

Prosthesis

by Evan L Williams

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The day James decided to get himself struck by lightning started at six forty-five a.m. He lifted his head and the whole day came at him in a single shape. It collided against his forehead, broke apart and unfurled. There, not unlike a long piece of ticker-tape, it revealed each of the horribly inane and tedious things he would do that day. He blinked, deciding at once into what shape to press the day, closed his eyes and fell onto the pillow.

One time James had been run over by a steam train, which he considered the deadliest of all mass transit vehicles. This was not due to an inability to see or outmaneuver the thing. In fact James had tried to kill himself. To his shock he'd wound up only paralyzed. Nobody had ever loved James. This was the problem as he understood it. He was thirty three at the time of his attempted suicide and had never *known* a woman. Now his dick didn't work.

James had purchased a silicon dildo that could be attached to his waist by a complex arrangement of buckles and elastic straps. He was numb from about the navel down yet retained full use of his arms, which had grown quite muscular and nice looking. Often did he imagine his powerful top half propelling the flaccid bottom half into the moist succulent middle region of a writhing young female. Yet arousal was an odd thing now. Obviously he could not get an erection. It was entirely mental and strangely satisfying albeit unrequited. Nevertheless the pursuit of women had not relented, having instead only intensified as his debilitated state often put him into the immediate sympathies of compassionate women—whom were always compassionate, could not help

themselves. And though he carried the squishy thing with him everywhere, he had yet to bag a gal with his prosthetic penis.

The freeform shapes of an oncoming consciousness stirred within him and he awoke to find he could no longer jump over buildings nor run the lengths of entire city blocks without taking a breath. Perhaps suicides go to hell and this—this dreaming of running and leaping and dancing atop the surfaces of placid mountain lakes—is the purgatory between purgatory and hell, the place people who fail to die when they try to kill themselves go to be punished for their misdeed. He shook away the thought and with it was stripped the residue of his dreaming so that he found himself alone in the stifling atmosphere of his bedroom.

The air in the room was stale again, turned stagnant overnight by his habit of forgetting to open the window above the bed. Though it was July, his home stayed quite cool. Situated in a north-south orientation, this kept the sun off the windows and the house at ambient temperature. He of course had central air, but he never used it. He'd never swum in his pool or turned on the Jacuzzi tub in the master bathroom. In fact, he hadn't gone upstairs since the accident—that was what he always called it, *The Accident*. He slept downstairs in one of the guest bedrooms, the smallest of the twelve boasted by the Cape Cod. It had been Glen Gould's before sitting empty for ten years while caught up in escrow. James thought it smelled like Glen Gould though he couldn't be sure.

He lifted himself up—his arms shook under the effort—and sidled into the chair that waited at his bedside like an obedient servant.

There was a shitstorm awaiting him at work. The specs for the Quincy job—a four story complex going in at the now defunct Warner Quarry—hadn't arrived last night.

His assistant, Maryanne, had waited patiently beside the fax machine until twelve-thirty in the morning, by which time she had finally given up. She retired to her apartment for a three hour nap before returning by four to again wait patiently beside the fax machine. Quincy was notorious for such things. But he was the biggest commercial real estate tycoon in the county. He had more money than what anyone would have considered conscionable; he also consumed more cocaine than what anyone would have considered conscionable.

“Motherfucker,” muttered James under his breath.

Maryanne had met him at the building’s entrance. The two blazed a hurried path down a hallway that ended at a great oak door adorned by complex geometrical tooling. They entered James’ office together. Maryanne, who stood two feet taller than James, handed him a packet of forms still in need of completion by two o’clock that afternoon when it was the inspectors were due to arrive. The floor was still bare.

“Motherfuckers,” muttered James under his breath.

“Yes they did call about the rug,” said Maryanne, stopping then before the massive planar oak desk devoid of any ornamentation. “They promised that today—before lunch—they’d have it installed. I guess it arrived last night. Something happened with the shippers and the rug got held up in customs. Some poor excuse like that. I stopped listening after the promise part.”

So too had James. He took in Maryanne, whom—despite her lack of sleep—looked absolutely scrumptious in a freshly pressed tweed pantsuit, low-cut chiffon blouse and neatly kempt bun. Her hair appeared unwashed and James wondered then if perhaps she had not changed her panties after having so patiently sat for so long.

“Richard and Tony have no ideas, James. This is going to look pretty bad to the inspectors.”

Her voice had an opiate’s effect on him, the way it rose and fell so softly and with such precision. He could have sat listening to it for a lifetime—no funny business, no prosthetic penis, just her voice resounding in her throat, that sonorous timbre around which he would wrap himself like a house cat.

“Richard and Tony aren’t paid for their ideas,” he said, speaking out the side of his mouth.

Maryanne approached him and calmly positioned his chair behind the desk. He assumed a dignified posture, folded his hands together and appreciated with subtle motioning the smooth lacquered surface of the two-hundred year old piece of furniture.

“What are we going to do?”

He liked that. Hearing her say *we*. What are *we* going to do? What will *you* and *I* come up with? *We*’ll have to think of something.

“Hartley’s a stickler,” he started, “he knows he rushed this thing. He’s with those rubes from the city that’ve been picketing this project since its inception. Oh he’s gonna be so satisfied with this. I can see his stupid smug grin now—” James angled his chair and stared out a paneled window over the sweeping view of the city and to the forested countryside beyond. “—I see him walking in here, we got nothing for him, and with that phony air of concern, ‘Oh dear, did you speak with Quincy?’ Fuck you.”

“That really doesn’t help us, James.”

Opposite him, Maryanne sat herself in a gnawgahyde chair studded with brass riveting, folded her long milky-white legs into a knot and smoothed the tweed blazer with

the palms of her hands. She had a distinctly Slavic look made all the more manifest by the devastatingly scarlet hue of her hair.

“You’re right. Let’s see—” He turned back to the desk and produced a laptop from out a leather satchel. He unfolded it front of him.

James cared so little for these things anymore. While attending Amherst to earn his master degree in architecture he’d felt true inspiration motivating him. There had been a precise moment when it was James knew that he was supposed to be an architect: The feeling—call it epiphany, call it God—struck him like an overwhelming gasp his body couldn’t contain, such that he staggered into the streets under the intoxicating influence of it, beseeching bewildered strangers for something, anything to write with—at one point it did occur to him: his willingness to cut himself open and write it in his own blood—until finally seizing upon a pen attached to an ATM by a little metal string of balls. He tore the thing loose and frantically wrote across his arm in large child-like scrawl— *Create something that brings people together.*

He ran his eyes over the schematics for the Quincy job. The site had been dubbed The Pit where The Warner Group had operated a granite quarry for sixty years. But they went broke and skipped town, leaving behind only the craggy rectangular hole they’d ripped out of the earth. It had been empty now for nearly fifteen years, home to the birds that built their nests in the imperturbable treetops that had started there as mere saplings but that had since grown into adulthood. There were ducks and geese in the early spring, after several months of steady rainfall. And in the warmer months, even the homeless took up shelter there. But it was soon to become the parking garage for the new Sherman Wood Mall.

But James didn't care about any of this. What he cared about was Maryanne. And though his eyes were busy upon the screen of the laptop, he was only ever aware of her fleeting shape at the edge of his eyes.

He had taken on the calling. At his moment of epiphany, the head and the heart wanted the world to be a better place. But such instances of clarity remain only briefly and the cataract of the mind soon positioned itself over the occurrence, leaving behind only the *feeling* James was doing something for a reason. Slowly it became clear that everything lay subject to this amnesia, that all that could ever be salvaged was faith—a terrible revelation for him. And once James found himself designing parking lots and shopping malls, he threw his body in front of a moving train.

“I know this looks bad but I think it's salvageable,” said Maryanne.

“I think you're right,” James said. He closed the lid of the laptop and pushed it aside, knowing quite assuredly the job was completely fucked for at least another three months, during which time his firm would again eat the costs.

“You and I will figure this thing out.”

“I don't understand, James. How should this fall on us? If Quincy can't get a form into us—even after three months of foreknowledge—how is it that it falls on us?”

“You won't have to worry about a thing. This isn't going to affect you. I promise.”

“That doesn't help me. What about you?”

Hearing that elated James. His whole bearing picked up; he may even have smiled.

“What about me? I'll be fine. I'll eat the cost again and hope for a better outcome.”

The money was not an issue, but the disrespect— If it had been anyone else, James would have put out a hit on the man.

Despite all that, James was overjoyed at the opportunity to spend the morning with his beloved assistant. “Is there any coffee?” he said.

Maryanne sprang out the chair. She turned and moved toward the door at the front of the office. James watched her ass as she stepped, a firm and resounding bounce yielding tiny almost undetectable quakings like ripples playing across the surface of water. He held onto the image in his mind, wrapped his eyelids around it and breathed slowly. The sound of the door opening signaled him back.

She brought it in on a silver tray: coffee carafe, creamer, a crystal sugar bowl with a tiny silver spoon hanging from it. She placed it on the desk where he could easily reach it. He stared at her fingers clutching the silver handle on the tray. He relished the way they folded in on themselves, how they curled so nicely against the soft fleshy part of her palm. The nails were painted. He hadn't noticed that before. They were a wine-red color or perhaps plum. He'd have to see them in brighter light to be sure. Everything she did sent him further into *it*, which was a difficult thing for him to name. It was a place of ecstatic rapture and increasing pressure where euphoria and blinding rage coincided. It was a beautiful agony pointedly associated with her.

She stood now, leaning slightly against the desk, arms folded across her chest. Her cleavage heaved with her breathing. She tilted her chin toward a window in the adjoining wall and let her gaze rest upon the horizon. She knit her brow and James thought maybe she was working at something difficult, something that was at odds with

herself. The edge of the desk cut into her ass and left an irresistible shape that he would have devoured, had there been even the inkling of consent.

He recalled the silicon dildo hiding in the satchel he'd brought with him.

Staring at the luscious bit of perfection, James reached for his computer, using its proximity as an excuse to get close to her. He left his hand on the lid of the laptop for a while, allowing himself to be closer to the delicate parts of her than he'd ever been before. Then he slipped the laptop back into the satchel, taking great care not to expose the head of the shameful prosthesis inside.

She bit her lip and it turned white. The blood returned in an even flushing then she spoke, saying, "So if there's nothing else could I go home? I've been here since four and then until twelve last night. I'm beat." She exhaled slowly. Her lashes fluttered. The impression of a smile left faint lines along her mouth.

There was a knocking at the door and immediately four men in white overalls came trudging in. Two men stood at either side of a tightly wound shrink-wrapped rug and shivered beneath its weight.

Dumbstruck, James turned to his assistant.

"Yeah, so uh—where you gonna want this? I'm assuming this big blank area here where it looks like there was a rug, yeah?"

The one talking had a big bright red mustache that hung over his mouth. James couldn't see his lips forming the words and this made him instantly distrust the man. He was hulking in size, though the overalls made it impossible to tell whether the man was made of pure muscle or just fat.

“Yeah here,” he said without as much as a word from James and he dropped the rug onto its side. The men at the other end huffed and let their portion fall to the floor and a cloud of dust shot into the air.

“Yes, gentlemen,” said Maryanne. She entered the center of the room where the workmen had begun slashing at the wrapping with their razors. “As you can see we have the perimeter marked with blue painter’s tape. You can see it along here—” With a painted fingertip, Maryanne indicated the small strips of tape she’d earlier used to demarcate the area.

The men stopped what they were doing and turned toward Maryanne. Their eyes were intent upon her and the room had gone oddly silent. A man with a hair-lip stared slack-jawed. James rolled into the middle of the room.

“Oh,” said one man.

“Oh? What?”

“Oh nothing, man.”

“I don’t want you slashing at it like that. You’re going to cut the rug. Just take it easy.”

“Oh don’t worry about that, man,” said the mustached one. “These here are trained professionals. You can trust ‘em. And me? I been at this ten years. So don’t you worry, you’re in good hands.”

The other men were still ogling Maryanne. James could feel her discomfort swelling. It was only a matter of leaving the room to allow the workmen to do their job but the way they had cut at the wrapping, the lack of respect upon entrance, the hair-lip, all these things begged him to stay and play monitor.

James hesitated. There was too much swirling inside him. He thought he heard one of the men—a young obese man with a blonde ponytail wrapped in brightly colored rubber bands—moan.

The mustached man started up again, “But for safety’s sake—hey you idiots get in on this end—” The three other men snapped into consciousness then scrambled over to assist. “—For safety’s sake—and believe me I know how long you’ve been waiting on this beauty—but, uh, we’re gonna take real good care to take care, all right—” He hunched over and all the men resumed slashing at the wrapping.

James looked at Maryanne. She was smiling absently like she had no ideas. He wanted to send her away but did not think himself up to handling the situation on his own. She indeed appeared tired. Her waning posture and glazed-over grin filled him with a disdain for himself. He would let her go. But then, *no*, he decided. He needed her. He craned his neck and whispered loud so that everyone might hear. “Let’s go over some of those responses we might submit to the committee.”

“But James they are already aware of what is happening.”

“Maryanne,” he said too sternly. “If we’re to recoup some of these losses we’re going to have to put together a better argument than one that simply shifts blame onto Quincy, whom—I might remind you—owns all those s-o-b’s”

“You’re right,” she said.

She took hold of the wheel chair and guided James back to the desk from where he anticipated a clear view over all things going on inside the room. He felt the electricity of her touch upon the titanium tubing of the chair. He closed his eyes and sought her

vibrations. He had familiarized himself with the sound of her steps, her stride, pitch and compression—the music of her walking had become something very dear to him.

James spotted the fat ponytailed man eying Maryanne’s rear-end as she pulled the gnawgahyde chair around and seated herself at his right. James hefted the leather satchel onto his lap.

The snap of tearing plastic echoed through the office and the rug began a slow unfurling until the red mustached man, followed then by the repulsive one with the hairlip, came up and began kicking at the thing with the toes of their filthy work boots. Unrolling, the rug shot across the length of the room then smacked into an opposing wall before finally coming to a stop, one end still curled in on itself.

“That got her,” hollered the least offensive of the workmen, a towheaded beanpole easily over six foot six.

A red-hot apoplexy burned brightly inside James. The thinking part of him was immediately overwhelmed. Maryanne put her hand on him, on his shoulder—its weight nearly imperceptible—but it was no good. Violence seethed within him. His chair—seemingly unmanned—shot into the center of the room and took up position between the savage workmen and his precious Persian rug.

James’ chest heaved. “Your services are no longer required here! I beg you, get out!”

The room went quiet. James heard his own words ringing through the room. The desperation there was embarrassing and he cringed, knowing it had belied any sense of severity he’d hoped to convey. He felt helpless.

“Oh that?” said the beanpole. “That’s no thing, that’s just how it’s done.”

“Get the fuck out of here!” cried James.

“I don’t think so,” said the man with the mustache. “Says here we got a rug to install and we stand by our services.” He tapped a clipboard against his hip. “Now don’t you worry little man, we’re gonna take real good care.”

Maryanne scuttled over, holding her hands like a prostrate.

James reached for the rug so that he might drag the unfurled end off the wall. He gnashed his teeth and grunted against its weight.

“Oh no. Here let me help you, man.”

The one with the hair lip pulled hard and James flew backward, flipped over the chair and landed onto his chest against the hardwood floor. Simultaneous gasps sucked the air out the room and then it went silent.

He felt coolness on his chin and then the warmth of the blood pooling against his cheek. He lifted his face off the floor. His mouth felt broken when he opened his jaws and groaned. His sight was blurry. On unsteady arms, he boosted himself into the air. The chair was on its side, one wheel spinning about on its axle. James saw the hair-lipped man staring down at him bug-eyed and ecstatic. He appeared to be struggling against his own laughter. The other workmen had similar expressions—all but the one with the giant mustache, whose shit-eating grin was undoubtedly masked behind that horrible curtain of red hair. Even Maryanne was grinning. And then James realized no one was looking at him. On the rug next to his satchel, lying like some kind of gelatinous beast, was the prosthetic penis, big and black and veiny and glistening proudly in the sunlight.

He felt coldness like before. Only now it was throughout his entire body. Only one command registered: *Get away!* He shouted it. Or thought he shouted it. He couldn’t

be sure. He was dragging the limp half of himself to the chair. With one arm, he corrected it and mounted the thing like a horse thief quickening to steal himself away.

Maryanne rushed toward him, a frantic and concerned grimace stretched crooked on her face. “No, James, please, allow me—”

But James was situated and already starting away.

“Please, James, it’s okay, please let me help you—”

“No, no everything’s fine, I have to be going now—”

James heard an eruption of laughter at his back. The four men gasped and then sucked air and erupted once more.

He felt Maryanne’s hands nearing the chair. His arms pushed hard at the wheels. *We can reformulate*, he told himself as he neared the door.

Maryanne yelped one more protest before finally letting him go. She said, “James, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

But he was outside the office now. He’d thrown the colossal oak door upon its hinges, the great crash marking his undoing like a tombstone.

He tried composing himself at once. There was blood trickling out the gash on his chin and pooling in his lap. His shirt had split open, leaving an ample portion of his hairy gut exposed to the air.

Maryanne had seen it.

It.

And now everything was over. There would be nothing to come back to. Flashes of the four rustic workmen taking turns on Maryanne—she would be spread out on all

four atop his expensive Persian rug, writhing like an alley-cat—raced through his mind and sent James screaming into the street.

The light was blinding. His vision bent and he lost all depth perception. Still the exclamation registered: *Get Away!*

James rolled off the sidewalk and into a street busy with traffic, his frayed senses instructing him to move fast, move faster, move as fast as all these horrible metal beasts rushing around him, squealing their tires and blaring their horns for no apparent reason.

James was quite sure it was working.

In front of him, a taxi slowed so the cabby could poke his head out the window. He screamed at James, “Get off the road you fucking drunk!” then laid on the horn and peeled his tires as he swerved clear of him.

Dumbstruck pedestrians stood stultified and pointing from sidewalks lining the thoroughfare. He had no ideas other than the one still resounding in his head like a dulcimer tone. He pushed hard at the wheels of the chair and glided easily up a small hill where there were even more people staring, and the taillights of the cars flashing like warning signs, and the sun’s dull reflection on a blacktop parking lot wavering like a mirage.

At last another idea struck him. He closed his eyes and took his hands off the wheels.

There had been a moment of hesitation before James leapt in front of the train. But not this time. James focused on the sensation at his chin, the air rushing into the wound. He felt his body lifting away as his awareness fled into the hole on his face, his soul guided by the keen sting of exposed parts never meant to be exposed. Not ever. It

enveloped him and the feeling of no longer possessing the crippled body grew full and it was the most blissful thing he'd ever felt. Then everything—even the soul itself—began to lift away and it was as if he were about to reset.

Then he crashed into a wall.

He woke to the keen scent of grain alcohol. It must have been coming from somewhere very near him. His eyes felt like balloons filled with too much helium. They were red hot and ready to burst from their sockets. His hands felt large too. He could move his body again but maintaining the effort was impossible. His ears opened—shrank and then enlarged and popped like a vacuum seal exploding. There was a clatter of people, the sound of glasses coming together and an old Benny Goodman tune played low. All of it assaulted his delicate new senses. He flinched against it and turned to peer out the pinholes in his face. It was his first inclination to assume he'd wound up in a hospital, but it was clear now he was inside some gloomy tavern, surrounded by four gruff looking men all of the senior citizen variety.

James located the source of the alcoholic scent he'd woken to. An elderly man was daubing James' dead legs with a bloodied vodka-soaked wash rag. He wished to speak but his mouth wouldn't move, his tongue felt like a brick lodged in his throat.

"Don't speak," said the man with the wash rag. "You took a pretty nasty spill—smacked right into Erma's."

His voice sounded like it had passed through a shredder. "This is Vodkee," he said. "It'll clean you right up. Don't pass for antiseptic these days but shit if it don't work."

The pinholes in James' face grew larger. There were four of them, plus a bartender. They were wearing caps and sipping from pints of dark beer or lowballs of brown liquor, some of them smoking, all of them staring. James lifted an arm. A man with a cigarette pressed between his teeth came near and put his hand over James' chest. "Whoa there," he said. "Not just yet. Boy I'll give it to ya though, yura' tough son of a bitch—heh, heh!"

James liked hearing that. He would even have smiled but instead he laid both his hands on his naked stomach and went to sleep.

He woke again to the same scent: vodka soaked rags somewhere near him. Only now he could feel them scouring his skin and burning as they passed over the open parts of him. He felt a measure of time had passed. The pressure behind his eyes was gone. He had full use of his sight now.

"There you go," said the man with the meat grinder voice. He backed away, threw the ball of bloody rags to the man standing behind the bar and lit a cigarette with his freehand. "You been out a while. You're gonna be in some pain but I think you're all right. No organ trauma for what I can tell. Some pretty extensive abrasions, you got some swelling and I think you may have a shattered patella but— Well it won't be a problem—for you."

"What is Erma's?" asked James. His voice sounded small; it felt like his larynx had been crushed.

"Heh, heh! You hear that, John?"

The man behind the bar signaled in what seemed like a customary fashion, throwing one finger into the air and then pointing at him.

“Erma’s is a whorehouse—though nobody knows that,” he said, winking with one colossal gray eyebrow.

“Right into the arms of whores!” cackled another man. “I should be so lucky!”

“I’m going to need my chair,” said James.

The men scattered in all directions. James lifted himself. He was on a tabletop surrounded by various instruments. His slacks were shredded, his sport coat gone, his shirt now split in several places and he was covered in dust. He looked like he’d indeed crashed through a wall. James recalled the moments before he’d let go, the sensations passing through him—the memory was clear until just before the crash. How long had it been? It didn’t matter to him. The sense-memory of lifting free from his broken body was what mattered. A cripple nearly touching the plurality in the sky—

James felt an upwelling of joyful emotions snag in his throat and he thought he might cry.

But it fell short as he had to ask himself what it meant to fly into the arms of a whore—reborn, perhaps, drawn from out a prostitutes womb and put back into his broken body—when he should have died, exploded into a million pieces.

He was stuck. James was decided on that. This *was* purgatory.

His chair appeared and just as quickly the four men were moving James into it, lowering him slowly with genuine concern. It had several dark gashes and one wheel was set askew upon its axle, causing it to roll with a strange jerking action like a broken shopping cart. The men stood around him as James wheeled from one end of the bar to the other. He navigated a crooked path through a thick blue-smog of cigarette smoke. For some reason the second hand smoke felt cool on his throbbing throat.

“Look at him go,” yelled one man. “You look great!”

“Yeah, if only you’d been able to see it—the crash I mean. You’d be blown away, too. Lucky Doc was here to fix you up, huh Doc?”

“Marty shut up,” said the man from before. “You know Joe don’t like talking about that.”

James turned the chair around so he could face the men. He wanted to thank them but he didn’t know what he’d be thanking them for. So he stared.

The tavern was just one open room. Small, hardly big enough to contain the four booths and bar. There were pictures of all these men—as well as a few others—hung on a wall between rows of liquor bottles. Above the pictures was a hand drawn banner reading Mount Lushmore. The bartender was a tall balding man with deep set eyes, wide muscles and a handlebar mustache.

“A drink for our new friend. He is returned!” said the man they’d called Joe.

“No really,” said James. “I don’t drink.”

“Doesn’t matter if you didn’t drink, you drink now—hey!”

The men came up behind James and pushed the rickety chair up to the bar. Two of the men hefted James by his armpits onto a stool and then took up their own places.

Joe held up a bloodstained hand, all his fingers extended. “Five pints, doesn’t matter what.” He turned and looked at James. “It’s bad luck not to toast a new life.” He had sharp dark brown eyes that appeared almost black in the dim tavern. Clean shaven and with an olive-colored window-paned suit and brown cap, he truly did look like a doctor.

“What don’t you like to talk about,” James asked in his small voice.

“Huh?” said Joe.

The bartender lined up five pints of dark beer each brimming with a layer of thick foam.

“Earlier when that guy called you Doc that other guy said you don’t like talking about that. Everyone seems to think you saved me, are you a doctor?”

“Oh that’s right,” said Joe. “Earlier we’d all introduced ourselves—got all the way through it before realizing you’d gone out on us!” He backed away from the bar and indicated each man with his crooked bloodstained forefinger. “This is Marty, this is Jerry, this is Bob, and that there is John the Medicine Man, the man with the cure for all your pain!” He laughed at that last part. “I’m Joe, Joe Percy.”

“Doctor Percy,” yelled Marty as he reached for his beer.

“Shut up, Marty!”

“Jerry what’s the problem? He’s a doctor ain’t he, probably went to ten years of school and doesn’t wanna be called doctor?” Marty’s accent sounded Jewish and this instantly endeared him to James. “Hey you know what? We got a bunch of clothes in the lost and found that we could give you. I mean yours are all shredded!”

James glanced down at his dead legs hanging from the stool. It was true. He was a mess.

“Yeah. You know what, yeah, I’m gonna grab ‘em.”

Jerry followed Marty with both their beers in his hands.

The Medicine Man knit his brow and cried after them. “You know them clothes ain’t yours!”

“Here,” said Joe, scooting James’ beer in front of him.

“Why don’t you like being called doctor?”

“Because I’m not a doctor anymore. You still in some pain?”

“Yeah.”

“Then drink this. I was serious earlier. It’ll bust up all your pain.”

James put the glass to his lips and sipped at the foam.

“Naw, you don’t want that part. Drink your beer.”

The man named Bob—silent so far—pulled a black-wrapped cigarette out a pack and extended the box to Joe. Joe doffed his cap and took one for himself. The air filled with the sick yet oddly anesthetic fumes. James drank his beer. Finished it in fact. Drank it down to the last drop and then asked for another. Marty and Jerry returned with an armload of clothes and helped James dress himself. He felt renewed in his charming new duds: navy blue flat fronted slacks, a Kelly-green herringbone suit jacket, and a white button up shirt with cigarette burned sleeves that hung to his fingertips.

James pounded down his next beer and soon another materialized before him. The quiet one named Bob gave James his hat. He gently patted it onto his head. It was tight but fit. James caught his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He looked like he could easily belong to Mount Lushmore. And why not? He felt better than he had in long time. He felt happy.

Benny Goodman’s orchestra swung out speakers in the ceiling and the pints of dark beer kept coming. The good doctor had been right. The pain in his throat was gone, the abrasions alight upon his skin like brushfire soothed into a mere nagging itch, and even his pride—or absence of—had ceased harassing him. He felt a dumb grin possess his face.

The small shaft of light beaming through the glass in the front door darkened. A clock above a neon beer light read 6:30.

James missed Maryanne suddenly. He decided she'd be asleep now and he imagined for a moment what that might look like: her hands tucked beneath a cheek, her lithe contours evident even beneath the sheet, her lips parted, her small breathing. She was an afterthought, he assured himself.

“What’s troubling you James?” asked Joe.

He laughed. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Course I would. I got no reason to suspect you of lying.”

“I lost the girl I love today. Once and for all.”

“These are privy walls,” he said and saluted with his beer. “I know the pain.”

“Yeah? Who did you lose?”

“Not a person,” said Joe. “I use to be a surgeon. You see these hands?” He held them out for James to see. They were long and unsteady and stained with James’ blood. “These were the steadiest most well-trained and capable hands in the country. I was in journals! I taught surgeons-to-be!”

“What happened?”

“I loved medicine.” He said it in that gravelly pitch—the words all shredded up in his throat—like it could have gone on his tombstone. “It was my life. My first thought, my last thought—I lived for it. But I got MS. It comes and goes but most of the time I can’t feel a thing past either wrist. I can use my hands but I don’t feel a thing anymore.”

“So you don’t go by doctor anymore?”

“I’m not a doctor anymore.” He took a long drag off his cigarette and then twisted the stub in an ashtray.

“You wanna know how I ended up in this chair?” said James.

“Sure.”

“I call it the accident. *The Accident*. Truth is I tried to kill myself.”

James felt good saying it aloud. He sipped his beer and then turned to Bob, whom had been quietly listening from a nearby stool. James asked him if he could have a cigarette. Bob produced one and lit it for James. The smoke felt like fire on his tender throat. But then his muscles slackened and accepted the fumes and James breathed deep and enjoyed his first cigarette.

“You know I couldn’t honestly tell you why I did it. I’ve always figured it was because my life didn’t pan out the way I’d wanted. I’d had real hope and real vision for it. I’m not an idiot. I know how the world works. I have a pretty firm grasp on how all this happens. I figured that I’d be able to steer clear of the trappings that ground good men into bits. But it still got me. When I realized that, all the inspiration and spark that had guided me up until then just blinked out and left me. And there is nothing as bad as that feeling. It was like the world opened up and just swallowed everything. And I was left so perfectly alone.”

“You and I hum the same tune my friend.” Joe signaled The Medicine Man. “Two whiskeys. The good stuff.”

The bartender reached for a bottle on the top shelf.

“So then who was this girl?”

“Maryanne. She was my assistant at work.”

“She quit or something?”

“No, I did.”

“Why?”

James took the glass of whiskey and threw it back. He swished it in his mouth, like how he'd seen people in the movies do, and swallowed hard. He blew out the burn in a long stream and instantly a warmth emanated from his chest.

“You ever go back,” James asked, “into surgery? Try to perform something simple, something you figured you could handle despite your condition?”

Joe stared at James and then at Bob and back at James. “Sure,” he said at last.

“How did it go?”

“Fine. I'll be honest with you though—I felt wrong about it. Like a liar. Like a fake.”

“That's pretty much what happened to me.”

“You mean she was unkind—about you being paralyzed?”

“She was nothing but kind. But I could never be complete enough for her.” James pointed down. “I had to be honest with myself. Stop lying. Stop pretending.”

Joe's eyes fell to the bar. Then Bob finally spoke up. “Why were you flying through the streets like that?”

James was silent for a bit. But there was no reason not to tell them. “It was no accident,” he said.

There was a crash and the three men turned to find Marty and Jerry in a pile on the floor.

“What do mean you had her last week! That was my appointment you asshole!”

“It’s her call, you know that! G-get off me! You know my heart palpitates!”

“So that’s why she cancelled then? That’s why! You thin dicked monkey!”

Each had his arms wrapped around the other. They were fighting but it was more like little boys wrestling. There would come the loud pop of an open-handed slap then one would cry out and smack the other. They took turns.

James was drunk now and the grin on his face grew long as he stared gawk-eyed at the two friends clashing.

“You think I gotta thin dick! Well at least it still works you limp pricked sissy!”

“You know my heart palpitates!”

There was another indeterminate smack then the two men stopped abruptly, rolled onto their backs and gasped for air.

“I told you two,” yelled the Medicine Man from behind the bar. “Erma don’t play favorites! You’re broke as a skunk, Jerry, and Marty pays—it’s as simple as that! Now get up off my floor.”

There was another loud crash and a low rumble and James thought that maybe the two old men were at it again before he identified the sound as thunder. The low boom shook the ground. The bottles of liquor rattled. All the men turned wide-eyed and gaped at the walls in attention.

“Thunder,” said Bob. “Count the waves.”

“But you wanna know something else?” said James, staring out the window in the front door at the graying sky still lit on end by a dim and low-lying sun.

“What’s that?” said Joe.

“I can’t die. I keep trying and I can’t die.”

“You gotta die,” said Bob in a whisper.

“I think I got it figured out though.”

“You’re talking about it. It!” rasped Joe.

The Medicine Man had come out from behind the bar and, using the open-side of one hand, had begun smacking the dust off Jerry and Marty.

“I gotta reset and never restart. That’s the trick,” said James.

“Godspark.”

“You go empty and everything is beautiful, but the moment you grasp for it you might as well be chasing a ghost— But I can’t die—”

“You gotta die,” said Bob again.

“Shut up, Bob,” snapped Joe.

Bob extended the pack of cigarettes to Joe and all three men lit up. “The body is the soul’s poorhouse,” said Bob to no one.

“—so what I need then is renewing—the kind that keeps on going.”

“Yeah!” yelled Marty. “Now you’re making sense!”

“Shut the fuck up, Marty!” cried Jerry who was sulking in a booth near the door.

James blew out a mouthful of smoke and stared out the window at the darkening sky. He tried to conjure the sensation he’d felt just before crashing into Erma’s, where it was his crippled body had anticipated him. A faint impression remained, a dull and shapeless thing much like a dream he knew was important but couldn’t quite recall fully enough to make out why.

Still, he felt better than he had in years. Drunk, chain-smoking—he was lighting one cigarette off another by this point—replete in an old man’s clothes, the warm boozy

glow lifting from his chest and giving to his skin the peculiar sensation of a fever. He just stared out the window, puffing absently on the cigarette. Tall columns of dark clouds had gathered and turned the sky faintly violet. Then it occurred to him. And, as though acknowledging the wisdom of the idea, a flash of light ignited the window and set the bottles of liquor rattling upon their shelves.

“What you need is to take the body,” said Doctor Joe Percy. “You gotta drink the blood. You know what the Eucharist is?”

“Transubstantiation,” whispered Bob.

James jumped off the barstool and landed in the wheelchair. His vision spun. He steadied himself then wheeled shakily to the door. He was prepared to burst forth and enter into the gathering storm when instead—gripped suddenly by the fondness he’d developed for the men—he turned and lowered his cap over his heart.

He looked at them each and said: “Thank you. I want to thank you for bringing me back.” And he really did mean it and he smiled and met each man’s wide eyes, and then he turned to leave.

He bumped over the threshold and rolled into the electric glow of the early evening with such decidedness that he laughed hysterically. And the sky answered with another crack of thunder and a bolt of white light that broke the sky into delicate shards.

He felt a charge in his heart and though he must have looked like a madman he was alone now—hysterical and alone—scouring the darkened streets and anticipating with what mind he had left the labyrinths that lay between himself and salvation—if there were such a thing.

Without a destination, he pushed hard at the wheels of the chair. The broken one seemed to resist him. He jostled about in a hunched position, determined. The sidewalks and roadways were empty. A metallic warmth radiated from the asphalt and the air possessed a prickling voltage that raised his hairs on end. Every breath was an exhilaration.

He had a question for the wheelchair and so he asked it aloud, saying, “Does titanium conduct electricity?”

And his mind fixated on the thought as he bumped along the narrow sidewalk not yet realizing he was already headed in the direction of The Pit.

He pumped his arms. The sky flashed, ripped apart. There was no distinction between the sight and sound of it, and what an odd thing there was no name for that. James felt the tremendous coupling of forces vibrate into his tissues, pass through his organs and enter his bones. The holiness of the occasion made him wish he weren't so drunk.

He closed his eyes and pumped harder. His arms filled with stinging acid. He pretended the pain cleansed him, imagined it coursing his veins, a yellow then a golden fluid flowing through him, penetrating his muscles and washing over his brain. He saw himself in the darkness of his mind as pure electricity—earthbound—deprived upward mobility, stricken. He would push until the current inside him burst through and he broke apart, his body exploding, and then the power in the sky would at last meet him so that a point of contact could be made, established, recorded, made timeless: His current would at long last touch the Great Current and he'd be lifted up into the air, out of the chair, away from the Earth, and everything would forever begin anew.

He saw all this playing out against the back of his eyelids as he squeezed and pushed and raced on through an ensuing downpour that pummeled the earth with the ferocity of a monsoon.

There was bright light coupled to enormous sound followed only by weightlessness. Weightlessness of the heart and mind and body.

And then he crashed.

The first sensation was the overwhelming sinking of his heart to gravity. Then he felt his body tumbling, his legs contorting and crashing into the feeling parts of him. His mouth and eyes filled with mud. Then the chair—he knew it was the chair—smashed down on top of him.

He lay there in the muck, broken and smiling absently and holding tight to the memory of again floating free of his horrible broken body, which—he knew—had again anticipated him. He breathed and as he did the clarity of the memory began to tarnish.

And when he took hold of what was left, held it close to his chest, it only melted faster and then it was gone and he was alone again, lying in the mud. He opened his mouth and let in the rain. His mind returned to him.

He turned and asked the chair: “How many times are you going to let me die?” And the chair answered back: “Countless goddamn deaths. Countless rebirths. Infinitudes of joy and sorrow.” James looked at his broken contorted legs. He wondered whether anything else lasted. What else could he claim but the broken body he always found himself inside?

So he claimed it as his own.

The rain fell into his mouth. He swished it through his teeth, spat, refilled and spat until things felt clean. The sky lit up, an interval of time winking briefly, and then the earth shook again. The storm was moving.

James lifted his working half and took stock of his surroundings. He had fallen down the first tier of the old Warner Quarry. He was maybe ten feet from ground level. Down in the lower reaches of The Pit, the treetops shifted and creaked loudly in the wind. The angry rasp of crows fell thin against the noise of the storm. Runoff had carved a small channel into the earth near him and through it flowed a thick black liquid that splattered his cheeks a little. He saw the chair lying next to him, partly submerged in the soft mud.

No thought went into his planning. A succession of brightly colored images registered and he merely sought to copy them. They directed him to unfasten his belt and loop it around his neck. Then he attached the open end of the buckle to the tray-hook on the armrest of the chair. He rolled onto his stomach and began dragging his aching body up the muddy escarpment.

The ten foot wall before him sloped delicately. The exposed roots of long dead trees snagged the way, the sharp ends of rocks poking through the mud to grate at his chest and forearms. He plunged his fists into the mud, hefted his body and crept slowly up the muddy embankment. Then the belt pulled taut and the weight of the chair resisted him. He pulled hard. The pressure about his throat grew intense and he thought his eyes might pop out of his head. Still he pushed, heard a shrill squealing from somewhere in the near distance, and then something gave—a redistribution of weight—and he was moving again.

Between labored and shakey strides, he would angle his neck so that he could glance out the edge of an eye to spot the chair following slowly behind him. It was working. A smile drew a crooked line on his face.

A little ways up, he spotted an orange halo of light. It was near the lip of the drop and he knew he was getting close. He clawed even more desperately now, his destination punctuated in holy light, not the dull light of an ordinary streetlamp but a beacon. The rain pelted down on him. The sky lit up and it was three then four, now five seconds before the thunder reached him.

He stretched his body long and hefted. He rested a cheek against the mud to struggle for a bit of air and as he did his throat pinched tighter, his airways shut and he nearly slipped out of consciousness. The pressure about his neck was too intense. His mind coughed up the image of a tourniquet knotted about a purple vein, and the rasp of the tightening leather sounded in his ears like the goading cries of some hell-bent antagonist.

And then his fingers felt the free air, the warm wind blowing steadily and the grit of asphalt against his fingernails. He went down into himself in a vain attempt to produce the strength to scream, but it was too little, and what came up was only stifled in his throat where it swelled and pushed hard at the back of his eyes. Whimpering weakly, he lifted his chest over the edge of the pit, gaped the dark maw of the city through the thin glow of the streetlamp, then heaved his broken legs up and over and onto the surface. Immediately he rolled onto his stomach, took hold of the belt and hoisted the chair. It came clattering up sadly, the sorry looking chair. And when at last he was on solid ground and his lungs working again, his throat opened and he screamed for a long while.

He lay in the rain beneath the glow of the sodium vapor lamp burning brightly above him, the belt still loosely knotted about his neck and attached to the chair like some horrible umbilical cord. His breath evened. He felt the ground against his spine and the rain on his face. The mud loosened from his clothes and washed away. He thought perhaps he simply looked like a well dressed man lying drunk in the street now.

He had lost Bob's hat, along with one of the shoes that Jerry and Marty had given to him. It was time to get up.

He untethered himself, clamored into the chair, and began rolling about, testing operability. It was dark now, still warm, though he was shaking. A distant rumble dragged itself across the valley.

James and the chair—both of them sopping and battered—rattled down the emptied sidewalk in the direction of nowhere in particular.

Darkened storefronts lined the street. The metallic tinge of the air had dissipated and he smelled only the rain now, then the sopping stench of his own self lifting from his secondhand clothes, and—for some reason—the unmistakable scent of ground coffee.

He paused. Looked all around.

Through a haze of rain distorting his vision like how a prism might, he spotted an orange emanation glowing in the near distance.

He rolled toward it until he was in front a café window lit so bright a passerby might have thought it was on fire. He approached cautiously—he was unsure exactly what he would do once inside—squinted and then entered the shop.

Bells tied to the door sang out upon his entrance. The warmth of the place greeted him with such sweetness he thought maybe he'd just stay till morning, or longer even, find a nice seat somewhere near that glowing window and just drink cappuccinos until the gods decided enough was enough, called everyone home and then ground them into paste.

Several bright cheerful faces met him. He must have looked crazy.

He felt for his wallet, found it in the inside pocket on his jacket, and then rolled to the counter. He craned his neck past the chromed piping of a colossal espresso machine and stared up at the barista.

"Hello," he said to her.

"Hello," she said.

"Could I have a dry cappuccino?"

"Absolutely."

The girl poured the milk and started up the machine. Beneath the blinding hiss of steam, he waited and took in his surroundings. The place was small, hardly big enough to be called a waiting-room. It was maybe a little smaller than the tavern he'd been in earlier.

Next to the cluttered counter was a display case filled with muffins and cookies and sandwiches. They all looked delicious and James realized then how brutally hungry he was. He craned his neck again and arched his brow earnestly. The girl met his gaze and stopped the machine.

"Is there something else I could get you, sir?"

"Yes, please, could I get a raspberry muffin and a peanut butter cookie and that roast beef sandwich?"

She laughed, covering her mouth. “Sure,” she said. “Do you want the sandwich heated up?”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, please. Could you heat it all up?”

“Sure. It looks like you’ve been out in the storm.”

“Yes,” said James. He thought the girl an angel to be so kind to such a crazy looking person.

James turned. He’d stopped shivering, his clothes had begun to dry, the drunk had worn away and his head had finally cleared. His thoughts turned to Maryanne. A warm mood had settled over him, and he thought then how much he would like to call his assistant and explain to her how right she’d been to say that there was nothing to be embarrassed about, as the body was only a sad and pathetic lie that must be stripped away anyway. He might even have thanked her for playing such a part in exposing him. Perhaps he would have called her and told her that, had there had been a payphone. But there wasn’t. And it didn’t matter anyway because she’d be asleep. He decided that was the best thing he could give her.

Instead he looked for a place to put himself. There were five tables set out; all but four were occupied. The last remaining was the one he had hoped for, the one near the window.

“Here you are, sir,” said the barista. She set the tiny cup and saucer on the countertop. “Your food’ll be up in just a sec.”

James took his table and sipped at the coffee. Across the room from him, he made eye contact with a young girl hiding behind a book. He felt strangely clearheaded at that moment and decided not to turn away. The girl lowered her book. She was smiling. And

while there wasn't anything particularly attractive about her, her smile struck James with the weight of a sun.

“Something's magical there,” said James to no one.

A flash of light lit the room so brightly his vision burnt out, then the lights went out.

“It's okay,” said the barista, lifting her voice above thunder's fading growl.

“Power's just gone out. It'll turn on. It always does.”

James sat in the darkness—the afterimage of the girl's smile persisting—and waited for the lights to turn back on.