotten there earlier than maybe in that same time stream the kid would have left earlier, too. Or any number of possibilities that he could lay out. It never sunk in that some things just happen and there's no way you can prepare for them or prevent them from happening.

Just as with his beliefs on suicide, so went his thoughts on marriage. He had pledged himself to Mary and there was no option to leave her. In fact, he felt that he was really all she still had – that if she didn't have him to hate then she would have no reason left to live. He did harbor the slightest hope that things could change, so he looked for things he knew she enjoyed. By the time he left for the day, he had booked what he hoped was going to be a nice, relaxing vacation.

Falling Leaves

the tenth part: going away

I beg to dream and differ from the hollow lies
This is the dawning of the rest of our lives
This is our lives
On holiday

-- Billie Joe Armstrong

Falling Leaves

Loomis looked out and all he could see was water.

“Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink,” he muttered to himself.

Mary was sitting in a lounge chair by the railing reading some sort of book on philosophy. She looked up every now and again with a big grin and stared at the endless expanse of water.

They’d had a rough time getting ready for the trip, as always. He could never manage to pack soon enough for her or get out of the house and on the way in the right amount of time. It didn’t matter that they got to the airport in plenty of time or that she hadn’t bothered to tell him – despite his many requests – what she wanted to take with her.

Once on board the cruise ship, however, things had turned around. They had an actual conversation during dinner last evening and he was feeling OK for the first time in a long time.

Mary had mentioned that she was thinking about getting back into teaching again. She said she had played with some old friends a few times over the last several weeks and she was getting to enjoy making music like she remembered before she had gotten burned out on it.

While Mary read her book, he spent the afternoon wandering around the ship. He checked out the casino and the various pools and activity decks. He spent a leisurely stroll around deck 14 – which was proclaimed on all the entryways as being “Topless Required.” With his shorts and flip-flops, he fit the description so he figured he might as well see what the deal was.

Things were going better than ever with Mary, and this stroll around the topless deck reminded him of some of the reasons he had married her. She was certainly different from most other women, and that had been a big part of the attraction. He never managed to understand typical girls who expected to be treated like a queen when they never gave anything back other than lackluster sex and a whole lot of bullshit. Mary had been different from the start. Not only was the first one to complain about not getting enough sex; she was more likely than he was to point out when she thought some girl in a tight dress was hot. They had never gone as far as bringing someone else into their bedroom, but it was fun to go out with her to strip clubs and play things a little more loose than most couples would feel comfortable doing. He knew Mary wouldn’t mind if he had a look around. Hell, she might even want to come up herself if he told her about it.

Everywhere he looked there were beautiful women. There were very few young women, but there wasn’t a sag in sight. He had a few drinks at the bar near the pool and tried hard not to return the gaze of the brunette who kept eyeing him up from her spot at a small table under an umbrella. She appeared

to be alone – at least as far as he could tell in the twenty minutes he spent at the bar, since no one else sat with her.

The woman was astonishing. If she was a day over 35, Loomis swore he would eat his hat. She had long dark hair which cascaded over her shoulders and fell to the middle of her back. Her skin was tanned, but not baked, and she seemed to enjoy the fact that her naked breasts were out and about – “ta-tas akimbo,” one of his old buddies would have said – for the world to see.

After the stroll around Deck 14, Loomis returned to where Mary was reading. He found her in the same spot, still staring out at the ocean.

“This is wonderful, Charles,” she said as he sat down next to her.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said.

“I know we’ve gotten away and tried things like this before, but for some reason I’m able to see things for the first time since... well...”

He waited for her to continue.

“I miss Jeffy, Charles. I miss him so much,” she said and then started crying.

Loomis took her into his arms.

“I miss him, too. Every day I wonder what things might have been like. I wonder what he would be doing right now and it breaks my heart,” he said to her.

“And I’m terrible,” she said. “I’m terrible for the way I’ve treated you. I’m sorry, Charles. Can you ever forgive me?” she asked.

He broke down at that point and was unable to hold back the tears.

When he had regained his composure enough, he led her back to their cabin. They spent the next several hours making love like he remembered from when their love was brand new.

It was the first time they had gotten physical in years, but it was as if no time had passed. Loomis ran his hands over Mary’s body, finding a few new lines that he hadn’t seen before. He caressed the tender spots on her neck beneath her ears, first with his hands, then with his tongue, then with his teeth. She arched her back under him, pushing her hot skin toward his tender touch.

They both knew exactly where to touch and when to move and, just like the first time they had ever been together, they both climaxed at the same time then fell into each other’s arms.

“That was fantastic, Mary,” Loomis managed, trying to catch his breath.

“I love you, Charles. I hope you know that,” she said.

“I always know. And I always love you, too, Mary-Berry” he said.

Falling Leaves

She smiled at the endearment and fell asleep in his arms. He held her tight, smelling her hair as he drifted off to sleep.

The morning sun shone through the small window which had been afforded the tiny cabin. Loomis blinked the brightness away from his sleep-encrusted eyes. When his eyes cleared, he looked around and saw that Mary was already up and out for the day, probably back on the deck watching the waves in between chapters of her book.

The he noticed that she had put the sheets and blankets on the couch again and he started to wonder if the evening he remembered had just been a dream.

He found a pair of pants and a t-shirt and put them on so he could go up to the dining room to see what might be left from breakfast. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so late. Usually his nerves or depression kept him from sleeping through the night but he'd slept like the dead last night. He did recall one moment of rolling over in response to Mary changing position, but he was sure they had lain intertwined most of the night.

As he pulled the t-shirt over his head someone pounded on the door.

Falling Leaves

the eleventh part: paging dr. davis

if this time were the last time
could i hold you all life long?
since this time is the last time
can I hold you all night long?

-- Peter Steele

An emotional void, a cold empty shell
Embittered husk, a heart of darkness
Trace weak pulse, vascular eclipse
Numbed and sapped, emotional paralysis

No time to cry
Stone cold emotionless flatline

-- Jeff Walker

Falling Leaves

He opened the door and found a couple of uniformed ship's crewmen standing in the hallway.

"Mr. Loomis?" one of them asked.

"Yes..." he said.

"Please come with us," the other one said.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Is everything OK?"

"I'm afraid I don't have any information, sir. I was just told to find you and bring you upstairs."

"OK... hang on a second."

Not sure what was going on, he grabbed a better shirt and tucked it in before following the two men.

Out in the hallway, people were scurrying about. It seemed to him that most of the people were heading into their rooms, which was odd for this time of day. The two men lead him against the tide of people up to the main deck and toward the front of the ship. Off to the port side, he noticed a trail of smoke which seemed to be coming from somewhere lower on the ship.

The two men led him through a bulkhead he hadn't noticed before and he found himself in a section of the boat which was more utilitarian than the decorated portions reserved for passenger use. The stark hallway was clean top to bottom.

One of the men pointed him toward a door at the end of the hallway. It was partway open.

Loomis pushed the door open and saw a woman standing in the room. She was wearing a white outfit similar to that of the two crewmen who had brought him here. She faced away from him and he noticed her long black hair was drawn back in a pony tail.

The woman turned, and Loomis had to shake his head to be certain of what he was seeing.

He now saw her white uniform was actually a doctor's coat over a set of scrubs, but what shocked him was her face. This was the woman who had been staring at him when he had visited the topless deck.

"Hello, Mr. Loomis," she said in a delightful accent. "I'm Dr. Watts."

She held out her hand to him. He shook it and noted the firm grasp she returned.

"I wish we could have met under better circumstances, Mr. Loomis," the woman said, then motioned to a chair. "Please have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

“No,” he said. “I’d really like to know what’s going on. Has something happened to...”

The doctor interrupted him.

“Mr. Loomis, I’m very sorry to have to tell you this, but your wife sustained severe injuries in the events of this morning.”

“What? You mean I slept through something which...” he started.

“This morning the ship was attacked by pirates,” the doctor said.

“Oh, come on,” he said, finally sitting down. “Now I know she put you up to something. She’s got me on some kind of fucking candid camera, right? What sort of pirates are you talking about? Do they have parrots? Where’s Jack Shandy? I’ll get some information out of him.”

“Mr. Loomis, I’m afraid I’m terribly serious. We were off the coast of Somalia, approaching the port of Mogadishu when several armed speedboats attempted to hijack the ship. Several passengers in the area of the ship where your wife was found were killed instantly. Your wife suffered massive injuries when a lifeboat was jarred from its mooring by an explosion.”

“Oh my god,” he said, burying his head in his hands. “We finally got back to having a real life – or at least something to signal the start that everything would be OK and now you’re telling me... what? What exactly are you telling me? Is she going to be alright?” he demanded.

“Your wife is right now in a coma. We were able to get her collapsed lung working again without surgery. There is the possibility that surgery may still be necessary if there is any shrapnel in her abdomen. The wounds looked mostly superficial once we got her cleaned up, but it’s the nature of the kinds of weapons they were using that the shards of hot metal can sear the skin closed as soon as they pass through. Only time will tell since our x-ray was damaged in the attack.”

Loomis sat back in the chair and breathed deep, letting this news sink in.

“When can I see my wife?” he asked.

“I’d like to give her another hour to rest before we disturb her,” the doctor said.

“And you’re really serious about pirates?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s true.” For the last fifteen years or so in Somalia and surrounding regions there has been a lot of turmoil and unrest. There hasn’t been an actual central government for quite some time, but it’s only recently that these pirates have started kidnapping tourists on cruise ships and holding them for ransom,” the doctor said.

“That’s crazy,” was all he could manage.

Falling Leaves

“With a ship this size, holding a couple thousand passengers, the only obstacle they have to overcome is getting the ship to surrender without damaging it too badly. They need it to sail the people into a private port and then they just use the ship to house everyone. All they need is for a handful of families to cough up the ransom and they make a killing.”

“This is really absurd, you know,” Loomis said. “Why didn’t they warn us of something like this when we booked this tour? I could have gone to the Caribbean or Mexico if someone had told me about this bullshit,” he said, getting agitated.

“I’m...” the doctor began.

“Who are these assholes? Is someone taking responsibility for these kidnappings? Some warlord or whatever? Someone who can be tracked down and wiped out?” he asked.

“I’m sure the governments of the world are doing all they can. The trouble is that when one warlord falls another one just as bad steps in to take his place.”

He was finally allowed to see Mary, and the sight of her shocked him. She was battered and bruised and both her right arm and right leg were in casts. She had small deep scratches all over her face and the part of her left arm which was laying on top of the sheet.

“Oh my god,” he whispered.

He sat with her the whole afternoon but she never stirred. Her breathing was shallow and ragged and her skin seemed to be translucent. The doctor checked in a few times but it was obvious that Mary was one of the ones who were better off so she didn’t come in very often.

That evening, he made arrangements to get a private communication line open to the mainland and he made some calls. The first was answered by a voice mail system which gave him a different number to call after he punched in his passcode. A few more calls got him in touch with one of his old Army buddies who now worked for some intelligence agency. This guy was in so deep that he wasn’t permitted to tell anyone who his employer even was.

The phone clicked as it was picked up on the other end and he could barely make out the other man breathing.

“Paul,” he said. “It’s Loomis. You know I wouldn’t call this number if it wasn’t serious.”

“Go ahead, Loomis. My scan shows the line is clean,” his friend said.

“Paul, I’m with Mary on a vacation. We took a cruise to Madagascar but the ship was attacked by pirates outside of Mogadishu.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty fucking hairy part of the world right now. It’s crawling with more assholes and lunatics than Baghdad most days. Are you guys OK?”

“I’m fine. I slept through the whole thing,” Loomis said. “Mary got hit by something those assholes blew up, and she’s in a coma right now.”

“Oh, man. That sucks. I told those idiots in Washington they need to put this on some kind of travel alert. We can’t have Americans getting blasted by pirates in the 21st century. That’s just not right,” Winslow said

The rhythm of the man’s speech took him back to the days in the desert.

He and Lt. Paul Winslow had been stationed at a guard post on the Kuwait/Iraq border. They spent most of their days trying to stay downwind of the burning oil fields, but they’d had to fend off their fair share of suicide bombers and border runners. Winslow had a knack, almost a second sight, for picking out who had a bomb strapped on and he generally followed through on his “shoot first, ask questions later” philosophy. The only thing he wouldn’t shoot on suspicion was a car with women or kids in it, even if he was dead sure the nervous, shifty-eyed, sweating man in the driver’s seat was packing a whole case of C-4.

Because he was always right, Winslow never got in any sort of trouble, despite the fact that his actions weren’t exactly the sanctioned procedure developed by the Army. Also, because he was always right, he and Loomis had made it out of there with all their limbs intact. No one else stationed in that location had fared as well.

Winslow was a born grunt. He’d opted for OCS out of college because he felt he had a little more to give than the average trailer park combatant who was shoved into the fray and given a rifle and whole lot of best wishes. Even so, his first choice had been Infantry because he wanted to be sure he got right into the shittiest situations. His callous disregard for danger yet his keen attention to keeping himself alive had put him on the fast track to bigger and better things and he was now working undercover in the intelligence world – a job which suited him perfectly.

“Can you find out who’s running these pirates?” Loomis asked.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure I already know, but I’ll get a definite. Are you going in? Do you need a local contact point?”

Winslow’s radar was still alive and well. He knew exactly why Loomis was calling.

“Yeah. Give me what I need to find these people and the ability to do something about it. I’ll owe you one big time for this,” Loomis said.

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“You don’t owe me a damn thing,” he laughed. “I’m still trying to pay off my debt for that school van I almost let get through the checkpoint. I wouldn’t be where I am now if that fucker had blown up one of the camps up the road from us.”

“Have it your way, then,” Loomis said.

“I’ll get in touch with you within the hour,” Winslow said.

“Huh? I’m on a fucking boat, man. How are you gonna pull that off?”

“I’m looking at your boat right now on my monitor. It’s nice to have access to the spy birds. I can override just about anything these days and get exactly what I want,” Winslow chuckled. “I’ll get word to you somehow. You’ll know it’s from me.”

The line clicked and Loomis hung up the ship’s comm receiver.

He wandered around the ship for a little while then found his way back to Mary’s bed. She looked worse than she had before. She was wheezing and her chest was barely rising and falling. Her face was completely blank and he found himself wondering why it had to come to this now.

A week, or even a day before, he knew he would have felt a spark of glee at seeing her like this, at knowing she could be gone any second. Maybe then he could have figured out a way to go on, continue with his miserable existence and turn things around so he could enjoy life once more. But it was all different now. Last night had changed everything. He didn’t want his life to be shallow and empty. He wanted everything to be like it was before Jeffy had died and last night was the first time in years that he thought it was possible. Last night it wasn’t just possible, it really was just like he wished it could be.

Now, Mary was comatose, barely breathing and he saw once again how no matter how hard he tried or how many unexpected things happened to make things go his way, there was always something else, some tragic, shitty twist that made him always want to just curl up and die. But not yet. No, he could do something about this and he was going to make certain it got done. He knew he might die trying, but that was fine with him. After all, he’d been looking for a way out for a long time now. Another few days wouldn’t hurt anyone.

The monitor next to Mary’s bed flat-lined and began to emit a soft, high-pitched whine.

Before he knew it was happening, he lashed out and punched the paper towel dispenser hanging on the wall next to the door. His fist crushed the white metal face of the thing, causing paint to chip off and rain down into the sink.

The doctor came in and glanced first at Mary and the monitor, then at the destroyed metal casing. Her eyes looked sad as she struggled to force a smile.

“Mr. Loomis, we’ll do our best. Please wait outside so we have the necessary room to work,” she said, then turned to give Mary her full attention.

Loomis hesitated for a moment, but he knew he couldn’t do any good in the room, so he went back to the small waiting area. He hung out there for a few minutes then decided they’d find him soon enough when there was news, so he went back to his cabin.

When he got back to the little room he was calling home for these ten days, he checked to be sure he had everything important with him. He had his wallet and the travelers checks, so aside from clothes there wasn’t anything else he could think of that he would need which couldn’t be bought or borrowed over the next few days.

He felt his military training coming back and he found himself automatically doing things he hadn’t been aware of in a long time. The first of these was now driving him crazy. There was only one way out of the room.

Before he could grab the door and flee, someone knocked.

“Yeah,” he called.

“Mr. Loomis, I have a message for you,” came the response.

Loomis opened the door and found a steward with a folded paper in his hand.

“I hope you can make something of this,” the man said, and handed him the paper.

“Thanks,” was all Loomis offered before shutting the door.

He unfolded the message and read what was on the paper.

CHARLES LOOMIS - QUEEN MARY III - 218C

**yinn ittie biib git i ub fyty vsgr
hydy igg egrtr ygr dguo fivjd
vibysvy eill nr onbuiyd**

Reading over the three lines of text brought a smile to his face. It was crude but very effective. If they had been able to establish a code it wouldn’t have had any of the little giveaways like the double letters, but he could tell that the spacing had at least been altered. He was already visualizing the decoded message.

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Tomm orrow noon got o in duru cafe
Just off wfere the ship docks
Contact will be obvious

It wasn't perfect, as the second line made clear. He cleaned it up in his head to be sure he had it.

Tomorrow noon go to Induru café
Just off where the ship docks
Contact will be obvious

He managed to calm himself down now that he had the certainty that something would be done about this.

the twelfth part: fighting to be done

He found him in Mombassa
In a bar room drinking gin
Roland aimed his Thompson gun
He didn't say a word
But he blew Van Owen's body
From there to Johannesburg
-- Warren Zevon

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Loomis sat in the dim café sipping an ice cold beer straight from the bottle. It was just about the only thing he trusted in a place like this since it was clearly made somewhere else and had been cracked open right in front of him.

He glanced at his watch which told him it was 11:58. He took a swig of the beer, knocking the rest of the bottle back in a single gulp.

“Sheemie, gimme another bottle,” he said to the bartender.

Loomis had learned long ago it wasn’t the words that mattered.

The bartender looked up from the paper he was reading and noticed the empty bottle.

“Shessa bommul?” he said.

Loomis tipped the bottle and nodded. The words didn’t matter. At this point, he didn’t think anything did.

The man flipped open the lid of the cooler and snatched another bottle from the sea of watery ice, pulling his arm out just before the heavy lid slammed shut. He popped the lid on the opener embedded in the edge of the bar – or maybe he just knocked it against the edge of the bar, Loomis wasn’t sure. Either way, he heard the fizzy release of the carbonation which meant that, most likely, it was a perfectly good untainted beer. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t the same brand as the last one, or the one before that, even.

He tipped this new beer up, vaguely registering the Cyrillic writing of the label and took a drink of the swirling dust-colored liquid.

He set the bottle down and heard the door click open in the very same instant that the bottle touched the counter.

“Perfect timing, as always,” he said, without looking toward the door behind him.

“I wondered if the code would give it away,” Winslow said from behind him.

Loomis turned on his stool to get a glance of his old friend.

Lt. Winslow had gone grey around the temples, but his hair was still chopped off in an Army flattop. He was wearing a dusty flak jacket over a Hell’s Angels t-shirt. He had on a pair of desert issue khakis and his scarred official issue boots. He stood just over six feet and was still in the same shape as he was the last time Loomis had seen him. It occurred to him that he was probably in about the same shape as Winslow would have remembered since he had dropped so many pounds on his bike. Winslow’s face was more worn and weathered, but still had the same carefree smirk as always.

“I’m the one supposed to be the one shooting terrorists,” Winslow said as he pulled up a stool. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing blowing away some asshole with a room full of hostages?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you about it if we get out of this one,” Loomis said, pulling another draft out of his bottle. “Buy you a drink?” he asked.

“Sure. Why not,” Winslow said.

“Hey Grover Cleveland, shessa bommul, toot sweet,” Loomis said to the bartender.

When Winslow had his drink, they picked up shop and moved over to a table in one of the lightless corners. The bartender wiped up the spot where they had been and wandered off into the back somewhere. They could hear him moving boxes around.

“Here’s the deal,” Winslow began. “You see that movie with Nicholson, what the fuck... About Schmidt?”

“Yeah,” Loomis said. “I liked it, why?”

“The guy you want is Mbutu Ndougu,” Winslow said.

“Dear Ndougu...” Loomis mused.

“Exactly. Only this bastard isn’t going to draw you a picture. He’s been on the unofficial shitlist for about six years now. He took out a shipment of computer parts going to one of the bases in Kuwait. That put him on our radar. He hasn’t done anything else to directly get up anyone’s ass – at least anyone in D.C. who’s gonna yell about it – so he’s been left alone.

“We got word that he was looking to raise some funds for some power push against one of the other warlords here in this hellhole by grabbing Euro tourists for ransom money. The Europeans don’t have the same ‘fuck them -- we’re not paying’ attitude that the Americans have adopted, so their vacation costs a little extra but they generally get out unscathed.

“That all ended with this bullshit with the cruise ships, which is actually a pretty recent development. I’ve been warning that this is going to affect Americans but nobody in the administration is listening. Of course, these are the same people who couldn’t manage to sell a goddamn war to a nation of violent, bloodthirsty heathens, so I shouldn’t be too surprised that they can’t do anything else right, either.”

Loomis finished his beer and took in what Winslow was telling him.

“Now,” Winslow continued, “I’ve gotten clearance for a special op. This is official so long as no one ever finds out about it – you know how all that works. We’re found out, there’s not a single person on this Earth who is going to vouch for us so be fucking careful, and follow my lead. I know you’ve got what it takes, but it’s been a long time since you were sweating it out under fire.”

“I know,” Loomis said. “I’m ready.”

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“You better be ready to die,” Winslow shot back. “These people are ruthless.”

“I’ve been ready for a long time. I faced the last straw years ago – I don’t give a fuck what happens to me.” I almost did. But these assholes took that away. Mary died yesterday.”

“Oh, man,” Winslow said. “I didn’t know. I thought she made it. I’m sorry.”

Loomis laid out the whole thing for him, from happy times through the death of his son to his brooding depression. Throughout his story, the bartender kept them refreshed.

The two of them teetered out of the bar and into the darkness many hours later. The ship had sailed long ago without him. Winslow led him to a shack at the edge of the small town. Two cots and a footlocker were all that were behind the padlocked steel door. Loomis fell into one of the cots and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

The next morning, he felt Winslow kick the foot of his cot just as he had done throughout their time in Kuwait. No matter how hard he tried, he could never manage to get up earlier than Winslow. They unpacked the heavy foot locker and distributed the contents between the two backpacks that had been covering the rest of the stuff. They left the musty room and didn’t bother to lock the door.

The morning air was cool and clear. The packs weighed heavy on their backs but they had carried worse loads in the deserts of the middle east.

On their way out of town, they stopped for some food when they came across a fish monger with a cart full of this morning’s catch. They had a quick breakfast of some sort of reeking fish paste and potatoes, which they ate while they were walking. The coolness of the morning broke just after they had finished their breakfast. The sun peeked its head up over the trees to the east and rose slowly up to a point right above them. In the desert, the heat from the sun had been much the same. But here, on the edge of the jungle, the humidity made it hard to breathe. Rivers of sweat were pouring from both men and they made sure to drink plenty of water as they made their way down the dusty and rutted trail.

“It’s about 50 clicks down this road to the cove where the pirates have their operation set up. If we’re lucky, we won’t see a single soul on this road the whole way there,” Winslow said.

He was almost right. They encountered two teenagers on ancient rusty Schwinn bicycles about an hour later. The kids were laughing and carrying on

and tore past the two men without giving them a second thought. They didn't see anyone else. Just after sunset, they reached a spot where a single-track path crossed the wider road they were following.

"That's the path to their camp," Winslow said. "We're going a little farther to come in from the other side where we'll be less expected."

The continued down the main road while the sun sank below the horizon. Loomis could hear the sound of the ocean through the scrub off to the left. He followed Winslow in the opposite direction, away from the sound of the water. He noticed that Winslow was checking a small electronic device in his hand. It was flashing a very dim light every few seconds, but the pace seemed to be quickening.

"Air drop. Can't bring heavy weapons into the country, you know," Winslow said.

A few feet ahead they found a crate sitting cockeyed in a muddy puddle. They grabbed it and dragged it to a spot under a low hanging tree. Winslow pulled a Ka-Bar knife and popped the lid off the crate. The contents were packed in plastic which seemed to have been soaked in a thick brown gravy.

"Mmm," he said. "Cosmoline."

"Best stuff on Earth," Loomis said, with a laugh.

The goop was a thick petroleum based lubricant, very similar to Vaseline, which protected the weapons from the elements. The stuff was hell to clean out of all the delicate mechanisms on some of the automatic rifles, but it was a whole lot better to deal with than having your gun jam up on you in the middle of a firefight.

They spent a few minutes wiping the shipping grease off of the cache of weapons. Then they stripped each one down and gave it a thorough cleaning of its mechanism to ensure they would operate with no jams. Loomis was pleased to see he could still dismantle and reassemble the assorted guns just as fast as his partner.

They checked the explosives and packed them carefully into individual pouches which were designed to hang on their belts.

Loomis' pack was now four times heavier than it had been on the hike out here. He was glad they hadn't had to carry all of this stuff with them. He was also glad the sun was sinking below the horizon, taking some of the oppressive heat with it. He was certain he had more firepower than he'd ever felt a need for. His pack was stuffed full of magazines for the guns he had strapped to him. His belt felt determined to sink straight to the ground with all of the gear that was strapped and lashed to it – most of it falling into the classification of goods that would get you into a lot of trouble if the ATF caught you with them. Luckily the ALICE straps, which held even more gear across

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his chest and back as they wound up over his shoulders, prevented gravity from forcing his belt to the ground.

“C’mon,” Winslow said as he shouldered his pack. “We’ve gotta get these claymores deployed before the moon comes up.”

They headed back toward the main road then crossed it into the woods on the other side. They made no sound as they traversed the edge of the jungle. The undergrowth was minimal this close to the coast so there wasn’t much to crunch and crackle as they made their way closer to the pirate camp.

They reached the other edge of the trees and Loomis could see the small inlet the pirates used for their base of operations. There were two shacks next to a poor excuse for a dock. Four black speedboats were tied to the dock and two armed guards sat on crates in between the two buildings. The men were smoking and playing some sort of game. Nearby, a few barrels of fuel were sitting. One of the barrels had a toolbox sitting on top of it. In the clearing next to the dock, a large pit filled with smoking embers was surrounded by rickety picnic tables and benches.

Loomis and Winslow were quiet as they made their way around the perimeter of the camp. They placed a half dozen claymore mines in the woods near the shacks which they could trigger to catch anyone who decided to make a run for it. The plan here was to make a clean sweep, and based on what they knew, it shouldn’t be too hard.

Once the mines were placed, they waited. So far, they didn’t know if Ndougu was in the camp or out in a boat somewhere. So they sat in the growing darkness and waited. They didn’t speak a word for almost two hours.

Winslow’s head jerked toward the water, alerting Loomis that someone was coming. Sure enough, he heard it a few seconds later. It sounded like a speedboat coming in slow. He heard the unmistakable sound of the engine cutting off. He made sure the safety on his AR-15 was off and double checked the other equipment hanging off of his various straps and belts.

Loomis flipped his night vision mask down and watched as the sleek black craft pulled up to the dock. It touched down with a gentle thud. Despite the slow velocity of the impact, the dock still shook and seemed like it might fall apart at any second. He watched and saw two men get out of the boat and walk across the creaking dock. They nodded a greeting to the two guards and started toward the larger of the two shacks.

Winslow clucked low in his throat signaling that one of the men had been Ndougu. He brought his hand across his throat then pointed ahead – their signal to get started.

The whole thing was over almost before it began. Loomis stood up from where he was crouched and opened fire. He didn't call out any taunts to give away the element of surprise. He just started shooting. He remembered what Winslow had told him about the guns being second-hand junk and that only one in three would go near what you had sighted in. He didn't care. He used his three-round bursts to stitch a series of holes into each of the men in his field of vision. The two guards fell before the other men even registered what was happening. The two men from the boat dropped dead before their instinct to flee had a chance to kick in.

A dozen men emptied out of the two shacks to see what the commotion was. Winslow used that moment to loose a grenade from the over-under mount on his M-16. The incendiary grenade bounced against one of the fuel tanks then exploded. Splinters of wood and fiberglass ripped through the larger shack allowing thousands of tiny beams of light to pierce the night. A second grenade leveled the shack and extinguished whatever light had been inside.

The few men who weren't mowed down by the shower of sharp boat and dock fragments took off in exactly the direction Winslow had predicted. He waited until the lead man was right in front of one of the devices and pushed the button on his remote.

The lead pirate disintegrated in a hail of C-4 powered shrapnel. The men behind him didn't make out any better.

Loomis stood in the darkness, listening to the crackle of kindling as the incendiary grenade started a fire out of the remains of the shack. Within a few minutes, the sound of the insects was louder than the crackle of the fire, and he relaxed.

Winslow threw his pack down and tore off the large bottom section. He pulled a red tag and the whole thing inflated into a small raft. He stripped most of the explosives and other weaponry and threw it all into the water where the dock had been. He kept a pistol as well as his assault rifle and some magazines. Loomis followed suit, keeping only the rifle and some of his ammunition.

"We follow this up river for a few hours and we'll get a small airport. You can get back to civilization from there," Winslow said.

They were the only words spoken until the next morning.

Loomis spent the boat ride drifting in and out of sleep, trying to wrap his mind around what was happening to him. He was amazed that the pirates hadn't managed to get off a single shot. They had been outnumbered almost ten to one and hadn't come any closer to death than if he'd spent the day at the zoo. In the calm and quiet of the dark ride up the river, he was able to sort out

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his thoughts better than he'd been in the last two days. Ever since the moment Mary's monitor had flatlined, he had felt worse than he remembered possible. He had been so ready to give everything up just a week ago that he was surprised at how much lower and depressed he felt now. He had a genuine regret that he hadn't been killed in the fight with the pirates, and now he was stuck in the same place he had been for the last few years of his life. He was tired. He had no reason to go back home, no reason to continue trying to do anything at all, but he still had that irrational thread somewhere inside that wouldn't let him finish it on his own.

At the tiny air strip just across the border, Loomis ditched the army fatigues and his weapons. He put on his clothes from the boat and wandered into the thatched hut serving as a terminal. He asked the clerk and the other two people camped out on a ratty flowered sofa how he could get a ride to a bigger airport and they all pointed to a small plane which was sitting on the far end of the runway.

Loomis laughed out loud when he saw the plane. It looked just like the thing Indiana Jones had been rescued in at the beginning of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The wheels were mounted in pontoons, there were two cockpits, and the single propeller was already spinning. A burly white man wearing jeans and a dusty white shirt came around from the front of the plane. He walked over to Loomis and shouted over the din of the V-12 engine.

"You looking to get somewhere?" the man asked in a thick Dutch accent.

"I need to get to the states," Loomis shouted into the man's ear.

"I can take you to International Airport," the man said. "You have papers?"

"I've got papers and I've got cash. How much do you need?"

"You give me one-hundred American dollars and I'll get you there by tomorrow morning."

"I'll give you two-hundred to get me there today," Loomis said.

"Alright!" the man shouted. "We forget coffee shipment and go right now, OK?"

Loomis nodded that it was OK with him. The pilot helped him into the front seat of the plane then climbed into the seat behind him. A few minutes later, the small aircraft was bouncing down the runway. Loomis gritted his teeth as he saw the markers noting the end of the runway ticking past. Right at the end of the line, the plane bounced hard and somehow pulled itself into the air.

The South African pilot skimmed the ground cover all the way to Nairobi. Once there, Loomis booked an American Airlines flight back to BWI. The plane was a 757, and according to the posters at the ticket counter, all of the American 757's had been recently updated. He was looking forward to whatever new gadgets and amenities they had installed. He welcomed anything which might get his mind off the fact that he'd be jammed into some economy seat for seven hours on the first leg which took him to London. He intended to upgrade his ticket to cross the Atlantic, but the economy seat to London had taken all of his cash and they couldn't process a credit card since their system was down.

The security here was no less intense than that he had experienced the last time he'd flown in the States. He had a hunch that flying without baggage might flag him for some sort of extra scrutiny, so he had picked up a few things in the bazaar outside the airport. He checked his bag and made his way through the security checkpoint without any hassles.

The guy in front of him didn't make it through so easily. He must not have heard the announcement about taking your laptop out of the case before putting it through the X-Ray. Loomis heard the baggage clerk call for a bag check, and watched the heavyset fellow by the explosives sniffer snapping on a pair of rubber gloves as he walked past. Loomis hoped the guy wasn't in a hurry – the explosive residue check would probably take at least fifteen minutes.

The plane ride home was very negative. It was uneventful and also quite uncomfortable. Loomis found that the seats had been designed for children. When he sat down, the armrests squeezed in on his hip bones and made it impossible to get comfortable. It was a lot like sitting in a trap, is how he first thought of it. That thought stuck with him for the rest of the trip.

He had somehow drawn the misfortune of sitting in the middle seat of his row. Next to the window was a middle-aged woman, probably only a few years older than himself, he mused, and on the aisle was a graying surfer type. The guy was deeply tanned but his bleached blonde beach hair was thick and unruly. His sunglasses propped on his wrinkled forehead struck Loomis as being quite ridiculous, and it was tough not to laugh when the thought first popped into his head.

Surfer-man had a shoulder bag of some sort. It was bright red and had some kind of conference organization's logo stitched in yellow on the flap. The bag looked to be stuffed full – kind of like the George Costanza version of a tote bag. The fellow was short and wiry, but had a monstrous beer gut. The bottom of his shirt rose up as he reached into the overhead bin, revealing his mushroomed “outie” belly button, as he tried to find a spot for his crap.

Since surfer-man had arrived late, he found the bins to be stuffed to capacity. Loomis had already witnessed some old hag cram an overstuffed wheeled carry-on bag in right where he had neatly folded his jacket. He felt fine

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putting his jacket in the bin since he didn't have any carry-on luggage. He felt even better about it when the flight attendants told the stragglers they would have to check their bags. He was accustomed to Southwest always asking people to take their coats out of the bins to make room for more bags – something he was always skeptical about. How many coats does it take to make room for just one tote bag full of seashells and beanie babies?

Loomis didn't have time to ponder the thought since surfer-man picked that moment to take his seat.

The guy flopped into the tight, uncomfortable seat like it was his favorite recliner. He jammed his feet under the chair in front of him and snatched a blanket from the crack between his chair and the one Loomis was in. He covered himself up with the blanket and rolled sideways in the seat, ending up facing the aisle. He jammed his ass into the partition between the two chairs so hard that the cover for the audio controls popped off.

Loomis had been prepared for anyone in front of him rocking their seat back into his legs – his traditional response was to punch the back of the headrest hard enough to slam the person forward a couple of inches before the chair could lock in place. But this was unexpected. He was certain this ass-in-the-hip behavior was going to be an ordeal over the next several hours.

An hour into the flight, the crew started up the in-flight entertainment. He was afforded his choice of movie – either he could watch “Madeline” on the LCD screen hanging down above the row in front of him or he could choose to try to block it out. He declined the offer to purchase a headset for two dollars. He also declined the offer of the three-dollar snack box. He was left wishing the lady next to him had forgone the diet coke.

The woman had barely finished her drink before she had to get up. Loomis had just watched as two people entered both nearby lavatories, but this woman was determined to go now. She pulled at the seat in front of her and clawed her way out of the narrow space afforded between the rows of seats. Loomis tried his best to pull himself tighter into the seat, but the jaws were locked and he couldn't manage to move much more than his lower legs. Despite his efforts, the woman stomped right on his foot. He gritted his teeth as she remained standing there, trying to regain her balance. Finally, she lurched out of the aisle past the snoring surfer-man and pushed on one of the lavatory doors. It didn't budge. Loomis again looked up to the illuminated indicator lights.

_ AVATORY - OCCUPIED

She slammed the palm of her hand onto the metal patch with the “PUSH HERE” instruction printed on it. The door gave way just enough to bash whoever was currently occupying the tiny booth.

“I’m pissing here!” came the muffled reply from the lavatory.

Loomis nearly snorted pepsi up his nose at this. Surfer-man gave another sharp kick to the chair in front of him, rocking the occupant forward with a jerk.

The old woman stopped her banging and just stood in the vestibule of the dingy airplane.

The sound of the blue water flushing in the tiny airline toilet came through the folding door. An elderly black man tried to exit the lavatory but found the way blocked by the woman. He took a small step and extended his cane and tried to dodge around her as she did her best to squeeze through the doorway.

“Dammit lady, you gotta learn some manners,” the man said.

“I have a medical condition, sir. I need to use this facility immediately,” the woman replied while shutting the door. She fumbled with the latch and it eventually caught and re-illuminated the AVATORY – OCCUPIED sign.

The woman made it back to her seat without stepping on any feet and Loomis tried to sink into that semi-conscious state that allowed him to skip these sorts of boring, uncomfortable travel periods. He was jolted back to the world what felt like only seconds later. He glanced at his watch and saw that fifteen minutes had passed.

The woman was poking him on the forehead.

“Excuse me, sir, I need to get out,” she said.

Loomis once again did his faux-scoot to make room for her to pass. This time she kicked surfer-man’s red bag and it shot papers into the aisle of the plane. He woke up for this and shook his head while giving some kind of “what planet are you from?” look.

The woman once again made her way into the lavatory and surfer-man picked up his crap which was strewn all down the aisle. He was still picking it up when she came back.

“You know,” surfer-man offered, “You can have this seat if you like. Maybe it would be more convenient for you.”

“Oh, no, sir. I don’t mind getting out. I paid for the window seat and that’s where I’m sitting,” she said as she once again squeezed past Loomis.

Falling Leaves

Surfer-man just shook his head again and gave Loomis a look. Loomis just shrugged his shoulders. They both knew the flight was jammed full so there was no chance of finding another seat.

Eight hours later, they landed in London. The woman had continued on her urination spree, but there was no rhyme or reason to it. Sometimes she went three times an hour, sometimes she managed to go an hour or two without a trip up the aisle. Surfer-man, however, was more predictable. He would wake himself up from snoring every half-hour. He would kick the guy in front of him right after waking himself up. And, as he managed to get back into a nice deep sleep, he would wiggle and squirm and slam the seat divider into Loomis's hip like a spike. Every time.

He booked a first-class flight back home to BWI, and he alternated between consuming the free booze and sleeping in his big comfy seat by the window. He was back in Baltimore before he knew it.

Loomis found the car where they had left it in long-term parking. It still smelled like Mary's things and he was overwhelmed as soon as he shut the door. For so long he had wanted to be rid of her, and now it hurt to be without her. The thought of her smile brought the first tears. The rest came easy. He sat in the parking lot crying for almost an hour before he managed to start the car.

He had forgotten all of the good times and the fun they had when they had first met and gotten married. He had forgotten the way they had seemed made for each other. All of that was dwarfed by the feelings they both had when Jeff had been born. They had created a life out of the two of them and these new feelings had consumed them. They forgot how happy they had been as a couple and therefore weren't able to retrieve it when they needed each other most.

Loomis punched the dashboard and left a dent in the dense leather-covered foamcore. He punched it again, harder this time. Then hit it again a third time. He had never felt so lost in his life – it was as if all the depression and longing for death he had lived through the past few years had just been a joke, just a qualifying round for the real pain that he now felt.

Without realizing he was still doing it, he slammed his fist into the dashboard again. This time he felt the skin of his knuckles rip open. The physical pain brought him back enough to clear his eyes and start the drive home. He didn't know if he would make it home, but that was the direction he pointed the car.

Falling Leaves

the thirteenth part: interlude

This is the maze of life
This is the maze of death
This is the matrix of eternity

The demon never sleeps
The demon never lies
He beats my heart and leaves no echo

What heavy burden holds me back
Every step along the track?
Fear that reaches deep inside of me

Sound the trumpets of Jericho
Still the walls remain

-- Bruce Dickinson

Falling Leaves

The next week passed in a haze. Loomis made the arrangements for Mary's funeral, and did his best to accommodate her family on their short visit. He had argued with Mary's brother about cremation. He knew Mary was strongly opposed to being buried since she had a very deep rooted fear of becoming adipocere – the fat, waxy corpse goo that came from being entombed in an airless space. Her brother didn't seem to understand that the viewing would go as planned, then the cremation would take place. He was under the impression that all the people at the viewing would get to see would be an urn with ashes.

Loomis had summoned the energy to engage Mary's brother in this pointless discussion and had managed to convince the other man that cremation was what Mary wanted. He wasn't able to focus on any of the other details, and he drifted through the funeral service almost without hearing a word the priest uttered. He sometimes found himself marveling at the listlessness which encompassed him. He had managed to forget about this feeling in the time since Jeff had died. But now it was back, and he welcomed it with open arms.

Family and acquaintances brought him food. There were lots of casseroles and meat trays. He picked at things throughout the day when people were around but he never managed to summon the energy or the willpower to heat up any of the other things in the evenings.

When Mary's family left, he puttered around the house trying to bring himself to clean up the things which she had left laying around the house. The open sugar packets on the kitchen counter and the little plastic squares, with the adhesive back peeled off to release whatever pill was inside, which she left laying on the living room table usually caused him to get agitated. It never bothered him enough to get mad and say something, he just picked them up and threw them out, and regretted that he had to do it all the time. Now, however, he found the little piles of pill plastics and splenda scraps comforting and he couldn't bear to throw them away.

Toward the end of the week, he managed to bring himself to start packing away her things. He went through the closets and packed her clothes into boxes. He straightened up her office and organized her desk. When she was around, any organization of her office would have lasted about twenty minutes before she pulled open a file drawer of music or bills and had piles of paper cascading across every available surface.

Loomis collected the current stacks of music – the remains of her most recent search for a single page which someone needed copied – and threw it all into a box. He was relieved that he didn't have to worry about cataloguing it or keeping track of it anymore. He was also relieved that he didn't have to worry about the cat tearing a sheet of it up, or someone spilling something on it and having Mary get upset at her now ruined selection. It was the first relief he had felt since getting on the plane in London.

Ryan Adam

He knew it was a sign that things would be alright.

the fourteenth part: retrograde

The mark is on you now
The furnace sealed inside your head
Melting from the inside now
Waxy tears run down your face

The whore that never told her tale
Relives it every night with you
Far off stands the lamb and waits
For the wolf to come and end its life

-- Bruce Dickinson

Falling Leaves

Loomis found himself back at work the next Monday. The turd was still hanging in the doorway to his workspace. Everything in the ex-conference room still looked just as it had when he last saw it.

He had drifted through the funeral in a stupor. He was dimly aware of the short service Mary's family had arranged. He remembered holding something in his hand throughout the whole day, feeling the shape of it and wishing it were the rifle he'd had in Africa.

No one at work mentioned anything about his wife. A few people he saw on the way in had asked about his vacation, and he just gave them a cursory nod as if to say everything was fine.

He sat down at his computer and checked his e-mail to see what he had missed while he was away.

Some things never changed. He had the daily reports and weekly statistics and football pool and office party memos that constantly filled his inbox. But one subject line caught his eye.

!! SECURITY PRECAUTIONS FOR DECEMBER 12 !!

He clicked on it and waited for it to pop up in the other half of his screen.

ALL EMPLOYEES:

PRESIDENTIAL MOTORCADE WILL BE STOPPING AT WASHINGTON CIRCLE TO ADDRESS CURRENT WORLD TRADE AGREEMENT AND CONDEMN DEMONSTRATORS WHO ARE RESORTING TO VANDALISM AND VIOLENCE.

SECRET SERVICE WILL BE POSTED ON ROOFTOPS OF SURROUNDING BUILDINGS. DO NOT USE THE ROOF ACCESS FOR ANY REASON ON DECEMBER 12. WE WILL NOT HAVE ANY SERVICE AGENTS ON OUR ROOF BUT THEY WILL BE OBSERVING AND MAY DECIDE TO SHOOT BEFORE ASKING QUESTIONS.

ALSO STAY AWAY FROM THE WINDOWS FACING WASHINGTON CIRCLE. WE ARE KEEPING ALL CONFERENCE ROOMS EMPTY FOR THE DURATION OF THIS EVENT.

FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY, DO NOT ENTER OR EXIT THE BUILDING BETWEEN 1:00PM AND 4:00PM ON DECEMBER 12.

“Great,” Loomis said. “Fucking great. Now I can’t work, either.”

He closed the e-mail and tried to focus on the items his supervisor had mentioned were top priority. He couldn’t get his mind off the fact that the president would be interrupting his life in two weeks. “What next,” he wondered.

The rest of the day, he was preoccupied with thoughts of the motorcade interrupting his day. If it was just the normal motorcade deal which sometimes caused him a few minutes delay on his way across the street to grab some lunch, it wouldn’t have concerned him at all. Those weren’t announced in advance and were generally gone before anyone got too bothered by the temporary road closure. This new thing, however, was really grinding on his last nerve. It had taken all of his reserve to decide to come back to work, and now he felt like everything was on the verge of falling apart again.

He tried to reason things out by telling himself, over and over again, that his suicidal track had been the only way he could find to get away from Mary without feeling any remorse. Now that she was gone, he needed to wade through the grief and get on with his life.

The problem he found now, was that getting on with his life was difficult. Sometime during the past seven years, his life had become a constant battle. If he wasn’t locking horns with Mary over some stupid non-issue, he was sparring with the world over every little thing. It was sad to consider that an uneventful trip to the drive-thru window which resulted in a bag containing exactly what he ordered felt like a monumental victory. He was tired of being pissed at the world. But he had forgotten how to do anything else. Now that Mary was gone, he tried to get back to all of the things he wished he could do – all of the things he blamed her for taking away his time to complete. But they were old things from a former life and they didn’t feel comfortable anymore.

He knew he was going to have to find new things to do which didn’t remind him of any of the old things. He needed new hobbies which didn’t dredge up any memories of Mary.

Falling Leaves

It occurred to him that he used to have a train-set that his dad had bought him for Christmas. He remembered adding things to the layout over the years when his parents were still together, but somewhere along the line he had lost track of his trains. He hadn't had any trains during the whole time he knew Mary, so maybe that was something he could get back into. Or maybe one of the collections he used to have.

His mind started churning, remembering the comics he had collected as a teen, and the Star Wars revival which had cost him most of his paychecks for the last half of the '90's. If he still had any of that stuff it was probably in boxes, buried in the attic. He hadn't thought of any of it in years and, again, it was stuff Mary had never dabbled in. As a bachelor, he had decorated his apartments with Star Wars dioramas and huge framed art by comics artists, but he'd left all of that behind him when he had first moved in with Mary.

In fact, he had tried to sell his collection to get some money to put toward a security deposit, or some such expense. He found out the hard way about market saturation.

He had rented a table at a comic and toy show and managed to sell two or three of the really good pieces, but nobody was interested in the rest of it. A few people came by the table and pawed through what he had to offer, but most of the potential customers walked right past him without even offering his giant stack of Lucas-ware a single glance. Instead, they slid right past his table to the one set up next to him. That guy was selling cards. Loomis had never been a card collector, so he didn't see what all the fuss was about.

He watched in dumbfounded amazement as some pimple-faced kid laid out two-hundred dollars for an autographed TV star card. A fucking TV-star. Not even a movie star or a rock star, but some nobody who got paid a couple thousand bucks to do an hour of work a week. Sure, he saw that the chick on the card was pretty hot, but it was only a card – just a small scrap of cardboard, not anywhere near as impressive as an 8x10 photo. It dawned on him now, as he thought back on it, that paying big dollars for hunks of plastic in the shape of a movie actor wasn't a more noble pursuit.

As the day went on, he saw the guy running the table tear open packs of cards and sort through them. He had boxes of the things – for any one theme he had at least two dozen boxes. Some people came up and bought a whole box. Some people bought a couple packs of cards. The card dealer, however, would sit and rip open five or ten packs at a time when he was having a slow couple of minutes.

Every time the guy sorted through his latest batch, he pulled out more autographed TV star cards. Loomis tried to do the math on a thing where a

pack of cards went for five bucks and the guy could sell a single card for two-hundred, but he gave up because he never got a handle on the distribution of good cards to crap cards. As far as he was concerned, they were all crap cards, just like his Star Wars collection.

While he'd let the collection sit in the attic gathering dust (and gathering value, so he thought,) the world had moved past freeze-frame cards and short-saber/long-tray variations. It was the same as it had been when he'd paid over three hundred dollars for a fifty-dollar retailer exclusive – people wanted the stuff which was out right now but which couldn't actually be found on a shelf. As always, the thought made him chuckle.

Why couldn't it be found on a shelf in a toy store somewhere for kids and casual collectors to find at the bargain price of fourteen-ninety-five? The simple answer lay deep inside your 24-hour Wal-Mart store at 3 in the morning. Every day. Every week. Every year. They were there, waiting. They wandered the aisles looking at Rainbow Brite and Power Rangers and wiffle-ball bats and Spongebob skateboards but what they were waiting for was that low-mid rattle. A bit of a rumble, and the scrape of cardboard on cardboard. They lit up like kids at Christmas when they spied the Wal-Bot straining to bring a huge pallet down the narrow aisle. The light faded when they saw cases of dog food or Sterno, and they turned back to the Candyland game they had been contemplating until they heard it again. Then the light in their eye flared again and they strained with all of their might to discern the logos on those far-off cardboard treasure boxes.

When they saw things like “Mattel” or “Hasbro Boys Toys” they waited with baited breath, not daring to hope, but hoping anyhow.

Blatant boxes stating “Star Wars” or “Hot Wheels” were bound to produce a nervous twitch and a steady shake not unlike your average heroin junkie.

The worst was when the evil Wal-drone dropped the pallet and headed back for another one without opening any of the cases. The unwritten, tho not unspoken, rule was that only an employee of the store could open a case. It's not that they cared about letting everyone have a fair shot at the merchandise. No – they were only concerned about some Hot Wheels moron slicing himself open with a box cutter while going for that rare 1 in a 100,000 find.

When the pallet dropped and the night stocker was out of sight, the salivating started. In your small town you might only have the one Hot Wheels guy and the one Star Wars guy there eyeballing the mountain of sealed plastic bubbles that awaited. As the local service area of your Wal-Mart grew, so too did the late night population of the toy aisle. Then you had two or three Hot Wheels guys ready to slice each other open to get to the box first.

And so it went.

Falling Leaves

The hawks sat in wait, keeping alert, listening for the return of the pallet-bringer. They would have already scouted the general area and had a pretty good idea of any other “official” personnel. And if it was just quiet enough, for just long enough, one of them would break. You’d see the hand drop to the pocket and pull something out – not quite round, not quite sharp. It would flash green in the light and for a second you would think you saw a guitar pick, but then it was gone – into a box labeled “HASBRO BOYS” and the telltale “POP!” of the tape echoed through the cavernous store like a gunshot.

With a dexterity well hidden within his bulky frame, the collector would slice through the taped lid and pull the flaps back. Some days he would find inflatable beach chairs with a rough likeness of Natalie Portman or, Heaven forbid, Jar-Jar Binks. Other days he would find something entirely unrelated to his quest. But today he found the holy grail – exclusive figures, and they were packed six to a case, but the distribution is one of each per case. So in that one box he had a complete collection. What would cost him sixteen-eighty-five including tax tonight at Wal-Mart could bring over one hundred and fifty dollars at the weekend toy show.

Unless.

“Yeah, there’s always “unless,” isn’t there?” Loomis thought, with a smile.

Unless, that is, he decided to keep them. Just shy of seventeen bucks for an exclusive set of figures which could only be found at Wal-Mart. Sometimes the collector got a flash of envy, picturing some mythic plastic toy which is today worth almost a thousand dollars. Maybe it was because it had the wrong accessory. Or the wrong color hair. Or a funny flash of light in the photo which looked like a giant golden penis. Whatever it was, you never knew about it right away. So there was always the chance that some day, many (or even just five, or ten) years from now, that seventeen dollar investment might actually have a tangible value well over the inflated sum he could earn at a weekend toy show.

Or, more likely, it could just have a coolness factor to it which totally offset any monetary dreams. Say this particular collector had made his own custom figures for some fourth-rate character who never even uttered a noise, let alone a line of dialogue, and now, twenty or thirty years later, he had in his hands a full set of legitimate, licensed renditions of his childhood dreams. Sometimes that was tough to give up, even for ten times the investment.

For whatever reason, he hung onto them. Treasuring them for what they were – little plastic dreams to bolster fading memories of innocence. And then, without notice, the moment was gone. Somehow, everyone had one. And the price came down. Steadily down. Checking auction prices was cause for alarm and angry mutterings. But the reassurance of having it – just having

the damn thing – was comforting so it was really OK in the grand scheme of things.

Loomis looked out the darkened window toward where the President would be blathering about nothing in just a few days. As he had come to realize about his other pursuits, he wasn't the same person anymore. His Star Wars collection, if he even still had it, meant nothing more to him than a pile of rocks in a parking lot. It pained him to think of all the money and time he had spent amassing such a worthless pile of junk.

He started packing up his things to go home for the day. He considered going across the street to one of the numerous Foggy Bottom bars to either get hammered or see if he could hook up with some bar floozy and try to forget his problems for a little while. He had already tried this once before, but he found that whenever he tried to start up the chit-chat he was blinded by an image of Mary flashing in front of his face. She was always the same, just sitting on the couch, looking at him with a smile. The image itself was perfectly safe, but having it superimposed over his glass of beer or whatever off-balance boozier he was trying to talk to made him nervous. He had felt like he was going to throw up, and he didn't think he could handle that feeling tonight. He decided it would probably be best to just go home.

Later that night, he found himself on all fours in front of the toilet puking up the chicken he had eaten for dinner. Between heaves, he recalled that he had polished off an entire bottle of Jose Cuervo 1800 while watching the news. When he was finished unloading his dinner, he stood up and turned to the sink. He turned on the faucet, not caring what sort of temperature it was set to and cupped his hands under the flow. It was cold, but that didn't mean anything. The hot water took minutes to make its way from the basement up to the bathroom.

He splashed cold water onto his face and scrubbed at the spots where he felt the vomit clinging. He cupped his palm and let it fill, then washed his mouth out several times. He grabbed a wad of toilet paper and blew his nose, wincing as the stomach acid burned the insides of his sinus cavity.

After a few seconds, the pain subsided and he looked up to his reflection in the mirror. His hair was sticking out every which way, and he had two days of beard growth on most of his face. A small patch by the corner of his mouth was bare, and he could only assume that he had been picking at it sometime during the day. His shirt looked like it had half of his dinner on it – and some of it looked like it had been there since before he'd passed out. A streak of red sauce was splashed across one of the breast pockets.

Falling Leaves

He squinted in the harsh light of the bathroom vanity. He felt disgusted with himself. He could sense that part of himself was still sleeping, probably thinking that it was still passed out on the couch in the living room.

He closed his eyes and felt himself totter backwards, but he caught the sway before he got off balance. When he opened his eyes, the reflection was still as disgusting as it had been before. He thought he should brush his teeth so the acid didn't strip off whatever enamel was still left in his mouth. He'd neglected them for years and the dentist bills to get them back into shape had been monstrous. He didn't want to have to go through that painful experience again, so he reached down for his toothbrush.

The toothbrush handle was slim and cold in his hand. He looked down and saw that he had picked up the razor blade instead of the toothbrush.

There was no thought in his mind as he ripped the blade up his left forearm. When a thought did register, it told him he should probably pick up the toothbrush if he was going to brush his teeth.

The razor blade slid into the soft flesh behind his watch band without a sound, and without the slightest tingle of pain. The little sharp thing was up to the crook of his elbow in a flash.

He stood, staring at the faint line on his arm. He shook his head in disbelief, sure that this time had been different than the others. He felt the same old rage welling inside at his inability to get it over and done. He threw the razor blade down and reached for the toothbrush and the toothpaste.

Blood dripped into the sink from the cut now that he had moved his arm.. He turned his arm over and watched as it peeled itself open from bottom to top letting a gush of blood flow downward and drip off of his elbow.

A very satisfied grin crept onto his face and he closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he passed out. He didn't think he'd lost enough blood yet to go this quickly. It must have been the tequila, he thought as his head bounced off the floor.

the fifteenth part: getting over it

Passion or coincidence once prompted you to say
Pride will tear us both apart
Well now pride's gone out the window cross the
rooftops, run away,
Left me in the vacuum of my heart.
What is happening to me?
Crazy, some'd say,
Where is my friend when I need you most?
Gone away...

-- Simon LeBon

Falling Leaves

In the end, he couldn't believe it was actually going to work. He sat on the cardboard covered table top where he had a bird's eye view of the activity in the circle across from him. He watched as the podium was assembled and moved from one spot to another, then another until some TV-savvy person decided it would offer the best combination of light and backdrop.

He sat watching the trucks come and go, watching as the crowd built in the area in front of the stage. His breathing was slow and shallow, and his movement was nonexistent.

Police motorcycles and dark-blue trucks blockaded the roads which criss-crossed Pennsylvania Avenue and the parts he could see of Washington Circle.

“Soon,” he thought. “Soon it'll be over and everything will be back to normal.” He scratched at the bandage which was hidden under his shirt sleeve. The cut had been deep, but when he had passed out he had landed on his arm. Laying on top of it until morning had provided enough pressure to let it scab over. There was hardly any trace of it now – just a flap at the end by his watch where the blade had first dug in.

He wasn't sure why he had such an adverse reaction to the news about a presidential appearance this close to the building. It wasn't any real concern. More like a minor inconvenience that he would once again be denied his workspace. Even that worked itself out in the end – another memo had gone out barring access to conference rooms which were affected by the security measures. His room was not on the list since it was technically classified as an office and laboratory. When 1:00 P.M. rolled around and the guards swept the rooms, they did it to the letter, by the number, just as they did with the laptops, and nobody asked him to leave his spot.

He decided to just wait it out and see what happened. He was sure his unnatural reaction to this being the worst thing possible had been a result of the stress of burying his wife and trying to figure out what to do next.

He heard someone try the doorknob, and he stiffened. He didn't want to be disturbed, he wanted to wait this thing out by himself. No other sound came from the door, so he relaxed and felt even more certain that everything was going to work out.

He noticed increased activity around the stage and caught a glimpse of the motorcade out the corner of his eye as it streamed past. “Almost over,” he thought.

The motorcade pulled around the circle behind the stage. The crowd swarmed to the barricades that had been erected to separate them from the

president. He was so close he could see one of the people in front holding a banner.

The kid looked to be just out of high school. He had the barest fringe of stubble on his face and his clothes looked like they smelled about as bad as they looked. He had on a tattered Bad Brains t-shirt and a backwards baseball cap. He held his home made sign up in front of one of the TV cameras. He held it for a few seconds, then he flipped it over.

“END THE REGIME,” it said on one side.

“DON’T LET BUSH CHANGE THE CONSTITUTION,” it said on the other.

The TV audience would get to see it in the opposite order.

He watched as the kid was dragged away by four secret service agents who tore the sign from his hands and thrust him further into the back of the crowd.

He spotted another kid in a similar outfit – only this time it was a Wesley Willis t-shirt. The sign looked like it had been made from the same materials as the first.

This one had just a single message, repeated on both sides.

“FUCK BUSH,” it declared.

It didn’t appear as if anyone was bothering to rid the festivities of this fellow or his sentiment.

Loomis kept one eye on the kid and the sign, curious as to how long he would last before his sign was shredded and he was given the boot.

The kid was still there, but his sign was gone when Loomis registered the movement on the stage. The curtain was drawn back and some talking head in a suit came out and blathered into the microphone. Loomis couldn’t hear anything through the tinted window.

The talking guy said a few sentences then raised his hands in the air. This caused most of the crowd to cheer, although Loomis did notice a fair amount of those in the back casting “boos” and waving their middle fingers.

The first man exited the same way he had come on. The curtain parted again and Loomis watched the president take his place at the podium. He walked with a cock-sure swagger. Loomis had never seen the man this close before. He could feel confidence streaming off the man in waves.

When he reached the podium, the president glanced down and shuffled through his notes. When he looked up, he had on his please-the-masses grin. The crowd quieted.

Falling Leaves

He was still grinning his idiotic smirk when the bullet blew out the back of his head. It left just a small black hole in the presidential forehead.

Loomis rolled off the table and onto the floor. He had been worried the thick glass would alter the course of the bullet, but it had traveled straight and true. He peeked over the table and found the small hole the bullet had left in the thick glass. A spider web of cracks radiated out in all directions, but none of them managed to snake a course all the way to the frame. Loomis looked beyond the hole to the activity in the circle across the street.

A wall of men in dark suits surrounded the podium where the president had been standing. Dark glasses obscured their eyes, but Loomis was certain they were scouring the crowd for anyone with a weapon. Each man held a semi-automatic pistol at the ready. Behind them a fury of activity surrounded the fallen president.

Wailing, an ambulance pulled right up to the front of the stage, the crowd parting before it. Under cover of dozens of agents, the president was loaded into the Ambulance.

Loomis scanned the area to see if anyone had pinpointed this building as the source of the shot, but there was no activity on this side of the street. There didn't seem to be any focus at all, just people running every which way. Loomis got up and put his Chinese assault rifle back into the case. He stood on a chair and pushed aside one of the ceiling tiles and stuffed the rifle up into the air space above the conference room. He gave it a hard shove and it slid across the metal grid strips until it bumped over the edge and down onto the slightly lower section of drywall which constituted the ceiling for the coat closet. He was sure they would find it, but it would take more than a cursory inspection.

He quickly checked himself in the hollow reflection from one of the other windows. It didn't seem as if he had any visible powder residue or grease from the gun on him, so he walked across the room and listened at the door. He didn't hear anything and figured everyone was stuffed into the offices farther down the hall which would have a decent, slightly angled view on the festivities.

He unlocked the door and opened it. No one was working at any of the cubes in that section of the floor, so he stepped out and looked down both of the hallways that met at this corner of the building. He didn't see anyone. He made his way down the longer of the two hallways toward the elevators in the center of the building.

About half-way to the elevator, he passed two offices full of people all trying to crowd into the flat window for a view of what was happening. He kept walking and no one noticed him. When he got to the elevator vestibule he pushed the down button and was rewarded with an elevator opening right in front of him.

He stepped in and pushed the button for the ground floor and took the elevator down to the cafeteria level. A quick walk past the vending machines and payphones brought him to the back door. The guard at the metal detector was talking on the phone.

The thought struck Loomis that his actions today would probably change policy on the metal detectors. As things currently worked, the metal detectors were reserved for people who had visitor badges. Employees or contractors with official issue photo-ID badges only had to slap their badge against the detector at the turnstiles at the entrances to the building. Visitors had to step around the turnstiles which took them through the path of the metal detector.

The guard hung up the phone and looked at Loomis.

“You goin’ out?” the guard asked.

“Yes,” Loomis said. “I’m going home.”

“OK,” the guard said. “The phone just said that Metro is not running any trains out of Foggy Bottom.”

“That’s OK,” Loomis said. “I drove.”

He walked past the guard and out the back entrance onto K Street. To his left was the cacophony of sirens and policemen trying to shout directions to the crowd of people around the stage. Loomis turned right toward 21st Street and walked to the corner. He waited for the walk sign so he could cross the street to the hotel where he parked his car. While he was waiting, Secret Service agents swarmed around the huge tan building. They were unconcerned with anyone standing on the street, but one of the agents took an interest in the next set of people to come through the door Loomis had just exited.

He crossed the street and descended into the parking garage. He was greeted with the smells of fresh concrete, plaster and exhaust. Its familiar scent brought him back a little from the tunnel vision he developed when he concentrated on aiming at a target. As he made his way down the ramps of the parking garage, his breathing picked back up to a normal pace. By the time he was in his car, he was back to normal and all traces of the killing machine the army had trained him to be were back to being dormant.

He drove up and out of the tightly packed parking garage. He hoped that by now they would have closed off the streets and started get a count of who was in the area at the time of the shooting. He handed his ticket to the attendant as he passed and pulled onto the ramp, fully expecting to find his way blocked by one of the ubiquitous dark blue Chevy Suburbans. The way was clear, however, and he pulled right out onto 21st street. He turned left on

Falling Leaves

Pennsylvania just as the D.C. cop directed him to do and he turned left again at 20th street. Just one block up the street, and life seemed normal. No one was directing traffic, and he could see people streaming in and out of the shops to his right.

The K Street tunnel under Washington Circle had been closed all day, so he kept going straight on 20th street up to Dupont Circle where he caught Connecticut avenue out of the city.

Loomis knew that this was it. There was no miracle cure for assassinating a president. Everyone at the office would eventually be able to identify him as the one who hadn't been crowding into one of the windows peering down the street to the president's address. They would search the conference room and find the gun with his fingerprints on it, and they would arrest him and take him to jail. That is, if someone didn't find him and kill him first.

The plan had gone better than he ever expected it would. He had brought the rifle to work in pieces, the only tough piece being the barrel since it was attached to the rest of the gun with a press-fit metal pin. At home, he had the tools to fully disassemble the gun, but he'd had to improvise to get the gun back together at the office. In the end, he got the pin in just far enough to fit the other parts around it. He only needed it for one shot, so he wasn't at all concerned with the attachment holding for any length of time.

When the time came, the people around him were the only thing he couldn't fully predict, but every single one of them had done just as he expected they would.

The only part of the plan that didn't go just right was the getaway. He never expected to make it out of the city, but here he was, cruising up Connecticut Avenue and cutting across Military Road to 16th street in record time with no trace of the rush-hour traffic he usually encountered.

Once he made it to 29 in Silver Spring, Loomis turned on the radio. This time he ejected his CD and reached for the tuner button. He found he didn't need to push it since the radio was already blaring the news.

"I repeat," the radio said, "President Bush has been shot and killed in Washington, D.C."

"Tell me something I don't know," Loomis said to the radio.

“Reports indicate a single shot was fired from an unknown location. Authorities suspect the shot may have come from one of several nearby office buildings which house embassies or other International Organizations. The International nature of their operations places them outside the normal scope of United States law so the Secret Service has been unable to search all of the suspected buildings.”

Loomis turned onto the D.C. Beltway and merged into the light mid-afternoon traffic.

“We have just gotten word that the Saudi Arabian embassy has opened its doors to American security personnel and they are now conducting a thorough sweep of the premises. The Saudi Embassy has several floors which have a view of the location of today’s presidential address. We do not know which buildings are under suspicion, but it can be assumed that the nearby Spanish Embassy and several World Bank offices are going to be under scrutiny.”

Loomis turned off the radio. Forty-five minutes later, he pulled into his driveway.

the sixteenth part: revolution

A dictator felt progressive
And lay down in the sun
His people were aggressive
They killed him with a gun

- Michael Kiske

Falling Leaves

Loomis sat down on the couch in his normal spot. Mary's blanket and pillow sat unused on the cushion at the other end of the cream colored sofa. He picked up his big blue universal remote control and turned on the components which allowed him to watch TV.

The receiver popped on as the TV hummed to life. The satellite receiver and the DVD recorder it was routed through came to life without a sound.

A Sony logo from the DVD player flashed on the screen for a second, then the feed from the satellite receiver took over. Loomis punched 202 on the remote control and the channel changed to CNN.

The screen showed an overhead shot of the area he had just left. The anchor's voice-over described the same situation as the radio had reported. The same report with no new information continued for the next several hours.

Loomis sat watching it all, waiting patiently. He glanced at Mary's blanket, comforted that the whole thing would be over soon.

During one of the endless repeats, the anchor interrupted whatever talking head was on location.

"Hang on, Marty," the anchor said. "We've got something coming in."

The TV image switched from the reporter standing in front of the crime scene tape to a dark, shaky, zoomed-in shot of the bullet hole in Loomis' conference room office. The camera pulled back to show more of the window and the side of the building.

"What we're seeing now is part of the World Bank organization," the reporter announced.

"This hole, which appears to have come from a bullet, was found by Secret Service agents who were doing exterior scans of the buildings which face Washington Circle."

The reporter paused, seeming to try to cram the ear piece deeper into her skull.

"Secret Service and Homeland Security are now in the process of checking the room on the other side of that window," the anchor said just as the TV image lit up from someone inside turning on the lights. The smoky glass got brighter, and the small circle was better defined against the dark window, but the TV camera was not able to get a clear shot through the polarized glass.

Loomis sat and waited through another endless loop of the same repeating news. When he got tired of the same voices and faces he would switch. Fox News Channel, local news, back to CNN, all around a tour of the same words with different faces.

Loomis heard a car door outside the living room window. He cautiously peeled back the curtain and peeked out the corner of the window. He saw a taxi pull away and watched as one of his neighbors ran up the sidewalk to her house. He let go of the curtain and turned back to flipping channels.

On one trip around the tour, he must have hit a button wrong and he found himself looking at the eternally fuzzy C-SPAN image. The caption at the bottom of the screen read, “Earlier Today,” and Loomis expected to see some reaction in the Senate to the shooting, but instead the video showed him a man he didn’t recognize addressing the Senate. The television identified the man as a Republican Senator from Ohio.”

“I must go against the wishes of my party and announce to you the findings of our committee,” the man said.

In the background, several men could be seen restraining the vice-president.

“It has come to the attention of this committee that the president and those in various places of power have been trying to pull a fast one on the American public.”

The man paused, letting the information sink in.

“Two of the last four bills which have passed the Senate have been slightly changed in the dark hours of the night to affect issues they originally did not address.

“This, in and of itself, is nothing new. It’s done all the time. It’s how funding for many special projects is allocated, it’s how things like the Patriot Act manage to give the police more rights to protect us from terrorism, but this time they’ve gone too far.

“Language introduced into these bills, one of which has just passed both houses, affects the term of the president’s term in office.”

The low-level rustling and whispering which had permeated the room up to this point fell quiet.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the man explained, “Your president has taken it upon himself to offer an extension of presidential office in times of war or national emergency. The decision to enact such a period of national emergency, as described in the current bills and several other drafts of pending legislation, lies solely with the president himself.”

“This is an outrage!” a Senator seated close to the podium shouted. “What proof—“

Falling Leaves

“We have all the proof we need. We have sworn testimony from several of the people involved in this brazen affront to our way of life.”

Loomis flipped the channel. The news channels were all carrying the same thing now.

The CNN anchor popped back onto the screen.

“That was Senator Ephraim McGee from Ohio, speaking in congress at the very same moment that President Bush was killed this afternoon. At this point, we have no idea if these things are related, but we are checking into the facts about Senator McGee’s statements at this very moment.”

“How in the fuck...” Loomis said, stunned.

“And,” the reporter continued, “We have just received word that Vice President Cheney has been taken into custody by United States Marshalls, and we have also just received a request from the C.I.A. for all copies of the recording you have just...”

The TV picture went black, then turned to static.

“This should be interesting,” Loomis said.

the seventeenth part: law & order

Quiver by the fiery light
Cringing as your soul ignites
The book of law's been thrown away
Starting today
The system before the war
Is gone for now and evermore
There is no sentence higher
A trial by fire

-- Chuck Billy

Falling Leaves

The next day, Loomis was awakened by someone knocking on his door.

“Police,” someone shouted through the door. “Mr. Loomis, come out with your hands up.”

Loomis got out of bed, still wearing the sweat pants and t-shirt he had been wearing last night. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and opened the front door.

Outside, two dozen police officers, many of them the same ones from the radio station, all had their guns trained on him.

Loomis held his hands up and stood still, looking at the police officers.

“Step forward onto the porch and keep your hands where we can see them,” the cop said.

Loomis followed the officer’s instructions and stepped out onto the porch. The brick and concrete surface was cold on his bare feet. One of the police officers stepped behind him and took his hands down, cuffing them behind his back. He was pushed down the steps by the handcuffs and swept toward one of the police cars which was blocking the driveway. The door was pulled open before he got to the car and he was thrust inside, someone’s hand on his head to keep it from knocking into the roof of the car. He sat down in the police cruiser and wondered what could possibly happen now.

At the police headquarters, he was placed at a table in an interrogation room. His cuffs were removed and he was given a cup of coffee. Just like on television, he was left to sit, alone, for several hours. The police made a point of checking in every once in a while to see if he needed more coffee, but no one asked anything more serious than that. He waited patiently, certain that murder was murder, even if the world had finally recognized that the victim was a crazed lunatic.

A clean-cut man in a neat and tidy suit came into the interrogation room. He sat down at the table and took a sip of his own cup of coffee.

“When did you first learn of the president’s plans, Mr. Loomis,” the man said.

“What plan?” Loomis asked.

“Let’s not play games, OK?” the man asked.

Loomis just shrugged.

“I’m Tom Watley, with the C.I.A. I’ve been undercover with the Secret Service for about ten months now working my way in close to the president.”

“O.K.,” Loomis said. “So you know a lot more than I do.”

“Seriously, Mr. Loomis, I don’t think so,” Watley said. “Let me continue.

“We’ve been keeping close tabs ever since someone let one of our agents out of the bag. We took that very personally, and it was only under very close inspection that we got wind of this conspiracy to thwart the constitution.”

“I only heard of this so-called conspiracy on the news last night,” Loomis said.

Watley sat, wide-eyed, staring at him.

“Then why...,” Watley began. “Oh. I get it. You’re so far undercover that you didn’t even get the full picture.”

“No,” Loomis said. “I’m not undercover.”

“Mr. Loomis,” Watley said, standing up now and picking up his coffee. “Did you...”

“Don’t answer that,” a voice interrupted.

The voice came just as the door opened. Winslow stepped into the room and gave Loomis a slow wink. It was the kind of wink that says, “you don’t know me.”

“Mr. Loomis,” Winslow said, “You don’t have to answer this man’s questions. He is not in charge of this investigation.”

“It’s our people who are getting fucked, not the Secret Service,” Watley said, before storming out of the room.

“The recorders are off. I gave strict instructions that I want five minutes alone with you before the official interrogation begins,” Winslow said.

“O.K.,” Loomis said, “But I still think I’m missing something.”

“I’ve been in far deeper and for much longer than that asshole,” Winslow said. “This is what I was working on before you and I went on our African safari – and I made it back just in time.”

“O.K...”

“I don’t know how you managed it,” Winslow said, “but you played this thing right into our lap. You couldn’t have done it better if I’d have given you a script.”

“Oh, come on. Are you fucking kidding me?” Loomis asked. He shook his head, trying to make sense of it.

“I’m done, Paul, fucking finished. I quit. Do you get it? I fucking quit,” Loomis said.

Falling Leaves

Winslow let him talk.

“I’ve been ready to die but unable to pull the trigger for so long... then – then this vacation comes and Mary and I finally connect again, it’s like old times and I actually let myself feel hope again.”

Loomis punched the palm of his left hand with his fist.

“I hadn’t felt that in so long, that wonderful lightness of being that comes when you really believe anything is possible. I couldn’t believe that I’d wanted to throw it all away when things could feel so good and free, but then it was all torn away again.

“Maybe I held on because I’m too chicken to pull the trigger, but deep down I know it’s all the religious shit my mother force fed me when I was a kid. And whether I believe or not, this fucking God, if that’s what it is, keeps teasing me. Giving me a little bit of hope, then snatching it all away.

“Fuck him. Fuck you, fuck this. Fuck everything. I’m fucking finished, Winslow, I’m fucking done. I shot some asshole in a radio station so I would get the lethal injection. You know – two birds with one stone. All that horse shit. That fucking backfired on me. Then I threw in the towel for sure – I went hunting pirates in the goddamn jungle. Well, that was a wash, too. None of them even fired back.”

Winslow still stood, allowing him to talk.

“Now look at me. I shot the fucking president. Assassination – of our country’s leader, and now I’ve got the Secret Service about to tell me, ‘Good Job, Loomis, how did you know?’”

Winslow raised his eyes, hoping for the answer he knew wouldn’t come.

“Well, I didn’t fucking know. I had no idea. Get it? No idea. I saw a sure-fire way to get myself killed. Hopefully in a hail of bullets as that big picture window came raining down around me – but no. It didn’t work that way. The dickhead president crumpled like a ragdoll and the bodyguards couldn’t pinpoint the source of the shot to save their own lives. Not only did I get out the building, but I got all the way home without once being stopped.”

Loomis paused, and Winslow took the other chair.

“When did this happen?” Loomis asked. “When did my life get so pathetic that I can’t even accomplish the simple task of ending my own life?”

“You wanna die?” Winslow asked, pulling his service pistol.

Loomis looked into the barrel of the gun which was leveled at his face.

“You know,” he said, “I’m not even sure now. This is all so stupid, so incredibly stupid, that I can’t even figure out what I want.”

“Good.” Winslow said. “Because if you had said yes I would have pulled the trigger.”

The door opened again and a woman stepped into the small room.

She wore a dark suit like all of the other Secret Service agents he had seen so far today, but something about her seemed familiar. When she turned around after shutting the door, he realized that the last time he had seen her she had worn her long dark hair down. Now it was confined in a tight bun at the back of her head.

“Hello, Kat,” Winslow said.

“Winslow,” the woman replied, giving him a nod. “How is Mr. Loomis today?”

She still had the slightest trace of an accent, just as she had on the cruise ship. Loomis wondered if she really was a doctor.

“Loomis, I’d like you to meet Kata Koivusaari,” Winslow said.

“You can call me Kat. Everyone does,” the woman said to Loomis.

“Kat has been keeping an eye on you,” Winslow said.

The woman threw a manilla envelope onto the table. Several photographs spilled out when it hit the scarred table top. Winslow picked one up and held it up for Loomis to see.

“Look familiar?” Winslow asked.

The picture showed an enhanced scan of some sort, he wasn’t sure what had made the picture, but the image was clear. It showed him as he was the day before, sitting on top of the conference room table aiming his Chinese rifle at the president. In the background, almost in focus, was the president standing at the podium.

“How... You people are playing me.” Loomis said, standing up and trying to pace the short room.

“No, my friend,” Winslow said, “it’s all just luck of the draw.”

Loomis sat back down.

“Kat was about to do what you had lined up, but she spotted you in position. She had a less than ideal perch since we couldn’t get anything diplomatic lined up at one of the embassies. If you hadn’t pulled through she would have done it for you, but the fact of the matter is, you saved the day,” Winslow said.

“Enough already,” Loomis said.

“Well,” Winslow said, “I can see that you’ve had enough. What are you going to do with yourself now?”

the eighteenth part: aika multaa muistot

You were such in a rush
To reach the other side
Look at yourself
With that love in your eyes
Smiling wide, preoccupied
With that river

-- Alan Robert

For my name is sorrow and I'm a friend of misery
I deprived myself of love for eternal agony
And I don't even dare to try - I know I can only lose
Between this life I live and nothing I have to choose

Take me home...
...to the one I belong

-- Sami Lopakka

Falling Leaves

They had spent another five hours in the interrogation room after Kata and Winslow had made everything clear to him. Together, they put on a show for the local law enforcement and F.B.I. guys who had brought him in.

Loomis vehemently denied pulling the trigger on the gun. He also swore up and down that the hole had been in the window for a long time. He told them he thought it had happened when they were knocking down the building across the street.

In the end, they had to let him go because someone broke the chain of custody while they were handling the SKS assault rifle. Winslow saw to it that it wasn't tested for a ballistics match since it couldn't be admitted as evidence.

Kata drove him home in one of the dark blue Suburbans. They were retracing the route he had taken out of the city earlier that day. They had spent most of the drive in silence, but she kept glancing his way as if she wanted to say something. Loomis didn't notice her glances since he was sitting with his head down. He appeared to be doing his best to stare a hole through the floor of the truck.

"My daughter died last year," she told him.

He looked up now and met her gaze as she glanced over to check his reaction.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"She was six years old," Kata explained. "She died of Leukemia."

"That's a terrible way to go," Loomis said, trying to understand the feelings he felt churning inside of himself.

"Your son was what, seven, when he died?" she asked.

"Yes. He was seven. And it's been seven years," Loomis answered. "But it still feels like yesterday."

"It feels the same for me," she said. "But I've managed to pull through. So far."

Loomis looked at her. He could sense the nervous feeling spreading through his mid-section. The feeling made him squirm in the seat and he choked back the urge to vomit which had overcome him.

"My husband couldn't take it," she said. "That son-of-a-bitch put a bullet in his own head when the doctors told us that Samantha only had six months left to live."

Loomis shook his head. He was starting to realize that he understood how she felt.

“That was seven years ago,” she said. “Your boy and my husband -- both dead for seven years.

They drove in silence for a few more miles before she spoke again.

“I held my baby’s hand when she she died. Her father was already rotting in his grave, and do you know what she said to me, just before she let go?” Kata asked.

She pulled up to a red light and looked over at Loomis. Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes.

“My little girl looked at me and smiled. She told me, ‘Daddy says he’s sorry.’”

Kata sniffed and wiped the tears away from her cheek.

“I don’t believe in that kind of... of... bullshit,” she said. “But, to hear her say that, it tore me apart to think that after all that little girl went through she wanted to make her mother feel better. She was my angel, and I miss her.”

Kata broke down then and managed to pull the Suburban onto the shoulder of the Interstate.

Loomis sat for a minute, his hands twitching in his lap. He wasn’t sure what he should do in this situation. But, for once, he he was able to identify what he was feeling. The sweaty nervousness that was spreading through him was compassion. He was empathizing with what she was feeling and he had a brilliant flash of clarity. It felt like being hit in the face by a tennis ball which had just been shot out of a cannon, or like getting punched in the face by someone who was hiding behind the door you just came through. But it was more real, somehow. In that moment, he realized that this woman sitting beside him – this woman who had been naked on a cruise ship, who had attended to his dying wife, and who had every opportunity to kill him while he was performing an act of treason – this woman understood what he felt inside.

It shocked him to think that it could be true, but it had been there from the start. The look she had given him on the cruise when he first saw her had been one of recognition. She could see the sadness inside of him as if it were painted on his skin like a tattoo. He had seen the sadness Mary was carrying with her, but Mary had never been able to see beyond her own hurt. Even at the very end when things had started to go better, she still couldn’t see just how emotionally crippled he was.

Loomis felt free, like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He reached over to Kata and pulled her closer to him. She clicked the gearshift into park and turned toward him in her seat. They shared an awkward hug in the confined space of the Suburban. She unbuckled her seatbelt and slid closer to him, gently brushing her lips against his.

Falling Leaves

He pressed against her and felt her mouth give the slightest little bit. She felt solid in his arms, but smooth and gentle. Their embrace lasted only a few minutes before he pulled away.

“I’m sorry...” she said.

“No, don’t be,” he said, brushing her long dark hair back behind her ear.

A streak of guilt had torn through him as they kissed. He felt as though he were abandoning or betraying Mary. He understood that the vows they took had explicitly stated, “until death do us part,” but he still had a short-circuit in his brain when it came to these things.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he said.

She looked at him, hoping for a better explanation.

“This whole crazy thing...” he started, “it’s all revolved around the church. I don’t get it. I mean, I hate the fucking church. I never put much faith into anything they said and then when Jeff died, that was it. I was done with the church, with religion, with all of it. But...”

“But it’s more than the church,” Kata said.

Now it was his turn to wait for her explanation.

“When my husband died, I felt lost and empty. At one point my daughter slipped into a coma and I almost followed him. I had the trigger nearly to the break point, and something inside of me snapped,” she said.

Loomis nodded, understanding the feeling.

“I couldn’t do what he did to me to the other people who cared about me. I like to think it’s because I’m a caring, thoughtful person. You’re the same way. I see it in you. You can blame it on whatever you want – blame it on religion or your parents, but it’s that experience which shapes us,” she continued.

“I think I know that...” he said.

“I don’t know the specifics, but I’m sure you had someone close to you commit suicide. I’d also bet your parents are divorced, which is why you never left Mary.”

Her words hit hard, but they rang true. These were the things he tried to find in his dreams but which he always managed to find some way to elude. Now that she had spoken them out loud, it all started to make sense.

Kata fastened her seatbelt and put the car back into gear. She pulled onto the highway and threaded her way over to the faster traffic.

Ryan Adam

When he looked at her, Loomis felt conflicted. He understood that everything she was saying was true. He also understood that it would take some more time to sort it all out.

“I have to figure some things out, Kat,” he said. “The rational side of me wants to tell you take me away from here and never come back.”

She smiled, understanding what he was going through.

“But, I guess I’ve never been good at dealing with my emotions, so I need some time to figure out if I can get past this.”

“Take your time,” she said, “I’ll be there when you need me.”

Falling Leaves

the nineteenth part: other side of the river

These weeds have grown
Where the sun once shone
And I can feel it

These weeds have grown
Where the sun once shone
And I can feel

This space between us

-- Alan Robert

I can see you're scared and tired of all this
I can see the torment, the damage it has done
Still we both know what the other alternative is
Don't go yet
Don't let go
Not yet, my only one

-- Sami Lopakka

Falling Leaves

Loomis stood in the cold air with his eyes closed. He could picture this place no matter where he was. Now that he was standing here again it was twice as vivid as his memory. Despite the fact that this little patch of land was hidden from view down a long winding road off the Interstate, he never forgot how to get here. And he never missed the turn into the little parking lot. He had parked his car in the little turnaround under the trees at the end of the short gravel road. He had left it running to keep it warm. Where he stood, just a few feet away, was free of any overhanging branches, but still the sun didn't manage to make it very bright. The day was overcast with just a touch of mist in the air, like it wanted to rain but couldn't quite summon the energy to get on with it. It was a feeling he understood very well.

The ground in front of him was freshly turned. Flowers covered the hard, partly frozen spot in front of the shiny new headstone. One spot on the headstone wasn't as shiny as the rest. He had chosen to have the plaque from Jeff's marker transferred to this new triple-header which he'd chosen as the new marker for the family plot.

They had gone ahead and purchased three adjoining spots when Jeff had died. After all, all trails lead to the cemetery, was how he'd thought about it at the time. Now the ground was nearly full. Just one space left, and he'd been on a collision course with that narrow piece of ground for a long time now.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there, but it was only now that he managed to summon the courage to place the flowers beside Mary's name. There wasn't a vase attached to the marker yet. They had told him it would take a few weeks before they could get one in and get it set up from him. He leaned down and placed the bouquet on top of the naked earth. It was almost old-hat to put flowers down for Jeffy, but this was new, and unexpected.

The melancholy vibe he got when he came to visit Jeff's grave was replaced with a dull throbbing, an ache which felt as if it would never be assuaged. All the emptiness and loneliness he had felt since Jeff had died seemed so fake and meaningless. He found it hard to believe he had been so close to the edge when there was still this much more pain, loss, and emptiness to feel. With both of them gone, he finally understood that there was a bottom to depression, and he had been nowhere close to that bottom before now.

Mary's funeral was still a blur to him. He recalled the faces blipping past as he barely registered the condolences and well-wishes. At the graveside service, he had perked up a little more, mostly reflecting on what he remembered of Jeff's funeral and trying his best not to vomit as his stomach churned with guilt and regret. He sat silently through the whole thing and waited until the very last moment before leaving. Just as with Jeff's service, he had watched as the burial crew lowered the casket into the concrete liner.

When they had buried Jeff, he and Mary had stood hand in hand, watching them lower the heavy concrete lid. The rain had stopped just as the

men had begun hooking the lid up to the crane, but the wind had still kept up. Just as the lid was about to come between them forever, two autumn leaves – born on a playful gust – had landed right on the crack of the casket lid. An instant later, the thick concrete slab had slammed down hiding the whole thing from view forever.

Mary hadn't gotten any leaves. Just concrete darkness. Somehow, the thought calmed him. He hadn't felt much of anything when the two workmen had begun shoveling dirt into the hole. But now, standing here today, he felt like it was right. He understood that Jeff would be happy to have two colorful leaves in the darkness with him but Mary would rather be alone.

"Mary," Loomis said, feeling his chest tighten. "I love you. I miss you."

A tear forced its way onto his cheek. It felt cold as it rolled down his cheek.

He felt strange to be talking aloud in a cemetery which was devoid of another living soul. His voice was calm and quiet, barely above a whisper, but it felt right to actually speak the words into the air rather than just thinking them. If he left them in his head, they tended to get jumbled together and confused. When he spoke aloud, even just a whisper, it gave his thoughts a more concrete form.

"Jeff," Loomis tried to say, but his voice cracked as more tears joined the first one.

"Jeff, you take care of your mother."

He realized he didn't know what to think or to believe. He couldn't identify with any truth in an afterlife, but something about it felt right.

"Mary, you and Jeff are together now. It's what you wanted for so long. Maybe..." he had to pause as a series of sobs racked through him.

"It's not the way you wanted it, but maybe it will be alright."

He sat down on the cold ground, trying to get a hold of himself. His breath fogged the air in front of his face as his sobs racked through him. Tears blurred his vision, and the tombstone doubled and trebled as he blinked.

"For so long, I've wanted to be where you are."

Loomis reached behind him to the lump of cloth he had laid down when he first arrived at the grave site. He pulled the wrapped bundle into his lap and tugged one end of it. The knit blanket slowly unraveled from the object within. After a few more spins, the rifle dropped into his lap.

"I've had this thing to my own head more times than you can imagine, Mary," Loomis said in his half-whisper.

Falling Leaves

He looked into the gun barrel, fully aware that a round was chambered and the safety was off. There was no magazine fitted into the receiver – there was just the one bullet in the chamber. Without the magazine, he had an unobstructed view down the side of the gun to the stamped metal of the trigger guard. As he already knew it was, the safety catch was pulled back flush with the back of the trigger assembly.

“I talked to that asshole at the church again,” Loomis said, this time with a chuckle mixed in with the sobs. “He says the same old shit as always. I’m not sure if I said it out loud, but I clearly remember thinking I should tell him to go fuck himself.”

Loomis turned the rifle around and sighted down the barrel. He panned it around until he caught sight of traffic on the highway a few hundred yards away through the trees. He tracked a compact Volkswagen in the open sights until it disappeared behind a clump of trees.

He let the barrel of the rifle fall toward the ground and he pulled back the rifle slide. The chambered round shot up into the air in front of him and he caught it before the slide snapped back into place. He held the gold and green shell up to the sun, getting a good look at it. The markings on the bottom of it were all Cyrillic. He had gotten a case of surplus Soviet ammunition over twenty years ago. Every round he had used from that case had fired without ever giving a hint of misfire. There hadn’t been any duds at all. The round in his hand had several “X” marks scored into the brass tip, just as the bullet which had killed the president had. The indentations served as a guide for the lead under the jacket, allowing it more opportunity to tumble and fragment and distort and therefore tear out bigger chunks of flesh and bone. He put the unused bullet into his pocket and set the gun on the ground in front of the headstone.

“I don’t think it’s the right time to join you. I’m not sure, but I think there’s more. I can only ask...”

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the image of her face.

“I can only ask that you let me know, somehow, how you want it.”

Behind him, his car stuttered, but he didn’t notice.

He covered the gun with some of the loose dirt around the freshly filled grave. He smoothed it out so that the newly churned earth was level with the base of the headstone.

He had done very thorough job of cleaning the gun with degreaser. All of the metal surfaces were exposed without any protective coating. In a few days – a week, tops, the gun would be a rusted hulk. If anyone found it after that time, the only way it could hurt someone was if it were used as a club. He had taken other precautions with the gun, as well. The receiver was from a different rifle. This new one had a mount for a scope, which he had always

hated, so he never used it. With the new receiver, the firing pin pattern would have different characteristics than the one which he had recently fired. The change wasn't even necessary. He had polished up his brass at both shootings and the cops had never requested either cartridge.

As a final step, he had also screwed an abrasive dremel bit onto the rifle's cleaning rod and spent fifteen minutes gouging the inside of the barrel. After the first round of manually altering the gun's rifle pattern, he had attached a drill to the cleaning rod and done another pass – this time enlarging the bore for most of the length of the barrel. He didn't think anyone would find it, but if they did, they wouldn't be able to connect it with the president's shooting.

Loomis leaned over and straightened the flowers on Mary's grave.

"I'll wait here with you for a little while, then I'll go home. I don't know what to expect, but I'm sure I'll..."

The car stalled, and now he noticed it.

He felt a chill run through him which was even colder than the winter air.

"That was quick," he said.

Before he had a chance to wonder whether this meant that she wanted him to freeze to death, a car pulled into the parking lot at the end of the driveway. It drove down the short gravel path to where he was standing beside his wife and child.

His heart skipped a beat when he recognized government tags on the car. Maybe they had changed their minds and needed a scapegoat for their presidential scandal. There could be a stealth helicopter hovering nearby, giving off some kind of signal which had killed the ignition on his car.

The tinted window rolled down with a soft electric whine, letting a puff of steam out into the cold air.

"You need a lift?" the driver asked.

He felt the smile on his face before the driver had even started to speak.

The voice was soft and gentle, a slightly British accent over something Scandinavian. She had told him she was from Finland. It sounded like a beautiful place, the way she described it.

"Yes, Kata," he said, still smiling. "It seems that I do."