

Panic

When the elevator went down, he heard the voices behind him, but the other passengers in the elevator—a doctor in a white coat, and some kind of girl in boots—their voices drowned out the others. “When are you going for lunch?” the doctor was saying. “You can’t work through the whole afternoon.”

The yellow people, who had been with him all morning, didn’t like elevator rides, and they’d be waiting for him at the bottom. They usually were friendly, and the elevator made them nervous.

“I have a couple more hours in the library,” the girl with boots said. The toes of her boots grew longer, as he stared at them, so he looked up at the numbers, with the red light flashing behind, until one of the numbers smiled at him, and he had to look away. The toe of her boot was moving across the floor of the elevator like a snake.

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In the interview room, Dr. Mukhapattee’s face was pale wood-colored, a soft brown like his big eyes. He spoke softly, which Jacob appreciated. The doctor’s face was surrounded by a yellow light, which made Jacob hopeful.

He nodded and told the doctor he was going back to practicing his guitar.

“Good,” the doctor told him. The doctor seemed tired, and Jacob smelled paint on him. “I smell paint,” he said.

“I’m having my apartment painted,” Dr. Mukhapattee said. Jacob sensed Dr. Mukhapattee’s tiredness, and his kind feelings for a woman, someone young with joyful black hair.

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The long summer grass is gray in the humidity, which rises off it. The hills are empty except for the grass, that swishes against itself, the hills roll down like water, gray, the grass talking in the afternoon sun.

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“What do you think about the reality of love,” Jacob asked the doctor.

Dr. Mukhapattee said, “Why?”

“Do you love me, Dr. Mukhapattee?”

“Yes,” Dr. Mukhapattee said. “Everybody loves you. We all love you, and we don’t know what to do.”

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Months later, Jacob finds himself in the Metropolitan Hospital locked ward. The interior of the hospital common room is drowning in fluorescent light. The walls are beige, and metal occurs here and there like a staple holding up a stage set. If he looks at the walls long enough, they begin to peel back, and he can see the dark spaces behind. The infinite galaxies, spread like humming insects, that go back and back beyond the door to the laundry room, if you open it. The two wooden locked doors with the chrome handles across them, locked to keep him inside, when they open reveal the places outside, and today, when the visitors came screaming at each other in Spanish, the outside rolled in across the floor like green shouts. *Mira. Mira.* The vegetation of

Puerto Rico, big leaves, lush, they brought with them. He had to go back to his room, and sit on his bed, to avoid getting his feet dirtied in the green.

*

That afternoon months before, he had gone to the Institute library on the eleventh floor, to see if the girl with the boots was there. She had a large red line around her face, pulsing with shadows. She typed on a laptop. The yellow people hadn't caught up with him from the elevator; a bell dinged as it shut. "Do you work here?" he asked the girl. "I mean, do you work?"

"Yes," she said. Smiling.

"I'm in a clinical trial," he told the girl. "Some outpatient thing they're doing downstairs."

*

A few nights after Jacob is committed to Metropolitan, Sam the RN comes to chat with him. He is a nice man, with a long face, and sideburns. He laughs easily. He asks questions about the voices. Jacob says he doesn't have any. "What would you describe your anxiety level as," Sam says. "I'm not going to patronize you. You're smart. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being you can't stand it."

Jacob listens, nodding, smiling, seeking out the holes in the floor. There aren't any, right now, which means that Sam is not lying to him.

"You want something to sleep?" Sam says.

"No," Jacob tells him. He understands that Sam is sympathetic. Somewhere in his life, he's been in a dark place himself.

"You want to talk about how you came in here?" Sam says.

“It doesn’t make any difference,” Jacob says. “Today is not the day I came in.” He sees that Sam is writing with a Bic pen. “Today is a Bic,” he says. “When I came in, it was Pilot. I prefer Bic.”

Sam nods. “Right,” he says. “You know I work here five nights, and if you want anything, you come to ask me. Cigarettes, or whatever you want.”

“Thank you,” Jacob says.

“This time here, is a transition,” Sam says. “Until you get straightened out.”

“Dante is lost in the woods.”

“In the middle of the journey of my life,” Sam paraphrases, “I wandered, lost in the woods. I know that from college. *The Divine Comedy*.”

The red faces, the warners, erupt behind Sam’s ear. Behind his head. They warn Jacob by becoming his thoughts. He waves his hands to erase Sam’s words in the air, which are dangerous, like knives that will cut the walls open. He hurries back to his room.

*

He is clear on what happened at Stanford. He had a girlfriend, who may have been sent by the others, but he thinks, most of the time, she was not. Before the nature of the true energies of the universe was revealed to him, she was a blond girl who listened while he played the guitar. She wrote poems about her unhappiness. She wrote stories about him playing the guitar, about his body. He cannot think about it now, but they spent time naked in his bed together, and he remembers his orgasms, huge blasting waves he could not control. Possible happiness. Nights of whispering, when her face seemed to glow in the dark. Her breasts. She came from Berkeley. Her father was a surgeon, and later Jacob thought that meant she might be like him, a cutter.

He went to his classes, wrote to his mother, and got B's. His mother wrote that she was all right being alone, she was seeing Frank. The tone of her letters was chipper. He got an A in a course called World Civilizations. The professor invited him to come to his house with other students, and he brought his girlfriend, and they drank wine with dinner.

Being a freshman wasn't bad, he wrote to his mother. His roommate, who was studying Eastern religions, bought some pot laced with something else. This roommate, who was from New Mexico, tried to get him to smoke it, but he demurred. His roommate tossed up his hands mockingly, "I respect that," he said. "It's crazy, but I respect it. You might want to go into government work."

At the end of the spring break, his girlfriend Melody said she thought she was pregnant. He remembers sitting on the quad, watching the students lacing in and out of the pillars of a covered arcade, thinking that life left trails behind it, even after the body disappeared. He could see them weaving. Melody said she almost wanted the baby, but she decided to get an abortion. He told her she was wrong. They fought. He told her the baby was from God. "Before you were in the belly, I knew you," he said, quoting Jeremiah. She went home for the weekend, and when she came back, the baby was gone.

He was stricken, as if he'd killed the baby with his own hands. He stopped going to classes. He stayed in his room, sitting on his bed, praying without letting anyone know he was praying. His roommate, thinking to help, gave him some pot, and as soon as it hit his bloodstream, he went into some other universe. The walls were unstable. The wind and water and human voices twisted into a semblance of speech he did not know. The objects around him, even his own hands, twisted like snakes when he stared at them. He knew he had fallen off some edge, and he was alone with it.

This is how it was reconstructed later, when he was back in New York, having dropped out of Stanford.

He was eighteen years old. He had committed a terrible error. Wrath was going to destroy him. The people were sending him messages all the time. If he sat, the voices nattered behind him. The faces of the doctors he was sent to by his mother morphed into the faces of animals. One was a dog, another a devil. A third was a camel. He learned to sit quietly, smile and agree. He was afraid to say what he saw, because the people became enraged when you told anyone about them. He lived with panic.

*

That afternoon at the Institute library, the girl with the boots, who was named Esther, finished her typing and dropped it off with her boss, the doctor in the lab coat. He said to Jacob, "How's it going?" with his eyes like snow. A Nord. He understood, and had no pity. "How's it going," Jacob said to him. The girl took him out for a sandwich at the Greek diner on 167th Street. He told her about the secret lives of eggs. The beginnings that linger coiled in eggs, which is why he wouldn't eat them. They took the subway to the park next to St. John the Divine to look at the peacocks. The birds came up and he fed them the rest of his sandwich, and they picked at the ground, where the sandwich had fallen. He said he used to play the guitar.

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At Stanford, the professor talked about the Greeks, whom he already knew about, and the gods of the Romans as well. The cults of Mithra, Cybele, the other gods he has come to know personally when they speak to him about certain happenings. Events in which he is participating.

*

After they met, Esther helped him. She walked along the street with him, and because his shoe sole was flapping open, and he was alert for invasions, people stared at them. Because he had trouble speaking directly, he stammered. A man passing by looked at him curiously, and then more curiously at her. She said he looked like her brother, who had died. He told her he liked to play the guitar, and she gave him a guitar, that had been her brother's. He played, with odd chords that ran easily and then became dissonant in the middle of a song. The fingers taken over, he felt the song go somewhere else where it wanted to go. She gave him the guitar to keep, and he was happy to have it. The next time he came to visit, the guitar was slung over his shoulder like a club, the strings dangling broken, the back stove in. Eventually he forgot it somewhere.

*

At Metropolitan Hospital, Sam the RN comes to chat with him again. He asks if Jacob can sleep. "What about something to help you stay relaxed. You want that?" As he talks, the floor tiles develop huge holes in them. Sam is lying. He's come for the shot of Haldol the doctor ordered for him.

"No, thank you," Jacob says.

"Jake, we got to," Sam says. Jacob hits Sam right below his mouth. Four orderlies put him into seclusion. The rest of the week, he can't have any visitors. He sits by himself on the floor in the corner. They gave him the shot of Haldol anyway; three held him down, and Sam gave him the shot. "I'm all right," Sam said to one of the other orderlies. The first two days in seclusion he just sleeps, except when Sam or someone else comes to lead him to the bathroom.

*

Esther comes to visit, but the head nurse tells her to come back on Saturday. When she comes on Saturday she walks through the common room doors with red streamers around her, and the vegetation is swept back in waves. She brings Mars bars and Hershey bars.

“Your hospital is better,” Jacob tells Esther when they’re eating the candy bars. “Isn’t it.”

*

The toe of one of his father’s shoes had come unglued, so his bare foot showed. He left it like that, so the shoes were asymmetrical. The forces he sometimes picked up on streets, when he was walking behind people, were confused by asymmetry. Sometimes he wore the shoes on the wrong feet, to avoid this.

He wore his father’s tuxedo, and his dress shoes, which he got out of the dark closet with the smell of mothballs. He wore them to visit the clinic.

“Afternoon, Jacob,” the nurse said. “You look like an ad for a Rolex.”

“It’s because I have to watch it,” he said. She laughed. Behind her, the shadows were forming faces. He laughed because she laughed, and the shadows dispersed while he was laughing.

“Where is Dr. Mukhapattee?” he said.

“He’s on a different rotation. He’s gone to a different service.”

When he sat down with the woman researcher, who had dangerous earrings, like points of blame, she wanted him to see the new doctor about increasing his medication.

“We can raise the dose. I think you need a little more.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

He was trying not to stammer, and he knew that more of the med would make his tongue even thicker. Yesterday, he’d wanted to drool all afternoon, because he was tired of swallowing

all that saliva. Just now, for a half an hour, he went into the bathroom at the clinic and drooled into the toilet, until the men using the urinals outside, who were speaking Spanish, said they wanted to go to a festival, and he knew it was a code word. Festival, fester, part of what was eating his brain.

He ran out of the bathroom and frightened a woman waiting on a bench in the hall. “Slow down, motherfucker,” she said.

*

His mother’s boyfriend Frank plays the piano in a bar on 50th Street. He’s short and wears a black vest. He reminds Esther of someone from a story by Damon Runyon. The floating world. She feels uneasy around him, because he plays the piano for gangsters. Strip clubs. He stays at Jacob’s mother’s apartment on Park Avenue, bought by the father with the tuxedo.

*

When Jacob is in Metropolitan, Frank throws him a birthday party in the hospital. “Put your glad rags on,” he says when he invites Esther. He brings a cake with candles that the head nurse says Jacob can light, but has to blow right out. They eat the cake. By that time, the top of the cake is showing Jacob messages in the pale yellow icing. Words from the yellow people, warning him about the head nurse. After his visitors leave, she’ll tell him it’s time for his weekly shot. He hardens his muscles, to repel the injection. After six weeks, now he finds that he can’t control the drooling at all. His feet slap on the floor when he walks. He can pay attention to the programs on television; they’re about a dog, and a talk show with a beautiful woman who tells about her divorce. The television rarely gives him advice, any more. But one afternoon it does: “Wait in the bathroom,” it says. “We can talk to you in the water.” He runs the water in the sink, a gray steel basin that shows a blurry outline of his face. The water contains a soft song about

Hiawatha. A melody. He runs the water until the nurse comes to stop him. “Come on now,” the nurse says. “Back with everyone else, where we can see you.”

*

Jacob’s mother still owns the apartment on Park Avenue. She says to Esther, ‘When his father was alive, Jacob wasn’t like this.’”

Frank says, “There was an aunt with problems, back in Tennessee.”

His mother wears a dark dress made of velvet, a deep neckline. She’s living with the old furniture. The Park Avenue apartment has the decay of something not changed for twenty years, once grand, now smelling of smoke and a lack of housekeeping. Dark interiors, with grand things, not cleaned.

“I had Jacob when I was thirty-five,” his mother says.

Frank smokes a cigar, standing behind her. He met Jacob’s mother when she came to the club, with her husband. He is devoted. “The aunt. My husband’s sister,” his mother says in her southern accent. “I never knew her, but she had to go away.”

Esther wonders why his mother seems so calm amid this chaos. The apartment, overlooking the Avenue, that the management must be dying to get them out of. The doorman who has known Jacob since childhood, and nods hello as he comes and goes, with his ragged clothing, his symbolic outfits, his father’s neckties, the wardrobe he has depleted, week by week, for the last five years. “I buy him clothes,” his mother says, “and he loses them.”

The girl imagines sweaters all over the city, new, light blue sweaters, gray, tasteful. His mother doesn’t seem sad that he loses them, or angry, either.

*

On her sofa, she listened to Jacob talk for hours, when she was exhausted and he wouldn't go home. He talked in poems, in codes, in images that stood for something else. Talk of light and shadows, she thought. Like no talk she'd heard before, not even in the poems in classes she'd taken. The speech that was other speech.

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"Well, I don't know," his mother said to Esther. "He was just fine until he went to college."

Esther would later tell her boss that she was surprised how uninvolved Jacob's mother seemed about everything. She didn't even visit him in the hospital. Her boss, who had just spilled coffee on his lab coat, told her that it was a cluster of genes. "It's a whole complex," he said. "We don't have enough studies. But if he's got enough of a load, she's got part of a load. She's going to be unusual herself."

*

Esther sat in the Park Avenue living room, waiting for Jacob to finish his bath. In a while they would go walking across town, where passersby would stare at them on the street. They'd go to the club where Frank was playing. Esther waited in a chair of exquisite French brocade, that smelled of cigarette smoke. The presence of Jacob's dead father had been spilling out of numerous closets as Jacob had been dressing himself over the months. Umbrellas, trench coats from Burberry's, hand-made shoes, several tuxedos, suits made in England.

"His father's family moved to Memphis," Jacob's mother said. "That was where I met him." She seemed to take everything as equally probable. Esther, whose life was full of financial and emotional uncertainties, marveled again at how Jacob's mother, with this extensive strangeness around her, found nothing strange at all.

“They were from Philadelphia,” his mother said. “They came before the American Revolution.”

Jacob emerged wearing his pajama bottoms. He slowly put on his father’s Burberry raincoat, and tugged on one battered dress shoe. “Wear socks, at least,” his mother told him.

He got up off the brocaded settee with its French gilding and returned after several minutes with a pair of huge white athletic socks, that he put on slowly, as if he were doing it for the first time.

“Do you need money?” his mother said. “I don’t have any.”

“I have some,” Esther said.

They changed plans. They went to the movies on 96th Street, but had to leave right after it started, because the words rolling across the screen, appearing and disappearing, were too specific. They told him to get out of the theater. Something bad could happen in the dark, with Esther. He would hurt her like he hurt the other blond girl, whose name he couldn’t remember, except when he heard the word meaning something else.

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Melody sits on his bed in his dorm, and tells him she’s missed her period. “I got the test, and I got the red line.”

He waits for her to finish. “I’ll get it taken care of,” she says. “You don’t even have to think about it. But you could give me a couple hundred dollars. I owe my mother.”

I’ve killed her, Jacob thinks. She doesn’t show it yet, but it’s going to come to her slowly. He is filled with a self-disgust so intense that he goes into the men’s bathroom and vomits. When he looks at himself in the long mirror over the sinks, there are, for the first time, moving lines around his eyes like hundreds of small automobiles of different colors.

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One night he came home to the Park Avenue apartment with a broken front tooth and a red, swollen eye. His mother told him to stop riding on the subway. Especially late at night.

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When Jacob brings Esther up to his mother's apartment, the doorman looks at him strangely, because the doorman is new and he's heard about Jacob.

"His father's family was six generations in the mountains in Tennessee," his mother says. "Jacob never went there. But originally, they were Quaker, in Philadelphia. They had to leave, because of some problem with business. I never paid attention." Her fingernails are scarlet. Esther feels more dislocated by Jacob's mother today than she has previously.

*

On the night that the final game of the World Series is played in Yankee Stadium, Jacob walks through Central Park. The bushes are hiding people, sometimes real, and sometimes the voices. A woman under a streetlight asks him if he wants a good time, until he gets up closer, and she says, "Never mind, honey." He sees that she is a woman and a man. At the edge of the lake, he takes off his father's shoes, and the tuxedo, and his shirt, and drops them in the path. The streetlights, like old gaslights, cast cones in the dark. He flings away his belt, and kicks off his pants, his boxer shorts. It's a good night for swimming. The fountain's shut off, but the lake water glitters red and purple. A pair of men pass him, and watch him, walking naked. When they're past, Jacob hears laughter like the barks of dogs. The sounds carve like knives across the back of his head. The air. The yellow people haven't shown up since sunset. He stops at the edge of the water, in the rushes, and wades in where some plastic bottles and other trash float. A food wrapper, translucent, rattles against the shore, bright white. He covers his ears, to see if the

sound of his own legs splashing in the water will echo less. The water reaches his waist, he ducks his head under, getting a noseful. Under water, the voices change, the roar grows louder, as if a train is bearing down on him. A train, coming right through the water, and up into his head.

He swims, floundering, up as far as the bridge. Strikes his foot against something sharp in the water, a bright blue pain. When he stops, gasping, hanging on to the stone piling of the bridge, trying to get his breath, the yellow voice winds down the pylon, and enters his left hand.

When the men come to get him out of the water, he runs across the grass, and when they catch him, and put a silver plastic sheet around him, he swings at one, until the solid one, who doesn't talk to him as if he's a fool, hits him in the windpipe.

"Why are you out here without any clothes on?" the young one says. "You looking for business, or what?"

"No, he ain't," the solid one says. "He's a section eight."

Jacob's throat has a huge buzzing crater in it.

"You ain't suppose to be out without clothes on. Where's your clothes?"

"This is the way God made me," Jacob says, struggling until they pin his arms behind him.

"Amen to that," the solid man says. "Call it in. We need another heat blanket."

"Come on, nature boy," the smaller man says. His face streams with a thousand red tears that lift off his cheeks as if the wind is blowing them. Except even Jacob knows there isn't any wind.

"What is it with these guys?" the man driving the car says. Reading the laptop on the car's dashboard. "They like the spring breezes, or what?"

“This is the way I was born,” Jacob says. The police officer, the one without the blanket, who tackled him in front of the statue of Alice in Wonderland, keeps holding his arm as they drive.

“Come on, Alice,” he says. “You got family somewhere, or did they already give up on you?”

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His second stay at Metropolitan Hospital, the regular doctor has been rotated off the service, and Jacob does not know the young resident who appears to evaluate him. A short, dark young man. Huge brown eyes that are rotting in the middle. Ambitious.

“What’s up?” the resident says, when they’re alone at the table in the common room on the ninth floor. The resident leans his chubby cheek on his fist. He’s tired.

“I’m hungry,” Jacob says. “I’m hungry with a hunger no food can fill.”

The ambitious resident types on his laptop. “You want a meal? They can order one.”

“They can write my name on the side of the potatoes,” Jacob says. “And everyone will know how important I am.”

The ambitious resident types more. He tells Jacob he needs to have his foot sutured, they’ll go back down to the surgical ER. The resident’s looking for something to make important, that he can tell people about. He wants to make Jacob something important, but he doesn’t think he can.

“My foot isn’t clean,” Jacob says. “Can you see?” He laughs.

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The wind blows over the grass, on the hills of Tennessee. He watches the grass bend, in a long sweep, as the wind touches it. Red, and blue, and coral and green.

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He'd looked through the ashtrays to find butts big enough to smoke, and found two. Since his last shot of Haldol, his hands had been shaking so much that he had trouble getting the flame to the end of the butt. He pushed his hands together, as carefully as he could, but it was hard to make them touch the black end of the bent butt, and the match's flame.

Now that he was back in Metropolitan, the shots came twice a week, and he had trouble dressing himself. His hands shook so badly he needed to ask someone to hold the match, or else he burnt his fingers. He inhaled to keep the voices away, with the whoosh of his breath. The girl Ether came to visit him after he called her. She brought some books, and candy, mostly Mars bars and Reese's peanut butter cups. He was always hungry for sugar.

One afternoon he was having a slow dressing day, and he was naked, standing looking out the window. He'd finished his shower a while ago. The city rooftops outside the window were pumping slowly up and down, moving across the sky whenever he let his eye rest on them. Saints were hiding, ready to manifest themselves in those buildings. Sometimes the brilliant light of a saint sparked off one of them, as the sun moved. He knew the nurses were going to come in and tell him to get dressed, because the doors were open. But when he heard someone at the door, and turned, it was Esther, with a paper bag in one hand.

She saw his body, pale, the fine muscled torso, the genitals nestled in blond hair between his legs. His buttock, the jut of his hip. He was beautiful. It surprised her.

She turned and fled before either of them had a chance to speak. He got dressed slowly. There had been a red shine around her. Even now, in the heaving room, with the points of the steel beds standing for rules of behavior, as reminders.

Later when he sat across from her in the common room, she gave him the cigarettes, the Mars bars in the paper bag. He stared at them after she set them on the table between them. She said, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you weren't ready. They said to go find you."

He said, "What was that, Esther? Was that Aphrodite?"

She didn't answer. He felt an enormous sadness with her, heavy in the stomach. She herself ate one of the Mars bars, and it made her smile, and underneath it all, a new fear. She had been thrown backwards by what she saw. Her face was white.

"What did you do today?" she said.

He didn't answer, because he couldn't remember anything. They sat for a while and didn't talk. "Okay," she said finally. "I'll be going."

When she left, he said, "Goodbye, Melody."

By the time she'd gotten to the end of the hall, where the elevators were, he'd turned back to the common room, where the TV was showing a game show. He sat to watch. He didn't think about Esther. By nine o'clock he would have his meds and be in bed. Sleep came easily.

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He sees the hills with the grass whispering, that he has never seen. The long, rolling reach of the sun, across the surface of the hills like water. He comes again to the mountains of Tennessee. The fair sweet wind, with a thousand voices that carry him along with their promise that when he opens his eyes, the world will be solid. That every shoe and toothbrush and grain of salt will stay in its place, silent, and the life will be gone from it. The duty of the earth, its heart, will be where he wants it to be.