

1. Z

I hate myself.

This story is as much an exercise of self-loathing then anything else. Self-loathing then seems too strong a word—self-hate would be more appropriate. But then self-hate becomes too broad a term—and as I peruse my dictionary for words beginning in “self” I’m lost. Self-loathing that this story, at its heart, is not fiction, but in its heart, is.

This verse is as much an exercise in illusions as allusions. Standard it seems, but there’s always that little bit of me that keeps crawling up. It’s a little thing, a little hot thing, like chile, that twists and turns in your stomach and keeps you awake at night. I turn to my dictionary and again there’s no word for what I’m looking for. The closest would be pride. A new Ulysses of trash, heaps and mountains of crap. That’s what I’m looking for. Dictionaries are rendered hopeless.

Mostly stories are stories. They can be about as much or as little as the author wants. The less there is, the more the words themselves must tell a story. I have faith in my words—that in these totally random symbols there can be inherent worth. Gold is gold, whether stamped or ground, or in little flakes in the bottom of alcohol.

Faith—yes that is what is needed. I want to write a lot, and I want to write about a lot. But, truth is, there isn’t a lot to write about. I might as well start, otherwise this faith in words is going to look very flimsy indeed—a ramshackle house of rigged cards.

I was an alcoholic. That’s pretty much all you need to know about me then, or about me now, or about me in about twenty years, when I may or may not be loved, but at the very least, I’ll still be drunk. But then, back then I was an alcoholic. I never got drunk—that’d be a pity. Yet I drank quite a bit, which is astounding. Because, because, because of some outstanding quality about alcoholism. Something—but that’s memory loss for you.

I knew a lot of interesting characters who quite enjoyed the fact that I was an alcoholic. The first that comes to mind is Charles Teamaker, who of course loved tea, and made me an alcoholic. You see, Charles Teamaker spiked my first raspberry tea. From that point on I never stopped drinking. But I never got drunk mind you.

Charles Teamaker was always very entertained about the fact that I was an alcoholic. To him, it was like he was training his neighbor into a warrior. “More cheery for the liver” was his battle cry. He was a dreary, depressing, and amazingly dark British import, who plastered his walls in black paper and claimed to speak with the dead.

Don’t get me wrong, he’s real. I mean, beyond this story. He’s real. But he’d sue me.

On some clumsy August evening I got up from my frosty windowsill and went into Charles’ room. I hated his room more than anything except myself and possibly apples. His room was so pitch black that the first thing anyone can help notice upon entering was Charles’ eyes—like a cat’s. I hated his room so much that I went there every day, hoping to find something new that I could hate even more than my crooked little existence. So far, so—

I went into his room so much that I should have been used to Charles Teamaker, who—amazingly enough—brewed large quantities of homemade tea which was definitely a little on the shady side. But, when I went in that evening, it was still dark, and to my credit, it was very dark. He still scared the hell out of me.

"I see great misfortune in your future!" he cackled in his hideously urbane accent.

I punched him in the stomach and turned on the lights. Charles doubled over onto his bed, nursing his stomach. I groped for hot water to fill my mug, which contained some coffee mix.

"Tea—" he wheezed between gasps.

I ignored him and looked out the window again. Some kids were on the move.

Whereas I was an aspiring novelist, Charles Teamaker wanted to be a famous poet. When I asked him why he didn't want to be a novelist too, he answered simply that Teamaker was a horrible name for an author, but for a poet it was magnificent.

Charles had regained his bearings and was now bearing down on me. I had time only to put down my mug before he had tackled me down, breathing heavily of spiked Earl. I threw him back and he confronted me.

"What are you depressed about now?"

Everyone I knew in Building Z thought I was a depressed nutcase, which was pretty accurate. I, of course, hated myself for everything I was and was not. I considered for some time blowing myself up—not literally of course—but the contrast of that me and the real me would just be more of a burden than the depression to begin with.

"Nothing. Go sip your tea."

I got up, brushing myself up, looking outside the window again, where the march continued.

"Why are you always so sad?" he asked, half-sarcastically.

"Because I have to live with you."

I marched out of the dark room. Charles whispered something sadistic behind me as I slammed the door and left. I turned around and was face to face with Miff Durango, my other unfortunate suitemate. I suddenly came to remember that the only

thing I possible could have hated worse than Charles Teamaker's room—and myself—was Miff Durango dressed up.

Miff had decided to dress up as, well, as many things as humanly possible. His feet jangled in cowboy boots with spurs. His pants were covered by a large white sheet, but underneath I could see that he was wearing tin foil. His belt contained, among other things, a sword, a gun, a whip and a bottle of water. His shirt was an interesting mix of chain mail, blood stained vest, and Star Trek insignia. Above his cape, his head was wrapped like a ninja, though glued on above that were bolts and large pointy ears.

Miff wore a cowboy hat.

"Mike! Mike—well, I couldn't damn near decide on one thing to wear this Halloween, so I thinks to myself, why not wear the whole damn assortment, but, shoot, I seem to have forgotten a few things this year—but I figure that what I don't wear this year I can wear next year, well, I did figure that until I wrote down the list, but the good news is that I won't need a costume for the next three years."

Miff's voice was distinctly muffled.

"Miff, it's not Halloween for two months."

I moved past him into the common room. The windows there were open and an open breeze and a blazing heater were competing.

"Sorry about the heater and the window and all, but with the window closed it's freaking hot in here and with the window open it's freaking cold in here. I couldn't quite think of a solution but then I thought if both were—"

"Why not turn off the heater?" I said.

"Can't, it seems as though Central Heating decided that for the duration of our stay that we must fry and bake, which I must say is a very haughty thing for them to do considering the varied makeup of our, our, our, sociological and geological background, no? Don't you agree Mike?"

I opened my mouth, which apparently qualified as agreeing because Miff continued. I ignored him and moved on to Bertrand Rattle's room. Miff stopped suddenly. Miff didn't care much for Bertrand for some reason that I wasn't sure of mostly because of the

haze that was my life. Miff turned. Bertrand's door opened. Miff, with one last hmph, quickly retreated.

Bertrand, of my three certifiably nutty suitemates, was the least nutty. In fact, he was the least of most things, except in physicality, for he towered at least six inches higher than us. Yet, he was so everlastingly quiet that for the first week we thought he was mute. He instilled quiet, which was fine for me. I was depressed and enjoyed the quiet because it was melancholy.

Bertrand and Miff, therefore, were fundamentally incompatible, which was a shame, because any scene containing both was comical. The towering six foot four black man and the short and very energetic five foot six white man stood out like dogs playing poker.

I liked my suitemates. We were branded the nuthouse, but that of course made sense. Miff was so energetic that at times I thought he would simply disintegrate into energy one day. This worried me, because the result would probably flatten the greater Elmwood area and leave a big crater. Charles Teamaker was so nutty that he deserved to have a nut named after him. His teas were remarkably talented; they did everything from heal to create love. And of course hate.

Even Bertrand was a mystery, for, despite his great size, compassion, and silence, he was completely and absurdly normal.

The reason, I had figured, for my self-loathing was quite medical, if you can call the mystical medical. The first day I arrived here, Charles Teamaker accidentally gave me a brew of his hate tea, which was also tinged with his addiction tea and a shot of depression peach schnapps.

I drank from that day on.

I'd like something cheery. Charles Teamaker was dark and crazy. Miff was just crazy. Bertrand was just quiet.

We lived in Building Z, which was constructed much like a mental institution, if only that it used to be a mental institution. How they turned it into a dormitory was always a great mystery, but there were four room cells that led to a common room. We lived in Hallway the First on the second floor, with many windows that

opened onto the streets of Elmwood below, where many children marched about, milling in the streets.

I was the drunk, depressed, inevitable, or so they claimed. They were right, of course.

I waited, but Bertrand did not appear. I pushed the door gently, but no one was there. The lights were on, which was my favorite thing about Bertrand. But Bertrand wasn't there.

Miff, creeping bouncily around the corner, piped in.

"Where's Bert?"

Bertrand hadn't looked like he liked being called Bert, but so far he had not said anything.

"I'm not sure," I responded. I went back into my cell to have a shot before going to sleep, reminding myself that to look in the mirror on the way and pronounce my hate one more time.

I woke up to lights in my eyes, squiggly bright dots that danced all over my eyeball. I shook it off and opened my room door.

Somehow during my short bout with rest, Miff had gone trick-or-treating around all of Elmwood on August 31st, and he was holding two large garbage bags filled with candy. He stared at me carefully.

"Miff? I couldn't sleep."

"Well, Mike, here's candy," he said, handing me a bag. "Be awful careful because in the bottom fourth of the bag there is candy from the Nyasha section of town, and you know how folk are down there in that part of town, a little shady if you ask me, but you know I don't hold it against them because they have a really nice section of town, but I'm just warning you because I think some of the candy that they gave me was a little stale—"

I cut him off.

"Am I well hated Miff?"

This silenced him.

"Hated? Of course you're well hated, we're all well hated."

He dropped one garbage bag of candy, and without a word turned and went into his room. It was the least he had ever said to me, I think.

I turned, dragging inside the garbage bag filled with candy and sat down on my bed to hate myself. I looked at my hands and remarked how hairy the knuckles were, which was stupid. My wrists, pumped full of cortisone injections, were a little swollen, which was also a little stupid.

I hated the way I hated my quite hateable suitemates, who were quite crazy, and deserved to be hated because of the damned way they tormented me day in and day out. I hated the way I ate steadily from the garbage bag filled with candy, until, sometime close to eleven, I simply fell asleep.

When I woke up, Bertrand was sitting at the edge of my bed. I nearly wet myself. It was completely dark, and all I could see were two eyeballs hovering several feet above me.

"Holy shit!" I cried.

Bertrand was taken aback and the eyeballs drifted back a few inches before settling back into their original position. There was a very awkward moment of silence. I didn't know what to do. Bertrand never responded to anyone, so we had stopped trying. If he spoke, we listened, but mostly he only spoke when non-verbal communication was absolutely impossible. So far, the number of times that had happened (and we kept track) was once. *Pass the pineapples, please.*

I wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, but I went back to sleep. It was a little strange with Bertrand sitting there, but I managed anyway. I dreamed a strange dream, with a cheery stranger who talked to me casually and a dark haired girl whose sadness was pristine. The man suddenly stopped talking to me and was quiet, and the sad girl gave me a strange sad smile, and winked at me in the most delicious way. I woke up, and Bertrand was still there. I glanced at my watch. It was midnight.

"What the hell? How long have you been sitting there?"

There was no response. Bertrand blinked.

"Er, Bertrand, are you alright? If you're not feeling well, Charles probably has something to make you feel better."

He blinked again, twice this time.

"Um, well?"

He blinked very slowly, then I heard him take a breath. This was amazing—I wasn't aware of any previous case of Bertrand breathing.

"I met a girl."

The voice that emerged was deep, soothing, and scared the crap out of me. I didn't know what to say, as my brain scrambled around desperately.

Then, in a stroke of genius, I fell asleep again.

My dreams continued the same track they were on. The man was telling me about his job as a doctor or something or other. His image stood in the background of the silver screen in my head, his jacket in the crook of his arm, his voice soothingly crashing gently against the shores of my ears. Against this noise the sad girl closed her eyes.

I woke up again, and Bertrand was still there. Ten minutes had passed. Naturally, I was still a little dazed.

"Jesus! Wh-what? What?"

"I met a girl," Bertrand rumbled back.

"Wh-who? What? Who?"

"Her name is Katherine Elliot Shore."

"Kathy Shore?"

"Yes," he responded slowly.

I wanted to keep him talking long enough for Miff and Charles to notice and come by to witness the miracle of verbosity I was witnessing.

"Where did you meet her?"

"Outside Y, as I was walking back from class."

I wanted to cry, it was so beautiful hearing Bertrand speak.

"Oh? And? You meet lots of girls, don't you? Kathy Shore?"

"She is—quite beautiful. I thought perhaps I would ask her to dinner sometime."

I counted two sentences strung together. I heard Miff stirring in the next room.

"Wh-why are you telling me this?"

"I was hoping you could perhaps give me some advice on the matter."

I stuttered wordlessly, clucking around for something to say, anything to keep him talking. His vocal chords seemed intent on staying shut as long as humanly possible though, and my silence couldn't elicit a response. Bertrand finally emitted one long breath. While I was trying to debate whether it was an irritated or disappointed sigh, he spoke.

"Maybe some other time," he said gently.

With a tender move, he got up from the bed and walked past a mystified Miff Durango. Miff stared, open-jawed and seemingly at loss for words, although as soon as Bertrand passed Miff had quite a few words.

"I was having the strangest dream, in which I was eating candy out of thin air, which may of course have resulted from me eating so much freaking candy today, but then I heard Bertrand speaking and—Mike? Was Bertrand speaking?"

"No," I lied beautifully.

Miff stared at me.

"Yes," I said, cringing. My beautiful lie! All crumpled up, like stamped origami.

"He was? Bertrand never speaks though? What could be so important that—oh jeez, you're not dying are you Mike? That'd be a tragedy and a half, you dying—oh but obviously you're not dying looking at your reaction. Then what was it? Oh shit, Bertrand must be dying! No? Is there a war going on? Oh, are we drafted? That'd be a shame or two. Unless, unless, unless—Bertrand was in love?"

I stared hard. How had Miff known?

"How did you know?"

"Oh we're drafted? Oh no! That's horrible? I mean, I'd love to fight someday for something—but what's there to fight for? I mean, love maybe, maybe if my girlfriend—if I had a girlfriend—was doing something that needed fighting for, I'd fight for her, or with her, no not with her like against her, but with her, like side-by-side, until at the very end—wait I do have a girlfriend!"

"Yes. And I meant that Bertrand likes a girl."

"A girl? Bertrand? Where did they meet, a mime society? Ha! I should hope so. But then again, if Bertrand is suddenly speaking, then there must be something special about this one.

What's her name? Oh, I bet—hm, who could it be? Someone nice? Probably not too short, since Bertra—oh I know. Kathy Shore. She is very nice looking, although I think her hair might be dyed."

"Her hair is brown."

"Exactly! I think it was strawberry blonde to begin with—but with everyone dying their hair strawberry blond nowadays it's surprising when someone is a brunette—wait! Does that mean that the girl Bertrand mentioned is Kathy Shore? That's terrific! Well—"

Miff's powers of deduction were astounding as always, as long as they stayed on one path. Instead, his mind was always rampaging like an elephant, trampling aside the forest. I was still trying to imagine eating candy from thin air, as if the very essence of air could somehow suddenly produce little drops of solid sugar. Wonderful, wonderful sweet rain.

"Bertrand speaks?" Charles asked from around the corner.

"Sh," I whispered, ushering them all into Charles' cold and dark room. I flipped on the lights and corralled them into a chair and bed, and I stood by the door.

"Yes. Bertrand told me that he liked Kathy Shore?"

"Hmm," Charles said thoughtfully. He brewed himself a mug of tea as I told them both everything that I had seen or heard, though my words cringed as they glazed over the part about my dream. My dreams were always quite nice, which disgusted me, and usually involved *her*, which disgusted me even more. Love in general was fairly disgusting at that point.

I was still trying to look for a greater tragedy to cling to. A war, as Miff had said. Or death, as Charles was always predicting. Something more than this self-hate that I was stuck with. I could only hate Miff and Teamaker so much to go along with my bare little hate for physical things. Which left me with myself, which is a terrible thing to hate. It's self-cannibalism with no point.

"We should confront Bertrand and present him with a cup of my finest Cupid Tea, which, served properly, will infuse him with the greatest of loves for this Katherine Shore. Once he lures her up to Z we will serve her a cup, and with that they will be in love!"

"You don't need tea for love," I scowled at him.

"Of course you don't, though the fact is that Chucky's Cupid Tea worked quite well for me and my girlfriend, that is, as soon as the indigestion passed. As for Bertrand, it sounded like, from Mikey's rather bare-bone description, that he is genuinely taken by this woman and will probably need no further goading then the sight of her—which, I may mention in a rather unfashionably unfaithful way, quite nice."

"What?"

I was suddenly beginning to hate myself for having even mentioned that Bertrand spoke at all. I could have lied, and it would have been easier than dealing with these idiots. Charles and Miff were now arguing, mostly stemming from Charles' dislike of Miff's nicknames, and Miff's anger that we called him Miff to begin with. I hated getting yelled at, even more so when it wasn't by myself, staring in the mirror at some weird time.

Most effective, it seemed, was not a mirror, but something vague, like my computer screen, which wasn't a perfect mirror (what is?). Something vague like that you can cry at without blame—it's not that you're ugly it's just that the screen does a bad job of reflecting your good points.

"So?" Charles was saying.

"So what?" I responded, confused. I had been trying to force a piece of Charles' black wall paneling into giving back a reflection of me, to which I could cry or yell, depending on my mood.

"As I was telling er, Charles here, we should see about this Katherine Shore, you know, look out for our good buddy Bert—er, Bertrand. Class, tomorrow, we should follow Bertrand, without being seen of course, so that we can see about this Katherine Shore. I know her, and she's a nice girl, but since Bertrand is being so tact about his new interests, we should investigate for ourselves."

"I agree with Miff," Charles said, with a slight skip in his voice.

"Fine," I said. I hated being the captain of the ship of fools. Miff pulled out his map of Building Z and pointed excitedly to the tower, where he claimed the three of them could hide comfortably. Meanwhile, he drew up timelines of Katherine and Bertrand's schedule for the most likely time for them to meet. Charles sat

quietly sipping his tea. When Miff finished, he was breathless, licking at the air like it was a lollipop. Without further rush, he rushed back into his room. He was like the wind, when the wind is colorful and rustles noisily.

Charles didn't say a word, but grinned at me idiotically. I automatically reached for a bottle of peppermint schnapps, which I gently swigged from. Charles grin widened.

"What are you looking at?"

"You seem ill," Charles responded. It was true, I was a little sick, not only of myself—rather it seemed that an adventurous colony of sickness had taken up in my throat.

"The best medicine is love," he said cryptically, shutting his door and turning off his lights, leaving me in the hallway wondering.

That night, I dreamed of kisses.

Building Z was constructed much like a mental institution, if only that it used to be a mental institution. How they turned it into a dormitory was always a great mystery, but Miff Durango seemed quite intent on solving that great mystery—always. It was constructed out of a strange white plaster-like material which seemed impervious to most damage except the exceptional type, like when Miff had taken a drill to it.

Z was strange in that it was completely flat, a huge one-story complex that stretched. Z Tower was mostly a joke, since it was actually a 1.2 story tower attached to the corner of Z which stretched to the other complexes. It was from this Tower that we were supposed to spy on Bertrand, though I was a little tipsy when Miff presented his plan.

We geared up for the expedition much as the usual fashion. Charles took his belt pack, which contained a sampler of the teas that he stocked. Many were medicinal. I packed a flashlight and my hip flask, and Miff had his backpack filled with goodies. We set off through the ventilation ducts, which would not only bypass the annoying Bosses who lived two doors down, but would be faster.

We slid through the silver lined ducts, which blasted uncomfortably warm air in our faces. Z was at best a maze. Miff,

who was intent on knowing everything, had immediately set upon mapping Z from the beginning of the year, but even his great energy and ingenuity had so far produced only a local map that went as far as Z Tower. The Tower itself was locked by extraordinary means, but Miff was well prepared for that and had somehow discovered a course on lockpicking that year.

As we snaked our way through the ducts, we often paused to consider forks in the path. Miff led; I followed. Charles was at the rear of the pack, and most of the things he said were drowned out by the continual roar of air moving through the ducts. Which means that everything I said to Miff was also lost. Which means that Miff was leading us. Which was scary enough.

We came at last to a long sliding section of dark ducting. I pointed my flashlight past Miff, but no matter what I could not find the end of the section. It sloped down gently. We huddled, squeezing together at an intersection nearby.

"I think this is the way," Miff screamed.

"What?" Charles replied.

"Miff, towers go up, not down," I yelled.

"What?" Miff replied.

"The duct section slopes down!" I roared.

"I know!" he responded.

"The tower is up!"

"I know!"

"How do we get there?"

"There are stairs!"

"Where?" I asked.

"At the end of this section!" Miff said emphatically.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"We're in an air duct!" Charles screamed suddenly.

Miff and I turned to look at Charles, who stared back gloomily at us.

"What?" he screamed.

Miff and I both grabbed Charles and shoved him down the sloping duct section. He immediately began sliding down. Miff leapt

head first into the duct, and I slid in after him. As I slid, my flashlight bounced in my hand, making the walls light up everywhere.

Suddenly, the duct dipped down, the angle suddenly increasing with our speed. I lost grip of the flashlight and it flickered out. Now, sound took over, and all I could hear was a crash of equipment as Miff's bag leaked. My flashlight collided with the walls of the duct as we fell. My hip flask came loose and slid with us. The decline was still increasing, and I soon became disorientated by the seeming free fall. Finally, before we hit the final drop, I managed to grab hold of my flask. With that, we dropped straight down, strangely enough, into the light.

I woke up, slightly dizzy, on the cold white floor of a huge square room. Around me was strewn the equipment from Miff's bag: a water bottle, a few CD's, headphones, several non-functioning pocket watches, a now broken mug, dozens of different batteries, a small box of Kleenexes, and what seemed like hundreds of assorted pieces of metal.

I took a small sip of my hip flask as I got up. I discovered that I had been lying on Miff, who now groaned.

"Miff, are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm ok, though I must say that they have really redone the duct systems since I did my last exploration. I shouldn't have to intone that the last part of our journey was unexpected and was completely a mistake on my part."

He paused.

"Oddly enough, I was not able to foresee this fork in the road, or duct as it will. That it would lead to a room of this size and inconspicuous location would also be a surprise to me, as such a room surely has never been seen before in upper Z. Furthermore—"

Miff was cut off by a low moan. Miff discovered that he had been lying on Charles, who now groaned.

"Charles, are you alright?"

"Quite so, though I must say that the fall seems to have hurt quite a bit," he replied, carefully opening a small bottle of tea leaves.

He took out a few leaves and chewed them carefully, then offered the rest to us.

“Slight analgesic properties.”

“Uh, no thanks,” I said.

Miff dropped to his knees and began gathering up his possessions. From his bag, he took out an item that had not fallen, a strange contraption hooked up to a long coil of metal. He rummaged for a few batteries, then powered up the contraption. It magnetized, and Miff began using it to pick up the small pieces of metal.

I picked up my flashlight, which was battered but functioning. As I looked around, I remarked to the others about the odd room.

“So, where are we Miff?”

Miff, who had finished collecting his things, stared around at the odd empty white room, which was easily taller than Z. Each of the room’s walls was white, as was the ceiling and floor. The only gap was the hole in the ceiling from which they had fallen. As I looked closer though, I realized that each of the corners was cut in to create eight side walls. The little corner paneling was about the size of a person, though a little thinner. There, gaps in joint between the corner paneling let air run through.

Taking a wind-up breath, Miff suddenly stopped and cocked his ear. We all listened too, and heard a distant continuous noise. Charles suddenly grabbed me and threw me back as Miff himself dived out of the way. The noise suddenly condensed into a scream that kept going until a figure fell out of the hole in the ceiling, preceded by a pair of glasses which bounced away on impact. The figure fell to the floor in a crumpled mess of red and orange.

He landed with an unpleasant thump and immediately bounced to his feet, brushing off his clothes, which I realized were more like robes.

“Hi.”

He stared at us. There was no response. Even the ordinarily energized Miff was a confused.

“Uh, my name is Buddha.”

We stared back. Charles chewed rather noisily on his pain-relieving tea leaves.

“Buddha? The Enlightened One?” he said, glaring at us.

“Hi Buddha,” we responded morosely. I was reminded of my AA meetings.

“Hello Buddha. My name is Miff Durango, and these are my friends Charles Teamaker and—“

“My name is Michael,” I said, cutting off Miff.

“Ah, hello Michael. Charles, Miff, nice to meet you all. Um, what are you doing here?”

“Ah, I think I could best explain that. Uh, mister, uh, Buddha, sir, we have a friend who is in dire need. His name is Bertrand, and as a rather silent individual who has happened to have fallen in love with a young woman. Alas, we’re afraid that due to his silence he may be unable to convey his emotions—“

“Shut up Miff,” I said. Buddha’s eyes danced to mine, and there was an uncomfortable silence as I crumbled slightly in his eyes. My self-hate burned inside under his glance. His eyes moved on. Charles was staring at him distrustfully.

“What are you doing here, if I may ask?”

Buddha’s jumped to Charles.

“Me? Oh! Right, I’m looking for a girl too. Has anybody seen her?”

We shook our heads.

“Oh, well too bad. I was supposed to appear in front of her, you know, the normal, but she did not appear on time.”

“What was her name?” Charles asked.

“Katherine Shore, about yea tall?”

Buddha waved his hands somewhere slightly above himself.

“Ah! Katherine Shore, for that is the name of the lady whom Bertrand has fallen in love with!” Charles cried out.

“Oh, I know! Of course,” Miff said, glancing at his watch. “Katherine was probably distracted by Bertrand! Her trajectory was effected ever so slightly by Bert, and Buddha here couldn’t find her because she wasn’t where she planned to be. It makes perfect sense, except, only, we seem to be late ourselves.”

There was more awkward silence. Buddha cleared his throat.

"Look, I wouldn't suppose you would know the way out, do you? I mean, I'd like to eventually find Ms. Shore. Someone upstairs seems to think she needs to be found."

"I see. Well, to be honest I think we're lost," I said bitterly with a look at Miff. Miff looked sad and lost.

"Over here," Charles said. He had discovered the corner paneling, and was prying open one of the corners. The paneling snapped off and revealed a corridor similar to the air ducts. Miff was silent. I had rarely seen Miff outdone in such a thing, and to be outdone in front of the Enlightened One must have certainly been a disappointment.

We followed the air ducting for a little while until it came to a dead end. I ran the light from my flashlight up and down the seams of the end, but could find no gap.

"We seemed to have hit a dead end," Charles remarked. At this, Miff looked up at him. Buddha shrugged. I heard something in the walls, and put my ears up to them.

"Shh! I hear something!"

I struggled and closed my eyes, shutting down every sense I had except for hearing. Distantly, I heard small twangs against the walls, densely muffled. Then, a grunt.

"I heard small twangs, but they were muffled. And someone grunted."

"Maybe we should knock?" Buddha asked.

We all shrugged, and Charles knocked three times on the wall, which immediately opened onto the largest man I had ever seen.

He stepped back into the corridor beyond. His hair was blonde and long, shining, and he wore light armor strapped to his chest, which was easily twice as wide as Bertrand's. He was taller than Bertrand too, and every inch of him seemed to be cut from pieces of stone and assembled with the precision of a Honda. Someone had seemingly taken a very large fat man and cut out all the fat, leaving a slightly less large muscular man.

His jaw flexed like a ball of rubber bands.

"I am Achilles. You will wait your turn to challenge."

Buddha looked quite taken aback, and Miff had faded quietly. Charles pushed his way to the front.

"May we pass?"

"You are not ready to challenge."

"Why not?"

"You are not as powerful as they."

"Who?"

"No one at all."

Achilles leaned back on his shield, which glistened in the dim corridor lights. The shield was as tall as Miff. Behind it was tied a spear that was as tall as Achilles, and about as thick as my neck. Around his lower legs were wrapped massive amounts of armor. I cringed.

Buddha forced his way to the front. Suddenly Achilles seemed to be taken aback.

"Buddha?"

"Achilles."

"Oh, I didn't know they were with you."

"Uh, yes," Buddha replied.

"Alright then."

Achilles moved aside, quite softly for a man his size, and we slowly filed past. Miff cowered against the wall at the sight of Achilles, and even Charles didn't look too happy. I glared at Achilles, who frowned back.

"You may not want to disturb them," Achilles was saying. We looked to Buddha for an explanation, but the Lord was quiet.

"They are playing squash, and are not expecting visitors. They are grumpy today."

With that Achilles returned to his position guarding the dead end. His massive back stretched like a muscled Antarctica.

"Aha! Squash. That explains the sounds that Mike heard, the twangs that is. That would also explain Achilles' asking for challengers, I do believe, though it is strange that—"

With a slight punch to the arm, Charles had silenced Miff.

We walked in silence down a long hallway that resembled most of the hallways in Building Z. The hallway began narrowing, and we squeezed through, Miff's equipment scraping harshly on the

walls. I had never known Miff to be so, well, miffed. He seemed genuinely upset that we had gotten lost. We had never made it to Tower Z, and certainly not in time to oversee Bertrand as he engaged Katherine Shore in conversation. I tried to work up the courage to tell Miff that he was not to blame, but I could not. I hated myself for it, because I was a coward, but my hate seemed to be rubbing off on Miff instead.

Building Z was notorious for being poorly built. We only had to live in there, and the exit to the outside world was right outside, though the genuinely annoying Bosses that lived down the hall always bothered us whenever we did have to go out to classes and such.

Miff had taken Building Z as his private Everest, but he was no mountain climber. For all his equipment and preparation, his efforts were mostly worthless. His map was deeply flawed, or at the very least so convoluted that even he could not find his way around with it. He was very proud of that map. He had spent most of September prowling around Z, scratching out the outline to most of it. We had used it successfully a few times before, but we had never strayed so far.

I had taken a liking to Miff, except on Halloween. On Halloween his appearance was genuinely annoying, but otherwise his constant jabber was tolerable. If I was paying attention to what Miff was saying, I could usually extract the truth from his exciting ramblings. He wasn't annoying at all, except on Halloween. Maybe a little too long-winded, but with Bertrand around I supposed balance was needed. Charles winked at me suddenly and looked ahead to the front of the line, where Buddha had come to a stop.

"It's a door with no windows," Miff exclaimed. He was at the front of the line.

"But what I've never seen a door without doorknobs, except, except at like a prison, or a sauna, or, a squash court! Yes, it's a squash court. That must mean we're in the basement of Building Z. From the amount of time that we slid down, I'd say we were about three stories underground. According to the history of Building Z, during World War II the squash courts in the basement of Building Z

were abandoned because people thought they were haunted—but—hau—haunted?"

I had never known that Z had a basement. Neither had Charles, for he was suddenly glum looking and scowling at Miff. Buddha snorted and twisted the doorknob.

He shoved his weight against the door and opened it. It creaked slightly, opening into the biggest squash court I had ever laid ears upon.

There was complete silence, and the twanging sound was curiously absent. It was the greatest canvas of quiet I had ever seen. Even in the previous corridors and rooms there was the rush of air, but the air in here was stale and seemed to lack circulation. It was still breathable, though, as I gasped in fear at the immensity of the room.

The room itself was a giant room at least three times as big as the room we had been in earlier. The corners were true corners, but the walls were painted identically as the previous room—pure white. The ceiling stretched so far up that I was left jaw agape. Against this backdrop I felt small and insignificant. I felt the universe crushing me in with its emptiness, that seventy percent unknown pushing me into a little ball in which I fumed. I felt cold and disarmed against this expanse. Miff had intuition, Charles had knowledge. I had a flashlight.

And a flask. I took a sip and the smooth alcohol warmed me slightly. The room was quite a bit colder than the corridors before. The line of people in front of me moved forward to fill the room.

In the middle of the huge chamber were two figures dressed in matching white robes, sitting cross-legged and facing each other over a chessboard. Neither moved.

Behind me, the door closed shut, and I realized with anger that there was no doorknob on the inside—not even the built-in one that had let us into the room on the other side of the door.

We were trapped in squash hell.

I had always thought of life as a chess match—but this was ridiculous. Actually, I had always thought of life as surgery, the

invasive kind that they show on bad movies and pass off as special effects. The kind where the doctor literally holds the patient's heart in his hands and watches it slowly leak away life, beating bloodily.

I always wondered about scenes like this. It's nothing more than open heart surgery. The surgeon rips back skin and ribs and grabs that little beatbox in our chest and listens to it like a child listens to a Christmas present. Why would a scene like this invoke so much emotion in the audience, no matter how badly done? Not because of the physicality of it, for the emotional response is no greater or less with increased bloodiness. No, I think something different is up. Something about the idea of control—no, not control, that's too harsh. Nurturing? Maybe, but that's too soft. Something in between that can only be described by the mere idea of literally holding someone's heart in your hand. Heart surgery is the metaphorical mapping of the territory inaccessible by sex. Maybe that's why it's so beautiful.

There was a complete and utter silence in the giant squash court. Silence so degrading that it hurt. The quiet hurt my insides, made them squish up and feel generally ill. I felt the need to scream, but did not. Again I hated myself for my cowardice, and again I felt a little whip crack in the back of my head.

"Check."

We closed in silently. Our footsteps did not register any sounds at all. The figure to the right, who had darker skin and a slightly less facial hair than the figure to the left, scratched his chin. He then, in agonizing slow motion, moved his piece away.

As we got closer, I saw that there were only two pieces on the chessboard, two kings. The one on the right had just moved the black king around. The figure on the left moved again.

"Check."

Slowly circling the figures, the four of us stared. The squash court was a yawning whore of a room, drenched in lack of reflection. I wanted to squash it. I wanted to grab down the ceilings and pull them back to earth. I wanted to take the side walls and, like curtains, pull them shut, somehow decrease the emptiness of the place. The

place reeked of pure waste of space. The enlightenment of emptiness was lost on me in that moment. The two figures playing chess were suddenly just two human beings playing chess in a poorly mismatched place, the gaping mouth of nothingness. Around them, the vast emptiness of the universe spun on unnoticed.

Buddha did not seem impressed.

"May I introduce my unfortunate friends," he said.

Without looking back, the figure on the left replied.

"Where'd you go?"

"I had to go find someone," Buddha replied.

"Ms. Shore, hm?"

"She's with Mr. Rastle," said the figure on the right.

"How did you know?" Buddha asked.

"Check your voicemail."

Buddha shrugged and addressed the three of us.

"I never check my voicemail."

We continued circling, Miff piping in suddenly.

"Why are you playing with only two kings? It doesn't make sense at all, with only two kings it's nearly impossible for you to checkmate each other. In fact, it seems like you just keep circling each other checking!"

"Check."

"What happened to the other pieces? A full chess game should have other pieces? Your pawns, bishops, queen? Rook—your knights? Where have they all gone?"

"Lost."

"Long ago."

"We killed them."

"Long ago."

"Where are they then?" Miff continued. "Even if you had pieces at some point, they should be here somewhere? And most importantly, where's your chess timer? There should be a timer somewhere around here, I mean, you can't just keep going on forever."

"You can."

"Time is not important."

"Only winning."

“The other pieces—“

“Wasted away.”

Neither had looked up yet.

“How long have you been playing?” Charles asked.

“Thousands of years.”

“Too many to count.”

“What are you playing for?” I asked.

“You.”

“You.”

We stopped pacing and they looked up. Their faces were skeletal and jaundiced, and they looked like the dead. They stared at us and within I wanted to explode. I, as well as Charles and Miff, took a step backwards. Buddha simply frowned severely. For a moment their faces were like skeletons, rotting and returning to the earths from which they were sprung. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, slipping away in a waterfall of cremation, pouring from head to foot to hell. Sickness, pestilence, something totally unnatural.

They stared at me, and for a second I saw myself at the operating table, unable to move or speak. My cage was flung open as if my internal organs had mutinied and were trying to escape. In horror, I saw that indeed, my heart at least had gotten out. There was no pain, thank goodness. The two figures were just skeletons, holding my heart in their bony sharp hands. I cringed invisibly as my heart beat against their cold fingers. This was horror—pure horror. *Your heart is in their hands*, my mind spat. And then, that too was gone as my thoughts became theirs. My thoughts were reigned in, and my last thought was that my soul was next.

Fortunately their attention returned to their game.

Miff stepped back and took out several pieces of metal from his bag. He went to the door and immediately got to work. I could tell that he liked this place even less than I. Charles was shivering slightly, and it did seem like the room had suddenly grown colder. If the walls could have bled ice, they would have.

“Check.”

If I could have cried, the tears would have frozen. I was tired suddenly, weak and weary, and I all I wanted to do was to rest. I

looked over at Miff. He was now sitting, working on the door, his intense energy corralled for once.

“Check.”

I looked at Charles. He was sitting, leaning against a wall, desperately looking through his belt pack of tea. He got to one, pulled out a clump of leaves and stuffed them into his mouth and chewed. Looking over to me, he grinned lazily and chewed away.

I wanted to get up and slap the boy, or at least shout or do something to get his attention, but nothing would do.

“Check.”

My eyes grew blurry. I lay down. Maybe a little nap, I thought, and I’ll wake up ready to tackle that door with Miff. I struggled to look over at Miff.

“Check.”

He was slumped at the door, asleep, his lockpicking tools scattered on the floor. As I listened to him snore, they were drowned by the silence. I heard the clicking of a chess piece.

“Check.”

I struggled to turn my body to look at Charles, who had his eyes closed. His chewing was slowing. The figure of Buddha kneeled in front of my face, looking at me.

“Help me,” I said to him.

“Help *me*,” he echoed. “You’re going to die eventually. I’m stuck here forever with these two idiots. I am in the continuous state of forget. I’m even beginning to forget who you are, and where I was before. Maybe that’s why I forgot about this place before. A convenient literary device played out by me. You can escape this trap. I need convenience to escape. I can forget and remember what I choose and will. I don’t know Building Z—but I do. I don’t know Jesus and Mohammed—but I do. All but for Katherine Shore.”

“Check,” someone said. It was nothing more than an echo now it seemed.

“How?” I rasped.

“I—well, I forgot,” he replied, looking confused.

“Escape,” I whispered.

“No escape for me. Just sleep; but when I dream—“

“Check.”

Buddha paused, striking a pose.

"When I dream—I wake up as something else and remember that I was that thing all along," he said with a coy smile. "Like an actor, or a clown, I play with masks. Too many masks to count. But they are all dreams anyway, as fleeting as a butterfly in a blink!" With that he disappeared without a trace. I was filled with a weak rage, a weak hate, a weak hunger, all taking time to reach me, like letters misaddressed, sifting through the paperwork of emotions to get to anger. My eyelids drooped—weakness.

"I remember," Charles said, gasping for breath, using it foolishly to laugh, "playing chess in Sunday school as a little boy."

"Oh really, that's great," I managed, sarcastically. My brain was filled with hate at this man who was so uncaring and random at a time like this. I was just thinking of something better to follow that—but then I fell asleep.

Somewhere in my dreams I saw myself holding someone's heart in my hands. The heart beat soundlessly, glistening with ripe crimson. Not even beating, I dare say, but more like a convulsion, a dying gasp from something with no lungs. Where's the attraction—where's the love in this pitiful organ?

Somewhere in my dreams it started coming to me: the ability to commit surgery with a pen. Fill this heart with control, with words, with grace and clumsiness. Pump the ink of shyness, or perhaps convention. Maybe scribble something banal and bland, or maybe there's something greater in that scribble? Something brilliant, something beautiful? Maybe not. If you look close enough I'm sure you'll find something beautiful, but maybe it'll only be in a single word standing tall and proud, starkly lit in a field of gray. Ha, sucker please! Starkly lit in a field of gray? No wonder hearts bleed.

When I awoke, Miff and Charles were dragging back into the corridor. My first image was of Achilles, far at the distant end of the corridor standing guard. I heard the door shut, and beyond it, silence.

"Wh—wh—"

"Don't think," Charles advised.

"I can explain if you will. Mr. Teamaker here was fortunate enough to bring a highly stimulating tea leaf with caffeine and a few other substances which I'm sure are illegal. Never mind that, because Charles was able to take some before he fell asleep. He soon awoke and gave the rest of the tea to me, so I could pick the lock. We then propped the door open with my bag and dragged you out, leaving us, well, where we are now. You then managed a few words. Charles advised you not to think, and I explained, if you will, that Mr. Teamaker—"

"Alright Miff, thank you. And thank you for the rescue Charles," I said.

"Right'o, I'm glad to be out of there."

We agreed that we had all had about enough of Building Z for one day. We gathered our things and headed down the hallway. It struck me that they had not bothered to wake me up with the tea.

Achilles turned to face us.

"Halt. You cannot pass."

"Why not?" I asked.

"You do not have the right clearance level."

"Oh, hogwash," Charles said, moving forward. One of Achilles' massive hands gripped Charles' shoulder and lifted him up.

"No one washes hogs," he said in a stern voice. He put Charles back down. We backed off, and I gave the shaking Charles a sip from my flask to calm his rather frayed nerves.

"We need to get past him somehow," I said, emptily. I actually had no clue how to get past Achilles. I was supposedly the leader by default, according to Miff, but I could think of nothing. Why couldn't I ever think of a plan? Was I so useless? Charles saved us all, but didn't even bother to wake me up until we were safe. I was more burden than help. I detested my uselessness; I was nothing more than a Swiss-army flask.

"I have an idea," proclaimed Miff. "First we need someone to distract Achilles, get him angry—perhaps I would be best at this. Second, someone who runs rather fast, like Charles, will steal his shield and run down the corridor. The third and final person will open the door as Charles throws the shield into the squash court."

"Me?" I asked dumbly.

“Yes, but—“ Miff began.

“That is a foolish plan. What would prevent Achilles from killing us first, then getting his shield back?”

“Well, we’ll have to cut our losses then, I mean, if this is the only plan that we’ve got, then we will have to suffer casualties no matter what, so we’ll have to maximize the efficiency to move on—“

“Shut up Miff,” Charles said. “I have a better plan. We will have to outsmart Achilles.”

We stared. I dimly wondered if it was night yet. If it was, the stars would have been out, and another sunset would have gone by, another shameful lonely sunset spent with fools.

The key to remembering something is very, very simple. Details, are of course, very important, but seemingly even more important is the order of things. What is this order of things that we all adhere to? Certainly not in philosophical and moral wanderings lost in paper. Oh no, I think the order of things is simply in the way we remember things. Memory may be flawed, but it is right. So, the way I remember things, the giant Achilles, physically more powerful than all three of us combined, was defeated by being outsmarted. Not outsmarted by the inquisitive and breathlessly vocal Miff. Not outsmarted by the bleakly genius Charles. But by me.

We emerged from Z hours later, when the sun was setting. I regretted my earlier thought about sunset; sunset with these fellows wasn’t so bad. If nothing else it was interesting. Charles squinted at the sunset while Miff whistled to himself, staring off into space, his eyes bursting from point to point, every point but the endless beauty stretching before my eyes.

Where do we go from here? There is nothing but the world to explore. There is nothing to do but everything, and we have no time but today, and after today, tomorrow, and after that another day, filled with 2 sunsets and rises, 3 feasts, 24 promises, 60 hopes, and 3600 thoughts about sex. Somehow, I had already burned 3600 and 3601 itched at the back of mind as we trudged back to Z, turning into 3602 and 3603, and by the time we reached home I was at 3700.

Don’t ask me right now what happened down there in the labyrinth of Z or how I beat Achilles. I don’t remember. Don’t ask

me how we blazed away the hours, or how we entered as three and exited as one cohesive group. Don’t tell me that you eat more than three meals a day, or that 24 promises is ridiculous, or that hope doesn’t come in quantized units—because that doesn’t matter. Don’t tell me the exact number of sexy thoughts I have every day—I don’t care.