

THE PHILO⁷OPHER



AN EPISODIC TALE
BY OOMNY



ISSUE #2

ISOLATION

**THE PHILOZOPHER
ISSUE 2: ISOLATION**

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EMBRACE THE BUZZARDS

Hello there, Reader. And welcome back.

It's been a while, and I apologize for that. My partner and I have moved into our first home, and with that venture an avalanche of responsibilities has barreled over us from behind. We've been buried, but we're digging our way back out. It's a lot to shoulder, but learning to tackle new quandaries is part of life's charm, don't you think? Overall, the experience has been wonderful. There is much enlightenment to be absorbed through hardship, and the buzzards are currently feasting on the carcasses of our old expectations. That is to say: when we move to a new stage of life, we leave part of us behind. In this case, the move for us was literal.

Speaking of this partner of mine, we've recently hit our four-year milestone. To date, it's the longest relationship I've managed. I'm certain there are some veteran partners out there, some real relationship warriors, who are scoffing at such a brief amount of companionship. Sure, perhaps you have more battle scars than us, but we have our share of wounds worth showing off with pride, so don't underestimate us. Don't get me wrong, I believe successful relationships are beautiful achievements—but they sure as hell ain't pretty. To quote the wise and reverable heavy metal musician Devin Townsend: "Loving you is the best thing and the worst thing in my life. Loving you is entire." It can be intimidating and outright frightening to remove yourself from isolation and jump into a serious relationship. It demands compromise, patience, and compassion, the depletion of valuable mental resources that you may feel could be put to better use someplace else. Not to mention you're going to sustain some injuries along the journey. And, hey, maybe you're right. Perhaps remaining completely independent works better for you—you do you, as they sometimes say—but there's no doubt that becoming proficient in the trifecta of qualities mentioned above will bring great benefits to your life in the long run, especially when applied to all of your relationships, not just that which you may have with a lover.

I suppose what I'm alluding to is that isolation can exist within groups as well as within individuals. One may limit his- or herself to like-minded groups, echo chambers—or mobs—where the only stimulation he or she receives is the kind that gorges the ego. This kind of positive feedback loop is one of the most dangerous forms of isolation there is, the type of isolation that has the power to destroy cultures and tear down whole civilizations. If there ever comes a time in your life's voyage where you sense a relationship is deteriorating because of dissenting opinions, I implore you to open an ear or two to whomever it is you may be perceiving as an adversary—or I daresay, an enemy—and listen. Really listen. Compromise on your desire to train another to think like you. It likely won't happen, and if it does it will take time and introspection on their part before

it sinks in. Which leads me to patience. Be patient with differing points of view while taking time to consider that you likely have some things wrong yourself. There's always something to learn from what another has to say. I truly mean that: always. And have compassion for where another may be coming from. Remember that in the end most people hold points of view that they believe serve the greater good. Most people are out to do what's best for most people, whether they agree on what the solutions are or not. Do these three things and your ability to both understand and save the planet will know no bounds, this I promise.

Okay, I've been rambling about long enough. Thanks for humoring me for a few paragraphs of thought. Enjoy the story.

THE PHILO~~7~~OPHER



ISSUE #2



I've been spending so much time alone I'm beginning to question if I truly exist. If so, how can I prove it? What if I spent the remainder of my life locked away from society and expired right here in the farmhouse? Ultimately, what proof would there be that I ever existed? I don't suppose there'd be much, just an assembly of dust and bone removed of its more distinguishable features and lying peacefully amidst a handful of possessions and photos stripped of personal belonging. But I'm getting ahead of myself: I'm not dead yet, just out of sight, out of the purview of every pair of prying eyes where I and only I am aware of my operations, aware that I even have operations, aware that I'm even operative. So...if I'm alive but keep myself in solitary, am I just the living dead? These are the things I've been mulling over lately.

"Did ya hear me? I said I'm movin' teh the city."

What I mean is if no one's around to listen to the syllables that define my experiences, if there are no witnesses to my being, do I exist? How can I be sure? What if there's someone around to pass my stories to, but my anecdotes fall on deaf ears? In fact, what if *no one* believes me when I take my past and give it form through words? Then did I, and do I, still exist?

"I applied for college and they accepted me. I won't be here much longer."

Can I trust my faulty memory? Can I have faith that my own biases aren't bending my words and recollections to fit the wrong mold? How can I grapple with the past, the actual past, when I only have myself to remind me?

"I need teh get outta this place, Morg. I can't stand it here."

Perhaps that's where you come in, Voyeur. I know you're listening to my words, that you're connected to my cogitation, but I don't know if you're believing me. If only there were a way for you to signal me, to verify that my matter matters. If not you, then who?

"You should look inteh gettin' out too. We're both worth more than what that factory has teh offer us."

I wasn't confident she'd take me for honest, but I was considering telling Flora everything—about my father, my mother...my eating habits. Everything.

"At first I was thinkin' we'd try a long-distance relationship, but maybe we should just move on from each other. Whatta you think?"

I felt that itch of resistance, however, and I just couldn't scratch it. That's not something to ignore. That itch was crying out for attention, trying to tell me that Flora wouldn't be able to handle the real me. It'd scar her, and it'd be selfish of me to put her in such a predicament.

"I mean what kind o' relationship do we got, anyway? Ya won't even sit down teh grab a bite teh eat with me."

Now with Flora leaving me, it seems my existence may be eternally in question. That's a scary notion.... I think I'll miss her. I enjoy her company; she's smart, smarter than me in ways only she can be and in ways I can only try to understand. Hmm...I wonder what her brains taste like.

"Hello? Earth to Morgan. Did ya hear anything I've been sayin'? What are ya doin'?"

"Just thinking."

"Well think out loud. I swear, it's like ya ain't even here with me. I can see ya, but it's as if ya don't exist on my plane. You're somewhere else. Sometimes I wonder if I'm datin' a ghost and you're just floatin' right through me."

Ah, so I've been asking myself the wrong question. It's not a matter of *if* I exist, but *where*. And even if I exist nowhere, nowhere is still a place that I exist.

"There's nothing wrong with a good factory job," I say. "We're no better than anyone who decides to make a living running those machines."

"I'm tellin' ya we're close teh breakin' up, and that's what you're concerned about, that I diminished our coworkers' value? Besides, I ain't sayin' our place in the world is more important than theirs. I'm sayin' we're in the wrong occupation. It don't suit us."

"And what do you expect to become of me, Flora? I don't have a degree I can use to polish up some resume, and I have zero desire to throw a bunch of cash at *higher education*."

"Sell this place and work on your stand-up. Morgan, you're a great comedian. I mean look at ya, you're headlinin' at Knock'm Dead this week. You're makin' money!"

"I'm making a hundred and fifty bucks."

"That still means somethin'!"

"How can I sell this place? It's all I got. For god sakes, my mother's buried in the backyard."

"So *move* her."

I can't do that. "I can't do that." It's too risky. "It'd be weird to dig her back up. And she literally told me she didn't want me dragging the dead with me everywhere I went."

"Morgan, I don't mean teh be rude, but Rosalina's gone. It's about what you want now, and we both know what you want is what she'd want."

"...I suppose you're right."

"Course I am."

Flora gently envelops my hand in both of hers and lifts it from my side. There's an opportunity here for me to salvage our relationship, yet I don't feel much more than a smothered excitement at the prospect of setting Flora free so she can move on and I can stop keeping secrets, so I can exist in my own head and give up any mental real estate I may own in hers. We never quite clicked anyway. And as I fix my gaze on her flawless and regal African skin engulfing the European I'm

wearing (European that's sparkling with liver spots like a night sky's worth of stars orbiting one rather large and unsightly birthmark), a thought occurs to me: "Do you think our relationship is more difficult because of our origins?"

"What are ya talkin' about?" Flora looses my hand.

"Well, we have thousands upon thousands of years of history embedded into our genetic makeup. Don't you think at some fundamental level we just can't fully understand each other? If we trace all the way back through the entire lineage of our experiences—the distinct languages, evolutions, journeys, and atrocities our ancestors encountered, let alone what we've faced personally—doesn't it seem like there's bound to be a disconnect?"

"I hate teh break it teh ya, but we're all human in the end, Morg."

"Sure, in essence we all have the potential to understand the other because in another life we could have been the other, and thank Luck if you're happy with your circumstances, but it doesn't change the fact that we're comprised of our own special secret ingredients—on an individual level for certain, but at least somewhat on a group level as well, whether racial, psychological, or otherwise. And I get that at its very source the human race shares an emotional spectrum that allows us to relate to one another even when we've lived different lives, but *still*...there's an array of independent atoms that have separated from that source—whether individually or collectively—and that have passed or failed unique trials only they can fully identify with."

"Ya best be careful. Sounds like you about teh jump down some kind o' racist rabbit hole. Why we even talkin' about this?"

"There's nothing racist about it, at least not by the conventional definition of racism."

"Yeah, well conventions change."

"It's merely an observation. It's just a discussion, Flora. Look, I'm not saying it's impossible to find the strength to overcome these potentially contrasting elements, but that it can create layers of difficulty. Here, just answer me this: Do you think you'd have an easier time dating a black man than dating me?"

I can see the gears in Flora's head turning; she's taking my inquiry seriously.

"Probably, Morg...probably. But teh be honest, I don't know if it's teh due with origins, the stigma around interracial couples, or if it's just you."

"Fair enough." It's undoubtedly all of the above, I reckon. "I get that you feel captive to this place. I really understand that. If you want out, you shouldn't let anyone stop you. But I can't move to the city. There's too much noise, too many people. I require distance. Moving isn't an option for me."

The wok on the stove catches my eye and for a brief moment I consider what Flora's brains might taste like tossed in a tablespoon of olive oil and a couple pinches of salt.

"So that's it then," she says. "We're not even gonna try? We're just callin' it quits."

I step forward into Flora so that our chests press and wrap my arms around her. I squeeze, tight, and bury my nose into the side of her neck. Being this close I swear I can smell the hidden candy wrapped behind her skin and skull. Yes, with just a bit olive oil and salt, stir-fried for about seven minutes, that would be...perfect. My stomach rumbles as the hunger blossoms. There's an addict whispering in my mind's ear.

I kiss Flora on the cheek and release her. "Why don't we take a few days to think about this. There's no reason to rush a decision."

“I’ve been thinkin’ about this for weeks already. I don’t need no more time for thinkin’.”

“Well it’s news to me.”

“Oh, come on. Ya seriously didn’t see this comin’? What, ya thought I was avoidin’ ya and barely speakin’ full sentences every time we spoke lately ‘cause I was feelin’ good about us? What were ya thinkin’, Morg?”

What was I thinking, she wants to know, only that’s not what she really wants to know. What she really wants to know is what was I feeling. And isn’t that the biggest difference between the sexes—his thinking and her feeling? These two quasi-distant elements are at their best when pieced together and working in harmony like a yin-yang, rolling smoothly over life’s obstacles with concerted effort. They’re at their worst when spewing sparks from jump starting a quarrel with a mistaken connection of positive and negative charges. In most cases, what she wants is to be heard and understood, regardless of the exact details the situation entails, regardless of the contradictions and misphrasings she may have spoken in an attempt to explain herself. For her, there are often no words to properly convey the emotions she has roiling inside. In most cases, what he wants is to get to the source of the issue and apply a fix. He wants to parse these emotions into digestible chunks of logic to help dissolve the feelings, whether he truly understands what she’s currently going through or not. For him, there is no problem that can’t be toughed out through reduction. In an argument this can make it near impossible to communicate, unless your idea of good communication is running endless laps in the opposite direction where you’re so caught up in yourself that even when you see the other sprinting towards you, you eventually pass right on by and just keep running. Over, and over, and over again. And while I’m fully aware of all this, I just can’t help myself when I find my intelligence under fire.

“What was I thinking? Let’s see.... I was thinking maybe the countless times I’d asked you if everything was okay and you answered—*every single time*—that things were fine, that maybe you were telling the truth for once. I was thinking if you really had something to tell me that you’d tell me, and we could discuss it like adults. I was thinking that I should give you the benefit of the doubt that you weren’t hiding anything from me, but I should have known better. Now you’re moving away for college with absolutely zero input from me. And do you know why? Because you, Flora, chose to withhold your output.”

“Oh, is that right? Well I’m tellin’ ya now, ain’t I?”

“Exactly, you’re telling me now, after you’ve already made your decisions. So what does that tell us...? It tells us my input doesn’t matter. It tells us you’re done with this relationship, otherwise we would’ve discussed this a long time ago. It tells us that you’re simply here looking for mutual termination so that you don’t have to feel like the bad guy when you tell your family and friends we decided to call it off because the thought of a long-distance relationship was just too much for us. Because what would you tell them otherwise? That you did a bunch of shit behind my back and ran off to the city to try something new with your little pen pal? That vulture’s been hovering overhead for months now, following the scent of us dying.”

“This has *nothin’* teh do with him. I’m the one here askin’ if ya wanna keep tryin’. You’re overthinkin’ this shit like ya always do.”

“Oh, bullshit. You’re not trying a damn thing other than to save your own ass. You didn’t ask me to go to the city *with* you, you said I should go *like* you. You want an easy way out of this, and

I'm not gonna give it to you. If you want to break up with me so you can give Toby a try, then just say it. *Just—be—honest*. That's all I require of you."

"Morgan, *I am* bein' honest."

"No, you just think you're being honest because you've been successfully lying to yourself the past few weeks, maybe months, maybe your *entire life*. Who knows anymore?"

"Ya know your jealousy gets ya sayin' the most fucked-up shit, right? Look at how you're treatin' me right now."

"Yes, it's always about how you're being treated. It's never about what you might have done or said that caused me to treat you this way. You have heard of cause and effect, yeah? It's where when you do shit, there's a response to the shit you've done. Like how you're always disturbingly eager to answer every goddamn message that sets your phone off, and then how you furtively attempt to navigate around speaking his name when I ask who you're talking to. It's like you're paradoxically fucking with me. I can see what you're doing, you're willingly putting it on display, but you're telling me it's not happening."

Paradoxically fucking with me...did I say that right?

"Oh my god, you're obsessed with my fuckin' phone, ya know that? I feel like a goddamn prisoner when I'm around you, like I'm always on watch."

Technology. For as much as it's done its part in positively shaping the planet, it's also opened up the playground for the mating game to be played out interminably through texting and social media. Everyone is a click and a tap away from each other. No longer are you required to find privacy away from your partner to sneak in a rendezvous or a phone call with a new interest. Now that same communication can be done in plain sight, billions of horny and lonely people constantly chipping away at the personal boundaries of others in the hopes of getting a foot in. Constant attention. Constant sexual signals. Constant pressure to fuck.... It's all kind of disgusting. You get what I'm saying, right, Voyeur?

"That's because you are on watch," I confess. "Because you've done nothing to earn a lick of trust from me. Shall we go over some of the things you've done and said during our relationship?"

"Oh, what is this? More o' your cause and effect bullshit? I know all about cause and effect, Morg. What *caused* me teh talk teh other people in the first place was you not payin' enough attention and actin' enough like ya give a fuck. Ya don't wanna do nothin' with me, you're always in your head when I am around, and like I said before, we don't even have meals together. What kind o' relationship is that where a couple don't even sit down teh eat?"

"I told you I have a fucking disease, Flora. It sucks, and it's embarrassing. You don't wanna see the garbage I have to eat. You don't wanna smell it. And you sure as hell don't wanna watch me eat it."

Again my stomach grumbles at me, upset I haven't fed it yet today, annoyed that I'm thinking and talking about food but have taken no steps to prepare any for consumption.

"That's another thing is ya won't even tell me what the hell's wrong with ya. I mean, what? Am I never supposed to know? Are we never gonna have breakfast, or lunch, or dinner together? *Ever*? How're ya gonna sustain any relationship like that?"

"I don't know.... Maybe I can't do it. Maybe I'm meant to be alone."

That was a bit hard to admit, but it's the truth. Maybe I am meant to be alone, and not because of my diet—because of who I am. I'm not exactly a people person. I don't play well with others.

I'm too easily agitated. I have an intolerance for incompetence and a detestation for distraction. I don't react well when bothered by the outside world, and I find too much of the population hasn't learned to be humbled by their own ignorance. And while I don't expect everyone to live flawlessly, a little more intro- and extrospection could go a long way. That doesn't mean I've got my shit nailed down either. I mean, look at me. I'm more than aware that I'm not handling this situation correctly as I'm mishandling this situation, and yet I'm determined to continue mishandling it. When it comes to people, myself included, I think it's just that I'm a little disappointed. I wish there were more people to learn from in a more direct, less observational fashion. I wish there were more honest, genuine teachers. I wish I had enough control to be one of those teachers.

Flora's frustrated me, but I should give the devil her due in the candor she's put forth. She's absolutely correct that I spend a lot of time in my own head and that I need to work on getting out more often, but she couldn't be more wrong about me not paying attention. She could at least give me that.

"Look at us," she says. "We've barely been datin' a year and we're already rarin' teh tear each other up. It don't exactly sound as if we're in love."

Love. People toss around the L-word as flippantly as they toss around the word "god." They have some vague notion of what it means, but they haven't taken the time to flesh it out. You can't expect love to necessitate only the most nice and pleasant emotions. Love is hard. It's something you fight for, and much of that fight takes place within yourself. It's a battle against egotism, a transcendence of selfishness. It's dedication before opportunism, understanding over resentment. Love is being there for someone, sometimes when you don't want to be—especially when you don't want to be—when the weight of the benefit appears to tip the scale in a favor not your own. Now that's not to be confused with not being there for someone when you know you shouldn't be. That, Voyeur, is revolution. It's showing love to yourself, and it's just as crucial a path to follow. Determining what's love and what's revolution, that can only be done by you.

Right now Flora's tangled in the vines that grow between love and revolution. There's no reason for me to make this any harder for her than it needs to be, not whenever I have the power to cut her loose. "Do you think we were ever in love?" I ask.

"Whatta you think?"

I think we got together for the same reason so many others do: because we sensed at least a slight pull coming from one another and it felt good to be wanted, so good we decided to give love a shot since we were limited with regard to more suitable options at the time. In other words, we were lonely. When you're single and desperate for affection, sometimes the bare minimum will do. It's a lot like needing a job when you're unemployed—you start off by taking whatever's presented to you and work your way up the ladder. It's a ruthless business, intimacy. There's rarely any fairness when a partnership dissolves. One half is moving on—the other half is starting over. It's some of the worst pain to be experienced, often for both parties, but it's something we risk every time we venture into the future with a new lover. Because we know it's worth the risk. Because the alternative—while perhaps less stressful—makes life a whole lot less memorable without a sidekick to take on the world with. Answer me this: Can you extract full value from a past lacking of shared experiences? Can you extract full value from being the living dead, a mind

without verifiable memories? Yes, the risk of becoming involved in a relationship can lead to temporary hells, but there's always a chance that risk will pay out in love.

"I don't believe we ever got there," I admit.

"Finally we agree on somethin'. And do ya think we'll ever?"

"It doesn't seem likely."

"Then what's the point?"

The point is that something is better than nothing, but that notion only applies to one of us now. Flora's selection pool has expanded. Mine's just decreased by one. Loneliness is going to suck, but it could be worse. I could be like Mother. I could fuck a monster.

"*This* was the point," I point out.

"What? What was?"

"For us to arrive here at this very conversation. This is the purpose of what we've been through, unless you think the year we spent together was a waste."

"No, not at all. We learned a lot about ourselves the past year."

"Exactly, and that was the point. Now we take what we've learned and we push onward."

Another tragic thing about isolation is that it can be a form of personal stasis, like staring into a mirror that refuses to show you your reflection. A partner's reactions, on the other hand, will tell you everything you need to know about how you present yourself, the good and the bad.

"So that's it. We're done?"

"Unless you're having a come-to-Jesus moment right now, I'd assume so. You've made it clear you're very unhappy where you're at. Don't be one of those people who sprints to the finish but regrets crossing the tape."

"I'm...it's just confusin'. It's not like I don't care about you. There are things about ya I'm gonna miss. I mean don't ya feel even a little sad?"

"Of course there are good things you're gonna lose here. There's nothing piecemeal about a separation. And yeah, I'm sad, but I'll be sadder tomorrow, and sadder the day after that. Once I go to text you in the morning and remember I can't do that anymore, once it's sunk in that you're no longer a major part of my life, once I'm curled up in bed and being plagued by mourning, that's when I'll be at my saddest. And you won't be here to see it. That's not a sadness you get to witness."

"Morg...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I don't need you to feel bad for me. I don't want to be both your sacrifice and the source of your pity. It's insulting."

Flora's visage shape-shifts into the form of anger. "Fine. I should go then," she says and storms toward the front door. She throws it open.

"Wait," I yell, and Flora pauses. "What about your brother's Little League game tonight?"

She glowers at me. "What about it?"

"I promised him I'd be there. Just tell him I said good luck, will you?"

She slams the door and marches toward her car.

It's weird, I can still feel her presence in the kitchen. It's almost as if she's still here, comforting me. As I notice my stomach begin to settle, I realize it's the sweet scent of her cerebrum that's keeping me company, slowly fading as she distances herself. Olive oil and salt. Yes, I am going to miss her.

*

Every evening since Mother's death I've made it a point to sit in a chair on the back porch and contemplate on her grave as the sun descends below the autumn treetops and drags the white-blue or white-gray gradient under with it until those colors are replaced by orange-violet and ultimately black, when the stars are unobstructed by the rays of the sun and winking their hellos. Mother's plot lies still beneath this remarkable celestial activity; the days churn as the dead remain sedated. Still, I often catch myself staring in fear at the rectangle of soil she's buried within, waiting for a tiny area of dirt to dance and dip as a set of fingers wriggle and claw until Mother's hand is reaching up, extended toward the sky in a desperate attempt to clutch herself a piece of the horizon's vitality.

I try to imagine how I might feel about that, if Mother became like Father, if she unearthed herself and shuffled out to the swamp to live ever after with her beloved, two dead-alive darlings with an extremely limited though nearly insatiable palate. It's kind of cute...in a horrifying kind of way. Thankfully that can't happen, not with what's left of Mother's brain being preserved in the fridge. At least I hope not.

The focus of my contemplation tonight is a little different, however. Tonight Mother's unmarked grave is acting as a prompt to another recent death in my personal sphere—my relationship. I've lost the two closest people to me in a cosmological blink of the eye, and the thought of beginning a new courtship is daunting and confusing, considering I'm not so sure reinvigorating my love life is something I should be doing. Maybe ever. I want transparency in a relationship, but I don't see how that's possible—and I hate living under such obvious hypocritical circumstances. Not to mention that I find the showy exhibit potential wooers put on when attempting to get a romance ignited to be either highly distasteful or commendable up to the point of disenchantment. Many either feign attentiveness in order to get what they want—another human entrapped by dedication—or they invoke their superhuman side and maintain it for as long as possible, or until they deem it safe to whip the veil from the grotesque they've been suppressing. Either way, the manipulation involved is tiring. Just once I'd like to be real and be received, and know what I'm signing up for without being fooled by the false advertisements of self-marketing. Imagine if every relationship started out on such stable ground, if we acknowledged our own negative miens from the start and didn't adopt an act of shock and disappointment when we saw similar failings in others. Imagine if right from the initial sentence we bared ourselves for our peers, and our peers bared themselves for us. No words or feelings off-limits, just acceptance of character and respectful response—the disintegration of stigma.

Hello, I'm Morgan Lashley. I consider myself a truth troll. I enjoy talking about things that challenge people and often make them uncomfortable, and I have an uncontrollable habit of rectifying misinformation no matter when it's being presented or who it's being presented by. I hold plenty of opinions on social, political, and religious issues, and I would love to dig into them with you. But let it be known: I find people that hold deep-seated political ideologies to be absolutely insufferable. On a lighter note, most of my favorite comedy films are rated below five percent on popular review-aggregate websites, the music I prefer tends to drive others nuts—oh, and I eat brains, occasionally human brains. Well, just my mother's so far, but I must say, it's been delish.

So how about it, Voyeur? Would you date me?

Speaking of, I have a date with Father tonight. This'll be the first I've seen him since Mother passed. I'd been considering never visiting him again, but after Flora left me this afternoon I decided to meet him one final time. He's the only remaining loose end I've got. Once I properly rid myself of him, I can start over. I can begin anew.

I stand from the chair and enter the house through the screen door on the back porch; I won't be spectator to the sun as it retires tonight. I lift my backpack from the coat hanger and move to the fridge. What's left of Mother's brain is in a jar on the top shelf. I retrieve it and stuff it in the backpack. There's a Glock 19 in a dresser drawer in my room. I retrieve *it* and stuff it in the backpack. I pull on my grime-ridden galoshes, slide into my polyester waterproof jacket, hang the backpack straps over my shoulders, and exit the house the same way I entered. Outside, I pause in front of Mother's grave. The plot is especially barren without a headstone. I'll have to do something about that soon.

"I'm sorry," I tell Mother, "but I don't think I can do this anymore."

I'm not sure if she heard me.

I march into the forest and head toward the swamp to search for Father.

*

*I'm out for Father,
And I'm wonderin' if I'll do it.
Alone without a mother.
Brains, or a bullet?*

I often come up with simple rhymes and poems when traversing the forest. Perhaps there's something about nature that awakens the songbird in me. More than likely, it's that I'm always nervous making the two-hour trip out to see Father. It's not that he's ever tried to harm us, but the sight of him never fails to cause me to drop the idiomatic shit in my pants.

*Dead above the earth.
The Reaper said, "Screw it."
And now it's up to me.
Brains—or a bullet?*

What skin of his that remains clings to him in patches of pale-green tatters, hanging from body and limb like a threadbare suit ran mercilessly through a washing machine that dispenses bleach and toxic waste. His muscle is deteriorating, has been for decades, and yet it lingers. His anatomy seems to be in a rapid cycle of regeneration and decay. And the swamp, of course, has left its mark on him as well. His lower half is forever gunked in muck which obscures his missing penis, a fact Mother had assured me of some years after I was born. How or where it had eventually escaped, she was never quite sure. Everything above the pelvis is pure rot. Two-thirds of Father's teeth and hair are gone, and his face is so sunken in his head might as well be a skull. He's a carrier of beetles, mosquitos, and chiggers that use his body as a mobile home. And then there's the maggots,

the plumpest and healthiest maggots I've ever seen, spelunking within every orifice as they use Father for the endlessly replenishing buffet that he is.

Yep, that's my dad.

Family is forever,

But who could have knew it?

A swamp could be a graveyard.

Brains? Or a bullet.

Mother's scent permeates the air around me, begging me to finish her, and finish her is what I should do. Father doesn't deserve her. That's why I brought the Glock. But I'm not so sure he deserves that either. That's why I brought the brains.

But saving her has been tough. Night after night she's wafted like caviar from the fridge and up the stairs to my bedroom, making sleep impossible. It feels almost as if I'm in utero, being reborn with new perspectives on appetite, tossing and turning and tangled in bedding while drooling for Mother's meat. She's recreating me—I'm stewing—transforming me from son to predator. Yet I've been able to fight it, and I'm winning. So far, but still she tempts me. Maybe, just maybe, if I'm strong enough I'll let Father have her, a taste of the woman he gave so much hope to. But then again, maybe not.

I bought the gun as soon as I turned eighteen. I never trusted Father. Mother and I fed him twice a week, and I can't count the times that I feared for our lives. I was certain a day would come when he'd attack and I'd have to protect us. Father never looked at us with anything that resembled love—just anger and impatience. He paid us attention for only as long as he had to. The second we unpacked the feed jar, he became obsessed with it, ripped it from the hands of whoever was unlucky enough to be holding it and threw the lid off to access its contents.

Every visit Mother refused to leave until Father was done feeding. She gazed on at him with fondness while I gazed on in disgust. He'd rub his tattered and bedraggled palm and fingers along the inside of the container and then lick his extremities clean, swamp debris and all. With no more flavor left to salvage from the jar, he'd simply look at us in disappointment as if what we gave him was never enough, then turn his back on us and slosh his way off into the mire. He's like a rapacious pet, a dog with a flesh-eating disease that's always begging for scraps by the dinner table. Never satisfied. Never grateful.

"He loves us, Morg," Mother would always try to convince me. "I know it don't look it, but he loves me and yew."

She never knew about the gun. I was afraid if I told her how I really felt about Father that she'd disown me, banish me out into the swamplands and have Father take my place in the house. I couldn't picture Mother actually going to such an extreme, but I simultaneously felt it wasn't worth the risk, so I kept my mouth shut.

The crunch and cracks of the detritus beneath me fade into damp suctioning sounds as the soil grows more malleable to the treads on my boots. This terrain change means I'm getting very near the meet-up spot. So before I'm forced to give all my attention to Father, let me ask you something, Voyeur: Have you ever been alone? To clarify, I don't mean in a place by yourself, not exactly. I mean have you ever *felt* alone? Has your mind ever convinced you that no one is on your side, that

you've been dragged under by the current and left behind? That there's no one to call out to, no one to extend an imploring hand toward to save you from the recesses of your self-doubt? Maybe you unabashedly criticized something that others love. Maybe you told a bad joke. Maybe you said something insensitive or challenged the status quo. Maybe you're too loud. Maybe you're too quiet. Maybe you're too smart and ruin everyone else's fun. Maybe you're too dumb and ruin everyone else's fun. Maybe you're weird. Maybe you're awkward. Maybe you're hard to understand. Or maybe it's your exterior people find unattractive. Whatever the reasons you may have felt unfavorably singled out, a couple maybes you should be focusing on are: Maybe you've been hanging out with the wrong crowd. And maybe you're not trying hard enough to find the right crowd.

*The singularity of the self is in search
Of the singularity of the self in search.*

That's what I wish Mother would have done, found her crowd. Instead she found Father, the incarnation of what happens when self-doubt overwhelms the psyche, the rotting fiend left alone to wallow in the mire he calls home. And they'd found each other because of the shared notion that the rest of the world had left them behind. They were the discarded who'd built companionship from the refuse. Though I'm curious if Mother considered Father her crowd or if he was simply the means to create her crowd—me. Either way, a crowd of two is no crowd at all, and it's too much pressure to ask a child to be his parent's lifeline. Still, I'd guess it must be the latter. Father is no one's crowd. Father's a plague, and plagues are dealt with through distancing, not intimacy. And yet here I am, born of plague and proceeding ever closer to pestilence.

But this time I'm going to eradicate the disease, I tell myself. Yet the voice in my head isn't exactly ringing with confidence. But I digress...

Let's get back to the topic at hand: isolation. Isolation is all that we are, a universe of senses, opinions, and experiences encased behind bone and bounded by the limit of language. From our start to our end point—from our womb, our bloom, and to our tomb—we are isolation. And we escape our isolation through expression, declarations which break down the barriers and free us to connect to others, and then—aha!—we are no longer isolated. Temporarily, at least, but we eventually end up locked back inside, windows open, yelling, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take it anymore!" Just a bunch of madmen, the lot of us, echoing sentiments through the emptiness in hope of being heard by the right person—a good person, someone who genuinely cares. Because if the kind are in short supply, sometimes the monsters will have to do.

Perhaps if Mother had someone kinder to bounce her isolation off of, everything would be different. Better.

*Contemplation in isolation is masturbation.
Ejaculation is the little death of conception.*

The swamp is now a chorus of splashes, my feet drumming a beat six inches deep. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. Night has long overshadowed all but what shafts of moonlight that have successfully squeezed between the tangled branches and dying leaves overhead and managed

to glint atop the water. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. My flashlight is illuminating a path dead ahead. I'm not afraid of getting lost, not even without the sun to guide me. I've traveled this wetland countless times, since before my first memories—since before my first words. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. This environment—from its countless insects zigzagging across the empty air like dots that never stay still long enough to be connected, to its diversity of beasts both adorable and deadly—is where I feel I belong. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. This wetland is my haunt, much more of a cozy fireside than the farmhouse and whatever strings of human experience come attached with homeownership. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. When I reminisce on childhood, the swamp is what fills my mind. The scent of moisture, algae, and decay. The charming yet creepy brown-and-green palette of leaves, bark, and fungus. The breadth of fog that hovers over the surface at dawn like an army of shifting ghosts. The sounds and sights of playful otters, calling herons, feral hogs, and sizable horse flies. These are the things that tickle me when I think of home. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. Mother used to cradle me through this place. I could lie in its sediment and sleep without labor. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. The beam of my flashlight captures the husk of a fallen ancient, a lateral tupelo gum tree reaching up from the darkened waters. *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*. This is my stop.

I sit on the trunk of the tree with my legs dangling over the side, click off the flashlight, and remove my backpack and rest it atop my lap. I've no idea how long I'll be waiting here; I haven't visited Father in weeks now. I'd assured Mother while she was bedridden that I was keeping up with the feeding affairs, but I've really been saving what food we've left for myself. I'd lied about proceedings involving Father much more than I'd have liked during Mother's shutdown. I'm just hoping tonight is the last night I'll have to witness his ghastly mug. Afterward I can begin the arduous work of forgiving myself for the necessary deception.

Yeh don't gotta see'm if yeh don't wanna. Just eat me. Finish me now and go on home.

Mother's scent is watering my tongue with the taste of sashimi and champagne, arousing a hunger that's conjuring a despicable version of her within my own head. Fortunately, I quickly realize this despicable voice of Mother's is a selfish little devil on my shoulder and I shake my head to clear her comments.

I commit to one big aggressive sniff, as if rebelling loudly against Mother in an attempt to drown out her voice, and the raspy snuffle carries over the still waters, joining the medley of toad croaks, cricket chirps, and the wet crackle of composed surfaces. I close my eyes and bathe in the sounds. I never feel calmer than when meditating in the swamp at night. Everything becomes symbiotic to everything. The water lapping my boots is as if cement binding me to the earth. I am the tree under me, its bark my skin, its death alive within me. I am the chitters and ribbits of insects and amphibians, their talk my language, their melodies my swan song as I die into the present and wrap myself in god. I am the moonbeams and the shadows, everything seen and unseen. I am whole—I am peace.

Static dances on the underside of my eyelids, the noise of no transmission, relic radiation from the origins of the universe. This visual is the epitome of association, the anchor that ties us together. If you ever need a reminder that all in existence is one and the same, just close your eyes and stare into the depths of Zero Signal, the source we're wrought from and the destination we expire toward.

My chest heaves with a giant intake of air and, “DAD!” I yell, breaking all composedness. The mysterious creatures hush and roil the waters while fleeing my presence. Eventually—other than the undulating waves and ripples—sound is drown out by silence... As the seconds pass, the critters of the night cautiously begin to speak up again. I can relate to these swamp things in the way that even I’m perturbed at the abrasiveness of my own resonance, but it’s the only way to get Father’s attention.

As I sit here anticipating Father’s arrival, I can’t help but think of his hideousness and what Mother must have felt with that hideousness inside of her. I have a hard time believing that mating with him was anything less than traumatizing. How could anyone stomach—or for that matter, survive—intercourse with a creature so doubly foul? That phallus, putrid and gruesome, ripped and ragged, engorged and oozing god knows what and threatening to snap off with every thrust. Fuck.... How badly she must’ve wanted a child to willingly endure such torment. But then again, maybe she was so starved for love that a part of her enjoyed the act. Maybe she felt attractive finally being wanted, finally being able to arouse a member of the opposite sex with her bulky body and slow, graceless gait. And maybe being wanted was all she’d ever wanted. After all, Mother was the sexual predator in this scenario. It was Father who was somehow convinced into copulation—or raped. I can’t discount the chance that Mother was so hell-bent on a family that she prompted it through force. Either way, whether through coercion or consent, candor or chicanery, confrontation or constraint, every last one of us is a sexual predator, we all just prey in our own way. The sexual tactic of choice often depends on one important parameter: the level of desperation. And I’d be neglectful to disregard Mother’s desperation when considering the cause of my conception.

Speaking of Mother, there she is again, her flavor drifting upward from the pack on my lap and penetrating my nostrils.

Eat me. Taste me. Put me inside.

“No.”

Dwell in the abyss and let the monster be yer guide.

“Stop it.”

Listen teh yer mother, Morg. Mother knows best.

“You’re not Mother.”

Finish me off and slaughter the rest.

“You’re not even me.”

Start with yer father. He’s already dead.

“You’re the anti-me.”

Save yerself the trouble and keep yerself fed.

The fucking voice is getting louder. It sounds like Mother, but it’s not. It’s materializing from an untapped part of me—from Father’s part of me—from a pocket of my mind I don’t personally have access to, like a sector of my subconscious I can hear though it’s inhabited by an external source separate from my own internalization. Because it’s not me—it’s the anti-me, the post-me crying out from crypthood. It’s my dead twin come alive upon the first taste of human flesh, Mother’s flesh. That’s why it’s Mother’s voice, but it’s an impersonation, a caricature enacted by the corpse-hunger. And it’s metastasizing, inching out from the abyss and spr—*pshhh—pshhh*.

Footsteps. Father is near.

I reinitiate the flashlight and direct its beam between the trees and toward the sound, ahead and to the right. Darkness at the end of the light, *pshhh—pshhh—pshhh—pshhh*, I embrace for Father's entrance into the golden spotlight, *pshhh—pshhh—PSHhhh—PSHhhh*, and watching as the ripples spread over my feet, *PSHhhh—PSHhhh—PSHhhh—PSHhhh*, I gulp my anticipation as the swashes become a silhouette, *PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*, and I whisper obscenities when the silhouette takes texture and color as Father comes to a halt a few feet before me.

His body is covered in a fresh assembly of woodland debris, the new markings of his mysterious adventures. And there's an empty sixteen-ounce Pepsi bottle crumpled and embedded in the muck atop his abdomen, below his left breast. Its label is torn and dangling, sun-faded into a pale representation of America's colors. The countenance barely hanging to the melted features of his skull is ornery as always. His lips decayed decades ago, now exposing two bumpy lines of purple-black gums desperately clinging to what calcified structures remain. There are no words to properly convey how I fear, and yet I manage one: "Father."

He doesn't respond but stands there slack waiting for me to open the backpack and hand him the jar. After resting the flashlight beside me, I pinch the slider tabs on the zippers and go to distance them from one another but stop after a one-inch jerk of my wrist. I get the sense, as I always have in the past, that this foul beast before me is threatening me with the unpredictability of his stillness, and suddenly I swell with a defensive distaste of being bullied into compliance. I glower up at Father for some amount of seconds and observe the subtle change of his features as they shift from repulsive indifference into an almost panicked urgency. His nose twitches with a rapid series of sniffs; he can smell Mother's meat. The realization that she's here with us, but only as feed, seems to set in on Father's face and he reaches to grab the bag at my lap. I attempt to fling it behind me, but he manages to dig his skinless fingers around the rubber of the reinforced bottom and yanks in his own direction. For a short while we battle back and forth in a tug-of-war that I fail to take seriously. This is a mistake, as I underestimate Father's strength and quickly discover the force of my own efforts is doubled in ferocity by Father's with every pull until I'm hauled off my ass and sent sprawling face-first into the water.

I rise from submergence coughing, expelling the swamp from my lungs and nose, the latter of which stings and burns as it struggles to suck in air. I wipe the sludge from my eyes to catch Father casually treading off into the night with Mother in hand. I charge forward in rapid marching footsteps—*PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH—PSHHH*—and tackle him from behind. This time we both go under. I straddle Father's spine and, using both of my hands, lean forward and press down on the reverse of his head so that his face sinks into the muck half a foot below the surface. I'm not even sure if I can drown a dead man, but I'm willing to try. As Father's head squishes further into the soft ground I become unsure if it's his exposed flesh I'm pushing on or if I've lost my grip on him and my fingers are now directly settled in the sediment. The texture of both Father and sludge is strikingly similar....

As Father struggles beneath my weight, my stomach churns at the knowledge of my affairs and my eyes gloss over in response to a sting of heartache. But I've nary time for downheartedness, because as my regret rises so does Father. He gets his feet underneath him and stands, lifting me on his back in the process, water cascading off his hunched form. I'm wrapped around his neck as if he's giving me a piggyback ride, because he is giving me a piggyback ride, and suddenly I have a slightly euphoric realization that this is the most bonding Father and I have ever done. He

straightens and trudges on, lifts the backpack from its position floating against the trunk of a tree, then continues walking as if I'm of no concern to him—as if I don't exist.

I spring from Father's back, reach down, grab the backpack, then pull as hard as I can. Father holds on and whips a one-eighty, but now there's immense annoyance on his face. He lunges at me and snaps his jaws, his blackened teeth clicking like soft candy millimeters from my cheek as I lean away and fall backward while still holding the pack. Somehow it manages to free from his grip and I splash bottom-first back onto the earth. I quickly spin to my feet and create a two-yard gap, fumbling with the zipper before eventually conquering it and gaining access to the Glock. I toss the pack, rack the slide, and aim for Father's forehead, arms extended.

He doesn't move, rather stands there growing angry as if impatient of my indecision. The moonlight falling twixt the branches is casting pale streaks diagonally across his cadaver. All the energy between us has been allocated to one side of this confrontation. His chest is still while mine is heaving. His distress is at zero while I am under the confusion of panic. He is as a statue while I am as a snowball bowling downhill towards a steep cliff. Then it hits me: this is what it's like to be alive.

Father steps forward.

"Don't you fuckin' come near me," I squeak through bated breath.

He takes another step.

"I'll kill you. I'm serious."

And another step, then another, and again until his forehead is pressed against the barrel of the pistol.

Now I can see his countenance up close. Now I can see his anger is a plea derived from the punishment of eternal purgatory. What Father wants is to finally rest. He wishes for me to squeeze the trigger, and as his gaze pierces my soul I realize that this is what destiny looks like. I'm seeing into the future while Father is negotiating with it. But it's not me Father here is pleading to, no. Father is looking past me and speaking directly with the anti-me, begging the anti-me to *BOOM* the barrel, then turn the gun around and *BOOM* it again before it's too late. Before I suffer the same fate. Father's stare, it's not one of despicability, it's a projection of pity and woe.

Well what're yeh waitin' fer? There's plenty enough bullets teh go round.

As my trigger finger trembles, I'm suddenly overcome with the sense that murdering Father would be murdering myself. I'm suddenly overcome with the sense that murdering Father would mean *having* to murder myself. To put an end to the bloodline. To prevent others from knowing such horrors exist. To save the world.

"Goddammit."

I lower the gun and tuck it into the waistband of my pants, then swash my way to the half-sunken backpack and retrieve the jar from it. I open the jar, reach inside, tear off a handful of Mother, then toss the chunk to Father. It bounces off his chest and splashes at his feet where it floats until he bends down to pick it up.

"She wanted you to have it."

I twist the lid back on, empty the swamp from the backpack, then put the jar away and equip the pack over my shoulders.

"You're not going to see me again. I won't be back. You do what you gotta do out here, but you leave me the fuck out of it."

Gazing blankly ahead—perhaps understanding, perhaps not—Father takes a bite of Mother.
I reclaim the beacon from the body of the ancient and head home.

*

Yeh shouldeh killed'm.

“I probably should've.”

He wanted yeh teh. Yew shouldeh done it. Yew shouldeh saved me fer yerself.

The anti-me has been festering most of the trip home, targeting my hunger and exhaustion, oozing between the cracks in my composure. I'm starving, and I'm shivering from the damp clothes clung to my body, the fabric beginning to crystallize beneath the chill of night. But I'm close to home, maybe a thirty-minute trek from here, and I'm eager to clean up, get the fireplace crackling, and calm my nerves. Still, I won't be free of Mother's scent. It'll continue to haunt me all throughout the night as has been the case since she passed—as it's doing right this moment. Mother is trailing right behind me. Her aroma is confirmation. It keeps the anti-me awake and possessed of mimicry.

Eat me.

“Not now.”

Come on, Morg. What yew waitin' fer?

I march on.

Son, turn round so's I can see yer face. I ain't seen yer homely mug in too long.

“You don't even have fucking eyeballs.”

Yeh shouldn't speak teh yer mother with them kind o' words. I ain't got no mouth neither, but yew still yakkin' teh me. Don't yew know I care 'bout yew? I only want what's best fer yeh.

“You're not real.”

I'm yer mother.

“You're nothing.”

I'm yew.

“You're not.”

Eat me.

I put my left foot forward.

Eat me.

Then my right.

Eat me.

Then my left.

Eat me.

Then my right.

Eat me!

Then I press my palms to my temples, hunker down so that my head is surrounded by knees, and bellow into the earth with optimum force. The yell encompasses me before dispersing amidst the forest. I hear my scream replayed back at me in layers of distance, and then I hear silence. I go down, my knees cratering mud, my breath heavy, eyes teared. There are priceless seconds where

the quiet maintains, where sanity peaks over the wall with a hoist from control, where the smell of cold soil and dew-ridden greenery is a godsend of the now. And then...

Eat me.

I whimper. I can feel snot running along either side of my philtrum and leaving its salty taste on my upper lip, but I don't care. I whimper again.

Eat me eat me eat me eat me—

“Shut up!” I cry out. I clench the hair around my temples and wrench. “SHUUUT UUUUUUP!”

Eat me eat me eat me eat me—

I growl and whip the backpack to the ground in front of me.

Eat me eat me eat me eat me—

Violently, I jerk the zippers apart and yank out the jar.

Eat me eat me eat me eat me—

I unscrew the lid and jam my hand inside.

Eat me eat me eat me eat me—

I stuff what's left of Mother into my maw and chew, my palm pressed to my lips as if quelling a secret.

Eat me...eat me...eat me...

I can feel speckles and splashes of Mother on my cheeks and the corners of my lips.

Eat me...eat me...

I use my thumb and forefinger to brush the morsels into my mouth.

Eat me...eat me...

I bite, I whimper, and I bite and whimper some more.

Eat me...

I chew until Mother has been utterly devoured.

Eat...

I chew until Mother no longer has a voice.

...

Then I just kneel there and cry, mucus caked between my lips and elongating from my chin, the taste of Mother and dirt and algae gathered on but fading from my tongue. I continue on in this pathetic state for quite some time, waiting for that bedeviled voice to make its awful reappearance...but it doesn't. Mother's gone. The anti-me is gone.

I'm alone.

Then the ground rustles to my right.

I'm not alone.

I turn the flashlight on the sound and there—like trembling comets crashing into my atmosphere—are two pale-yellow circles fast approaching. “Shit!” I spit and scuttle backwards. The gator snaps and clamps down on the empty pack in my left hand, rips it from my possession with a violent whip of its head. The gator's action provides just enough of an opening for me to drop the flashlight and grab the Glock from my waistband. I aim the gun and fire the entire clip into the animal's head while roaring in what I'm hoping won't be my blaze of glory. I roar long after the gunshots are replaced with the mechanical clicks of a powerless trigger. I roar as the beast lies there twitching its danse macabre in the soft moonlight, as the spittle and tears and snot pool about my mouth and shine in a betrayal of my many madnesses. Then I tuck the backpack under

my armpit, shove the gun back into my waistband, and sprint the rest of the way home fast as I can, as if my life depends on it, as if the swamp is Death stalking to revive the anti-me.

*

I tear through some brush at the edge of the woods and stumble past Mother's grave before regaining my footing. I've been breathing so hard for so long that I can hear my mind gasping along with me. I speed up the steps onto the back porch and shoulder the door open, immediately dropping the backpack and flashlight to the rubber entrance mat and staggering through an archway on the right that leads to the kitchen where I collapse over the sink, slide to my knees, and cough up the excess oxygen my lungs refuse to make room for. I continue to cough in between gasps until I feel it, that feeling when nausea and dizziness sneak in and cloud your concentration until all that's left to do is give in, so I pull myself up to my feet and give in.

The vomit expels like an unclogged sewage pipe erupting with a buildup of waste and it ricochets about the metal basin, portions of it raining in reverse back up toward my projecting face. Specks sprinkle my cheeks and the tip of my nose, but I don't care—I'm too busy hyperventilating, too busy trying not to choke on my own spew and rapid breaths to care. For a time I'm genuinely uncertain if I'll survive the ordeal. The disturbing noises sounding from my throat would cause a betting man to put it all on black. The uncontrollable hacking, the spilling of internal liquids, the desperate heaving and wheezing—these *must* be the sounds of a man at the gates of his terminus. And if not, then these will be the sounds that accompany stories of humorous embarrassment told to comrades in the future, the tale of the night I ran so hard I almost died. Hell, maybe you're that comrade, Voyeur. Maybe someday down the road we'll both be laughing about this. In fact, maybe you're the only one who will ever know about it. After all, there's nobody else here but the two—

“Morg? Are you all right?”

I startle to a stand so violently that as I spin towards the voice, I lose my balance. I attempt to steady myself by grabbing the top of a dining chair, but instead of keeping me upright it falls to the floor with me. As I lie here on the kitchen laminate, Flora is standing beneath the archway, her face dressed down in alarm. But that's not all—there's also horror tucked into the curves of her expression. And of course there is, I'm covered in swamp, vomit, brains, and affliction. What must she think of what she's witnessing? What must you?

“Morg, what the hell happened? Are you *drunk*?”

“No. I...I just fell is all.”

“I heard a bunch o' gunshots and screamin'. Was that you I was hearin'?”

“A gator. I was attacked by a gator.”

“My god, Morg. What you doin' way out there by yourself? And what's that muck all round your mouth?”

I slide the chair off me and sit up, forearms resting on angled knees, head hanging. “Why are you here, Flora?”

“So ya ain't gonna answer me? Fine. We broke up, so I suppose ya don't owe me any explanation.”

This time I focus directly at her. “Why are you here, Flora?”

She whispers a derogatory remark under her breath, then says, “Ya left some stuff at my place. I packed it up and brought it on over. It wasn’t much, just a toothbrush, some pajamas, and a couple books. But maybe I should o’ just burned ‘em.”

“I’m not sure how I’d wear my pajamas if they’d been reduced to a pile of ash, so thank you.” I hang my head again and wait for Flora to continue the assault. She doesn’t. “So, how’d Troy do?”

“He did great. Two singles and a triple. Three RBIs. They won.”

“So they’re in the playoffs.”

“Yeah. They’re in the playoffs, Morg. Troy...he told me teh tell ya bye if I ever spoke teh ya again. So...Troy says bye.”

I nod, solemn. I can detect traces of my regurgitated and partially digested mother wafting from the sink. Luckily she’s lost that appetizing scent of hers. “Okay. So why are you still here?”

“What do ya mean?”

“You could’ve dropped my stuff off and left, but you camped out here. Why’d you wait around, just to relay Troy’s message?”

Flora drags out a seat from the kitchen table and sits in it. The action along with her slowness to answer betrays the importance of what’s on her mind. “There’s somethin’ I wanted teh ask ya. It’s about somethin’ ya said earlier today.”

“Mkay. Go on.”

“Ya mind sittin’ up here with me so we can better see each other?”

“Yes, I do mind. I’ve been through a lot tonight—been through a lot the whole day, to be honest. I don’t have the energy to pick myself up off the ground right now. Think I’ll just stay down here at my lowly spot on the floor awhile. You know what, though? I could really use a glass of water.” I lour at the sink as if it’s a hundred miles away.

“Fine. Ya can stay down there on the ground if that’s where ya belong, but I ain’t servin’ ya no water. You can get that yourself once ya decide to pick your lowly ass back up.”

I nod. Touché, Flora. It’s those kinds of comments I admire most about her, her ingenuity in assertiveness. “Well, then what are we waiting for? Go on and say what it is you gotta say.”

“Okay.” Flora pinches the tip of her nose briefly and looks to the side. She’s staring at the fridge while simultaneously not registering that it currently exists, lost in thought, dwelling in agitation, but it’s plain to see she still cares about me. Why else would she be so agitated?

“Were you serious earlier when ya said we don’t get along ‘cause our skin’s a different color?”

My eyes widen with surprise. The question itself arouses my annoyance a bit, but my exhaustion is helping to keep me in check. Even so, as I sit here trying to come up with an answer for her, I find my agitation is commandeering the brunt of my focus. Must it be so common for a conversation with a significant other play out like this, with twisted words and distorted context? Must emotions be so hard to disarm in order to hear what’s actually being said by another? Why are people so unable to peer past the screen doors they’ve installed at the boundaries of their awareness?—those enmeshed layers of biases that distort what’s on the other side. I mean I know why to an extent. I get that humans are improvised balls of bias formed from a teaspoon of nurture and a couple pinches of nature—each his or her own world within the world and colliding with the surrounding worlds of others—my “why” is simply an expression of disappointment. I love that consciousness is complex, I really do, I just wish more people had a muzzle on it.

“That’s not what I said,” I say. “I asked you if it could have been a reason our relationship was harder than it should have been. I was just curious if you had an opinion, or if you’d ever considered it.”

“Yeah, you were just curious, huh? Well did ya ever consider how I might feel hearin’ somethin’ like that? Or do ya think it’s okay teh say whatever ya want long as ya mean no harm?”

“Well, I think the fact that I meant no harm should play a pretty big part of it, sure. Can you explain why what I said was so offensive to you?”

“I’m not so sure I can right now, but that ain’t even the point.”

“Did it annoy you that my query came out of nowhere, and so you thought I wasn’t taking our breakup seriously? Or is it something bigger than that? Is it because you’re uncomfortable breaking things down by race? Did you feel I was dehumanizing our relationship by categorizing us as an interracial couple instead of just a couple? Did my question awaken a defensive instinct in you, a deeply embedded sense of oppression that made you feel ill? I’m sure you don’t care much for these questions either, but there will always be questions that are uncomfortable, and those tend to be the questions worth exploring. I don’t believe race should play a factor in just about anything. My question was: Does it?”

Flora cups her face in her hands and sits there for some seconds before finally allowing herself to breath and slapping both palms down hard on her lap. “Morg, ya still don’t get it. Ya can’t get it. Ya don’t have it in ya teh get it. None o’ that stuff matters. It’s not about if your question was *intrinsically* offensive. What should matter to you is if *I* was hurt by it.”

We stare into each other’s eyes for what seems like forever. I say nothing.

“Don’t ya understand? I wanna be taken care o’. I wanna know my partner is there for me. I don’t give a damn about the importance of the questions or the answers. I just want peace. I want love.”

I register what Flora is explaining while simultaneously knowing I cannot give her what she requires. I find her plea for unremittent love a selfish request, the way she mounts it over the hearth where it’s safe from the smoldering ashes of kindled inquiry ignited by her own hand. To hell with the philosopher, Flora says. To hell with inquisitive minds whose probing carries entire civilizations forward. To hell with it all in the name of love. But I promise you, Voyeur, it’s not that I think she’s wrong to feel the way she feels. It’s not that I don’t get it. It’s especially not that I can’t get it. It’s just that I’m not on the same page. The difference in degree between not understanding and not agreeing is a universe apart. And maybe I’m a hypocrite, but I’m not sure that’s something *she’ll* ever get. So while I’d like to respond to her with generosity and kindness, the stench emanating from the vomit, muck, brains, and piss water staining my clothes and skin overtakes me and I become repugnant from within as a complement to my exterior.

“I think you’re selfish. I think contorting my words to fit around your feelings tainted this whole conversation before it even began. I think not giving me the benefit of the doubt, ignoring every shred of context, and painting me into the image of a monster is unfair. And not allowing me to speak my piece because of your desire to be coddled like a child is bullshit. We’re adults, and we have a responsibility to act like it.”

Flora’s eyes well with tears. “You think, you think, you think. Well that’s fine, you keep on thinkin’. But while you’re busy thinkin’, I’m gonna go find a man that’s actually interested in

fuckin'." She stands with such aggression that the chair she was in slams to the floor as she storms from the kitchen and out of the house like a passing tempest.

What did I tell you, Voyeur? Assertive ingenuity.

I lie back and stare up at the ceiling with nothing but the quiet to keep me company, thinking...and thinking...and thinking...and thinking...and thinking...and then...sleep. Heavenly sleep.

END

Thanks so much for reading.
Stay safe out there.

