

## **Any Color You Like**

Everyday Mythologies

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## **NIGHT – The Museum & The Mannequin**

### **The Museum**

I believe that there are physical places in this world that are able to mine the ghosts that exist deep inside ourselves. That are able to pull back the layers and reveal an undiscovered country. A place which exists in our bones. In our marrow. In our soul.

There is a lonely bar on the edge of this country, with a spherical red light casting its shadow on the green felt of a pool table, and an old jukebox in the corner plays all of our favorite songs, a couple, in love, eternally slow dancing next to it, and that's when it gets real bad. Or maybe real good.

Like a mirror, these places reflect the raw ingredients of emotion and draw out an artifact of a memory. Play it like a movie projected onto the three-dimensional space in front of us. A mythology built, like a fire, from the combustible mix of history (the remembered) and forgetting (the forgotten).

The characters in these myths, the specters in these memories, emerge from physical relationships between objects which together weave something like a dream. And on the edge of this dream exists a perfectly good nightmare, ready to be picked like a ripe fruit.

Observing and cataloging examples of these places, a time-tested method, allows a natural understanding to develop. This process lets us build the scaffolding, a precision tool, for the work, an artistic product.

Through the heavy lifting of memory, a thoroughly difficult task, we come to see that they, *these places*, don't necessarily have to be objectively horrible to have ghosts. They don't have to be war zones or crises rooms in hospitals or encampments of the forgotten and the dejected on the fringes of cities. The far away and the unknown and the unknowable.

Neighborhoods which fight to resist the avalanche of time and change are the first examples which come to mind, but even they can be tinted with anxieties which alter an organic emergence. Anxieties which doom a natural curiosity.

More examples follow: late afternoon walks down tree lined streets, fingers crossed behind backs; early morning commutes, full of small battles for quick moving ground; reading the Obituaries in the California section of the Sunday Times, a cup of coffee at the kitchen table.

But these images fail under careful scrutiny. Why? They are static and sidestep a more granular reflection and analysis.

They lack a narrative development, a sort of patient nothingness, required in order to create real ghosts, and that takes time. So, like in a bad film, craft is used in our memories as a substitute for feeling.

This keeps the horror at a distance, and we are protected once again. Standing at the line demarcating bullshit and the truth. An infinite firewall that we can never see through.

But if *they* are not these places, then what are? Where do they exist? Where do we find them?

I don't know, and I'm not sure, but I can tell you that searching for evidence and presenting it as truth is bad logic, because truth can be a slippery thing.

What I find interesting, and what is unexpected – what we’re less prepared to deal with if prepared at all – is when horror isn’t actually seen as horror at all, but at first as something beautiful.

When the birth of chaos comes from order. When the ghosts are found sitting right in front of us in the garden, bathed in the warm happy glow of daylight.

We rarely expect to see horror and ghosts in beautiful things, in beautiful places, so we are ill prepared for their presence when they rear their ugly head.

*Song, Artist, Album, Year*

Song: Inner City Blues

Artist: Marvin Gaye

Album: *What’s Going On*

Year: 1971

### **The Mannequin**

Something strange always happens at *The Void*. It’s just after eight o’clock on Saturday night and the bright Summer day had been hot and bleached bone dry and now the wind moving from the direction of the Western hills is painting a rough cool texture on the night. An invisible

hand moving over sun kissed skin in the dusk. We turn into the driveway and move across the lot, two motorcycles, Adam up ahead, each of us with a passenger, and he stops at a space near the corner sidewalk and I move next to him and back in and kill my engine.

I plant my feet and balance and tap Paige twice on her thigh, our signal that it's safe to get off, and she loosens her grip over my waist and steps down.

The din of music and voices from the inside of the gallery that we're next to now pushes against the vacuum of the exterior world.

We each follow our own routines of removing helmets and yawning and fixing our hair. An easy cool down after a day trip through the city and up PCH, and the sound of laughter and clinking glass cuts through the night.

Engines silent, the machines still, I look at Paige and she smirks and tilts her chin up, acting faux tough, and then blows a kiss my way and I catch it and smile back, creasing my forehead, adding an index to the moment.

I remember a conversation with her on the living room floor in the middle of the night, about the mechanics underpinning attention. "A way of being asserting Will," she told me, "that's what you should avoid, because not even the strongest Will can do battle against unwavering Attention."

Somewhere in that moment, the conversation etched a path that enclosed the perimeter of a lie.

"I fake sensitivity," I told her, "when there really isn't any there. I try to make it real."

“Don’t we all?” she said.

The air carries the scent of the nearby food truck and the last orange tint of day is being fed into purple and charcoal shredder that is the horizon of the hills. The movement of a flame on the edges of wood burned char.

A little further down the road, neon signs outline the characters on them who keep watch over red brick buildings and shooting stars streak by on the gravel road. Across it, half built apartment buildings are going up and a network of electric gates and rail tracks stand erect under the skeletons of future windows arranged haphazard in the dark.

On the other side of the tracks there are shells of brightly lit art deco shapes dressed up with modern neon and I think they must have once been electronics stores or mattress outlets. Those are the first businesses that come to mind, electronics stores and mattress outlets, or maybe even a warehouse for scratch and dent appliances at wholesale prices, but I don’t know if any of these actually ever existed in these spaces.

We’re not quite on the outskirts, but just the right amount of distance away from the myth of city center that exists over the rolling hills, at the Northern seat of the last valley before the Pacific.

I’m off the bike and folding my jacket when Adam walks over to me and, when I notice him, begins to say, “I wonder who owns these pieces of shit.” He points to the bikes that we’re parked next to, and gives me a sarcastic smile.

I make one last fold and then look at the machines and see that they're well put together.

Thought out, built with time and skill - long and lean and handsome.

"I wonder if that's safe to ride," Adam says, pointing at one of them.

The blue glow from the exterior of the building lights reflect off of his leather jacket in broken cubist fragments.

"I don't know, it's skinny," I say, "but it looks sturdy." Goya is painted on the tank. *Saturn Devouring His Son*.

"To barhop maybe," Adam says, "but not for long distances."

He runs his right hand through his hair and then crosses his arms in front of him. The eddy of a thought passes in the current of the wind and he follows its path somewhere far and holds his gaze.

"Where would you really take it though?" I ask him, looking at him, his eyes still fixed, "not across the country."

"True," he says, and then turns away from the object in the distance. "My one gripe with these things though, as pretty as they are," he says, and then looks up at me, "is that they're almost identical copies of designs from the past, and there's no glory in that."

"How do you mean?" I ask him.

"This iteration just rapes the 70's for all its got, man" he says, "kind of what like we did with the 50's and the 60's, but this trend just hasn't bucked since like 2001."



“You could say the same for the 80’s and even the 90’s now,” I say. “Nostalgia always exists in some way, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s like we got stuck in a time warp after 911,” he says, “and just keep getting sucked back into the good old 70’s.”

“It’s not those times, I know,” I say.

“It won’t ever be,” he says, and as I nod agreement, I search his eyes for a clue about the direction of the conversation. I find humor in some corner of my mind and then counter, “but hey, they look pretty, right?”

“You’re not wrong,” he says, looking back at the bike, his hands now in his pockets. He stretches his legs and exhales slowly and then places his right hand on his lower back.

“God, it’s fucking hot,” he says, looking at me, and then yawns.

“So, aren’t they serving their function?” I ask.

“If to be pretty is what their function is, I guess”, he says,

I think about this.

“Maybe, maybe not,” I tell him, “but how do I know? How do you?”

He smiles and his faces eases and an anxiety drains from it and then he says, “Really though,” and he looks at Star, “I don’t.”

There's an implication in his comment, hiding something, but conversations between close friends and family are always the most treacherous journeys to start, regardless of the subject.

I don't press him any further, but it echoes, amplified by nothing, and he turns his head and looks back toward the object in the distance.

Something strange always happens when I see Adam, and I'm not sure if it was for me, or for him, but he pushed a little further than any of his usual quips or one liners.

"Anyways," he says, "let's go inside, yeah?" and relaxes his shoulders and steps towards the girls.

The smile he gives them is not a hoax or a lie, yet there seems to be something that he's working out in his head that he's uncomfortable telling anyone just yet.

"Are we gonna' go inside or what?" Star says to us as she adjusts her black purse strap across her yellow jacket."

The light has almost disappeared and the sky is starless and a plane cuts across it blinking red and white.

We walk together toward the patio of the gallery and introduce ourselves to some friends of Star and Adam, *hi, how are you, talk to you later*, and then move inside the gallery space and greet familiar names and faces.

There's a sculpture in the center of the room, the feet and lower legs, standing alone as if ripped from an ancient Greek statue, everything above the knee missing. There are paintings

and photographs organized in no particular order on the white walls, and Adam and Star separate from Paige and I. It's warm and *Bizarre Love Triangle* plays from the speakers next to the DJ booth in the far corner of the room and it smells like a Halloween outlet, I don't know why, so Paige and I move toward the small cash bar near some lithographs of classic LA monuments.

"I don't know why she's here," Paige tells me, her left arm against the white table top as she stands and sips her cocktail through a thin red straw.

"He doesn't even like her," she says.

I chew on the ice from my glass and it carries a hint of the whiskey.

"How do you know that for sure though?" I ask her.

She sets her drink down.

"Look, I know he's your best friend," she says, "but he's my brother, and I don't know for sure, but I feel like somethings eating at him. Like he's," a pause, "conflicted about something."

"I saw that in his face earlier," I tell her, and then "just thought I should mention that." I break up the ice.

She looks at me and let's this comment sit for a while. The dark wells of her pupils encircled by green remind me of a poisonous flower. She waits a beat and then looks around and leans in close.

“Look,” she starts, “I don’t want to make a big deal of this,” she pauses and prepares her lips for the next sentence, “but I think that Star is pregnant.” She looks into my eyes and I stay with her there, “and that doesn’t bode well for my brother,” she says, “Like, with our family, with me, and it should worry you too.” She almost whispers this to me. There is a deep concern.

“Shit,” she says, “they were already done and he was seeing that pinup girl,” she closes her eyes and quickly runs her right hand through her hair, “I can’t remember her name, but Star *had* to have him back and wouldn’t let him go, and she already fucked him up.”

“I know she can be a little reckless,” I say, “but Adam seems to think that he can tame her.”

“She’s fucking plastic,” she says, “like a fucking mannequin.”

“Yeah, but a lot of people are like that now - blame social media.”

She takes a small breath through her nose and then bites her lower lips and a look of helplessness flashes across her eyes for a brief moment and then she says, “She took my brother for a fucking ride one night,” a disgust is crackling like a flame from within the wells of her pupils, “And they drove to that pretty bridge in Pasadena and she fucking showed him where she was going to jump. What a crazy bitch.”

I take a good drink from my glass and then lift it a little higher to dispense another piece of ice into my mouth.

“I don’t know,” she continues, “something is way off this time, and I don’t know what it is. I’m genuinely scared for my brother,” she looks in his direction, “because you and I both know how he can be, regardless of the girl.”

I break the new piece of ice in two.

"I'm not going to allow her to fuck up my only sibling," she says, and then takes a drink from her glass, "Again."

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Paige and I walk around the gallery and say *hi, hello* and nod to familiar faces and move past a collection of photos of discarded couches on sidewalks and in alleys, organized by color - *ROYGBIV*. I notice that Star looks at us from near the bar and she seems to have something on her mind as well. The lights in the room have dimmed.

"Everybody wants to be a hipster," Paige tells me, and then moves her short dark hair out of her face. Her red lips seemingly float alone in the shadows cast by half-light. "Everybody acts like a Rock-star before putting in the work," she adds.

"I see it all the time," I tell her, "I butt heads with those people all the time. I think they believe that they exist at the level where mythologies are competing against each other for existence, but I don't think that they're actually there."

"It's an act," she says, "and that's a scary place to be because it takes all of you."

There's a pause. She's still thinking about her brother.

"So, why'd you come back?" I ask her. "Why'd you leave him, and why are you here with me? I feel like now that we're here, I might as well pop the bubble and ask." I place my right hand in my right pocket, and carry my drink with my left.

"Look," she says, and then stops walking and turns to me, "I'm like everybody else - acting, pretending. I go with the flow, and sometimes I can't stop either. *I am guilty too.*"

I nod at this and then say, "I know, it's not easy to hold back sometimes Paige. That flow is strong."

"Why did you bring me?" she asks, returning the inquiry, searching my eyes for the truth.

"I'm in the middle of the water too," I tell her. "I want to see where the ride takes me, but I'm not gonna' pretend that the curiosity of resisting doesn't exist. *That* to me is a lie."

She mulls this over.

"I think that we lie to ourselves with our stories, play pretend with them all of the time," she tells me. "That, whatever the cost, we will defend them."

"But that can be a scorched earth mentality," I say, "and there are people that just aren't that shitty."

"Peoples acts are bullshit," she says, "obscured by short sighted actions. There isn't a long view anymore."

We both don't say anything for a moment and then she adds, "well, there's always Baseball," and then she smiles and then takes a drink.

I chuckle and wipe the sweat from my forehead with my right hand.

"I like you" she says, "that's why I came."

I meet her gaze. "I do too and that's why you're here."

"So, is this wrong?" she says, "are we doing something wrong?"

"I don't know," I say, and then, "Why would this be wrong?"

I cross my arms and she turns around and we start moving toward the projection of Kim Novak on one of the gallery's walls, running through an old clocktowers charcoal hallway.

Paige begins to mouth a word but stops herself and then smiles and looks down and nods to a hidden rhythm. I wait in silence until she looks up and focuses and, like watchtowers in the distance, her eyes are searching.

"Everybody is doing something they're not supposed to be doing, she says. Everybody is playing with fire."

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I ride back home alone on the freeway late at night. There was a distance in her smile. A dark thin line between now and forever.

There is a moon, yellow, that's now looming over a frigid concrete night, while the sound of the engine underneath me demarcates my path. Leaving a momentary trace.

There is a moon, yellow, sitting on the edge of the horizon while the other side wakes up.

## **MYTHS – Courage & Brother**

### **Courage**

Phantom sun impressions are captured in pictures taken earlier this month and now shuffled in a box on the living room floor. Bands of light slide in through the blinds that move against the thin mesh screen and there are windchimes and birds talking outside. It's the middle of a hot day and the room is cool.

Outside, the sound of the leaf blower starts and I picture it in the hands of the gardener with the rough face and leather beaten skin, who moves out of my way when I pass him on the sidewalk, but who doesn't meet my gaze, as if I've already taken enough from him, and I'm not allowed any more.

The sprinklers are on in the front yard and sirens wail in the distance and it's Tuesday morning. I'm reading the news on my phone while drinking coffee at the kitchen table. The Wildfires all over the state are being slowly contained and apparently they're real bad, but somehow I'm still bothered when my Amazon package shows up a day late.

I'm sitting shirtless in a chair, in shorts, legs stretched out, notes for work on a yellow legal pad in front of me, and I close the news app and look around the space which I'm in. The walls are painted white and on them are framed posters and sketches all are arranged without error.

On a corkboard above a grey desk: movie tickets, black and red squares from photobooths, wristbands from shows throughout the city.



Too many nights, too many people, too many parties that left hazy memories in the morning, regardless of the quantity of alcohol consumed. Nights under fading starlight on sidewalks that we saw in our dreams.

And then the city crumbled and changed and we changed and didn't like it. Finished school, got real jobs. Then what? What's the next move? Trying to leave a place where everyone wants to be is a strange contradiction. Especially when that place is home.

You'd said you'd never give in to the snake, yet here you are. The girl of some forgotten dream, but why do you still appear, and why do I push toward you?

Days and nights that can be traced through a narrative from some point in the past but whose scenes are scattered in the hallways of memory. The task of ordering them is like trying to collect scraps of paper escaping in the breeze.

To make sense of what's important, what can't be lost, is too much work – too big of a task. It's better to leave and start over.

A thought passes through my mind, like a firework cutting across the sky. This moment, this city. Its heartbeat, its sweat, its sun. People and their concerns about how no one signals and gas prices and no love or respect and the heat and other people and about freeways at a standstill like a bad dream in an Italian movie.

I half understand the catalog of myths used to organize chance and circumstance, but that's ok. There's no rush. In this room, I have what I need and what's so often missing - time. Making sense of structure piece by piece, bit by fleeting bit.

Organizing history, even a personal one, attached to years and places, takes something like courage. That feeling spans across an immeasurable distance and seeks to gather what's been scattered.

But what is courage? I've asked myself that a million times over the years and expect to ask myself a million more. I still haven't come up with an answer and time is always running out.

A quiet flash and a punch of sound fill the thought and rivulets of color rain down like after Friday night fireworks at the stadium. The thought is erased, disintegrates like old film burning up, washed away and replaced by blue and cloudless sky.

There is a breeze and the smell of bougainvillea and the sound of daytime traffic like static on the radio - waves sliding up onto the shore. This particular image can now be inserted into the present.

I think of what this picture is, where it's from, if it still exists. I lean back in my chair and cross my hands behind my head and remember to forget. I empty out my mind into the drift.

I'll be doing a good job if I can make myself laugh in the process, but it's taken me a while to come to terms with that. I cheat and I'm lazy, but I'm passionate when I fight, and what's becoming more apparent is not that I fight, but what I fight for. There's an art to railing against the world.

I am my own worst enemy. I am my worst critic. I am hardest on myself

Taking the first step is always the hardest part.

*Song, Artist, Album, Year*

Song: God's Plan

Artist: Drake

Album: *Scorpion*

Year: 2016

### **Brother**

I'm walking down 8<sup>th</sup> and Olive in the afternoon and I stop at the corner of the street, waiting for the light to change, and when it does I look both ways and step off the curb. A girl in a red skirt and a flower in her hair passes swiftly by, and when I step onto the curb again I feel the phone in my back pocket begin to vibrate.

I answer.

"Hey little bro," he says to me, and then, "hang on. Hang on just a sec."

I walk into the old hotel and toward the elevator doors and step inside before they close.

I wait in silence for what seems like a small eternity, surrounded by three mirrored walls trimmed with red velvet, and then the doors open and I walk out toward the doorway, still on hold, the blue sky and the tops of buildings cut out in a rectangle. I step through the door and

the sound of traffic comes back within earshot and a car honks and the breeze on the roof is punctuated by the accent of a slow beat from the speakers near the pool.

He comes back on the line.

“Hey, sorry about that. So, what did you want to talk about?”

I think carefully for a moment before answering. “I don’t know,” I say, “Everything. Nothing.”

There’s a silence on the other end.

“Well, I don’t know what you really had in mind by calling earlier, but thanks,” he says.

“Not a problem”, I say.

“Have you talked to the parents?” he asks me.

“Yeah, I call Dad or he’ll call me when he gets the chance. It’s not scheduled or anything. Just when he can or when I can.”

“Good, he says,” sternly. There is a skepticism in his tone.

“What about you?” I ask him.

“What about me what?” He replies.

“Have you talked to the parents?”

“Everyday,” he says, without hesitation, and then continues, “I call the house at 8:30 every night. Just to check in, you know.”

"Mm-hmm," I sound out.

I hear someone talking to him in the background.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about really?" he asks, present again.

"What's the rush?" I ask him. "I thought we had we had some time. You never answer when I call."

"There's no rush," he says, "I just have to get through the next chunk of work so that I can move on from it, you know. There's this project that my group is working on, so gotta' talk to the team and triple check work and write reports and rinse and repeat to make it all happen again tomorrow."

"I wouldn't know anything about that I guess," I say.

"Funny," he says, dryly, but still aware of the joke.

"So what about you funny guy?" He asks this seriously, and I imagine him with his forearms on the edge of his desk, hands crossed in front of him. He takes a moment in the space between the next question. "What have you been doing?"

"To be honest with you," I say, "what I've been doing feels like a whole bunch of bullshit."

He doesn't say anything after I say this, as if waiting for me to say more, so I continue.

"I guess I thought that by doing this, I would be doing exactly what I wanted to do, which is to make art and be out in the world and meet people. To live that dream I guess, but it's a big task, and right now I feel like I'm drowning."

I can hear him breathe on the other side.

"The more I get into it," I add, "the more that I do it, the more that it feels like I left a career for something fickle and vain."

"It's all transitory," he says. "I wouldn't worry too much about the fickleness of it little brother. We're all just passengers, passing through."

"About vanity though" he adds, "I don't really know what to tell you. It can get you a lot, for sure, if you put in the work, but it can be a drain on someone like you."

"I don't think I understand where I want to be right now, so I have to ask myself if I was wrong."

"Mm-hmm," he says.

"What's the point, you know?" I tell him.

"You have you to stop digging your own grave," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You have to stop with all of this what's the point bullshit," he says, "that's the real bullshit that you should be worried about Julian."

"Well then, what the fuck am I supposed to talk to you about then?"

"Calm down," he says, "Look. I don't want to press you on this, just keep that in mind, but I'm not selling it to you as advice either. Just something to consider."

"Yeah," I say, "I know."

“See,” he says, “you say that, but I don’t think that you actually know Julian. And even how you said it gave me the impression that you don’t actually believe that you know either.”

“So now you care?” I tell him, and then neither of us says a word.

“The grass is always greener on the other side,” he says, “And unfortunately, the only people that can convince us of anything are ourselves.”

I clear my throat a little.

“True conviction,” he adds.

“I just don’t want flail and wander about my life and do everything halfway and then leave it for later,” I say.

“Then don’t leave it for later,” he says.

“I’m trying,” I tell him.

“There’s a huge problem with that though,” he says, “*trying*.”

“There is no try in this game Julian,” he says, “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you this. There is no time for the good old College try.”

I listen.

“Life itself is simply too important,” he continues, “but you know that and I don’t need to remind you of that.”

“That can be another conversation,” I say.

"Sure," he says, and then, "just think about it first please. Don't just wing it."

"I just want to ride into the sunset," I say.

He eases up and I can see him shaping a smile on the other side.

"Be serious," he says.

"I just don't know what I'm doing," I say. "And I don't know why I'm doing it and I feel like I'm wasting my time."

He lets out a big sigh on the other end of the line.

"Look," he says, "I have to go, but it was good talking to you brother. All I'm going to tell you is that you're smart, you're good looking, and you got the drive, but I don't think you're using your brain in the way that it should be used. You're wasting it everyday."

"You have an OK head on your shoulders," he tells me, "but it needs to be better. You need to be better Julian."

"Yeah," I say, "thanks."

"You got a lot of potential kid, but you're wasting your time in that city."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say.

"Next time you call me," he says, "please have whatever you're going to tell me ready, if not, no offense little brother, but don't waste my time."

I don't say anything.



“Just keep that in mind, please,” he says.

“Alright duder,” I say, “I’ll talk you later. Love you man.”

“Love you too little bro,” he says, and then he hangs up.

## **LOVE - Modern Logic & Red Giant**

### **Modern Logic**

I'm searching for a ghost that I'm afraid to see.

I used to look for it by driving familiar streets and boulevards late at night, each one imbued with its own collection of myths. I was fond of the one where we drove to the ocean and listened to oldies on the radio. I miss that one.

I was attempting, forcing maybe, the reconstruction of a trace of an image as simple as the one where we're in the park in the afternoon and the lady in the wheelchair near the tree gets upset with us for smoking on the swings.

The effort of forcing a memory though, is not good practice, and attempting to use willpower to draw silhouettes on the present scene misses out on the subtleties experienced through undivided attention.

I'm talking about ghosts, but not in the way that we usually talk about ghosts. They exist beneath the polished surface of the material world, and are often locked within the layered problems of memory. Their projection can be triggered by even the most casual movements in time.

Moments at which the present narrative and a memory become entangled and together form a new and original experiment. Ghosts then play over our surroundings, like holograms, or movies.

The blue fabric chair in the corner, and you on it, reading your Japan travel guide in the light of the afternoon. The lamp with the paper shade, casting a small shadow over the small orange skull with a wick on top. The French doors open and the air moving through the room and the sound of the leaves rustling outside.

The night we slept on the couch, when your husband was out of town.

I go back to old places late at night, in the city, on its edges, sometimes as far as the suburbs if I'm looking to stretch the feeling. On highways and freeways, connecting the electric metropolis of organized chaos when I stitch together a narrative in the dark.

I change the radio dial and get off the 10 somewhere and go to a 7-11 for a pack of cigarettes. I then drive to the place on Broadway where we would meet each other late at night for a drink, but don't find any trace of you.

I scribble on a napkin and then crumble it and put it in my pocket.

One day, I sat in the patio of the empty café, listening for the sound of your black ballerina flats moving in my direction. I remember those same flats moving across a checkerboard floor, your shoulders back, chin tilted slightly up, and with just a hint of arrogance. Like a perfect picture dancer caught in time. How beautiful you looked.

All you needed was a rose to match your red lipstick and this image channels Wim Wenders and his classic Polaroids of Perris, Texas.

How do search through a labyrinth? What are the strategies and why should I trust them?

What can I do to forget you?

*Song, Artist, Album, Year*

Song: Windows

Artist: Sugar Candy Mountain

Album: 666

Year: 2016

## **Red Giant**

The needle falls onto the spinning black disc on the record player and amplifies the hisses and the pops in the small light of the dark. The vinyl reflects the skewed square panels of moonlight as it moves, and outside the window the silhouettes of trees and hedges are grainy and soundless. A quiet second before the record player speaks.

Paige and I are on the white carpet on the floor of the living room. It's late and she wears my red sweater, the one with the pine tree and the mountain, and there are tumblers half-filled with Cabernet on metal coasters next to us. The un-corked bottle is on the glass table and a red and blue paper lamp in the shape of a star glows from the corner of the room, above the bookshelf.

"I know we've been seeing each other a lot," she tells me, "and I want to say, I'm sorry, really."

"Why?" I ask her and take a drink from my glass.

"From pulling you away from things that you have to do," she says.

"That's not a problem," I tell her.

"But she is," she says, "Why can't you just leave her already?"

I pause, think. "I don't know," I say to her. "I just can't right now. Its not the right time. Things just aren't lined up correctly."

We have been spinning stories out of the hours of the night, when everyone is furthest away, deep in dreams, and now we have reached the center of the labyrinth. The proverbial Minotaur.

When I look at her I can't help thinking, is she as guilty as the people putting Zyklon B in the gas chamber or am I?

"I know who you are," she says, "and I know what you can be, but I can't wait forever."

I nod my head and don't respond right away.

"You're just stringing her along," she tells me, and "wasting both of your lives in the process.

Don't do that to her. Don't do that to yourself."

"But leaving her isn't the responsible thing." I say.

"The responsible thing," she repeats and then laughs.

"Isn't that what adults do?" I say.

She runs her fingers through her hair. "I never thought I'd be thinking like this," she says, "but I guess our parents never thought they'd get old either. I'm sorry, maybe it's the wine."

"You don't have to be sorry," I say.

"I know," she says, "It's just late and I'm tired, but I'm glad that I'm here with you."

"I'm glad that I'm here with you too," I tell her.

"I love you," she says, and then takes a drink from her glass, "and I don't want to lose you again."

I look into her eyes, dark green with black centers and then inhale and lean in and kiss her on the lips, taking some of her lipstick off when I pull back.

"A part of me is trying real hard not to be a Barfly," I say, "and you're not helping."

I get up off the floor and head into the kitchen.

"All we're doing together is just getting drinks," I add, searching for a bottle of water in the fridge.

"So, let's not get drinks," she responds, still on the floor "Let's go to a baseball game instead. We talked about doing that."

"When?" I say, reaching for plastic bottle on the shelf.

"I saw some drunks in jerseys walking down Spring the other day after I got out of work. It reminded me of you."

I close the fridge door and stand up straight and then smirk at her. My smile drips with sarcasm.

"Thanks," I say, "I'm glad drunk sports fans remind you of me."

"That's not what I meant to say. I didn't mean it like that."

"I know," I say, "I'm just fucking with you."

"I meant that I thought about how we talked about going to a baseball game at the beginning of the summer and we're almost halfway through August," she says.

The elegance of the days will come to an end, I think, and the roughness of the nights will follow.

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We're slow dancing in the kitchen later that night, over the checkerboard floor, under the glow of the Edison lights, listening to an 80's playlist, the sound of *Don't Change* currently filling the room. If I was given a second chance, I think, I would do it all over again just for her.

"I'll never leave you again," she tells me.

"And I'll finally tell you that I love you," I say.

And then the sun rises.

## **FAMILY – Voice & Grandma**

### **Voice**

Family is a tricky thing to think about. A tricky thing to talk about. A tricky thing to write about.

On the one hand I expect so much from them, grace and elegance and laughter, all inserted into scenes like pre-recorded tracks, and on the other hand I expect nothing.

I wait for Adam at a diner on Fairfax and I'm sitting at a table near the kitchen and a busboy carrying a tray of plates passes by a line of cooks and tells them *Trucha, Trucha*, and someone whistles and calls him a *pendejo* and then the busboy smiles and makes a joke about the cooks mom and the others laugh.

The cars outside the window move in an unbroken stream and the foot traffic on the sidewalk is rapid as the day cools down and some form of a thought finds itself settling in my mind.

I expect grace under pressure from my family, parts moving in sync together in a well-kept machine, but this isn't giving them enough credit. We're all human and this version of reality, this expectation, can never exist. Real life is continuously layered.

I expect them to be to be tolerable, articulate, elegant, but really, they're awful, vile, vicious - cold hearted creatures of the crudest sort.

But here in the diner, looking at the groups of people having small conversations around their meals, I remember that I like my family. But, why do I like them?



Well, for starters, even though there are interpersonal conflicts, like there would be anywhere, in any family, nobody has ever really given me the impression of getting the short end of the stick.

In the context of family, although they can be classic assholes to each other, to me, to anyone really, about different shades of skin color or the shapes of eyes or faces, of weight, a turned up nose, a flat stomach. Even though they can be assholes about things like that, they're not fixated on only those things. So, between us, we move past that. Past a visual stimulus activated. Past a quick judgement.

In the order of our senses operating, the visual sense is usually at the front. Careful observation was a huge evolutionary step in our species survival. We needed our eyesight to survive effectively in the natural world, so we became *de facto* observers. But, if sight is indeed the first sense that turns on, and we think through things from that starting point, in a conditioned order, does that shape our focus?

And is that the only order? What about sound instead of sight? What if you couldn't see, and you could only smell?

We can get really wrapped up in that first sense, really taken for a ride by it, however, part of being a good logician, a good ethicist, a good scientist, regardless of the tools, is the power to step back from the impulsive reactions due to our perceptions. The ones that are really baked in by conditioning.

To step back and observe the thing in and of itself and to be able to pick and choose what you would like to play with, to wander forever, would be an infinite joy, right?

However, we are mortal, and one the biggest problems that we deal with every day is time.

We have a beginning and we will have an end, so in this short span of cosmic time, we have to find the moments for the things that we would like to focus on intensely.

To objectively observe requires the time to develop a technique capable of diverting the natural impulses of our reactions. Whether its ten minutes, or twenty-five minutes, these short moments should be fully invested in that thing, whatever it is. We give ourselves over to that thing, day after day, and stitch all of it together.

My family doesn't have the ability to frontload an idea.

A natural impulse would be, to be fucking assholes about material things and not move past that. But I like that we shift the weight of our focus, move through the order. Start somewhere else, and detach from the natural order of ideological reactions.

Are other families like this as well, and if so, is the world becoming objectively better?

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Adam sits across from me, sunk into the burnt orange colored vinyl booth, and he quietly eats a spoonful of Matza-Ball soup.

"She eats handsome boys," he tells me. "Can you believe that shit?"

I recall her lips floating above the wine glass reflecting the light from the red paper star, burned forever in my memory. I see blood dripping, like a dream, down the sides of legs when she would cut herself and Adam would call me because he wouldn't know what to do.

"I have this recurring nightmare," he tells me, between spoonfuls of soup, "where we park by the bridge in Pasadena again, like we did that one night, and then walk down the road and across it in the dark and then up some stairs and towards its middle, suspended above the Arroyo."

I listen and notice his figure relaxing a little as he tells me this. A plate breaks in the kitchen and highlights Frank Sinatra gliding around the room

"We stand on the edge again, like we did that one night," he continues, "when she showed me the place that she was about to jump from, and then I wake up, and I'm still here."

"Why did you let her do that?" I ask him.

"I don't know," he responds, "because I'm weak," and then, "I'm so fucking bad at everything man, I'm even bad at dying. I can't even fucking commit to that."

He looks me directly in the eyes.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?" he says, and looks away and places his elbows on the table and his hands on his head. I sit back in the booth and watch him and am unsure about the next move.

I think.

“She eats handsome boys,” he tells me again, from under the cover of his hair over his face and hands, “and your whole life can go in a second with someone like her.” He looks up.

“You could be sitting in the backseat of a car,” he continues, “your whole life ahead of you, flying down the highway, and then someone misjudges the overpass turn and you’re gone.”

“True,” I say, “But, you could also be standing still, ..., maybe in a line at the bank or maybe waiting for Metro, and someone can decide to have a bad day.”

He crosses his arms and looks toward the pastry counter.

I remember the gun in the car, but I don’t tell him about it. I looking past his shoulder at the picture of Richard Nixon with red LED eyes and devil horns above the bar.

“You know,” he says, “I know you’re worried about me, but I’m also gonna’ tell you to be careful with Paige. You know she’s technically not divorced yet and I know you guys are meant to be and all that, but she can be nuts too.”

I nod. “I hear ya’,” I say, “I appreciate it man.”

“I know you’re still seeing Elle,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Well, what the fuck then?” he says, expressively moving his hands.

“I know, I know,” I tell him.

“Well, take care of that shit,” he says, and picks up his spoon and scoops up some soup.

I search through the faces of the other people in the room and the clink of a glass pulls a thought from somewhere unexpected and the room becomes a screen for the movie of a drive during the Spring, when we stayed at a Hotel in Santa Barbara. My mind searches for the rest of the story, but it’s tenuous right now.

I have images of places that I pass through, and I wish I had a better sense of structure.

“So, how’s your writing coming along?” Adam says, and puts down his spoon.

“Good,” I say, “I’m moving slow, but I do it every day. I just have to be relentless,” I tell him, “there’s a fire inside me that exists no matter what I do, so right now I’m just trying to temper it and use it for good.”

He nods. “Good,” he says, “that’s good. Keep on doing that.”

I stir the lemon slice in the teacup in front of me and Adam pulls out his phone and I turn a corner in my mind, down a street.

I take out my phone also and open my notes.

*It’s about change,* I write.

There are just some things that you can’t say in person, I don’t know why. Some questions that you can’t ask.

*Song, Artist, Album, Year*

Song: Any Color You Like

Artist: Pink Floyd

Album: *Dark Side of The Moon*

Year: 1973

## **Grandma**

Grandma is buried in Rose Hills, far East of Downtown, a beautiful and rolling piece of land from which you can see the entire LA basin stretched between Palos Verdes and the San Gabriel Mountains. There is a peacefulness in this place, a gentle calm, overlooking everything. We would park near the top of the hill on afternoons during High School and then climb the old water tower and watch the sun set and the city in the distance illuminate the dark.

Grandma was born in a small Texas town in the early 20's and came West not long after that, in her adolescence, to treat her tuberculosis. Doctors told my great-grandparents that she had only a forty percent chance of survival, so she spent three years in isolation at Olive View Sanitarium in the 30's in order to recuperate. She was quarantined that entire time, so the crucial moment between fourteen and seventeen was spent without a physical connection to her family.

I remember I used to ask her about how the city was like during the 40's and the 50's, and she would tell me stories about how her and her friends would go to Downtown, to Broadway, to the old Dance Halls and Theaters, and stay up later than they were supposed to.

She told me about how she met Grandpa while they were both tenants of an apartment complex on Vermont. Her, working during the day as a secretary, and him, behind the switchboard on the night shifts at a radio station.

They could only see each other in passing, so they left letters under one another's doors in order to talk. To communicate.

They grew together in this way, and she wrote once *I will always be thinking of you, even in dreams.* "That's all that it took for your Grandpa," she told me, "to know I was his."

"He was a good man," she would say, "he built this house," and then she would point down to the floor in the kitchen where we sat. She would tell me that he was loving and affectionate and cared deeply for his three boys. I remember her looking at me and saying, "You would have loved him, he was such a good man," and then taking an almond cookie from the plate, the same cookies that my friend Maggie Chien had introduced me to in middle school.

I remember sitting in my Grandmothers kitchen and talking to her about these things. And then sometimes we would just sit and listen to the sounds of the birds and the windchimes outside and then she would call her little dog, "*Tiny! Tiny!*," she would say, and the little Pomeranian would jingle on over with his small head tilted to the side and his tongue sticking out from between his crooked teeth. The protector of her heart in the quiet moments.

I think about these things as I ride East on the 60 and down the 605 and then exit and make my way toward the cemetery. I come here less frequently now, but somehow it's always on my mind.

I miss her, I think, I really do.

When I arrive, I turn the engine off and untie my bag from the rack and then make my way through the maze of headstones from different times and move in the direction of my Grandparents.

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I'm sitting on a bench staring out over the valley and I remember the backyard parties and the piñatas and the meat cooking on the grill, the late afternoon turning purple, and then I blink twice and it fades, erased from present memory.

I know that we come across remnants of the past at different points in time, pieces of it lost in the chamber of the forgotten. Loosely organized into a collection blending a longing for some distant place and now. The present.

Beauty and heartbreak are cracks in the Dam, and the feeling of the future play out like a memory when we hit a nerve. Somehow though, we only manage to remember the best of them, but that's what gets us and that's what hurts. The best is what makes us want more.

They are impressions.