

WHERE THERE IS NOTHING, THERE IS GOD

(A NEW GUYS TIME PORTAL NOVELLA)

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David Erik Nelson lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and has become increasingly aware that he may be “that unsavory character” in other people’s anecdotes. In addition to telling you stories about time travel, he’ll also spin tales about non-Euclidean houses and teach you to build your own synthesizers. His latest tale for *Asimov’s* is a Time Portal story full of unsavory characters and set in the same universe as “The New Guys Always Work Overtime” (February 2013) and “There Was No Sound of Thunder” (June 2014). The first two tales can now be found online, as can he at daviderniknelson.com.

**From the Journal of Pastor Ephraim Otis,
Quansigamog Pond, Massachusetts, 1770**

A missionary comes to us from the wilderness to the west. Only the smith, Young Charles Bull, has yet spoken to him. Young Charles is agitated greatly. He says this man of God bears a New Gospel, a physical Gospel of the Manifest Christ. Prior to this wandering parson’s advent, Young Charles had been no paragon of Faith nor Industry. But now he is ebullient, his face unnaturally full of the Spirit of the Lord, his workshop perpetually ablaze as he prepares cask upon cask of iron nails to take to market in Boston town.

It is frightful to look upon him; one fears being seared by the intensity of Young Charles’ sudden zeal.

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Chico and the portal guy were waiting for me outside FDA Annex D. Chico was smoking a cigarette. If this was a screenplay, his entire character description would read “sinister Mexican.” The portal guy was just standing there, hands in pockets, staring up at the stars and whistling that “Yakkety Sax” song from *Benny Hill*. He abruptly cut off as I climbed out of my car.

"This is your New Guy?" he asked Chico. The portal guy was one of those cheap-blue-oxford-&-khaki-pants cubicle drones, but younger and skinnier than the stock character. He looked pretty damn ruffled—not just "it's three A.M." tired, although it was three A.M. It was more the "I'm tired of my whole stupid life" kind of tired. Chico blew twin streams of smoke out his nose, flicking away his cigarette butt without acknowledging the portal guy's question.

"New guy?" I mugged like a vaudevillian, joining them at the glass door, "What happened to the *old* guy?"

"Gal," the portal guy answered as he waved us in through the glass doors of FDA Annex D. "She got burned as a witch." We walked through a grey little reception area, and into a dim office space broken up into cubicles.

"Taaay-lor," Chico scolded the portal guy like a naughty puppy, then turned to me without breaking stride. "Don't mind him, Paul."

The portal guy—Taylor—shrugged and led us into a bright conference room, immediately heading over to fiddle with a wall-mounted touchpad hanging next to a door-shaped rectangle of blue masking tape. The rest of the office had seemed pretty lived-in—papers and knickknacks festooning the desks, calendars and family photos pinned to the cubicle walls—but this little conference room showed no such signs of life. There wasn't even a conference table, just a scattering of chairs and some boxes stacked along the back wall. One box was open, revealing a tangle of computer cables and mice with one of those starfish-shaped conference-call phones partially embedded in it.

"Taylor is being a dick, Paul. They didn't burn no witches in Salem, Mass," Chico explained, "They hanged 'em." He barked laughter.

"And crushed," Taylor added over his shoulder, the second word turning into a yawn he didn't bother to stifle.

"Yeah, and crushed. Madison, she got crushed. But that was Salem, Paul, that was sixteen-whatever. Mistakes was made. We bringing our A-game now; Massachusetts 1770 is easy money. No hitches." His eyes drifted down to my feet, and one eyebrow climbed fretfully as he noted my plastic flip-flops.

"It's okay," I said, stepping out of the sandals, then using my toes to nudge them together. "I talked to someone I know who's doing a dramaturgy internship at the Guthrie Theater." Chico looked alarmed, and I rushed to explain. "In a strictly hypothetical way. Getting period shoes right is really, really hard, especially when you start thinking about distressing them properly. Given our options—and the character I've conceived—barefoot is our best bet."

Chico nodded appreciatively. "You got your method on, like Marlon Brando. I get that." Chico slapped me on the shoulder. "I admire that. You ready for this shit, Pablocito?"

I was not, in fact, ready for this or any other shit. My woolen cassock—a single-breasted Chesterfield front with thirty-nine buttons, liberated from the University of North Carolina costume shop—was hot, itchy as hell, and the set-in sleeves were binding me in the armpits something fierce.

Also, I was about to walk through a wall into the past. What had seemed like a fun little gig when I was raiding the UNC costume shop suddenly seemed suicidal.

Chico set one hard hand on my shoulder. "You got stage fright or portal fright?" He asked gently. "If it's stage fright," he said, "You just picture all them fuckers naked, *¿claro?* And if it's portal fright, you just picture the roll of money you gonna get when you come out."

What I had was Chico Fright—but I didn't want to say that, so instead I asked: "Didn't one of these portals turn a Chinese guy inside out?"

Chico frowned and turned to look at Taylor, who shook his head. "That was a teleporter," he said. "And that was in China."

Chico turned back to me. “See? That was a *chingada* teleporter, Pablo. That was in *chingada* China. *This* is a time portal. This is America. This shit is FDA-approved.”

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and thought about the money. I’ve never found picturing the audience naked to do much for stage fright, but thinking about that money sure did help ease my Chico Fright. “Okay.”

“*¡Qué bueno!*” Chico slapped my back again. “Knock ‘em dead and break they legs, Pablocito.” It was only then that he handed me the snuffbox, which I slipped into my rough-woven satchel.

“Anywho,” Taylor yawned, “Bon voyage, Parson Brown.” He tapped the control panel—which turned out to be just an off-brand tablet computer glued to the wall—and I forgot all about the money.

The portal seeped out of the drywall like lightless, tar-black water seeping through a paper placemat. But it wasn’t water, wasn’t a fluid at all. It was a hole. A deep hole, so hot it made the air waver the way a BBQ grill does in the summer. And there was a light, a tiny light like Venus in a clear winter sky, *waaaaay* down at the bottom of that hole.

I know this makes it sound scary, but it wasn’t. It was beautiful. Seeing it form gave you vertigo, but also this rush, like getting high, a clean, clear high, without the jangling, jaw-clenching babblecrash of your own hyper-speed thoughts.

Looking at that tiny glimmer so deep back down in that lightless well, you could believe in God.

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How’d I meet Chico? It’s sorta complicated, but just to clarify: I was never a “meth head.”

But that’s sort of getting the cart before the horse.

A couple months back I was leaving a Subway sandwich shop when this tweaky little made-for-TV meth hag stopped me. She looked just gawdawful: Her brown hair a lusterless rat’s nest pulled back into a sloppy ponytail, her skin sickly and scabbed. She had that off-center burn on her lower lip, the kind you get from getting the pipe too hot while trying to smoke meth cut with too much ground glass. That burn, so stereotypical of the dedicated meth aficionado that it’s almost a cliché. I didn’t even realize she was saying my name until she grabbed my wrist. Her hand was cold and clammy and awful.

“Hey, hey,” she was saying, “Hey, Paul, it’s me, it’s Tina.” Her voice was croaky and ancient from smoking cheap-ass Basic cigarettes. “It’s okay, Paulie.” She smiled a ghastly, rotten smile. “You’re with friends, Paulie. You’re safe.”

“Tina?” I said blankly. I sorta knew a Tina, but hadn’t seen her in almost five years, not since I’d gotten my degree from UNC. *My* Tina had been pretty, round-faced and athletic. She played rugby or soccer or something. I’d been really into EDM—electronic dance music—and would hit all sorts of warehouse shows with this sound guy, Dale, and his roomie, Wei Xen. Wei cooked these great little batches of crystal, and loved to share. Tina was one of those people we’d habitually bump into at shows.

But we *weren’t* “meth heads.”

Just like most of the bubbas who drink a beer or six while watching the Tarheels aren’t *Lifetime*-movie alcoholics, we weren’t scary-PSA-ad “meth heads.” We’d bump some meth, dance all night, have a hangover the next day, and get on with our lives. Dale got his degree and a job remastering and digitizing back-catalogue country blues albums in Nashville. Wei Xen—the “Man from Shenzhen”—went to work for Dow-Corning. I steadily worked my way up to waiting nice tables. EMD got big enough that there wasn’t an “on the way up” that included Asheville warehouses anymore. And with day jobs and no shows worth seeing, why bother getting high? The world had moved on, us included.

Except for Tina, apparently.

"Tina," she repeated. "Tina. Dancing Tina." It all clicked, and I could suddenly see the shadow of Tina's round, bright face hidden inside this loose, mottled mask. My heart sank. "Hey—" she asked, her eyes roving around. "You carrying anything heavy?" I looked at my sandwich, not understanding at all, and then realized she meant drugs.

"Noo-oo," I said carefully, "I . . . um . . . made some lifestyle changes. Decided not to lift anything heavy any more."

She sighed, disappointed but resigned to a life of disappointments. Then she brightened. "But you still act, right?"

I smiled back, because I do. Voice acting mostly. Not much, but it's work.

Now Tina was positively beaming. "Yeah! Yeah! I've seen you! Well, heard you, I guess. The ad with the personal injury attorney and the fish!"

I nodded humbly. Whiplash Bass. People still love those ads. One time, at a different Subway, the stoner kid making my footlong was so pumped to meet Whiplash Bass that he gave me the combo for free.

"Gosh! That's great, Paulie! That's really great for you, man. Because I know this guy, he's a *glass installer*," she enunciated the words as though she was telling an Asian tourist a street name, "Pella, Anderson, Weather-Seal—lots and lots of heavy, heavy lifting, lots of glass, and I owe him a *really big favor*. Introducing him to a good, quiet actor . . ." she trailed off. She was still smiling, but it was a brave-face smile: her eyes were shimmering and about to spill over. "It would really, really get me out of a really uncomfortable situation if I could introduce my friend Chico to a good quiet actor, a good guy like my old dance partner Paul."

And that's how I met Chico.

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Looking at the fuming black time-portal hole in the wall, you'd think "Man, I've got a long walk ahead of me to the Light." But stepping past the threshold, it was like sliding into a swimming pool full of orgasm. The light got brighter and brighter and brighter and then *pop!*-ed. The next thing I knew I was hearing panicked birds bursting through thick foliage.

My vision came back, and I was standing beside a babbling brook in the forest primeval of what I'd been told would be eighteenth century Massachusetts, with Taylor's portal thing crackling away behind me like a chintzy fake fire. I turned around to look at it, and was surprised at how totally different it looked from that side: No long black tunnel, no light at the end, just a flat pool of dappled, shimmering light hanging in the air.

I took a deep breath, but when I let it out it came in shudders and giggles. I shook it all out and tried again. I was Parson Mordecai Brown and Parson Mordecai Brown's face has hospital corners. I ran my hands over my face and close-cropped scalp, taking another deep breath, blowing it out slowly, getting into character.

I've been walking a long while, but I'm not a bit tired.

I'm sustained not by food or drink but by the Lord's New Communion and Manifest Gospel.

It was morning and the air was pleasantly crisp, but you could tell it was going to get hot. I was glad that I wouldn't be sticking around in my long wool cassock.

Then my iPhone eeped its low-power warning and my heart leapt into my throat. I hiked my cassock up and inventoried my pockets. I had indeed accidentally brought my cracked iPhone—which had no service, but faithfully reported it was 3:14 A.M. where I'd come from and that its battery was at 20 percent. I powered it down, then checked my other pockets. I'd thought to leave my wallet in my car, but still had my keys and a tube of Burt's Bees beeswax lip balm. The portal behind me

closed with a tidy *snap*. It would reopen in thirty minutes. The clock was ticking. This was my cue, and I was not ready to make my entrance.

Heart racing, I dropped to my knees, dumped out my rough-hewn satchel, and sifted through my hand props—a suitably distressed prayerbook in illegibly small type, an apple, a crust of artisanal bread; the kind of things you'd expect to find in a colonial preacher's purse—until I found the hourglass, which was really a thirty-minute glass. I tapped all the sand into one ampule, then flipped it, checked the flow, slipped a dark leather cord through its wooden frame, and tied it around my waist like a belt. I scooped everything back up into the satchel and put Chico's extra-special snuffbox in my cassock pocket.

I was nine kinds of panicked, right on the edge of blowing the performance. So I just stopped, blew out my breath, and centered myself. I listened to the silent forest, which, of course, wasn't *silent* silent; it was *audience* silent, full of the little sounds of life: The unbearably clear brook chuckling over the rocks; birds flipping through the branches, chirping; squirrels bitching at each other from opposing trees only to be shushed by a rising breeze.

It was an expectant silence, leaning forward, waiting for something worth watching to happen.

I took a breath, and the air smelled faintly of wood smoke and nothing else. I'd never realized how much stuff I'm constantly smelling, stuff that people have labored to make and buy and use and discard: Exhaust and plastic, shampoo and body spray, fryer grease and sewer gas. Our world.

I took another breath. I didn't really care about Tina. And I didn't care about what Chico would do if I blew this. And I didn't care about what he'd pay me if I nailed it. I cared about the role, I cared about the show—my show, my character: I was Mordecai Brown, the Barefoot Parson, in a one-act, one-man, one-night-only improvisational show, and that show *must go on*.

I followed the brook downstream until I came to the outermost fringe of the settlement, just as Chico had described. It was a rough-hewn little cabin with an open-air lean-to tacked on to the side. The lean-to was dominated by what looked to me like an *enormous* stone barbecue grill: A forge. Thick black smoke poured out of the chimney. In the shade of the lean-to a darker shadow hulked and toiled at the forge's base, working the bellows with mechanical regularity.

"Hullo!" I called, my voice a Connecticut Yankee's nasal lilt. "Hullo, brother! How fare you this excellent morn?"

The figure stopped his labors and looked up at me, then ducked out from beneath his awning. He was shorter than I'd expected, shorter than me, but Jesus, what a brute! He was shirtless, with a leather apron over blue breeches. His forearms were as thick around as my calves. His chest was broad and muscled like an ox's back, scarred from countless stray embers. He was greased with sweat, like he'd just run a marathon, but not a bit out of breath. As he approached he rubbed his hands clean on the seat of his breeches and looked at me curiously. Then he caught sight of my bare feet and froze, agog.

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**From the Journal of Pastor Ephraim Otis,
Quansigamog Pond, Massachusetts, 1770**

The smith, Young Charles Bull, is not himself. Previously he was an isolated and phlegmatic lad, tending toward melancholy, and even a black biliousness. But he is suddenly now sanguine in the extreme, speaking without pause even as he works

the bellows, hammer, and tongs. He jigs about his workshop from place to place, periodically clapping his hands or calling out in praise of the Lord. He is a font of energy, but of an ill sort, like the fierce lightning storms that harrow the autumn fields.

Though long known for his taciturnity, today Young Charles was only too eager to speak of matters diverse and disjoint. On the topic of that wandering parson he was quite insistent.

"His feet!" Young Charles enthused, enraptured. "His hands! He came from the forest, unshod and bareheaded, but there was no kiss of the sun on his pate." He worked the bellows ceaselessly as he spoke, heating a rod. "His hands and feet were as soft and pink and clean as a newborn sprat's!" He pulled forth the rod, which seemed almost overheated; it nigh on drooped, and its end was as bright and searingly yellow as the brassy midsummer sun. "That, that, *that* was how I knew," he swung his hammer, pounding and turning the rod in excellent synchronousness, squaring it off and drawing it to a point. "How I knew, *knew* he was an angel of the Lord."

Charles laid the rod upon the anvil and, with a swinging arm and jiggling twirl, switched his hammer for long-armed snips. He took up the rod and freed the half-finished nail from the thick rod single-handed. He then twirled the snips back onto his workbench and took up tongs with a flourish, using these to set the hot iron into the die on his anvil. "And he's come here to us," Young Charles pounded out the head of his nail with the passion of Cain bludgeoning his brother to death. "Come to us, come to us, *come* to us! He's come to us with the Lord's New Sacrament!" He quenched his fresh-forged nail in a bucket of water. It sizzled and he panted, reining in his galloping fervor.

At my behest he described for me this sacrament. According to Young Charles, the wandering parson had proselytized but briefly, and then brought forth a gentleman's snuffbox.

"The lid was a scrimshaw of angels blowing trumps above roiling seas, and what else could it be? For I am as dauntless as a whale now!" He whirled again, rubbing his sooty hands over his face and through his greasy hair, which stood out like the hide of a porcupine. He snatched up his tongs and again applied his demi-nail to the flames. "Within was a powdered host, like salt, like the dried tears of the Son Himself, praised be He, and I knelt before the parson and took his sacrament like a gent takes his snuff, and the Lord, the Lord, the *Lord* was full in me in a nonce! The *Spirit* of the Lord crawled my skin and filled my eyes and all was His roaring sacred Light—but not light in the eyes. It was a Light in my brains." He tapped his forehead to emphasize this, leaving a smear of ash. "And my internal eyes remain unhooded now. I can see God's Godliness in every crumb and morsel of His creation now."

As he spoke he completed another nail and quenched it. The steaming nail he then tossed into a large cask already overspilling with like nails. The whole cask steamed, for all its contents were fresh forged, two days' work done in a single morning. As I marveled at this industry, he was already pulling forth his stock to begin the next nail.

"And what fealty does the Lord demand for this New Sacrament? For this wondrous Manifest Gospel? Naught but spoons and buckles!" He cackled at this, like a bawdy crone at her hearth. "Buckles and spoons for the Lord!"

I asked Young Charles if he had retained any of this powdered host, and his eyes glittered, but guardedly. Though he muttered on, he spoke no further to me—although I was the only soul visibly present.

* * *

The first thing I heard stepping back through the portal—even before my vision had cleared and the ecstatic shivers had finished running off me—was Chico laughing.

"Damn, holmes!" He called out, a caricature of himself. "You been to Colonial

Williamsburg, or down to the strip club?" I blinked away the portal dazzle. Chico shook his head, still grinning.

Taylor swiped at the wall-mounted tablet and the portal collapsed with a snap. "You do look sorta flushed, and you're grinning like a loon. Just in case it doesn't go without saying, I don't think you should be hooking up with people in the past. That's . . . that's weird."

The sweaty blacksmith jumped to mind. "I didn't!" I blurted out too quickly, because I hadn't, hadn't laid a finger on him. I don't think he would have been amenable. "It's just portal rush!"

"What the hell's portal rush?" Taylor asked.

"You know, the rush you get from—" but Chico waved it off.

"Whatever, Pablo. What's your haul?"

I dug into my satchel and brought out the two spoons. Until you lay hands on the real deal, it's easy to forget that basically all of our "silverware" is really cheap pressed steel. Actual *silver* silverware is heavy and dense, not bright like jewelry, but gun-metal grey. Chico nodded his appreciation, holding the spoons out delicately. They practically glowed in the cheap fluorescent light. He tinged them against each other and they sang like crystal. "*Niiiiiiice!*" he sang out in spot-on harmony. Chico produced a chamois, wrapped the spoons so they wouldn't knock together, and then slipped them inside his jacket pocket. He held out his hand, palm up, like a bellhop waiting for a tip.

I stared at his hand. Taylor rolled his eyes.

"The snuffbox, Pablo," Chico chided.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah." I dug around in the satchel, and then searched my pockets, and came up with it. Chico shook it and seemed satisfied when he heard nothing. Then he squinted at me, gears grinding in his head.

"You left the rest of the 'teenth with whoever, ¿verdad?"

"With the sweaty blacksmith, yeah. Like you said."

He scrutinized my face, like a cop does, shifting his head from side to side as he checked my pupils, peering at my nose and eyes like a horse buyer. He watched me, just standing there breathing. It made me nervous, even though I was clean as a whistle.

"The blacksmith," I added, trying to fill the void, "he seemed . . . he seemed like he'd spread the Good Word. Evangelize. But a sixteenth of an ounce isn't much."

Chico smiled, showing his eyeteeth like a cartoon wolf.

"'xactly, Pablocito." He spirited the snuffbox away with one hand and simultaneously produced a fat roll of twenties with the other. He counted out twenty-five bills. "When you got a inelastic vertical demand curve, scarcity is the name of the game. Econ 101, *cabron*." He handed over the stack and left, calling over his shoulder, "I'll call you in a week or two for an encore performance, Pablocito."

I drove home in a haze, buzzed from the portal, but anchored to reality by the knot of twenties crammed in my pocket. Back at my apartment, despite the buzz, I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

* * *

The next morning I was halfway through a bowl of store-brand flakes before I realized I'd never turned my phone back on. When I plugged in and powered up, it blew up with chimes, vibrations, chirps, and trills.

What I noticed first was how badly I'd overslept, because the phone is also my alarm clock. It was almost noon. My gut sank. The voicemail and notifications did nothing to lift its spirit.

There were seven texts from the floor manager at Stalk, the up-and-coming fine-dining gastropub where I waited tables. The first was genial:

COME IN ~1HR EARLY? NEED BRUNCH PREP W/ MICHAEL B/C OTHER MICHAEL NO-SHOW.
KITCHEN TIME&HALF TIL DOORS.

The final text read:

A\$\$HOL3: DO NOT COME IN TIL WE TALK!! YOU ARE WRITTEN UP!!!!!!!!!!

This was followed by two emoji: a gun and a skull.

There were also voicemails, several from Stalk—which I deleted unplayed—and one from Jenny at Voice Talent, Limited. It's a good company run by two very earnest Mormons, the wry name totally unintentional. Jenny was *super* sorry to be the “bad news bear,” but the client for the three radio spots I had slotted for that morning—which I'd slept through anyway—had backed out. She and Jon and John were *super* disappointed, too, but all thought I was a *super* fun guy to work with and they'd be *super-super* sure to reach out the next time they had a client that was a good fit, *okay*?

The last message was from James, my boyfriend. But before I could check it my phone rang, a number I didn't know with a 617 area code. My phone said that meant “Boston.”

It was Chico.

“Hey, Pablocito, we gotta meet up.”

He didn't seem super enthusiastic, but definitely better than the floor manager, who was at that very moment fuming through my shift, schlepping trays of asparagus and morel tapas and pushing this cut-rate Beaujolais we'd gotten cheap from some shady distributor in Montreal.

“I thought it'd be a week or two?” I nervously peered out my windows. A stooped man in a straw hat led a waddling old terrier down the sidewalk. Neither of them looked like narcs or *narcotráficos*.

“Yeah, well, now it's now. You like Mexican?”

I said I didn't, because I don't, but Chico seemed distracted.

“Great,” he replied and gave me the address of a strip-mall mom-and-pop taqueria. “Let's have lunch.”

“Wait! When?”

Chico sighed, and I could hear him rolling his eyes. “Now. It's lunch time.”

He hung up, and I scrambled to get dressed.

* * *

The place was crowded, and Chico was already seated and crunching through a plate of flautas when I got there. As I picked my way to his booth, a frumpyish gal in large, dark sunglasses and a charcoal cardigan ducked out of the bathroom and joined him. Chico slid a cellphone—presumably with a 617 area code—across the table to her, and she tucked it back into her purse. A waitress immediately brought her a red plastic tumbler filled with a large volume of ice and a small volume of diet cola. Chico scooted over and motioned for me to join him on his side of the booth. No one asked if I wanted anything.

“Peggy,” he said through a mouthful of lettuce, “This is my actor, Pablocito.”

She stitched her brow. “A blue-eyed Pablo?”

“Paul,” I said, offering my hand.

“Pablo, this is Peggy. She collects spoons and shit.”

“I'm an adjunct professor with the history department at UNC.” She took my hand and shook it once, briskly. “I specialize in Colonial and Early Republic material culture.” Peggy dug a rolled piece of black velvet out of her purse. She unfurled it, revealing a drawer's worth of spoons.

“Chico says you're a fine actor. You didn't get burned as a witch, so I suppose that's true.”

“Why does everyone keep making that joke?” I wondered aloud in mock bewilderment. She carried on as though I hadn't spoken.

“You may be a great actor, Paul, but you need an education in spoons.” She plucked one up. “Here’s one from your haul from last night. Coin silver, elliptical bowl; plain. It’s something a man of means might have used daily. But—” she indicated the top of the handle. “See this rounded, upturned handle with the mid-rib? That’s a little fancy; a well-off tradesman bought this to put out for guests, to show off a little. He was feeling prosperous. We know it’s pure coin silver, and we know it’s from Massachusetts in 1770.” Now she smiled. “And it’s part of a set; you got a pair. All together, that pair is probably worth a grand.” All the air went out of the room. It suddenly seemed like someone had cut the highs and turned the bass way up, making the lunchroom chatter throb in my chest like an electro kickdrum.

One thousand dollars. That’s over four hundred and fifty hours of work at my waiter’s hourly. Even if you figure in a good night’s tips—which wasn’t guaranteed; Stalk was highfaluting, but Asheville isn’t Manhattan—I’d still have to work ten good shifts to walk away with that much money.

A grand for thirty minutes of acting. Peggy reached out and took my hand. Chico stopped chewing briefly and smirked.

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” she said without a trace of sarcasm. “You’ll do better next time. I’ll show you how.”

She let go and turned her attention back to her spoons. Chico returned to his flautas. “Everything you get, historically speaking, is equally precious. And the provenance is beyond dispute. But despite what we know,” she tipped a nod to me and Chico, “We can’t *document* the provenance of these items—they have, after all, skipped several hundred years of probate, auctions, passing from collector to collector, all that. So we sell to individual collectors, not institutions. Individual collectors with resources—and tempers. Just to forestall any clever innovations: If we scammed a university or museum and got caught, they *might* sue us, but would probably just sweep it under the rug. Bad press. But if we get caught scamming *these* collectors, they will hammer our hands flat. That’s not just a vivid turn of phrase, Paul. I could show you pictures. They’ve shown me pictures.”

Chico grunted and nodded, but never stopped working his flautas.

“That said, *our* clientele also places a premium on decorative flourishes and interesting back stories,” she smiled primly. “Which we clearly have. An institution wouldn’t offer that premium.” She pointed to a spoon all the way to her right, one of the ones I’d brought back. “Here’s your spoon. It’s plain, but nothing to be ashamed of. See the bowl? It’s elliptical, an everyday spoon.” She indicated another spoon, further to the left. “This has an elongated oval bowl, and, look,” she flipped it and pointed to the back, where a clam-shell shape stood out at the joint of the handle and bowl, “A swag-form shell motif. Fancy. Believe it or not, a collector will pay for that, even though it’s of little historical import. It’s the same with these bright cut designs on the handles.” She indicated several other spoons with ornate designs that seemed to glow up out of the dull gray silver. “Revere was especially adept at these. They impress the pants off buyers. I once sold a spoon just like this to a man from Southie who was buying it as a gift for James ‘Whitey’ Bulger.”

“Revere?” I asked, “*Paul Revere? As in, comma, Midnight Ride of?*”

Peggy smiled and Chico snorted his mirth. “You thought Chico was just sending you back in time to fleece rural blacksmiths of random dinnerware, Paul?”

“But if I collect the spoons from the villagers, aren’t they going to disappear from the museums and collections where they already are?”

Peggy scrunched her nose. “Of course not; these spoons never made it into any collections or museums, because you went back and took them before they could.”

“Is that really how it works?” I asked, slackjawed.

Chico chortled again. “No, but it’s like that. You’d have to ask Taylor that runs the

portal. All that counts is that nothing you do through the portal does shit to the here and now. We are literally creating wealth here, holmes. The government should be giving our asses a tax break and shit."

Peggy shrugged it all off; however it worked, it wasn't her problem.

She selected another spoon from her roll, identical to mine—I assumed it was the other from the pair, and then she flipped them both. One was blank, the other had REVERE set in a little rectangle crookedly stamped along the length of its handle. She pointed to the blank spoon. "This is yours," then the other, "and this is much, much better. Most of the utensils and silver you see in Quansigamog Pond will be from Revere's workshop—I can identify them with confidence—but we get *seven times* as much if the piece bears his mark. He used several in his career. He inherited the business from his dad, Paul Revere Sr., and used some of his marks, too—" she flipped several more spoons. Two showed a PR, one in italics, the other straight. Another showed •P. REVERE in a rectangle with a little dot before it.

She pointed back to the first two identical spoons, mine blank and hers with the mark of REVERE. "To review: Your spoon will get us five hundred dollars. If it bore the mark it would be worth thirty-five hundred. There's a lot of moving parts on this deal," she looked at Chico, who had finished off his flautas and was now sipping his horchata, watching. He nodded curtly. "So it's important you come back with a stamped Revere every time. And small items, like spoons, are the least of it. Something like a tankard or quart cann—"

"A can of what?" I asked, legitimately confused.

Peggy smiled and shook her head, "A 'Boston cann,' with two *ns*. A tankard has straight sides and a lid; a Boston cann is more like a big mug: no lid, bulbous body. That style is sort of Boston-specific, and so it's big with my Cambridge collectors. A cann or tankard will sell for over fifty thousand dollars. Provided it bears the mark of patriot and silversmith Paul Revere, comma Midnight Ride of."

Peggy smiled, then hit me with her *coup de grace*: "You get a flat fee for trips where you return with spoons and buckles, but you get a percentage on something like a quart cann. Seven percent."

As she rolled up her spoon collection the numbers rang up in my head—I'm a waiter, after all, and seven percent is just shy of half of a fair tip. Seven percent on fifty thousand dollars is thirty-five hundred, more than I've made in any given month in my entire working life. Thirty-five hundred dollars for thirty minutes of work, for thirty minutes of *acting*.

I couldn't help but smile at her. She smiled back like the canary that ate the pussy-cat, her hands folded primly over her velvet roll of priceless spoons.

But, of course they had a price. It all had a price. I could get 7 percent of that price.

Chico slurped the last of his rice milkshake and stood.

"Boy am I exhausted," Peggy said idly, and then with just a little *too* much import: "I could *really* use a latte." Chico, digging through his pockets for his cash, produced a meticulously crumpled ball of paper, coughed, and absent-mindedly tossed it on the table as he continued sorting through pocket junk. Peggy snapped up the ball before it had even stopped jouncing around. She mumbled a thanks and immediately walked out.

Chico finally came up with a twenty dollar bill and laid it on the table next to his clean plate. "You not hungry, Pablo? What up with that?" I started to answer, but he wasn't listening. "Anyway, I'll call you in, like, two weeks, a month—after we sort some shit out on our end."

* * *

**From the Journal of Pastor Ephraim Otis,
Quansigamog Pond, Massachusetts, 1770**

For nearly a fortnight this barefoot, wandering parson has returned daily, and yet I fail and fail again to make his acquaintance. I grow to suspect that the smith, Young Charles Bull, endeavors to conceal from me this parson's comings and goings.

Members of my flock have become increasingly withdrawn from our small congregation, but are far from idle. The village hums with their industry. It seems that every cottage burns late into the night, looms and needles and wheels in constant, restless motion—even on the Lord's Sabbath. Broadcloth, stockings, caps, tinware, pottery, cask upon cask of nails—all are stockpiled in great heaps, then freighted each two days to Boston town by Young Charles. He returns late in the night—seemingly no longer in need of sleep—having traded all this stock for a rich-man's saucière or tankard.

In the village there is a great mania for silver. Not a spoon remains, and barely a shoe or kneebreech retains its buckle.

I fear the Devil has come to Quansigamog Pond.

* * *

It was almost three weeks before Chico called me. During that time Voice Talent, Limited lined up and lost another gig, and my manager at Stalk continued to give me the cold shoulder, shorting my shifts and giving me ridiculously vacant sections. I think he was starving me out. So I was pretty glad to finally get Chico's call; five hundred dollars goes quick.

Three A.M. FDA Annex D. Taylor met me at the double glass doors. I slipped off my flip-flops as soon as I came inside, while Taylor latched the door behind me.

"This is your shtick? Shoeless Joe Parson?"

I picked up the sandals and clipped them to my keys. "I've gotta get back into character; it's been three weeks." Chico had been kidding when he called me Brando, but he'd been right: I really am committed to Stanislavski's System, even if that seems pretty ridiculous for a guy whose very limited claim to fame is doing voice work for a cartoon fish injured in a fender-bender. But the system is the system, and the system works, regardless of the role.

Taylor shrugged as he led me past the empty reception desk. "It's been three weeks for them, too; I wouldn't sweat it." We passed through the little cubicle farm, heading toward the bright door of the conference/portal room.

"Oh," I said, mostly just making small talk, "I assumed that I'd go back to right after my last visit, the next day or something."

"No sense in that. We keep it real time. The user interface for the portal controller is suckier than the suckiest corporate-CRUD software you've ever seen. Once we have an initial state, it wants to auto-increment it in order to keep something about the something-something persistent," he squinted, "or maybe *consistent*. The manual is even worse than the interface. So we don't monkey with it too much, if we can avoid it."

"You guys do this a lot?" I asked—still just trying to be conversational. It was only my second show, and I had opening-night jitters. I kept patting my pockets to make sure I hadn't accidentally brought my phone again.

Taylor scratched his head and yawned, but it was a fake yawn. He was stalling. "With Chico?" he asked, a little too casually. "Naw, this is only the second attempt. The first foray was kind of a bust."

"Why?"

"I screwed up the date, and there was no Revere silver yet." We crossed into the crappy little beige conference room that had been outfitted with the portal. Chico, who had been lounging in one of the abandoned Aeron knock-offs, leapt to his feet.

"Okay, Pablocito!" he slapped me on the back, seeming way too jolly for three A.M. I wondered if he was getting high on his own supply. "You ready to go get us a big ole

tea set or something?" He braced my shoulders, giving them a politician's squeeze.

"Um, yeah. Sure." I set my sandals and keys on one of the empty office chairs, gave my pockets one final sweep, then dug the sandglass and leather cord out of my satchel.

"*¡Que Padre!*" He dug in his pocket, then tossed me the little snuffbox. I slid it into my satchel. Taylor prodded his touchscreen, and the blank stretch of wall marked off with masking tape bloomed its deep, dark tunnel. I stepped in, like stepping into a cataract of giggle-shivers and butterfly kisses. As soon as I was in I was through.

Colonial Massachusetts was a lot gloomier upon my return—the air was heavy and the day so overcast I couldn't immediately get a sense of whether it was morning or afternoon. I assumed morning, but didn't really dwell on it, because there was a Mohican staring at me. He was half-crouched in the bushes, decked out in buckskins accented by long strips of trade cloth embroidered with stylized poppies. Looped over one wrist was a birch basket he'd been filling with early morels when Taylor's little portal forced its way into his reality.

The portal snapped closed. Without even thinking I turned over the thirty-minute glass I was holding and tied it around my waist; wouldn't want to miss my ride home.

The Native American was slack-jawed and pop-eyed—which I figured was just amazement at seeing a preacher step through a curtain of fire—but also unnaturally pale. His skin looked almost gray, and was greased with an unhealthy sheen of fever sweat. His scalp—roughly shorn, save for a floppy, crooked mohawk—was dappled with flea-bites and scabs. Around his neck he wore a rough crucifix made from two slivers of broken bottle glass, lashed with some sort of twine. He stumbled out of the brush and made the sign of the cross, then fell to his knees, hands palm-to-palm in the universal sign of prayer. His accent was husky and strange and it took me a while to realize he was speaking two English words over and over: "Sacrament" and "communion."

It seemed that the handsome blacksmith had indeed been spreading the Good Word during my nearly three weeks' hiatus.

I set my hands on either side of the sloppy mohawk, mumbled something indistinct, then fished the snuffbox out of my satchel and scooped out a little dollop of meth with my pinky nail. I tenderly set my nail against the rim of his right nostril, said:

"This, too, could be my body," and he snorted. An animal frisson of pure pleasure shivered through him. I scooped a second dollop, set my nail against his left nostril, and solemnly said, "This, too, could be my vital spirit."

He snorted, then gasped exultantly and sprang to his feet. A howl of joy came up out of him, long and strong and seemingly unbidden, as though it got a running start at his toes and gained momentum all the way through his body, until it burst out of his mouth hell-bent for the moon.

He was glowing, thrumming with the Universe's One True Song. The Native American sprang off down the creek like a deer dodging bullets, heading toward the village, and I followed.

I called out "Hullo!" as I broke through the tree line, but the smith was already jogging out from his cabin. He was smiling with relief but looked awful, like someone who's been up three nights running with stomach flu.

"Welcome, Parson!" He took me up in a big, enveloping hug. It was just a brotherly hug, and he wasn't rough by any measure, but my God, his arms and chest; it was like being hugged by Thor.

Also, not to be gross, but people stink differently in the past. I don't know if it's what we eat or all the deodorants and antiperspirants messing with our natural skin flora, but a sweaty man in 1770 smells wonderful. It's like that good musky smell that you get if you hug a big dog that's been lying in the sun all afternoon.

“Thank God you return,” he sighed. “The double-portion hardly lasted us the Sabbath, now that our congregation increases. We grow ill with privation from the Lord.” He released me, and I was chilled all down my front with the absence of his heat. “Wannakusket is gathering the rest of our flock, Parson. And their offerings.”

Once he'd let me go and I could focus on something other than his arms holding me tight against his beating heart, I saw that at least a dozen colonial bit-players—milkmaids and coopers, farmers and goodwives with babes in arms, a barefoot girl with crooked pigtailed—were jogging down the broad dirt lane. Lots more glass-shard crucifixes, which struck me as a pretty risky fashion statement. It had started to drizzle—a warm mist that seemed to congeal out of the hot, heavy air—but no one noticed, let alone gave a crap. They called out their greetings and blessings as they came.

But Young Charles's co-religionists didn't look so great: They were sweaty, pale, scabby. And they were pitifully relieved to see their parson. I let myself believe that there was probably a stomach bug hitting the village. I mean, there was just *no way* that a sixteenth of an ounce of meth split a dozen ways more than three weeks ago hooked them. That's probably not much more than a bump each; first-graders on Adderall are taking more speed than that.

“I beg your indulgence, Parson,” the smith muttered, standing at my elbow, “I know the Lord requires silver alms, but I've got naught but iron nails.”

I turned back to look at him, to see that strained, wheedling smile, the greasy mixture of hope and shame. I recognized it, because I remembered feeling it on my own face, back in the days after Wei Xen had stopped cooking, but I was still using.

“I grow weak in the Lord's word, Parson, and suffer mightily for want of his Manifest Blessing.”

“Certainly, Young Charles,” I said beatifically. He smiled with stupid relief. “Certainly you may take sacrament. Today.” I looked him in the eye coolly, and Young Charles' smile faltered. “But tell me, Young Charles: How great is the Lord's manifest love? Is it just a meager teaspoon's dollop of love the Lord begrudges you?”

“No!” Young Charles gasped, “When I take his New Communion, I feel it to my bones! It's bucket upon trough of love! A great rushing cataract of love!”

“Indeed. The Lord showers you in His love—and yet, you expect to dole out the Lord's tankards of love by the teaspoon?” He was totally gobsmacked—which was the intended effect. “When next you trade in Boston, I'm certain you'll return with an offering worthy of the Lord's love.” I smiled innocuously. Young Charles looked like a knife was twisting in his gut.

Just for the record, standing there, I *hated* the villainous prick saying those words as much as you do. And there was a millisecond of lag before it caught up to my brain that *I* was that villainous prick. That's the thing about having a great character and an audience that's really invested: Your brain splits, and the judgy audience part of you leans back to watch, so that the hollow actor part can expand to channel the role. It's like speaking in tongues: Some people get taken by the spirit of the Lord; I got taken by the spirit of Willy Loman, and the spirit of Mercutio, and the spirit of Amos “Mr. Cellophane” Hart, even the spirit of Whiplash Bass. Right then, I was taken by the Spirit of Parson Brown.

I know that's not much of a defense, but it's what I've got.

“Parson,” he was careful, “Our work is humble—candles and weaving, crops and meat enough to feed ourselves year round, supplemented as it is by the forest's bounty. Already we suffer for want of nails, for all my production goes to market in Boston town. Smyth and Alton have slaughtered and cured every hog we had so that they could be sold, and that fetched us just the humble offerings you've already—”

And then the other parishioners were upon us. I turned and greeted them, holding my arms broad and offering a brief benediction. They knelt in a semicircle around me.

Young Charles dropped to his knees mid-word, and clasped his empty hands in front of his mouth in supplication. Just as with Mr. Last of the Mohicans, I set my hands on the blacksmith's head, mumbled something vaguely ecclesiastical, then brought out the snuffbox and administered a bump to each nostril. He shivered exultantly, but kept his supplicant posture. The man to his left held a spoon peeking up above the fingers of his clasped hands. This I took and used as a scoop, offering two small bumps before dropping the spoon into my satchel. I continued down the line, mumbling and scooping, juggling the little snuffbox awkwardly as I laid hands on each parishioner. One held a buckle instead of a spoon, so I pocketed that and gave him a single toot from my nail. He frowned when I stepped away, but didn't open his eyes or say a word.

I didn't notice, not until I was right in front of her, that the little girl held a spoon as well. I set my hands on her head. I'd assumed her hair—which was a frizzy, dull brown—would be coarse and greasy, but it was soft as bunny fur. I mumbled my blessing, gently took her spoon, and stepped away to her mother without offering the sacrament.

I don't imagine that will earn me any points with anyone, not now, but I wanted to go on the record: I did not give a little girl crystal meth.

Once I was down the line I dumped the little bit of crystal that remained into a mussel shell, as I had last time—there were lots of these shells littering the open stretch between the town and stream, and I was supposed to leave the leftover meth to help “spread the love.” The little girl with the crooked pigtailed snuffled, and I looked up to see her bent in prayer, struggling not to cry, puzzled that she'd been passed over by the Lord's messenger. I looked at the remaining meth—not much more than a quarter-line clumped in the damp mussel shell.

“Tomorrow!” Young Charles had risen and was again at my elbow, giddy with the Lord's Chemical Communion.

“Pardon?”

“By morning prayers tomorrow,” he whispered, failing to suppress his jubilation, “I'll have returned from Boston town with an offering suitable to the Lord's largess.”

“There's no sense in that, Young Charles; I'll not return for a fortnight or more.”

He looked charmingly confused. “You say that every day, Parson. And yet each morn you arrive at daybreak to lead our orisons and offer His Manifest Gospel. You grow distant from the things of this world,” he scolded. “Why do you never take the New Communion with us, Parson?” It was a guileless question, asked out of real concern for me and the state of my soul. Young Charles reached out then, but instead of taking the meth on a half-shell I was still holding, he folded my hand closed over it. “He is a Tree of Life for those who hold fast to Him,” he said earnestly. “Bind yourself back to the Lord, Parson.”

I clasped my free hand over his and closed my eyes, bowing my head in mock prayer over Young Charles. Then I got him started leading the congregation in the Lord's Prayer, and slipped away back upstream before they'd even gotten to “Shall not want.”

Halfway back to the portal clearing I tossed the mussel shell and its baby bump of meth into the creek to wash away. Then I stopped, crouched, and dipped my hand in the cold, clear water. But that wasn't good enough, so I took up a handful of the sandy bottom and used it to scour my palm. I didn't like the idea of any little grain of crystal sticking to my skin. Bowed down on my knees like a Muslim at prayer, I scrubbed my hands, and then my face, then my hands again. And when I stood, I felt remarkably refreshed. Not bump-of-meth-in-the-middle-of-a-busy-Saturday-night-shift refreshed, but clean and new.

As I waited for the portal to pop back up I dug out the ten spoons and buckle. As I'd suspected, the buckle was just a buckle. But every single spoon was a stamped

REVERE. Chico was just about through the roof when I handed them over with his empty snuffbox. He didn't notice that I wasn't able to muster his level of excitement. Some actor I am, I guess.

* * *

I met James for brunch the next day at Fond, and the first thing he asked was where I'd been at three A.M. the night before. He'd swung by my apartment after finishing his shift—he tends bar during Fond's dinner service—but I wasn't home.

My first inclination was to lie—which probably doesn't say terrific things about me. But there wasn't really anything to lie about, was there? I wasn't *doing* meth. I wasn't even really *dealing* meth, not any more than I was dealing that crappy 2016 Beaujolais Nouveau the owners had us pushing at Stalk.

So I told James about the new acting gig.

Or started to, anyway—as soon as I said, “I’ve got this—” one of the matronly ladies getting up from the neighboring table swung around and growled, “*turrrrrrrible* pain in my neck, Mr. Attorney Man!” Her tablemates cackled their delight.

“I’m sorry,” she said, setting one hand on my shoulder. “But I couldn’t help myself; you sound *just* like that Whiplash Bass in the television commercials.”

James smirked, stirring his Bloody Mary with a perfect stalk of local organic celery. “Ma’am,” he said, “That’s because he *is* Whiplash Bass.” He crunched into his celery, equally relishing the zing of the cocktail and my reddening face.

“No!” The woman gasped.

“Yup,” I said, smiling my best “And He Was Such a Nice Guy” smile.

“No!” she gasped again, then turned back to her three friends. “Marlene, did you hear that! This is *the* Whiplash Bass!”

“*Turrrrrrrible* pain, Mr. Attorney Man!” Marlene bellowed in turn, shaking her head through the *turribles* like someone doing an impersonation of Richard Nixon impersonating Mr. Ed. Her companions cackled, then sang out the attorney’s phone number in a distressing inharmonic imitation of the little kick line of lampreys at the end of the television spot.

You’ve *never* seen that ad?

Well, that jingle is an apocalyptically perfect earworm. It’s exactly the kind of dreadful local-TV spot that *everyone* adores, like it or not. Sullivan Green, Esq. will probably be sending both his kids *and* his mistresses through college just on the business that ad brings in. I was paid ninety-five dollars for the day, plus one hundred dollars for the buyout—chump change for a guy who charges two hundred and fifty per hour. The only thing that keeps me from being bitter is this: Everyone knows his number, and everyone calls him for their DUIs, slip-and-falls, and petty drug charges, but no one can ever remember his *name*. Once that ad started airing, Sullivan Green was forevermore “Mr. Attorney Man.”

The coven of Whiplash Bass fanatics wanted a group photo, and I obliged. By the time I sat down again, James was halfway through his Bloody Mary and all the way through his celery.

“Sherry’s bringing us next week’s special,” James said. My face fell. I’d been looking forward to eggs Benedict; Fond’s Hollandaise is the platonic ideal to which all other Hollandaises aspire. James took my hand. “Don’t fret, Paul; there will be Hollandaise sauce. Now tell me about the new gig.”

And so I told him that I was playing an itinerant preacher in Colonial Massachusetts preaching a “New Gospel”—sort of a generic Episcopalianism with some spiritualist mumbo-jumbo sprinkled on top—and collecting “alms” that just happened to be highly collectible Paul Revere silver. And, oh yeah, I wasn’t doing this for a historical museum reenactment or an insurance guy’s ad—I was actually going through a time portal and actually doing this before the hardest audience: The folks parting

with the silver, and primed to see the devil's work in any mistake I might make.

You might have noticed the details I glossed over.

Meanwhile, Sherry set down our plates: Sous-vide poached eggs on corn arepas with Fond's house-cured tasso "bacon" and micro-herbs, drizzled with a ghost-pepper Hollandaise sauce as hot and sweet as the silky giggles of the damned.

James frowned as I spoke, but it wasn't his frown of disapproval. It was his frown of measured consideration.

"A time portal?" James asked once I'd finished. "Didn't those turn some Chinese guys inside out a couple years back?"

"That was a transporter." I said. "This is different. It's FDA-approved."

"I thought they only used time portals for really tiny industry things, testing how well rubber gaskets age and stuff like that."

"This is sorta . . . off the books. Under the table. Boston gangsters with a patriotic spoon fetish are bankrolling it."

James ruminated briefly, a lick of bacon held daintily between thumb and index finger.

"I think you should drop this side job, Paul," he said.

I balked. "It's a great role, James; a role I wrote myself—and not something I would normally do. Parson Mordecai Brown is a perfectly villainous bastard. It's like a new and improved Richard III. This isn't a goofy little one-off thing for a muffler place."

"But it's not a *role*, Paul: You are *really* messing with people's lives and abusing their faith—"

"It's just spoons!" I cried. "I'm not messing with their lives doing this any more than I'm messing with the lives of DUIs when Whiplash Bass convinces them to pay Mr. Attorney Man to argue their hopeless cases. Should a DUI even offer a defense? Those fuckers kill people all the time!"

This was a low blow: James's uncle Jimmy was killed a few years back pulling a drunk out of a ditch, when a second drunk blasted past the flares and mashed him into the side of his tow truck. Both drunks were fine, and Uncle Jimmy was closed-casket dead right there.

But James's gaze didn't shift. He wasn't looking *at* me, wasn't studying my features; he was looking *into* me. "You don't like this gig, Paul. And it doesn't suit you. You should drop it."

"I don't *like* it, James; I *love* it. I love the role, I love going through the portal. I don't *love* the money, maybe, but I sure do like it a lot."

James nodded, but he wasn't agreeing. He was still processing, still watching whatever it was he could see percolating inside me.

"If you love it so much, then why didn't you tell me about it a month ago, when you started? Why are you hiding it?" There wasn't a trace of bitterness or point-scoring; he was just asking a perfectly fair question.

A perfectly fair question for which I had no good answer.

Hearing myself explain it out loud—even entirely omitting the meth part—the gig didn't sound good; it sounded cheap and mean. I *wasn't* okay with how this job was turning out. I *wasn't* okay with the little girl holding up her spoon. More than anything—and you can call me a coward if you want, but I'm being honest with you here—I was terrified of what James would think of me if he ever found out that this is what I was doing for some extra dough that, when push came to shove, we didn't really even *need*.

So I agreed to quit.

But as it turned out, I ended up having time to think it over: The number Chico had called me from was indeed Peggy's, and always went to a full voicemail box. James assumed I'd quit—he had no reason to suspect otherwise—and I didn't do

anything to upset that. Besides, I really was planning on quitting, just as soon as I could actually talk to Chico.

But when Chico finally called me two weeks later—from a blocked number—he wasn't super receptive to my change of heart.

"Pablo," he cajoled, "Pablocito; this is a good gig, holmes. Good money, zero risk. You are a top-notch actor." I could hear his greasy, wolfish grin. "I understand that someday you gonna go Hollywood on us—you, my friend, are a big fish. Big fish gotta swim out to the sea . . . Once they all done with they obligations here in the li'l pond."

I reiterated that I was quitting, effective immediately, and that I hoped there would be no hard feelings.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Chico asked, his voice rising. "This isn't some table-waiting gig. Giving me two weeks' notice, or one week's notice, or I-ain't-showing-up-tonight-notice, that's as fucking ridiculous as laying that shit on the *chingada* busboys." He laughed bitterly, almost hysterically. "Listen: You, me, Peggy, we're all in the same hole together. You don't even fathom the monsters that's standing up at the top edge of this hole, ready to step on our fingers every time we try to get a grip and pull our asses out."

"What if I just don't show?" I asked. It was a lot easier to be a hard ass over the phone, where you could turn down the volume when someone yelled.

But Chico didn't get loud, he got quiet.

"Where you gonna be if you ain't playing your part at the FDA Annex? You gonna be in your third floor apartment with the big window, at," I heard him shuffling some paper before he read my address. I dropped to the floor and wriggled under my vintage, thrift-shop chrome-and-formica kitchen table. Chico was laughing in my ear. "Chill out, Pablocito; I ain't got nobody watching you. Right now." Despite his reassurances, I chose to stay in my formica-topped bunker.

"Anyway, maybe you no-show, and maybe you no-home either. Might mean you at that restaurant," more shuffling, "Stalk, all stalking among the tables with you waiter-tray held high. But maybe you ain't there neither, 'cause instead you hanging out at the bar at Fond, where works the man of which you is quite fond. And if you fellas ain't there, maybe you getting fond together back at—" flip, shuffle, crumple, and he read off James' address, including the ZIP-plus-four.

"You maybe probably thinking that you could maybe rat me out with the cops and turn CI and slide out scot-free. You maybe think that because you maybe don't got a ton of experience with the *chingada cerdos*. But I do, so I want you to know two things: One, you are as tangled in this shit as anyone else; you are guilty as shit, and there ain't nothing that can ever get pinned to me that'll make it worth it to drop all the shit about you. If the cops get involved, you gonna wind up in a cage, too. So that's one. Two is that even from in a cage, even from beyond the fucking grave, I can get you, Paul. Even if you was to shoot me in the back and cut off my head while I slept tonight, my peoples would fucking get you. There's 'standing orders,' and that shit is fully funded. They will get you, and they will get your boyfriend. They will lock you up in rooms where you can hear each other scream, and they will fuck with you for twenty-one days. Then they will gut you and leave you to bleed out while that building burns. Do you hear me?"

I mumbled that I did. Chico was not satisfied.

"Repeat it back. Repeat back what I said."

And I did, quietly, my voice even, but the tears digging hot furrows down my face.

"'at's good!" Chico's praise sounded legitimate, which made it all the more awful. "That is damn good, Pablocito. Most fuckers, I gotta coach them through the last part, the part where they tell me about how they are going to die if they fuck with me. But you got it in a single take. You learn your part *quick*, Paul."

"So that's where we're at, then?" I said flatly. I was pleased with how calm my voice sounded, how even and controlled. I was also a little disturbed to realize that I was listening to my own voice coming out of my own mouth as though I were an audience member, leaning back in his comfy chair in the dark, sinking into the solitary pleasure of watching some asshole wriggle on the hook.

"Yup, that's where we at, Pablo. Merrily we roll along until spoon mania has run its course." His voice took a sympathetic turn. "Look, Paul, don't get all your panties bunched up your ass about this. Someday this shit will all be a happy memory for you. And I promise on my mother's blessed soul that when that day finally comes, all this," I heard him rattle his little dossier, "it goes to the bottom of my parrots' cage until it is terminally shit-caked. For reals. No one ever gonna know who you were, no one 'cept me and Peggy. And after this gig is done, we don't fucking care. But *until* that day, I care a fucking lot. You will neither rock my boat nor rattle my cage, Pablocito, ¿claro? I see you tomorrow night without delay, ¿verdad?"

"I work tomorrow night," I said.

"That's damn straight," Chico said, "You work serving canapés until two A.M., then you got an hour break, then you work acting like Parson No-Shoes from three A.M. until three thirty A.M.—local time."

I felt numb, but I'd be lying if I said that numbness didn't include an element of relief. It was a relief to know that I didn't actually have a choice. None of this was really my fault.

* * *

**From the Journal of Pastor Ephraim Otis,
Quansigamog Pond, Massachusetts, 1770**

My Lord, my Lord, my Lord, my Lord, my Lord, my Lord, my LORD—Blessed are You for accepting our tithes of silver vessels Blessed are You for sending among us your Unshod Parson bearing with him your Manifest Gospel Blessed are You for this Balm of Gilead

Holy Holy Holy is this Lord of Hosts who casts out weariness who hushes all doubts who emboldens the blood with His all-consuming divine Love as we traverse this Vale of Tears

Where once we cowered in darkness, now we crow at the sun, for we are overfull with all His Manifest Glory

Amen

Amen

Amen

Amen

Amen

* * *

{later}

the noxious ache and malaise that follows the Manifest Communion is nigh
unto intolerable

my brains are venomous

i pray for relief

and to once again know the Light of the Lord's Love shining upon us
through His New Sacrament

and soon

amen

My shift at Stalk was uneventful, save for a hundred dollar tip from a table full of Tarheel ladies' soccer fans who were pumped up about something that, even after they explained it twice, was entirely inscrutable to me. Frankly, compared to spoon money, it was sort of hard to get excited about a single Benjamin.

As I left work I texted James, saying I thought I'd maybe started to come down with a stomach bug, and he shouldn't come by my place after he'd closed out at Fond. I'd call him tomorrow morning and tell him how I felt.

My phone buzzed almost immediately, showing four of those cartoony little emoji icons: A frowny face, a wide-eyed pile of poop, a goofy ghost sticking out his tongue, and a big red heart, rendered a little crooked because it coincided with the crack in my screen. I replied *SMOOOOCHES!*, shut my phone down, put it in my glovebox, and drove straight to FDA Annex D.

As I changed into costume in the buzzing men's room, carefully perched on a newspaper so my bare feet wouldn't touch the small white tiles, I noticed I was missing a button from my cassock's thirty-nine-button Chesterfield front. Annoying, but far from a mission-critical wardrobe malfunction.

Taylor already had the portal fired up when I stepped into the conference room, and Chico was standing next to it, convivially tapping his watch. He tossed me the loaded snuffbox, and I slipped it into my satchel. Then I stepped through the portal without a word, because that seemed like the professional thing to do.

It was beautiful morning in eastern Massachusetts: The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the brook was babbling, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I flipped my half-hour glass over, strapped it on, and strolled downstream, whistling a jolly tune. I heard the portal snap closed behind me.

I've had a lot of time to think since then, and I've been wondering: If I'd happened to glance over my shoulder just then, would that have saved me misery down the road? I sorta doubt it—the past is past—but . . . but you've gotta wonder, right?

I hardly recognized the village when I came out of the thick brush. It was in a shambles. The blacksmith's cabin was a charred ruin with just one wall still standing, the stone one supporting his forge and awning. In the two weeks since I'd last been there they'd cleared an astounding number of trees; what had been a fairly wooded lot separating the blacksmith from what I imagined was the rest of the village was now a barren, muddy expanse, churned by ox hooves and deeply furrowed by the logs being dragged off. The slick mud squelched between my toes. It was like standing in a tub of cold whipped squash.

There was a hunched woman between me and the remains of the smithy, tending a big iron pot simmering over an open fire. It smelled terrible, even from fifty feet away. Maybe some sort of leather-tanning preparation? Or dye? I don't know; I never took the Horne Creek Living Historical Farm field trip as a kid. When she heard my bare feet farting around in the mud, she glanced up and then did a comical double take. On the second look, her face was split by an awful, beaming grin.

"Parson Brown!" she screamed, elated. "Parson Brown!"

Despite the light that joy brought to her features, this woman looked absolutely ghastly—ten times worse than Tina. She was gaunt and frail, like an old crone, but pretty obviously hardly even twenty years old. Her face was pocked with little scabs where she'd picked and picked at the skin, and her mouth was an awful brown pick-et fence, almost more gap than tooth.

Pocks and scabs and jack-o-lantern maw notwithstanding, she sprang up from her cauldron and *sprinted* toward the other buildings of the village, yelling, "The Lord's courier has come! The Lord's courier has come!" all the while.

And then they came streaming in. Oh, Jesus, it was like kids rushing in on a busted

piñata, but with the cast of *Night of the Living Dead* instead of *The Little Rascals*. There were thirty of them, if not more—men, boys, women, children, the old, the tired, the huddled masses yearning to be free of the drudgery of back-breaking labor in some Massachusetts scrub woods even God had abandoned. The blacksmith rushed from his lean-to, waving his arms. "Respect!" He shouted. "Respect! Queue for the sacrament! Await the pastor! Await Pastor Otis!" All the while he kept glancing back at me, his face twisted with outright terror.

I had no idea what that look was about—I'd sorta thought Young Charles and I were buddies—but didn't really dwell on it in the moment, because I was twisted up inside like wet bedsheets tangled in the washer: I hadn't left *any* meth with them on my last visit, two weeks earlier, but here they were, more tweaked out than ever. I'm no chemist, but it was absolutely inconceivable that they'd come up with some way to cook their own, right? You need matchbooks and paint thinner and Sudafed; they didn't even have coffee and cigarettes.

Nonetheless, the congregation had grown, they were all jonesing, and just a glimpse at their village strongly hinted at an uninterrupted run of meth-head thinking: Meticulously sorted piles of useless crap, projects well-begun then abandoned half-finished, the clear-cutting of their wood lot.

I couldn't fathom what had happened. I repeat: Counting that trip, I'd brought back maybe four grams, total. Back when I was rolling, that would have lasted me and a pal a weekend, with a little left to even out the crash.

Watching that crowd gather—a school of carpet sharks closing in on the chum still locked in my little bone-and-silver snuffbox—was maybe the first time it dawned on me that I'd probably had kind of a serious habit back in the day.

The blacksmith broke the townspeople into two rows of a dozen each. The first row immediately dropped to their knees, eyes clenched hard, hands clasped in prayer, spoons presented. A shout drew my eyes away from the ranks of spoons, and I saw Wannakusket and a black clad figure in a broad-brimmed hat come streaking around the side of one of the log cabins at the other end of the muddy expanse. The figure in black was short and a little dumpy, but he was cooking across that slick mud, quickly outpacing Wannakusket. He looked to be carrying two big half-liter cans of Asahi beer, one in each fist, pumping them as he ran like a jogger with five-pound weights. His broad hat flipped off his head and was trod into the mud by Mr. Mohawk's pistoning moccasins. Wannakusket joined the end of the first row, dropping to his knees with a single, large black-and-white feather protruding from his clasped hands.

The man in black—their pastor, I imagined—hooked around the other end of the double row, forcing himself to slow, laboring to rein in his ragged breath. I was worried about the pastor's heart. He looked worse than tweaked out, almost as bad as the blacksmith: His skin was dead white and sweaty, his eyes wide at the sight of me.

"Parson Brown," he said breathlessly. "Such is the leniency of Our Lord that He returns you to us, despite . . ." his mouth worked like a fish out of water, and finally the word he got out was "all . . . all that . . . transpired." He dropped to his knees on the mud, but not in prayer; his arms dangled abjectly, his head bowed with shame. His fading, sandy hair was thin on top, and the crown of his head sunburned and peeling. Must have forgotten his hat the other day—not that it would do him any good ever again; I doubted he'd even be able to find it out in the mud.

"We are blessed, blessed, blessed with your return, with the Lord's forbearance, with His unbounded mercy. Should He have scraped this place from the earth and cast it into the Void, such would have been right and just punishment for our . . ." He exchanged a look with the miserable smith, then glanced at the kneeling Native

American, lost in prayer. “. . . Our transgression.”

But I wasn't really following him because I'd realized what he was holding: Not big Japanese beers, but a pair of those quart-sized, round-bellied mugs Peggy had called “canns.”

“These vessels,” I asked, dry-mouthed. “These are from the hand of Our Lord's servant Paul Revere?”

The pastor lifted his head, uncomprehending. “Of course, Parson Brown, of course; as the Lord demands, so it is our pleasure to fulfill.” He lifted the cans high, offering them. “Should the Lord require vessels made from the cupped hands of our own children, we would fetch the saw.”

And he meant it—but my brain couldn't keep hold of that little nugget of colonial charm, not with those two mugs glowing in the sunshine. One was plain, but the other was engraved with a fine, intertwined tracery, an endless Celtic knot that flashed and flowed like quicksilver. I took one, then the other, rotating them admiringly before slipping them into my satchel; both were stamped •REVERE

One hundred thousand dollars—not counting the spoons. One hundred thousand dollars to Peggy and Chico, who knew how to connect with the right people. Seven thousand dollars in my pocket before sunrise back home.

The pastor clasped his hands in prayer next to me, and I held my hands high and gave my benediction, then began doling out the Sacrament, starting with the blacksmith—who grinned with relief at the first snort—and working my way toward Wannakusket. When I got to the first kid—a boy of maybe twelve or fifteen—I took his spoon, set my hands on the crown of his head, blessed him, and moved on.

“Don't,” the pastor begged. I glanced back to see his eyes open, pooling. “Don't punish the children for our,” he looked to the blacksmith and Native American again, “trespass.”

I had no idea what to say, so I simply left this unacknowledged and moved down the row. When I got to Wannakusket the second row slid through the first and knelt, and I worked my way back to where I'd started. I finished with the pastor, who wept freely. Then I got them started with the group prayer and slipped back into the woods.

Once I was back in the brush I glanced down at my thirty-minute glass and saw it had run out. I was late. I didn't like the idea of that fiery doorway sitting there, open and unattended. Also, I didn't like the idea of being in the past—in that past I was monkeying around with—one second longer than I had to be. I rushed, and because I was in a rush, I stumbled just a few feet from the portal and came down hard on my hands and knees.

And that's when I saw *me*.

I was hung on a maple tree a few dozen feet farther into the woods. If I hadn't stumbled, I never would have seen it; the shimmering portal was blocking my view.

They'd strung me up by lashing my arms to the lowest two boughs on the tree, which put me—my corpse, that other me—in a posture less like Jesus and more like someone doing the “Y” during a dance floor bout of “YMCA.”

But it wasn't the hanging that had killed the other me. My throat was slit ear to ear. A line from *A Christmas Carol*—I'd played Mr. Fezziwig once—popped into my head: *I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.*

I carefully stood and stepped around the portal, so I could get a better look at Dead Me. The buzzing of flies was distinct from the staticky shushing of the doorway home. The breast of Dead Me's cassock was stiff with dried blood. A little swarm of flies scattered like dust in the wind when I reached up to touch it, then resettled on my slit neck, rubbing their hands together as they said grace over the feast that was my body. I didn't like looking at my face in that condition, so I looked at the cassock instead, and saw that all thirty-nine buttons were intact. I double checked the one I

was wearing, which was still one button shy.

Then I noticed Dead Me's satchel; it had some heft to it. I carefully peeked in, and a big tankard—even more ornate than the ornate cans I'd just received—lay within. As I pulled it out I heard the snuffbox clink against it. I reached in, and wasn't surprised to find that one empty. The one I'd brought with me, in my own satchel, still had almost half of that day's 'teenth, which I'd declined to leave behind. I stowed this empty snuffbox in my own satchel, but the tankard wouldn't fit, so I set it at my feet.

And then . . . I can't say why I did it, but I checked his pockets. My pockets. It was . . .

It was an awfully weird thing to do. As I slid my hand into Dead Me's pocket I got this weird series of flashes, first phantom pressure along my thigh, as though I was digging through my own pocket, and then this vivid sensory memory of slipping my hand into the pocket of my first boyfriend's baggy jeans as we sat in the back of a crowded theater watching a midnight revival screening of *Reservoir Dogs*. And then I hit something. My mind snapped back to the here and now—which was really the then and there. The thing in Dead Me's pocket was smooth and flat, and I couldn't fathom what it might be. So I pulled it out to see.

It was my iPhone. His iPhone. Our iPhone. It had the exact same crack running across the screen, just like mine—which I'd taken pains to leave in my car's glovebox.

But when I turned Dead Me's phone over, the apple had a bite out of the wrong side, the left side instead of the right. My breath locked up in my chest, the forest went grey, then lurched hard to the left, and I thought I was going to puke.

Dead Me wasn't Future Me; he was Alternate Me. I thought about the smith's insistence that I'd regularly arrived for morning prayers, even though I knew for a fact that I'd personally only stepped through that portal three times. I'd dismissed his claim as tweaker's confusion. Time flies when you're having fun, and all that. But the joke was on me, I guess, 'cause there was more than one me hopping through the forest.

"Hey," a voice from behind me said carefully, like someone trying to wake a possibly violent sleepwalker. I put my hands up—I don't know why—and slowly turned. It was Taylor, the Portal Guy, looking at me with a crooked, confused grin.

"Don't worry, Paul; I won't shoot." He looked past me, at the dead and crucified me, and then back at live me. "Chico is getting antsy. We should go."

"Go?" I dropped my arms.

"Go." He confirmed, then looked at my hand. "And you shouldn't bring your phone along on things like this. I'm sure the roaming charges are insane."

"I'm on Verizon," I said stupidly, pocketing the phone.

Taylor nodded his approval. "Nationwide coverage with no roaming. I've seen the ads. You travel a lot, then?"

"Never."

"Well, maybe you should consider traveling an option. You mess around with meth heads too long, you might end up like that guy." He didn't look at the Dead Me when he said that last part, just kept his eyes locked on mine. "But whatever. Let's go. Looks like you've got lots of chips to cash in. Chico's gonna have to go to the ATM."

* * *

Chico—who was ecstatic to see the tankard and two cans—didn't end up having to go to the ATM.

"You got a PayPal?" he asked, his eyes never leaving the fancy tankard, which he tipped back and forth, so the light slid along the complex engraving. I said yes and gave him the email address. He dug out his phone and briefly glanced away from the tankard to type something with one thumb, lightning fast. "Check you phone."

I almost pulled out Dead Me's iPhone, and then caught myself. "I left it in my glovebox." Taylor gave me a look, but didn't contradict me.

“Whatever. I just sent you the five hundred dollars for the spoons; I gotta talk to Peggy, but it’s pretty much for sure that you gonna start seeing money for these mugs by the time you wake up, and you’ll have your ten-point-five grand before dinnertime. You can go take you honey-man out somewhere nice for dinner—somewhere even nicer than the somewheres nice you guys work at.” Chico was looking at one of the cans now, but more clinically; he checked the mark, then held it up and shifted it in the light, looking for dings and dents. The spoons just got a cursory glance, checking for those all-important •REVERES.

He turned to Taylor. “You got some bubble-wrap or newspapers or something?”

Taylor shrugged. “Sure, something.” Then trotted off.

Chico turned his attention back to me: “FYI, if you transfer all that money out too quick, the Federales, they gonna nab you ass. I suggest you get you one of them PayPal debit cards and just sorta use it same as cash.”

Taylor came back with an empty copier paper box, a loose piece of bubble wrap, and a sloppy stack of *USA Todays*. Chico lost all interest in me.

I told them I was just gonna leave, if that was okay. No one responded, so I left the other snuffbox—the empty one I’d taken off of Dead Me—on the corner of the conference table where Chico was wrapping up his treasures and showed myself to the door.

I dropped my keys twice trying to unlock my car. My hands were numb and I was trembling like a dog on Fourth of July. Everything was too loud—the buzzing of the parking lot lights, the grind of the crickets and cicadas, the creak of the peepers. My head ached with the racket.

When I finally wrestled myself into my car and slammed the door, it was like being wrapped in a down quilt. I calmly got my phone out of the glovebox, then dug the other phone out of my pocket. The cracks across the screens were absolutely identical, which is creepier than you’d think. There probably haven’t been two identical cracks in the history of the Universe, but these were twins, right down to those micro-scratches your phone gets jostling around in your pocket with spare change and keys.

Identical twins, save for the logo reversed on Dead Me’s phone. In the fine print on the back, right under where it said “iPhone” and mine says “Designed by Apple in California Assembled in China,” Dead Me’s phone said, “Designed by Apple in California Assembled by the People in China.”

I was tempted to power my phone back up—I felt disconnected from the Universe with it blank and cold like that—but I sort of dreaded what I would discover PayPal and Chico had done for me.

So I drove home instead.

James was waiting at my apartment when I got there. He was leaning against the bricks outside my building’s front door, even though he has keys to my place. His face was eerily lit by his own phone, which he poked at listlessly with the thumb of his cupped hand. His free hand held a cigarette that he seemed to have mostly forgotten; the ash was almost an inch long.

“I thought you were quitting,” I said weakly, faking a smile. James looked up with an arched brow. He didn’t have to say *I thought you were, too*.

I burst into tears.

James ground his smoke out on the bricks and wrapped his arms around me, gently rocking me through the worst of my sobs. God, we must have been a sight: A handsome bartender in black vest and bow tie hugging a sobbing Colonial preacher. But it was three A.M.; we were a living tableau with no audience.

After a little bit I realized James was talking, repeating “It’s okay, Paul. C’mon. Let’s go in,” the way you might say it to an injured dog you’re trying to get into a car.

I let James lead me up to my apartment. He sat me on my sofa and went to the kitchenette.

I finally turned on my phone, and it immediately started chiming with alerts, the PayPal app informing me of \$1.99 payments as fast as the little banner notifications could scroll by. I peeked at my email, and amid the mounting pile of receipts from PayPal users with unlikely handles like “fish@lozenge.cx” and “fasc@rrrrr.cc.ch” and “empty_string_EXIT_0@boo.bs” there was one from “Vox Celeste, LLC” for \$500. The little memo line listed “For Spoons-Revere Colonial Choir backing vocals, rights and distribution buyout.”

There was also a message from *IndieMusicMeNOW.com*, congratulating me on opening an account, adding my payment information, and uploading my first track. Apparently “A Very Whiplash Bass Xmas” was pretty popular, ‘cause that’s what the payments were all for.

I muted it. But even muted, the sound of the vibrations as the notifications came in was driving me nuts, so I shut the phone down and put it on the coffee table.

When James returned with a glass of water for me, I showed him the other snuff-box, the one I hadn’t given back to Chico, which still had a few bumps of meth in it. I showed him Dead Me’s iPhone from another dimension. I told him everything—like, everything-everything: the meth and the village, the money and Chico’s Google Maps print-outs, Dead Me strung up in a maple tree, my strong suspicion that scores of meth-muling multiverse Mes were hitting that poor little village day after day after day.

The entire time I spoke, my eyes never left Dead Me’s iPhone, the alternate iPhone. James was watching me watch the phone.

“Go ahead and turn it on,” James said gently. “It won’t be anything crazy. Probably won’t even be anything interesting. Either it won’t work with the system here, or it will and it’ll just be a clone of your phone—backward apple notwithstanding. Most stuff on your phone is out in the cloud or whatever, not stored on the phone.”

I picked it up off the coffee table and powered it up. The apple popped onto the screen, still backward. Then the phone loaded to the lock-screen wallpaper. On my phone that’s a picture of me and James standing to either side of a well-muscled, shirtless, kilted man playing a bagpipe and billing himself as the “Southernmost Bagpiper in the United States.” We’d taken it when we’d been down to Key West for New Year’s last year. On Dead Me’s phone the picture was a professional black-and-white close-up of me and James, grinning like fools, freshly shaved and coiffed, our beaming faces framing a wedding-cake topper with two tuxedoed grooms on it.

Then the phone gave us the “Reserve Battery Power” pop-up, then it croaked. I wanted to plug it in and poke around more, but one look at the port on the bottom of the phone made it pretty obvious that it wouldn’t fit any power chord Apple had ever shipped in this reality.

“Okay,” James said, taking the phone out of my hand and placing it on the coffee table reverentially, as though it were the sort of ancient holy book you feared might bite your fingers off. “You’re taking a nice hot shower, and we’re gonna get some shut eye. Up at eight o’clock, a hearty breakfast, and then we’re going down to this FDA Annex D and sorting everything out. Okay?”

I nodded, and James helped me to the bathroom, where he got me undressed and into the shower. When I got back out, I found that he’d ironed and hung up my vestments, and even replaced the missing button. I immediately flashed on the image of Dead Me lashed to the maple tree, no gaps in his cassock’s thirty-nine-button placket. Without a second thought I plucked the new button off mine, threw it in the toilet, and flushed. Better safe than sorry.

* * *

The next morning we left the dishes to soak and drove to FDA Annex D. It was disorienting to be there during business hours, when the parking lot was full and the office park bustling. The space next to the Annex was a little tortilla factory, the double doors chocked open. It breathed out warm puffs of frying corn chips as it hummed along to the tinny roar of that new Beyoncé album.

When we asked the receptionist for Taylor, she replied, “Taylor who?” and my heart stopped. It had never dawned on me that the Portal Guy might not be legitimately employed at the FDA Annex. My mouth worked silently, and the receptionist’s face lit up. “Hey!” she said, snapping her fingers. “I thought you sounded familiar; you’re Whiplash Bass!” She swiveled in her chair to call back through the doorway into cubicle country: “Ohmygod, Taylor! Whiplash Bass to see you!”

A skinny middle-aged black guy in a tie came to the doorway, coffee cup in hand, looked at us, and then looked at the receptionist, annoyed. “Why the hell would Whiplash Bass and his boyfriend wanna talk to me?” He looked back at me and James, and then said dismissively: “They must want *White Taylor*.” As if on cue, the Portal Guy popped through the doorway, out of breath, a folded *USA Today* in hand. “Yeah!” he said, “Sorry! They’re for me.”

“White Taylor knows Whiplash Bass!” the receptionist gushed. Her tone was congratulatory, as though this was almost a little better than getting a new car or a really great haircut.

Black Taylor—who was also Clearly-in-Charge Taylor—shifted his ire to our Taylor, and especially Taylor’s folded newspaper. “When do you get anything done?”

“I work late,” the Portal Guy blurted.

Clearly-in-Charge Taylor, as it turned out, was also Clearly-Not-Impressed Taylor: “You are on your break now. I’m going to assume,” he eyed the *USA Today*, where a mostly finished sudoku was visible, “that you already took ten minutes of your break. You’ve got five to talk to your *compadres*, and then I want to see your ass back in your cubicle.” As if to punctuate this, Clearly-in-Charge Taylor made a point of looking at his wristwatch and pushing a button on the side three times. “I’ll check your cube in exactly five minutes.”

“Yes, Mr. Panke. Totally. I’ll be there in under four-and-a-half.” Taylor said this to Clearly-In-Charge-and-Not-Impressed Taylor’s back, because the man was already walking away.

I’d finally caught my breath. “I wanna quit my job,” I said in a rush.

Portal Guy Taylor turned back to me and sighed. “Everyone wants to quit their job, Paul. But this isn’t the place to talk about it.” I looked over his shoulder to the receptionist unabashedly watching, as though we were the latest episode of her favorite reality show.

“And that convo will take,” he glanced at his own digital watch, “More than four minutes and twenty-something seconds. Listen: I’ve got my lunch break in a little over an hour. You know that Chili’s by the mall?” James pulled a face, and I must have too, because Taylor rolled his eyes. “Jeez, guys, get a grip; their blossom is awesome. And they’re the only bar close by that serves at 11 A.M. I’ll be there. If I happen to run into you guys, then we’ll talk.” He glanced at his watch again. “And I’m gonna go back to work now. Not all of us have an acting career to fall back on.”

He turned on his heel and left without further quips, leaving us with the embarrassingly enthusiastic receptionist. She squealed and clapped, then asked us to reenact the ad so she could record it on her phone. I declined, and she settled for a selfie with me and James. “You look great!” she gushed at James—which was an odd thing to say, until she continued “My friends are never gonna believe that Whiplash Bass and Mr. Attorney Man are a couple!” She was already busily poking at Instagram, and thus didn’t see James pantomime his theatrical distress at being mistaken for

Sully Green, attorney-at-law—who actually *did* look kinda like James, if you squished James vertically and added a mustache. I couldn't believe I'd never noticed the resemblance. It's a funny little world, isn't it?

We had time to kill, so we went to the mall. Things are always normal in the mall. If you're in the throes of an existential crisis, I strongly recommend going to the mall: Get a big cookie, walk around, look at pants, poke at the new iPads, test out absurdly pricey headphones. It's better than a spa day.

When we got to Chili's, Taylor was already there at one of the high round tables clustered near the bar. He was sitting with a slouchy, doughy looking guy, also in cube-monkey khakis and polo shirt. They had some Dos Equis and a basket of deep-fried monstrosities that looked nothing like an onion.

"I thought the blossom was awesome," James quipped as we reached the table.

The doughy guy rolled his eyes at Taylor. "They haven't done an Awesome Blossom in, like, six years. Taylor doesn't normally order food is all."

"Who's this guy?" I asked Taylor, nodding at the doughy guy, who was dipping a fried thing that looked like an alien egg into a little ramekin of green-flecked pink ranch dressing.

"That's Deke," Taylor said. "Deke's cool."

"Thanks," Deke said, his mouth full of Awesome Alien Abortions.

"I wanna get out of this thing with Chico and Peggy," I reiterated.

Taylor finished his beer, and held the empty aloft. "Can't help you." The waitress nodded at him, and he set the bottle on the edge of the table. "Don't really know them. I'm just a poor boy with the Dept. of Ag."

James frowned. "I thought you were with the FDA. The building says 'FDA Annex D.'"

For just a second Taylor looked like he'd swallowed a nickel. His partner, Deke, leaned in, addressing James. "FDA's in the Dept. of Ag, m'man."

James shook his head. "No, it's not." The waitress glided in, swapped Taylor's empty for a fresh bottle in a single deft movement, and moved on without a pause. "And the Department of Agriculture offices are in Raleigh."

Taylor sighed. "It's sort of an inter-agency lend-lease thing."

"You got lent and leased?" James asked archly.

"The porta—" the chubby guy, Deke, caught himself, "the *equipment* we, uh, *service*, it got lent, or leased, or whatever."

This didn't satisfy James, either. "So you guys drive four hours from Raleigh—"

"It doesn't matter who signs his check, James!" I snapped. "It matters that *I* don't want to work for him anymore!"

This annoyed Taylor. "You aren't working for me, Bassmaster. Shit! Not only am I lowest squirrel on the totem pole, you and me aren't even *on the same pole*." He waved at the waitress again, flapping his hands and holding up fingers in an ornate semaphore that bespoke a man who spends an unhealthy amount of time sucking suds in this Chili's.

"Listen, Paul: *I* work for Uncle Sam via the Dept. of Ag, at this time directly under the supervision of Mr. Panke of the FDA. *You* work for South Boston mobsters with Cambridge aspirations via Peggy and the History Department of UNC-Asheville, under the direct supervision of Mr. Chico. Our org charts do not intersect. I'm not your HR rep, your union steward, or your priest. You are on your own here."

"What am I supposed to do?!" I heard how shrill I sounded and hated it, but not so much as I hated the jam I was in.

The waitress glided by, depositing a pair of Dos Equis for me and James.

He shrugged. "You could shoot them; isn't that how meth dealers make inconvenient people go away?"

"I'm not a meth dealer!"

"Your *amigo* Chico is," Deke suggested.

"That's *racist!*" I practically shouted.

Taylor took a pull from his beer, unruffled. "*Amigo* was poor word choice, I think. Deke isn't saying Chico's a meth dealer because Chico's Hispanic; he's saying Chico's a meth dealer because Chico deals meth. People who deal meth are meth dealers. QED. Independent of race or ethnicity. Doesn't matter if they're doing it across all space and time," he looked at me pointedly, "or in a Taco Bell bathroom."

Taylor locked eyes on me and took another long pull from his beer, and it dawned on me that he hated me. But he didn't hate me for being me, or even for the thing I was doing to the people of the colonial village: He hated me like a prisoner hates the bars across his window.

"I just wanna fix this without anyone getting hurt. Especially me."

Taylor and Deke exchanged a look.

"We could send Chico to camp," Deke hazarded. This, to me, sounded an awful lot like *sending the dog to live on a farm*.

"I don't want to get anyone hurt," I reiterated.

Taylor nodded to Deke, but spoke to me. "It won't get anyone hurt. He'll live 'til he dies, he just won't do it anywhere near here."

I swallowed, absurdly grateful for this brief glimmer of hope. "And I don't want it to be violent," I said with much less certainty than I'd hoped.

Taylor laughed. "Have you seen yourself, Paul? Have you seen Chico? I think we'll opt for subterfuge over brute force. Play to your strong suit, as a thespian."

This word tickled Deke, who chuckled and returned his concentration to his clutch of extra-crispy popcorn alien larva.

James watched all of this coolly. "Before we agree to anything, I want to hear the actual plan."

Taylor turned on James, fixing him with the withering gaze fed-up schoolmarms reserve for the willfully stupid.

"Or else what?"

James opened his mouth to answer, and then closed it, because the "or else" was pretty up in the air. Or else we go to the cops? And tell them what? That I'd been breaking into a government facility to transport a Schedule II controlled substance across state lines—and time lines? That I'd been knowingly colluding in a criminal enterprise for *months*?

"Yeah," Taylor said, reading our subliminal dialogue. "You aren't *agreeing* to anything, 'cause we aren't making a deal here. This isn't a negotiation. We're working *together*," he emphasized this by pointing at each of us in turn with his index finger, then poking himself in the chest, "to solve *Paul's*"—he poked me hard in the chest—"problem under *Paul's* conditions without getting anyone fucking shot. I am *helping* you here."

"Why?" James asked, honestly perplexed.

Taylor looked to his partner—who was a whole lot less jolly now—and something silently passed between them. Then Taylor's face hardened.

"It's a long story." Taylor dug his iPhone out of his pocket. I assumed this was the prelude to the long story, but instead he dialed a number. He tilted the phone away from his face once it began ringing on the other end, and said to me: "When I get him on the phone, make up some reason that he has to go through the portal with you tonight."

"You're what the what!?" I asked, panicked. And then Chico picked up.

"Hey Chico!" Taylor said in a bright, fake customer-service voice. "T. here, from the office. Hope you don't mind me ringing you direct."

There was yelling.

Taylor's customer-service smile never wavered. "Yeah, I know you didn't know I had this number. Yes, I recognize that you are upset to learn someone has your direct line. Ya-hunh. I hear that, Chico. I share your concerns and regret the inconvenience. But—now, Chico, listen. I only called because it's super-duper important. Yeah. Paul's here." Disturbingly, the yelling clipped off as though the call had been dropped. "Un-hunh. Yeah. *Paul*. Paul swung by my office during *regular business hours*. Un-hunh. Because in all the hubbub last night with that *excellent* haul at the *antique show*, he neglected to mention some *big news*."

Chico asked something.

"I sure do! I have him here, and I'm handing the phone to him now."

Taylor's customer-service smile disappeared, and he held the phone out for me. I reared back like the handset was liable to both bite and scald me. He scowled and shook the phone at me once, hard. Finally James leaned out, took the phone, and held it to my ear.

"Chico?" I hazarded, gingerly taking the handset.

"Paaaaaul," he sighed slowly. He sounded pretty disappointed. This was somehow much worse than him yelling. "Paul, I imagine you are going to tell me something completely fascinating now, eh? Something *superfantastico*?"

"I . . . yes. Yeah. Last night, um . . . the . . . guy who had those tankards, he told me they have a full tea service of a similar, um, provenance. Like, the whole nine yards: Big tray, teapot, coffee pot, creamer, sugar bowl, a whole set of teaspoons. All done in a nautical theme, so it matches. One-of-a-kind." Chico was disturbingly quiet, and I worried I wasn't hooking him. "He says it was made for Samuel Adams."

"The guy on the six pack?" Chico asked, bemused. "That a real guy?"

"Yeah. He was related to John Adams somehow. He ran the tavern where the Founding Fathers schemed. Anyway, he bailed on Revere and never took delivery, so Revere got all pissy and gave the set to his pastor's assistant as a parting gift when that guy left to be the pastor in the village." This was, quite easily, the greatest ad lib of my entire life. I couldn't help but be a little proud, even through the terror. "But it's *huge*, 'cause it was made for, like, showing off in a tavern. There's no way I can carry it back to the portal—not without risking dinging it all up—and no way I want any of the audience seeing how I make my entrance. On top of that I'll have the normal haul of spoons and gravy boats—" I felt my explaining verging on *over* explaining, but couldn't seem to reel it in. Thankfully Chico was already shushing me.

"*Claro, claro*," he hushed. "You need to bring your *manservant* to help cart off the tithes. I get it, *Blanquito*." He was obviously running some mental math of his own. For the first time I thought about his end of this business. He wasn't doing all this just to sell a sixteenth of an ounce of meth every couple weeks—even at the favorable temporal exchange rate. Chico wanted to impress those potential Cambridge connections with what a versatile and resilient business partner he could be.

Cambridge. The College Town to End All College Towns. How much meth could be moved there if you had exclusive distribution rights? Lotsa all-nighters in Greater Boston, lots of college kids with more cash than hours in the day.

And how happy would that tea set make Chico's Cambridge prospects?

It was a lure too shiny for any big fish to pass up.

"Yeah," he said absently. "Howsabout we meet tonight, do this little thing? You bring me a proper costume."

And he hung up on me. I sat for a moment with the warm, quiet phone pressed to the side of my head, the metal edge creasing my palm and ear.

James and Deke watched me raptly, waiting for an update. Taylor drank from his beer and stared out the windows, toward the mall parking lot.

"He said we'd meet tonight."

“That’s good,” Deke said, flecks of batter pattering down on the tabletop.

“Not really,” James replied. “Because there isn’t *really* a tea service, is there?”

I shook my head.

“That’s bad,” Deke opined earnestly.

“That’s fine,” Taylor declared, draining his beer and holding the empty aloft. More disturbing than his rate of consumption was the fact that he didn’t even seem buzzed. “That’s perfect. We just need him to show up. Me and Deke will sort out the details. Toodly-oo!” He dismissed us with a backhanded flutter of his fingers. We let him pay for our beers, neither of which had been touched. I don’t imagine he let them go to waste.

* * *

James and I were raiding the UNC costume shop for something Chico-appropriate when it dawned on me.

“James,” I said, my belly full of ice, “I have no idea what the plan is.”

He didn’t pause in his shuffling through hanger upon hanger of frock coats. “There’s only one plan that makes sense, Paul: You’re going to ditch Chico in the past.”

“How the hell am I going to do that?!”

James looked up, one eyebrow crooked curiously. “Jeez, Paul; by *acting*. That is, after all, what they are paying you to do. But right now, what’s important is finding this Chico something to wear that’s his size, period-appropriate, and won’t accommodate a gun.” James glanced at his phone. “And for both of us to make our shifts on time.”

I turned my attention to a rack of particolored knickers. “I think we should call in.”

“I think that if this Chico was ever watching us, he certainly is tonight. We’ve gotta keep everything normal. Besides, your floor manager is gunning for you. You’re going to need that table-waiting gig more than ever come sun-up.”

I finally found a pair of black knickers I thought would fit Chico, and James simultaneously held up a simple cassock, like Jeremy Irons wore in *The Mission*. The only place to hide a gun would be in the waistband of the knickers, and there’d be no way to quickdraw with the long cassock buttoned up.

“Disco!” he cried in his finest RuPaul.

“Quite slimming!” I agreed, plucking a big shady straw hat from the bin of big shady hats tucked under the knicker rack.

I took the cassock from James and held it up, then frowned. “Drat. The lines will be *totally* spoiled by cramming a Glock in the waistband.” I sighed theatrically at this fashion tragedy, James broke character and started laughing. Somehow, that made it all better.

We packed it in, went home, cleaned up, and went to work. James was right about not calling in. It wasn’t just that I needed the job: I needed the distraction. If I’d called in, I would have spent all night pacing my apartment and chewing my paws, thinking about the instant chemical confidence boost still inside the snuffbox I’d withheld from Chico. After my shift I picked James up at Fond and we went back to my place so I could get into costume before heading to the FDA Annex.

James caught my cuff as I was on the way out the door and pulled me back. He kissed me lingeringly—a black-&-white railroad-platform-in-the-rain sort of kiss—then stood back and looked me squarely in the eye.

“Clean slate, new leaf, first day of the rest of your life, and all that. I’ll stay up, make you breakfast.” He fixed me with a somber gaze. “There will be hollandaise sauce,” he declaimed, like a Pentecostal preacher admonishing that *There will be blood throughout the land of Egypt*.

And then I was off.

* * *

Chico was visibly relieved when I stepped into the conference room at FDA Annex

D. “*¡Madre de Dios!*, Pablo; this my fucking costume?” He held out his arms for the bundle of clothes, and I handed them over. “Imma be your Mexican slave or some shit, right?” he scoffed, trying to puzzle out the garments.

“No!” I said, “You’ll be a Jesuit missionary, like Jeremy Irons in *The Mission*.”

He looked half amused and half annoyed. “I don’t look shit like Jeremy Irons.”

“You’ve got a noble brow,” I reassured him. “It works. Besides, I doubt they’ve seen the movie.”

“I dunno,” Taylor yawned, scratching his head. “It was on cable an awful lot for a while.”

“I’ve never seen it,” Peggy said, and I just about jumped out of my skin. I spun around, and there she was, dressed like a very historically rigorous milkmaid.

Chico had set his knickers, shirt, and hat aside, and was holding up his cassock, nodding approvingly. “This is pretty tight,” he told no one in particular, “Got a look like Neo in *The Matrix*, ¿verdad?”

“You’re coming along, too, Peggy?” I hazarded.

“Um, yeah,” she blushed, like an English teacher caught waiting in line to see *Twilight*. “Taylor called me, said you needed extra hands to bring in the Samuel Adams tea service.”

“I . . . I’m sure Chico and I can handle it.”

“It’s a million dollar haul, Paul, and the story, the details, drive the price *up*. Besides,” she looked away and smiled to herself. “I . . . I want to *see*. Part’s just curiosity—I’ve spent eight years working on a dissertation about Colonial material culture and its impact on the daily lives of women and children. There are things that just *aren’t* in the literature or the unpublished monographs or the special collections or even the private collections. I’ve got questions that just twenty minutes through Taylor’s magic portal will answer.” It was obvious that this was her *excuse* for going through, not her *reason*. I would have pointed that out, but she beat me to the punch: “But mostly, I just want to see for myself. See what the fuss is about.”

Chico had stripped down to his jockey shorts, and it was hard not to gawk: He was as lean as an underwear model, his shoulders, back, and abs perfectly sculpted. An ornate tattoo of an eagle stretched from shoulder to shoulder. It was done to look as though it was carved out of marble, outstretched wings replaced with vibrant American flags. A banner draped across his shoulders read *FORGING DESTINY*, and below that *61st Cavalry Scouts*.

“You were in the army?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said, not looking up as he stepped into the knickers, “I’m a fucking Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

He pulled the shirt over his head, and I eyeballed his pile of street clothes. “You don’t have a gun?” The words had come out of my mouth uninflected and unbidden.

Chico snorted, an eyebrow raised, and shook his head as he continued dressing. “Why the hell would I have a gun?”

“Okay,” Taylor said, stepping to the portal controls, “Time to get this show on the road.”

I took a second to step back and eyeball Peggy. She wore neither shoes nor stockings, which saved me having to make up a reason for her to leave them behind.

“No shoes,” I said approvingly, and she smiled.

“Chico explained your reasoning, about wear patterns and build quality; very sharp. You should have gone into academia.”

“There’s more money in voice acting and waiting tables.” I was being honest, but she laughed as though it were a wry one-liner. In this whole thing, that was almost the saddest bit: That a highly trained adjunct professor reduced to dealing meth and stealing spoons for spoiled mobsters seriously thought she was better off than a

waiter with modest theatrical aspirations.

I turned to see Chico in full regalia. Tall and lean, he cut a graceful figure in the long black cassock, the wide-brimmed straw hat tipped over his eyes, like an imported assassin in a spaghetti western.

“You. Look. Stunning!” And I meant it.

Chico smiled, then scowled. “Yeah, well, it’s the part I was born to play.” He turned back to his pile of clothes and dug the snuffbox from his jacket, tossing it to me. I dropped it into my satchel, so it wouldn’t clink against the *other* snuffbox, which was resting in my pocket.

And then the dark, cavernous portal bloomed up on the conference room wall behind us. I wasn’t facing it, but I could *feel* its warm shimmer. It was like that giddy little contact high I used to get from buying meth—long before the music started, long before we crammed four to a bathroom stall and crushed up the crystal. A totally clean expectation high, the high of knowing that the real high is imminent.

“C’mon, this is the best part,” I said, quite sincerely. “No matter how many times you do it, it’s never going to be this sweet again.” And I stepped into the portal gladly, thoughtless of whatever unpleasantness was to come.

And it *was* wonderful, that cascading staticky animal frisson of time or probability or the “tachyon emissions” washing over you, or whatever it was.

And then I was in Colonial Massachusetts. *We* were in Colonial Massachusetts. I turned back to see Chico and Peggy looking around with casual interest.

But not flushed with the journey. Not . . . *high*.

“How . . . how was it?” I asked.

“It was nice, I guess,” Peggy said politely. Chico shrugged and nodded. She took a deep breath. “The air smells great here, doesn’t it?”

Chico sniffed. “I guess.”

They hadn’t felt it, which at once made me feel sort of special—like someone of such refined tastes that he could really *dig* this symphony or that wine—and also lonely. I mean, I wanted to share it with *someone*. But maybe I couldn’t, and that was as sad as getting high all by yourself in your shitty little apartment.

The portal shrank and closed, and I saw, a few yards behind Peggy and Chico, where the other me was strung up in the tree—but this wasn’t the *same* other me as before; this guy’s throat was pristine, but he’d been terribly beaten. His head was a mashed purple lump with one dangling eye. I wondered what I’d find if I searched *his* pockets; a *third* identical one-of-a-kind snuffbox, licked clean? Yet another cracked iPhone, this one with a pear or banana or rising Chinese sun emblazoned on the back? For a moment I wondered why Ye Olde Tweakers kept killing me—because they were mad about what was happening to their community? Because they wanted all the Gospel to themselves? Because they wanted to themselves be the Lord’s mainline to His flock?

But I didn’t wonder for long, because I knew that at its heart it was Tweaker Logic: irresistible in the moment, unintelligible to the outsider, regretted in the aftermath, repeated at the next opportunity. Lather, rinse, repeat, ad nauseam, amen.

I tore my eyes away from Yet Another Dead Me before Chico and Peggy might wonder what I was staring at and turn around to see for themselves. Instead I led them a few steps away, toward the village, drawing their attention to my half-hour glass as I turned it, checked the sand, and strung it onto my belt.

“Okay,” I said, “Thirty minutes. Let’s go.” We hiked up our frocks and started picking our way downstream. Soon we came to the muddy, denuded outskirts of the village, which was shrouded in a low-hanging, noxious tannery miasma layered atop the B.O.-stank of people who only believed in bathing twice a year. In the gloom of his nearly collapsed lean-to, the blacksmith, Young Charles, toiled before a roaring

fire, tongues of flame lapping out from his forge and threatening to finish off all that remained of his home.

"Jesus!" Chico coughed. "You was wrong, Peggy; the past stinks!"

Peggy snuffled and rubbed at her stinging eyes, but was still grinning like a fool. "This . . . is amazing!" she said.

"Better than digging through old ledger sheets and making suppositions," I said. "Anyway, listen: I need to make a big entrance. You guys head out across the mud, toward Young Charles—he's the blacksmith, and sorta my number-one helper—yelling 'Hullo!' and 'Blessings!' and tell him you've brought the 'Manifest Gospel for Communion.' He'll bring everyone running and lined up. Play it priestly, with a prayer—"

Chico rolled his eyes at me. "Pablo, I was an altar boy; I know Communion."

"Oh. Well, then just do that stuff." I dug into my pocket and brought out a snuffbox—not the full one Chico had just given me, but the other box, the spare one I'd taken home after handing Dead Me's empty snuffbox over to Chico the day before. That spare snuffbox had still been half full then, but I'd dumped its contents into the toilet before going to work, to eliminate any possibility that I might decide that maybe I needed a little Old-Time Religion to get me through that day.

I handed over the empty snuffbox.

"Here's the Gospel. Start with Young Charles and work your way over; once you've done two or three folks I'll make my big entrance."

"Yeah," Chico said, starting to sweat his big performance. "Okay, Peggy, you play altar-girl. Good." She nodded, still watching the village, taking it all in.

"Okay," I said. "Go!" And I shouted the first big "*Hullo!*" myself. Young Charles jerked up from his work, locking on to Chico and Peggy as they stumbled out into the slick mud and began toddling toward the lean-to. Peggy and Chico, fixated on the forge, couldn't see that their jubilant greetings were already drawing the townspeople, who came shambling out from among the log shanties like Romero zombies.

I quietly turned, ducked into the undergrowth, and walked back upstream. It really hadn't been so hard; I didn't even have to make a break for it. When I was almost back to the clearing I heard an outraged bellow. This was followed by a little hubbub—which I imagined was the townsfolk's response to the revelation of Chico's empty snuffbox—but it seemed to die down quickly. Whatever was happening back there, I put it out of my head.

Coming into the clearing, I was surprised to see the portal already open, even though the half-hour glass at my waist was still more than half full.

And then I saw me step out of the portal.

I couldn't believe how young I looked, how happy and relaxed. Then, with a moment's reflection, I couldn't believe I'd aged so much in just a few months, and with so little to show for it. I couldn't think of a single special thing I'd bought or done with Chico and Peggy's money. It had mostly just evaporated: Getting Subway because I didn't feel like cooking, buying clothes because I didn't feel like doing laundry, calling in because I didn't feel like working.

The New Me that had just stepped out of the portal marveled at the sights, seeing it all for the first time. We both heard his iPhone's low-power *eep*. It was a small sound in the clear morning air, but it hit New Me like a 120-volt shock. He jolted like Kramer bursting into Jerry's apartment, hiked up his cassock, fumbled the phone as he attempted to power it down and stash it in his satchel, then spastically turned out his pockets and patted himself down.

Half of me wanted to laugh, 'cause it was really top-notch buffoonery. And half of me was enraged, because this was the dumb asshole who'd gotten me into this mess. Or a version of him, anyway.

But that bemusement and outrage, it was all intellectual—I didn't really *feel* anything. My emotions were jarred up in my head, like preserves I was saving in a cellar to sustain me through some disaster.

But isn't that acting? Isn't that art? Canning your emotions, and then doling them out a teaspoon at a time for pay, or when you need to con someone, or when you need to talk yourself into something? It's not that different from buying your emotions from a Chinese grad student, or a Mexican and a historian, or a fake parson.

So I pulled down a jar of rage, spun off the lid, and scooped out a big dollop.

"Hey!" I shouted as I stomped into the clearing. "*HEY!* HEY, ASSHOLE!"

New Me, still panicking from his iPhone FUBAR, swung around, then shrank back on his heels.

"Oh Jesus!" he squeaked.

I closed on him and took up a double fistful of his cassock. He still had all thirty-nine buttons.

"Is this your first time?" I demanded.

"Wha—?"

I'd never been in a fight. I'd never taken a karate class. Heck, I'd only ever done a single half-day stage-fighting workshop, and I spent most of *that* flirting with the guy I got paired up with. That guy turned out to have a very funny, very busy German wife, and I never learned how to throw a realistic punch.

But I'd worked in bars and restaurants since I was sixteen. I'd seen some brutal brawls. And I am an actor. So I hauled back and smashed my forehead into New Me's nose. It crunched satisfyingly, his blood and snot spurting warmly down my forehead.

"Onk!" he cried.

"I asked!" I bellowed, whipping him back and forth like a dog with a rag doll, "I fucking *asked* if this was your first time, asshole!" I charged into him, taking him off his feet and driving us both into the creek. We lost our footing on the smooth stones and came down hard in the shallow water.

I struggled to pin him, giving him a solid knee to the crotch in the process, knocking his breath out. Finally, I got a leg over and straddled him, pushing him under, my fists to his chest. The crisp, cold water poured over his face, pulling a streamer of blood from his nose as it went.

The water was cold and refreshing. Energizing.

I eased up, letting him thrust his head out of the water.

"Have. You. Been. Here. *Before?*" I asked.

"N-no!" he stuttered. "Ne-never!"

I punched him, but chickened out at the last second, and it became a weird, hooking fist-slap that glanced off his left cheek. So I punched him again, right in the eye. Then again, in his smashed nose. He honked a terrible pained cry, and I thrust his head back under water.

Held it.

"You ruined our life," I quietly told us, even though I knew he couldn't hear anything. But it didn't really matter; I was in character.

I was in character playing me.

And *that* seemed like it was probably the worst part.

I tore New Me back up out of the water, then stood, dragging him to his feet.

"Don't ever come back."

"What—" he gasped for breath. "What will I tell Chico?"

That struck me as a reasonable question, but Character Me still treated it as a piddling little detail, almost unworthy of his consideration.

"Tell him you got jumped," I heard myself say dismissively. "Tell him they were on to you from the start, and you were almost burned as a witch."

"Hanged!" New Me gasped. "The Portal Guy said witches got hanged, or crush—"

"Whatever!" I shook him, snapping his head back and forth. "Whatever!" I shoved him up the bank and frog-marched him back to his portal. "Whatever you do, don't ever come back!" New Me stood next to his dappled portal, doubled-over, breathing in thick pants. Snot and blood and pristine spring water dripped from his face, pattering onto his bare feet. He nodded his head quickly, placatingly, and I realized those thick panting breaths were actually him repeating "okay" over and over and over again.

And then he looked up and finally recognized me.

"Who . . . ?" But he was too scared to finish.

"I'm the ghost of Mistakes Yet to Come. Go home, Paulie Boy," I sneered. "Get married. Settle down. Don't ever do any of this shit again."

He nodded. Actor Me—the calm little me deep in my head, pulling the levers and tweaking the knobs that made Character Me strut and fret his hour upon the stage—clinically noted the lack of surprise on New Me's face when I said "get married and settle down." I wondered why it was that I seemed to be from the only timeline where James and I *couldn't* just tie the knot and settle down, the only reality where things were so consistently and arbitrarily unfair.

What a stupid, petty little world I was stuck in.

For a second, it dawned on me that maybe the solution was to steal New Me's portal, to go out into his America, where James and I could just go down to the County Clerk and fill out a form, and then get back to choosing a cake-topper and being overcharged for white folding chairs with broad satin ribbons tied to them—just like every other glowing young couple.

Clean slate. New leaf. First day of the rest of my life. Blah blah blah.

I turned. I had every intention in the world of popping through New Me's portal, stealing his happy little life, and ditching him in Colonial Meth-burgh to sort it all out on his own while his James and I lived happily ever after as Mr. and Mr. Miller-Cointero.

But Wannakusket was there, standing next to the maple with Dead Me strung up on it, watching us. Wannakusket was pale as a dead man himself, with a bright spray of red spattered across his nose and cheeks like Morgan Freeman's freckles.

He held Chico's broad-brimmed hat. There was blood staining the straw. He looked at me, then at New Me. Dead Me's satchel swayed at Wannakusket's hip, rocking like a pendulum weighed down by that heavy little snuffbox of meth. A sixteenth of an ounce doesn't seem like much. That's not even the weight of a couple paperclips. But it can be the whole goddamn Universe, a champagne fountain of stars shooting right up your spine.

Wannakusket was eyeballing my satchel, then New Me's. I could see him measuring us up, calculating how much fight was left in us, how fast we could run, how far we could leap.

New Me finally looked up at me, and then past me to Wannakusket and Dead Me.

"That Native guy next to the scarecrow's got a tomahawk," he said flatly. His words were mushy. A little runner of bloody drool ran out the corner of his mouth at *tomahawk*.

"No," I said carefully, soothingly, the way you'd talk if you looked up and saw the bull was on *your* side of the fence. "That's not a tomahawk; that's a hammer." It was a short-handled maul. I could picture it in its former life, hanging at the side of Young Charles's anvil, one tool among many. But since those days it seemed that this maul had become Special, in that dangerous nonsense way that little objects did when you ran on meth for days upon days upon days, unblinking and manic and convinced that you and you alone were finally seeing What It All Really Means. Many painstaking, crystal-fueled hours had gone into carving an ornate filigree of

illuminated crosses into the wooden handle. Wannakusket held the maul formally, like a Templar holding his two-handed claymore. He raised the maul to his forehead, lightly touching it to a point between his eyes, then lowered it to his navel, then raised it to his heart, then brought it across his chest to rest it against the other nipple.

His eyes never left us.

“I think it’s time to go,” I told New Me, likewise keeping my eyes glued on this dedicated adherent to the Manifest Gospel.

New Me took one wordless step toward his portal. Wannakusket violently jerked, his eyes locking on to New Me and that fresh satchel with its heavy little snuffbox of Sacrament.

“But gimme your bag first.” I held out a hand blindly, and an unseen hand thrust a strap into it. Wannakusket’s eyes followed the satchel. I heard a single wracking sob—which I guess must have been from New Me—but it faded fast, washed out by a quiet crackle of portal static. Then there was a snap, and I couldn’t hear the portal any longer.

The forest was quiet. A bird sang, and then stopped, and then began again.

Wannakusket extended a hand in a gesture of unmistakable supplication.

“Communion,” he said huskily. “Communion.” His skin was pale and sweat greased, his eyes weepy.

I shook my head. “No. I think . . . I think I’m just gonna take these with me. You all need to take a break.” I stepped back, and he took two quick steps forward. I stepped back again, clumsily stumbling into the brisk creek, and he shook his head violently.

“No no no! Communion!” he begged, “God!” He begged, “God, God, God, God, God.”

“There is no God,” I croaked. “Just chemicals.”

I doubt he understood that, but his face darkened in a way that made it pretty clear he’d gotten the gist: *Sorry, ladies and gents: No Communion today.* He released Chico’s bloodstained hat, which landed on edge, rolled into the brook, and was whisked away toward the sea. It had a leatherette band stamped MADE IN CHINA. I wondered what history would make of that. Maybe nothing. Maybe the hat would sink and rot before anyone could find it and puzzle over how the hell the damn thing was made, the stitches so even, the weave so tight—all the perfectly regular detail work we ignore, because machines did it in faraway countries at the hands of people we couldn’t be bothered to imagine.

Wannakusket curled his lip and brought back his maul, choking up on the grip like a big leaguer. He coiled down through his hips, ready to pounce.

And then, true as dramatic irony and *deus ex machina*, a portal blossomed next to me, like fire pouring out into the air. I glimpsed down at the hourglass tied at my waist and saw it had run out. This was my ride.

Wannakusket’s face fell, not with slack-jawed shock, but with disappointment: Apparently the Good Lord did not mean for him to take by force what I refused to grant; He’d sent me a chariot of fire, and really did intend to abandon them and take back the Manifest Gospel He’d granted. I understood—because it really is a stupid, petty little world often enough. But that didn’t mean I was going to leave the meth with him. The buck has to stop somewhere.

I took one big step back up onto the muddy bank, and the next step put me through the portal. The shimmering temporal effervescence bubbled over me for the last time. It was, as ever, absolutely wonderful.

Even before the light cleared out of my eyes I knew something wasn’t right: We’d left Taylor standing in the conference room alone, but there were many voices now, chatting amiably. One was a touch clearer above the rest, asking “Well, who the fuck is *that*?”

"Oh, that's just Paul." Taylor answered, "Chico and Peggy will be behind him."

"No," I said, trying to knuckle the light from my eyes, "They won't. I ditched them in the village."

That stopped the conversation.

"Fuck, Paul, why'd you do *that*?!" Taylor said.

My eyes had finally cleared. The conference room was crowded with a half-dozen guys holding Starbucks cups. They all wore bulky blue jackets with DEA printed in yellow over their hearts and across their backs. Two happened to be facing me, and so I saw that the windbreakers looked bulky not because they were heavy, but because they covered Kevlar vests. The guys all had guns at their hips, but none were drawn—the holsters weren't even unclipped.

"I thought that was the plan," I said, bewildered.

Taylor rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, as though beseeching an Absentee God to check his goddamned voicemail for once.

One of the DEA guys—he bore an uncanny resemblance to a clean-cut Russell Means—was pretty clearly annoyed. "So Valdez and Durand are *not* coming through?"

Taylor ground a palm into one eye. He really was the most exhausted guy I'd ever seen. "Doesn't sound like it."

Agent Russell Means' sharp eyes never left Taylor's face. "Then why don't you just go get 'em, kid?" It was technically a question, but he didn't ask it like a question. He asked it like Robert De Niro asks for a table in a packed restaurant.

Taylor just laughed, shaking his head. "Because that is mos def above my pay grade, Special Agent Pete."

The Agent scowled. "These little expeditions don't come cheap, Chuckles; we're angling for big fish."

Taylor shrugged. "Then why not send one of your guys?"

All the DEA guys—who, I noticed then, were pretty damn young—assiduously avoided eye contact. Popping back in time to chase perps through the wilds of Colonial New England was evidently above their pay grade, too.

"I don't think anyone wants to do that," I volunteered. "There's a really pissed off um," I looked at the lead cop again, his umber skin and raven hair, "First Nations person standing just on the other side of the portal. He's got a sledgehammer."

That seemed to settle it. I guess DEA foot soldiers know better than anyone that, even if you're packing heat, you don't want to tangle with a hammer-wielding tweaker. Agent Russell Means tightened up, even more pissed off, but he remained silent.

"Anywho," Taylor said, easing between the mulling agents, "That being established, I'm just gonna shut this down before anyone over there gets bold." He reached the portal's controls, and the portal shrank, then dissipated. The rank-and-file finally relaxed.

And that's when one of the junior agents piped up. "Hey! I know that voice! You're Whiplash Bass!" Everyone turned, all smiles, and another called out "What's with the identical purses?" He meant my two satchels. The brimming snuffboxes of meth jumped to mind. Something must have passed over my face, because everyone darkened and sharpened. Hands brushed up to holsters.

"What's in those bags, sir?" the first junior agent asked, his voice as cold and deep as a well. I didn't answer—I swear I didn't, just by old reflex, Fifth Amendment and all that—but no answer was all the answer they needed. The guns came out, and I was on the floor before I knew what hit me.

So, that's how I got the bruised jaw and ribs, and the charge of possession of Schedule II controlled substance with intent to distribute, which I guess is all *factual*, even if it isn't exactly *true*.

December 2016

For what it's worth, I really appreciate you coming down in the middle of the night like this. And I'm sure you're really great at your job. But if at all possible, I really want Sully Green representing me. I think I need Mr. Attorney Man for this one.

In case it doesn't go without saying, I've got the money to pay:
I'm an actor.

* * *

**From the Journal of Pastor Ephraim Otis,
Quansigamog Pond, Massachusetts, 1770**

Two more emissaries have come—a Spaniard and goodwife. They are as soft of foot and hand as Parson Brown but bear none of his teachings nor the Lord's New Sacrament. Parson Brown does not return, and these new emissaries claim mystification. We fear they may be Fallen Angels sent for our perdition, or a test from the Lord, in like stead as He tested Job and Abraham.

We all fear for the states of our souls in a world absent the Face of God and His Communion through the Manifest Gospel. We are sick for want of the Lord's Grace. It is intolerable.

Young Charles takes hammer and tongs to the new emissaries, in hope of extracting some confession, and of showing the Lord the true depth of our steadfast Faith. Their cries rise swiftly to Heaven. If they are truly the Lord's servants, then He will intervene on their behalf soon, and we will again enjoy the full Ecstasy of his New Sacrament and Glistening Communion.

Until then we pray.

And pray

And pray

amen.

—*For Sri Gordon, Steff Weyand, and Stephen Trouvere, for filling the gaps.*