

# WHAT

A NOVELLA

An aerial photograph of a town, likely in the Pacific Northwest, featuring a river winding through the center. The foreground shows residential houses with gabled roofs, and the background consists of rolling hills and mountains under a sky with soft, wispy clouds. The overall color palette is muted, with a mix of greens, blues, and earthy tones.

Vernon Howl

VERNON HOWL



*The Egg Queen*



“Please don’t throw the toaster in the toilet. My wallet is in one of the slots.”

I was lying. My wallet was in the refrigerator.

“I know your wallet isn’t in one of the slots,” Melinda replied. “I saw it in the deli drawer when I was making you that bologna sandwich earlier.”

“I want a divorce,” I said.

We screamed at each other for several hours. I eventually broke down and told her I would pay for her Rottweiler’s plastic surgery.

She threw the toaster in the toilet anyway.

...

Things were pretty rough between us but, come fall, I took a job at the local community college. I was Professor of Egg Science. I loved my students and they loved me.

“Are you cheating on me with one of your egg groupies?” Melinda would often ask me.

“They are foolish eggheads but we are getting close. Gotta love them eggies.”

“The Egg Queen?”

“Bingo.”

Penny, the Rott, groaned in the corner. She had had her nose job yesterday and was due to get the bandages off soon. Melinda and I crossed our fingers that she looked alright beneath them.

“Would you like a bologna?”

“Bingo again.” I smiled coyly. “And make one for ole Penny while you’re at it. She’s earned it because the nose job was a real painful procedure. I hope they didn’t botch it.”

My star student was Alecia, the pride and joy of the eggies. She understood the nuances of a delicate field like Egg Science. And she was a beauty. The previous head of E.S. was a man named Truman Sky. He was something of a myth. He seduced and married Alecia when she was a freshman then promptly retired at the end of the school year, as legend would have it. I couldn’t get her to tell me heads or tails about my predecessor, who was currently on some kind of vacation or independent research study. But, by golly, did she know her eggs.

During my first summer off from the professor gig, I got really into ice hockey. I bought as many VHS tapes of old hockey games as I could afford. It was an obsession.

I was two minutes into the finale of the 1985 Stanley Cup Finals when my wife told me she was preggers. The Edmonton Oilers had scored eight damn goals and I had just scored my first.

“What?” I said with a smirk.

“You heard me, you rat bastard.”

My sperm had penetrated her egg and this gave me a renewed interest and true sense of purpose as far as my job was concerned. If I could put my seed into a human egg and make a baby, then I could find The Egg Queen, and I would force her by any means necessary to divulge the secrets of the universe.

My body felt like a star, burning out of control in another dimension. I laced up my rollerblades and picked up my stick. I had taken to blading around town recently, practicing my moves against a fake opponent in the streets.

“I’m headed to the office,” I told my wife.

“But it’s the Fourth of July,” Melinda replied.

“This can’t wait.”

I texted Alecia the emoji of the chicken hatching out of the egg. She replied back, “what.” It was hard to text on rollerblades with a hockey stick in one of my hands. I noticed I had texted her the emoji of a bat in flight by mistake.

“This can’t wait,” I wrote. “We need to find her.”

The purpose of the Egg Science department, on paper, was to find safer ways to process and deliver chicken eggs to the consumer.

But as legend goes, some time in the late 90s, Professor Truman Sky discovered what would be the true purpose of E.S. faculty and students alike: locating The Egg Queen and possibly torturing her if necessary. For it is she who holds the key to the universe: immortality.

As soon as I started the job, I opened the first of two manila folders Truman had left for me in his old office. It said, "URGENT" on it, written in bizarrely feminine bubble letters. The contents of this folder would change my life forever.

But what we already know about The Egg Queen isn't important. It doesn't matter. It's all just a means to an end, or something else entirely. It's always been like that.

"What's gotten into you?"

"Alecia, thank you for coming. I know it's the Fourth of July. God bless America."

"God bless America," she said.

"Listen," I said, packing a huge wad of chewing tobacco. "It's high time I meet this hubby of yours, Truman Sky. What do you say?"

"Oh Julio, you pugnacious, silly man. Even if I wanted you to meet him, don't you realize?"

I knew what she was about to say.

"He doesn't want to meet you. I'm sorry."  
We sat in silence for what felt like eternity.

“Plus,” she said with a hushed reservation about her.  
“He’s in Germany playing ice hockey professionally.”

I felt sick and stiff with shock. “What,” I said, not so much as a question but as an expression of my general blankness.

“Look, Truman didn’t find her, OK? But he got close. Close enough that he found something that made looking for her feel dumb! Feel... sickening. Are you happy now? He’s not coming back! He led me on and then he left me. I was just a college freshman...”

Alecia slumped over in a hefty sob. I didn’t know what to do. I thought they were still a couple. If I consoled her she might think I was trying to seduce her. And I had a bun in the oven waiting back home, so that was out of the question.

“I’m sorry your elderly husband hit the road to pursue a career in the ranks of the D.E.L.” I said.

“You know about the Deutsche Eishockey Liga?” Alecia peeked up.

“Yea,” I said, rather slyly. “I got the bug too.”

“The hockey bug?”

“Bingo.”

As I walked her to her car, I told her about my sudden and rapid fascination with all things hockey. The D.E.L. was the premier league for the sport in Germany and I had purchased many tapes online from the dark web of its pinnacle games. The one thing I couldn't wrap my head around was how a man near eighty years old could cut it over there. Alecia couldn't either.

In fact, she told me, there was no record of a Truman Sky on any roster. But every month, without fail, he would send ephemera and collectibles that had to have been from a player in the league.

"I mean, a used jock strap signed by the entire Fischtown Penguins?" She said.

"Sounds legit," I told her, smiling at her German pronunciation of the word "penguin." Although the Penguins were technically a second tier squad, members of the D.E.L. 2, I let it slide. "Look, you should go home and get some rest. It's been a long day."

And just then she leaned over and kissed me. Her lips tasted like fresh buttermilk. I couldn't pry them away.

We made love in her car, a 1999 Toyota Camry. And then she drove off without exchanging any words.

I was an adulterer now, but something felt right. I looked to the sky and said, "You have big plans for me, Julio George McManus, don't you Queen? Don't you?" It felt like The Egg Queen was in the sky for some reason. Little did I know just how wrong I was about that factoid.

I bladed home and watched fireworks with my wife. When the finale finished exploding light on our TV screen, my wife asked me how it went at the office.

“I had sex with one of the eggies,” I replied.

We were officially divorced by the end of the month and, come August, I was a mess, ravenously consuming booze and watching hockey tapes over fifteen hours a day, sleeping at my office, barely showering.

I reached inside my desk and pulled out the second manila folder, this one had “SUPER URGENT“ written on it, but not in silly bubble letters. Underneath in smaller text there was a note: “don’t open till you’re ready.“

This was a cryptic message but nonetheless one I adhered to. I truly hadn’t felt ready until that moment. And so I pulled out the only piece of paper inside it. Two names were printed on it. I had no idea what they meant or who they were. I spent days searching them on the internet: no hits.

Summer break would be over soon and Alecia and the rest of the eggies would be ready to rejoin the quest. I had to get my act together.

I decided the absolute best way to do this would be to adopt a dog. The worst thing that could happen in this scenario is that I’d ruin both the dog’s life as well as my own. But at least we’d have each other.

And wouldn't you know the first smiling dog face I saw at the shelter belonged to Penny the Rott.

The nose job didn't take. It had been botched.

"Well," I said to Pen, not mincing any words. "I can see why my Melinda gave you up. You're hideous." It made me ill to look at her, but we had a rapport from previously living with each other and I knew she was housebroken.

I took her home to the apartment I was renting just a few blocks from my office at the college. "First things first, sweet girl. We'll need to order you a mask."

It took me well over a week to find the perfect mask for a dog who had a horribly botched nose job available for purchase on the internet. When it arrived, school was back in session. "Penny, you're the ghost from *Scream* now," I said, locking the door behind me.

When I called roll and got to Alecia, I heard nary a whisper. She was absent, absent on the first day of the semester, a rotten sign.

I spent the rest of the session in a depressed stupor, thinking about Alecia. Was she skipping out on her entire junior year or just my class? Was she now just another lost name like the two inside the folder?

An eager new student named Joe came up to my desk after class. "What gives, teach?"

"Please, call me Señor Julio."

“You know why we’re all here right?” He said. I sneered at this. “We gotta find her, man.”

“What do you know about it?”

“More than you think,” he said. “I’m here because of my sister. Her name is Joan Jane Marbles.”

“Let’s go to my office,” I told him.

There, I pulled out the folder with names and dramatically slid it across the desk towards Joe.

“Who gave you this?” he asked.

“Does the name Professor Truman Sky ring a bell?”

“No,” he said. “Should it?”

“He taught in this position before me. He ‘retired’ under mysterious circumstances and left me this note.”

“My sister Joan was a student here. Her transcripts have been erased, just like everything else. There’s no...” Joe started to quietly cry.

“Oh, my sweet boy,” I told him, grabbing his arm in a fatherly way. “No tears today. Please, tell me. How do you know she was a student here, that she took this class?”

“Because,” Joe muttered between tearful gasps. “She texted me this right before it happened.”

He showed me his phone. It was a picture of a girl and Truman Sky standing in front of the Egg Science building. They were each holding a dozen eggs, smiling. “It took me for-fucking-ever to find this school based only on that picture,” he said. “You have no idea. That was over three years ago. And this place is real far away from Florida.”

“Can I take a picture of this picture?”

“Umm... Why don’t I just text it to you?”

“Bingo. That’ll work.” I recited my number. We were more deeply connected now that Joe had my info in his phone. I had just met the boy but, truthfully, he felt like a son.

I texted the photo to Alecia. Maybe it was a long shot, but I had to try. “I’m gonna try to get some answers, son,” I told him. Alecia texted back almost immediately, in all caps, “STOP THIS.” I saw the bubble pop up which indicated she was still typing. I waited. “RIGHT. NOW.”

“Joe,” I said. “Office hours are over. I need to make a house call.”

It was unethical at best to frantically knock on the door of a student at her off-campus apartment, but this was a serious situation and the stakes were high. “Alecia!” I called out. “Open up, it’s me, Julio. Please.”

I waited a minute before a note was passed underneath the door. “I can’t talk about any of this,” it read. “Contact Special Agent Gregor at this number...”

I walked away from the apartment, deeply worried about this mess she’d clearly gotten herself into, and if it had any connection to the Marbles girl or The Egg Queen or any of it. My guess is that it did.

Slinging a fresh lump of chewing tobacco into my gums, I dialed the number of this Gregor fellow.

“Special Agent Jay Gregor?” a voice answer.

“Hi, is this Special Agent Gregor,” I said.

“Yes,” he said coldly. “Who is this?”

“One of my former students gave me your info. I think she might be in trouble. I was—”

“Sir, excuse me. I can’t understand a word you’re saying.” I spit out the wad of chew. It stunk to waste a brand new wad but this was way too important.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was doing chewing tobacco...”

“Umm,” Gregor said. “Okay. Who are you and what do you want?”

“My name is Julio McManus and I’m a professor at Raritan Valley Community College, Egg Science department. My former student is Alecia Wilcox. I

believe she may be in some trouble. She gave me your number.“

There was a lengthy pause before Gregor told me to meet him at the dining hall at nine in the evening. He then abruptly hung up.

“Why is the F.B.I. involved?“ I wondered aloud as I walked back to campus. “Hmm.“

I needed to find Joe Marbles and learn more about his sister.

I slipped my boy Jamal at the registrar a twenty and he gave me Joe’s schedule. He was in an experimental film class. “Bingo. I can sneak him out of there easy.“ Jamal shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “None of my business, chief.“

Just as I’d expected, the film class was watching Stan Brakhage’s classic “Window Water Baby Moving.“ I snuck down every aisle whispering, “Joe? Joey Marbles“ as a woman gave birth on the movie screen. The movie had no sound so everybody heard me. I hoped he liked to be called Joey.

“Señor Julio?“ A voice called from across the room. It was Joe and he was very embarrassed.

The first thing he told me when we got outside was that he hated to be called Joey.

“Won’t happen again, son,“ I assured him. “Do you like chili dogs?“

“Hell yeah.”

“Good. I know a great place.”

I almost didn't know where to start when we got to the chili dog spot.

“Does the name Clarkson Maxx mean anything to you?” I asked.

“No,” Joe said in between massive bites of hot chili dog.

“Yeah. I didn't think so. Shot in the dark.” I took an equally huge bite of my dog. There was some real, playful father-son rivalry stuff brewing here. Who could eat the most chili dogs? But maybe Joe wasn't playing the game yet. “Well,” I continued, “it's not too much of an intrusion, can you tell me everything about your sis, Joan?”

“Of course,” he said, slowly and methodically dabbing chili dog residue off of his face. “Joan Jane was something of a wild—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Do you really call her Joan Jane all the time?”

“Yes. We're from Kissimmee, Florida,” he continued with a smile which indicated that such a name was common in them neck of the woods. “So Joan Jane was a real wildcard. She drove our parents mad. She's the oldest of six kids. I'm the second born. Summer after her senior year, she disappears.” He paused for a chili dog break

and I did the same. “Around Christmas time she starts randomly texting me. It was always one-off stuff, like a picture of some trees or chickens or one-liners, like ‘Joe I’ve never been happier.’ Things like that. I tried to find out where she was or what she was doing but it was like she was oblivious and her line of communication with me only traveled one way.

“I tried to tell my parents. Believe me, I did. But they had long since given up on her. Joan Jane was real smart, smarter than the lot of us. Graduated high school a year early. She alienated a lot of the family. My mother was especially cold. ‘Good riddance,’ she’d say whenever I tried to show her we’d been in touch. This went on and on until the incident in May.”

“What was the ‘incident in May’?” I asked. We had both finished our first dogs. “Please, Joe, continue.”

“She came home. Boom. Just like that, out of the blue. But she was a zombie, in a constant stupor. She wouldn’t talk. Or, rather, she couldn’t. And then one night, about a month later, they came for her.”

“Who, Joe? Who came for your sister Joan Jane in the night?”

“Fuck if I know,” he said. “But if I didn’t know better, they looked like the Feds. All dressed in black except for a small emblem on the shoulders of their uniforms. Looked like a target, a bullseye.”

Oh my god. The F.B.I.

I couldn't blow Joe's mind by letting him know I was in contact with Special Agent Gregor. Not before I knew more about what was going on. "Joe," I said tenderly, poker face on. "That's a horrible story. I'm so sorry."

"Well, I'm here now. Only took nearly three years of research. I mean, New Jersey? What led her here?"

"I don't know, Joe, but listen," I said in a real fatherly voice. "I'm gonna do everything in my power to help you find out."

"Thanks, Señor Julio."

"Don't mention it," I replied. "And you know what? Call me Pops if you'd like..."

"Maybe I'll just call you Julio?"

"Of course, son." I left him at the chili dog restaurant with a fresh one. He could have this round. It was clear he had the chili dog gene too and, at his ripe age, it'd be no problem to scarf down three or maybe even four in a sitting.

I went home and took out my 'blades. It had been weeks since my last hockey simulation and I needed to burn off some energy before my meeting with Gregor.

I strapped on my rollerblades tight and grabbed my stick. It felt so sweet and cathartic to 'blade around campus, doing spin moves against invisible opponents, scoring a hundred invisible goals.

I arrived at the dining hall twenty minutes early and noticed a man wearing aviator shades, sitting by himself and eating a large salad. He looked way too young for the job, but he stunk of the F.B.I.

“Agent Gregor?” I asked as a piece of red cabbage slipped loose from the man’s jaw.

“Sit down.” I did as he said, though his tone wasn’t appreciated. Didn’t he know we were on the same side?

“What do you know and when did you know it?” Agent Gregor grumbled.

“Hold up,” I replied. “What do I know? Very little actually. I was actually hoping you’d have some answers for—”

“Shut your goddam mouth!” Gregor screamed, slamming a plastic salad fork which then bounced off the table and went flying across the room. The student body present sat muted with stifled laughter.

“Calm down, dude,” I said. “You know what? Let me buy you a beer.”

We went to one of the local pubs, which was much more crowded than usual with college kids indulging in their true purpose to kick the new year off right. “I’m a Mic Ultra man, myself,” the Agent said, declining my recommendation of a local IPA. “I’m sorry about that outburst earlier. I’ve been under a lot of stress.”

“No worries, Special Agent. Can I call you Special Agent?”

“Please, no. Call me Jay.”

“Okay Jay,” I said, overemphasizing the rhyme with a chuckle. It went over his head. “So... “ I didn’t know where to begin.

“Just... begin at the beginning,” Jay said, sensing my unease and confusion.

“I’ll try my best.

“It all started when my wife threw my toaster in the toilet. I mean, who does that? What a thing to do. I can recall just standing in front of it, my unplugged toaster floating in the water. It’s only a two-slice model so it actually fit pretty good. Room to bob and whatnot, like a little silver boat lost at sea. It was kinda beautiful.

“That wasn’t the end of things, naturally. But it was certainly a marker. That was 2012, the dead of winter. I knew I had to make a change. My life was going nowhere...”

**MAY 1st, 1992**

Sheila rubbed her very preggers belly. Then she itched around the rope where her ankles were tied to the bed. She was in Celebration, Florida and it was May Day. This surely wasn’t a party but she was in trouble.

As the first morning light began to show, Otto Zimmerman sped back from Kissimmee, about twenty minutes to the west. It was time.

“This is just...” Sheila stammered, “an idea. It doesn’t... mean anything.”

Otto pulled a syringe out of his black bag and set it on the side table. He made sure the blinds were drawn tight and double-checked the locks on the motel door.

“There’s going to be a few injections,” Otto told her. “Then... the hospital.”

Sheila began to cry.

“Please, try to remain calm.” Otto got out some more supplies, vials and more needles. “I’m going to drop you off. This is going to be all over soon.

“For your baby,” he reminded her, patting her leg.

Otto pulled up to Florida Hospital with a blindfolded Sheila tied up and moaning in the backseat. It was just shy of noon. He wasn’t a gambling man but he gave the baby 50/50 odds of being born today. Or perhaps he considered, with a cold and deep calculation in his soul, of being born at all. He wasn’t certain he had delivered the induction drugs correctly.

“Not to be crass, Mule,” Otto said to his friend. “But if that baby’s born at 12:01 AM, then it might as well be a stillborn.”

Mule grunted. He didn't know if these were strange fantasies or unthinkable realities. "You gotta wine and dine those dentistry holes, fella. Maybe they'll come back to life? Not sure how teeth work?" Mule was pointing to Otto's mouth, which was sans dentures at the moment, exposing multiple crevasses where teeth used to exist, the product of late adulthood in hockey.

"You knob. We're all so close to being inhabited from the inside out by insects, in the scheme of things..." he stammered. "These insects, that will rip our cells into explosive new versions, they... so what's the point? Don't make me call Gerald again, okay? Teeth? We'll be able to generate jaws of steel when they hatch." Mule blinked dumbly.

They got back to their vigorous skating exercises on the shimmering rink of The Ice Factory, Kissimmee's best public venue for open skating and youth hockey practice.

"Did you really knock her up with a rape?" Mule asked after they finished another speed round.

"Oh no. Love is love," Otto replied, barely out of breath. "It had to be love."

Back at the hospital, just five miles away, Sheila was in good care and ready to do the final pushing. Her son was born at 6:12 in the evening. She named him James. She would call him Jimmy, Jimmy Brown. He was as healthy as a baby elephant.

Just down the hall, another baby had been born almost twelve hours earlier, a little girl. Her proud, young parents named her Joan Jane Marbles.

•••

“You know,” I said, coyly, between sips of first class airplane champagne. “Right when I saw your baby bump... I knew it was mine.”

“And you didn’t even know I was rich yet,” Alecia Wilcox said with a wink.

“Bingo. And cheers to that.” The two of us shared a laugh.

We were flying first class direct from Newark into Bremen Airport, in northwestern Germany. We were on a mission to find Truman Sky. It was Christmas Eve, 2014 and it had three weeks since we’d mysteriously lost contact with Special Agent Jay Gregor of the F.B.I.

“Should we check on Joe?” Alecia asked.

“He’s like a little brother to you,” I said. “That’s nice. Because... he’s like a son to me.”

“Well,” she said. “Not too much like a brother.” Alecia winked and we shared a chuckle.

“No more ’pagne for the expecting mom!” I shouted, playfully snatching her flute away. “I’m gonna go see Joe.”

The plane was half empty and Alecia had more than enough money to have bought Joe a first class ticket too. I guess this was some kind of power move within our weird, new family structure.

“Joey baby!” I said, drunkenly, slapping him on the knee. He was fast asleep.

“Jesus, Julio, trying to catch some Z’s here.”

“There’ll be time for sleep enough when we find this Sky fellow.” I’m not sure what I meant by that. “What are you gonna do when we find him? Rip his fingernails out?” I was wasted beyond belief.

“You know,” Joe said, contemplating something deep and true. “I can’t get over the fact that... that I know him. Or I knew him before.”

It was true. When we had snooped on the Skype session between him and Alecia a few days earlier, Joe had been visibly shaken. “Do you think, maybe,” I said, emitting a tiny belch before finishing my thought. “...that he’s your dad?”

Joe ignored me and I slumped over on the two coach seats next to him, falling asleep almost instantly.

When we got to the hotel suite later that same morning, I made sure everyone hid their wallets in good hiding places around the room. “Wallet-hiding is good practice wherever you are, but in a foreign country that rule counts double. Dibs on the microwave.”

“But what if we need cash or ID?” Alecia asked.

I loosened my tube socks, which were pretty loose and stretched out to begin with, and revealed said items rubbing gently against my ankle. “Bingo.”

We were there on a mission: find Sky and get some answers. There was no time for sightseeing.

“Let’s get right to the arena and stake it out,” Joe said.

“Excellent idea, son. Early bird catches the Truman.”

“More like ’True-Worm’,“ Alecia said with a wink.

We hopped in a German taxi cab and I told the driver to step on it. “Actually, hold up,” I said, changing my mind. “We should eat first. Driver, what’s the German equivalent of a chili dog.” I winked at Joe. Alecia rolled her eyes.

Several stops later, we had the ingredients for some makeshift chili dogs: bratwurst, some kind of a soft pastry item, and a watery stew that, while a far cry from meaty American chili, was good in its own right. “Jesus,” Alecia cried. “Can we get on with it already!”

“Easy my little container of buttermilk, that’s not good for our baby.”

We were parked outside the venue by early afternoon. One thing we definitely weren’t sure of was the approximate age of Truman Sky. He had told Alecia he

was seventy at the time of their marriage but she felt he might be even older. “He often talked about living forever,” she’d said. “He took dozens of cocktails of new age anti-aging drugs. Real cutting edge stuff. From Africa, I think.”

The real mystery was whether or not he was actually playing hockey in the D.E.L. or if he was using a ringer. Visual documentation was hard to come by. Plus, all the beautiful German beards the skaters donned weren’t helping. It was hard to peg their ages.

We had reason to believe that he would be here at the venue early, even on Christmas Eve. He was a true hockey junkie, just like me. If I hadn’t been an expecting father of not one, but two children, then hell I’d probably be out on the ice too.

Bremerhaven Arena was set to host a primetime holiday matchup between the hometown Fischtown Pinguins and Eisbären Berlin, AKA the Berlin Polar Bears. My excitement for seeing some hot international hockey wasn’t easy to mask but we weren’t in Mother Deutschland for fun and games.

“I still don’t see the appeal, Alecia. An old man like that.”

“Well, it wasn’t sexual,” she replied. I was taken aback. I didn’t know this.

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“It was at first, at the very beginning.” Alecia began to blush. “But then, you know... it stopped working.”

“Hmm. She’s talking about his dick, Joe,” I said. Joe nodded. “Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“What does it matter?”

“What?” I retorted. “It matters. It’s... weird.”

Just at that moment, a black Mercedes Benz pulled up. The driver was a brutish, extremely tall man. He looked like a player for sure. He walked around to the passenger side and opened the door. He lifted out an old man and carried him like a baby. It was Truman Sky.

“Oh my god,” I said. “It’s him. What happened?”

“On Skype, there was no way of knowing he couldn’t walk,” Joe said, and I nodded in agreement.

Alecia teared up a little.

“I don’t think he’s on the active roster.”

“What do we do now?”

“Well, we didn’t travel almost 4,000 miles to stare. Let’s move out.”

I tipped the driver a pretty penny, and the three of us got out of the cab. Alecia cupped her preggers tum-tum and looked anxious. Joe aired his unusual mix of aloofness and eerie confidence.

“Truman? Professor Truman Sky?” I yelled from across the parking lot.

The large man turned and immediately tilted the old human in his hands towards us, as if pointing a flashlight in total darkness. “Well, well, well,” he said. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

The elderly man indeed gave us all a good once-over. His body was all immobile, saggy nothingness, but his eyes were bright. “Ms. Alecia. Professor McManus. And...”

“This is Joe Marbles, Truman,” I replied. “I believe you know his sister... Joan Jane?”

With that, his eyes turned sour and glum. “Ah, yes,” he said morosely. “Please, Professor, may I have a word with you in private. It is indeed you who is in charge of this caravan, isn’t it son?”

“Umm,” I stumbled. “Well, of course it is. I think... I think that should be alright.”

“Good. Follow me to my office. Alecia, and... Joe, please hold tight. I’ll have someone bring you finger sandwiches.”

“And what?” Alecia balked. “Eat them standing up here on the cement?”

Just then, the large man spoke for the first time. He told us they’d also bring folding chairs and a little table. “Don’t worry,” he said. “They’re comfortable chairs. I’ve sat in them.”

I followed Truman and the man inside the arena, through a few doors and up a long narrow staircase. His office was in what he referred to as “the bird’s nest,” high above the ice. “Best view in the house,” he said. Admittedly, I felt like a little school girl at the thought of being able to watch the game from so high. I had to focus hard on the mission at hand. It wasn’t easy.

“One parallel between us,” I began, “which, frankly, is totally odd, and I’m not sure you even know about, is... our shared affinity for the sport of ice hockey.” I paused. “I’m a junkie too.”

I made a two-handed cupping gesture as I said this. Truman Sky laughed.

“Son,” he said. “I know a lot more about you than you could ever possibly realize.”

I immediately felt nervous. I wondered where the large man was. And what kind of finger sandwiches were being served outside. “But you didn’t come all this way to talk pucks with an old man. Did you?”

“The boy’s missing sister. I think you know something about it. And I think it has something to do with The Egg Queen.”

“Not. Bad,” Truman said with a mock affect. “But first, indulge me. What have you learned about The Egg Queen, yourself? You uncovered the true nature of the R.V.C.C. E.S. Department faster than I thought you would, so let’s have it. What do you know?”

“For starters,” I told him. “She’s the key to the universe and perhaps even the path to everlasting life. Something to do with the regeneration of cells.” I stopped to scratch my chin. “Frankly, I haven’t made much headway lately. The last few months have been pretty hectic.”

“It certainly appears you have had a lot on your plate, what with your international travel plans and impregnating another man’s wife.”

How did he know?

“But that’s neither here nor there. You’re here now. And there? ...there might as well be Montana at this point. So tell me Julio, we know so much about the ‘what’ as it pertains to The Egg Queen, but we know relatively little about the ‘why’ and, perhaps, most importantly... the ‘who’.” He paused and opened his desk drawer. He took out a piece of paper and a pen. “Who do you, son, think The Egg Queen really is?”

I was pretty flabbergasted. “I... I don’t know. I’m pretty sure we’re dealing with ‘what’ instead of ‘who’. You’re not insinuating...”

“Let me spell it out for you, son...” He put pen to paper and began to speak, slowly, as he drew on the page.

“If two babies, born of the same father to different mothers on the same day, a boy and a girl, grow up and have sex with each other on their eighteenth birthday and this sex results in a pregnancy, and that pregnancy is

carried to full term, then that child, if it is female, is The Egg Queen.”

**DECEMBER 24th, 1994**

Clark returned from the hunting expedition with a fresh, large buck. He took pride in skinning it in his deer shed. The smell of blood made him horny.

“Sheila and the boy are in for it tonight,” he muttered, his hands massaging the deer hunt. He took a big bite. “Amen.”

He went back into the cabin and washed his hands. When they were married, he and Sheila Brown mutually agreed that he would become the boy’s legal father. On one condition.

He change the son’s name to Clarkson Maxx. Son of Clark. Clark thought that was medieval or something, and he liked it. He liked the sound of it.

“Clarkson,” he said. The little boy, now two-and-a-half, stared at his stepfather blankly. “If you’re lucky, I’ll throw a couple venison bites in your baby food.”

“He really shouldn’t eat that. The—“ Sheila tried to interject, but a beer bottle came flying at her head. This time Clark didn’t just scare her. His aim was off and it hit her smack between the eyes. There was blood everywhere. Clarkson began to cry.

About fifteen miles down the road, Otto Zimmerman was checking into the Caribou Inn and Convention Center.

The receptionist looked sad and asked him why he was alone on Christmas Eve.

“That’s really none of your business, but thanks for asking.” Otto rubbed his beard. “I’m looking for something out here. Maybe peace of mind.”

“Good place for it,” she said with an embarrassed smile.

The ride into northern Maine had truly been a lovely one, and if Otto was the type of man who gave a shit about enlightenment, well, he’d have had to agree. Otto couldn’t argue that. But it wasn’t the peace of mind he was after, it wasn’t spiritual. It wasn’t the kind of anything you or I would ever recognize.

Otto locked the door behind him and dropped his large duffel bag on the bed. The room had several extremely large paintings of wooded scenes. Otto counted two bucks and one doe. “That number’s off.” He chuckled.

He dialed for an outside line and rang Mule. As he waited for him to pick up, he removed his sniper rifle from the duffel and began to polish it. “Yup,” Mule finally answered.

“I’m here. Go see Gerald and check on the thing.” He hung up the phone.

Otto picked up a pen on the nightstand and walked over to the painting. He started scribbling an orb over the bigger buck in the center of the picture, covering its prideful horns. His swiveling hand turned over and over

on the canvas. Soon, the great male deer had no more antlers.

But a large black egg, a crown atop her head instead.

...

The Target Corp. Board of Directors watched diligently behind the two-way mirror. The doctors surrounding Joan Jane Marbles were all wearing hazmat suits over their body armor. They were prepared for anything. The Chairman fixed his hand over the kill switch. If anything were to go wrong, he'd torch the room. The doctors knew this risk. Money talks, so they walked. Or in this case, they prepared to deliver a child that could be an interdimensional creature. They signed up for it. They had all been deep beneath the company's Minneapolis headquarters since apprehending Joan Jane just after Memorial Day Weekend, 2011. She had been on a ketamine binge which nearly nullified the pregnancy. It was a long journey back for both mother and the unborn baby girl, but everything was looking good. It was January 22nd, 2012, and she was being induced. When the baby was born, nothing happened. It was just a baby. The Board named the child Wendy. A majority vote rules to execute the mother. They killed Joan Jane Marbles via lethal injection later that same day.

...

“It’s all random. It’s all chance,” Sky said, followed by a long sigh. “I can control so much of the equation, but at that moment... life is gonna do what life’s gonna do.

“My first attempt was an epic failure yet it was still a near-perfect try. There’s no room for error when it comes to Egg Science.

“It was 1981. The babies were born within an hour of each other, though I didn’t know it at the time. One in New Jersey and one in Anaconda, Montana, of all places. Don’t ask. But, alas... two boys. No bingo.”

“This is... insane,” I told him. “You’re certifiably nuts.”

He laughed. “I called it the ‘Y Ask Y’ dilemma. On account of the two boys. Y chromosome? Get it?”

“I think I’m gonna be sick...”

...

Jay and I were wasted. We stumbled back to my apartment for a nightcap. It had felt good: spilling my guts to him at the bar on the night of our first meeting. Even though he was a Special Agent in the F.B.I. and I was a science teacher at a community college, it felt like we could have been brothers. Or maybe even father-son. He looked so unbelievably young! There was just so much going on. I hadn’t realized I was so stressed out.

Just then, Penny the Rott came barreling in. She wasn't wearing her Scream mask and I was livid. "Penny," I yelled. "Bad girl! Where's your mask?"

"What?" said Gregor, giggling.

"Bad. Girl!" I grabbed Penny by the collar and screamed into her ugly face. "You're hideous! You make me sick!"

Just then, she started to maul me. Penny got me by the throat and I passed out.

**DECEMBER 25th, 1994**

Otto crept up on the cabin just after daybreak on Christmas morning. His rifle was loaded.

Inside the house, a night of much carnage had mercifully ended with Clark Maxx lying passed out on the floor. Sheila, despite having both eyes nearly gouged out by her abusive husband, had managed to get her son to sleep. She wept, softly, in the bathroom, trying to assess the extent of her injuries. She could barely see. The world was a cloud. She trembled and felt ill. "Why..." she cried to her murky and unrecognizable reflection.

Otto was outside the window now. He saw the body of the man he'd come to assassinate spread out on the floor. He let himself in. This was going to be much easier or much harder than he thought.

"Who's that?" Sheila shrieked. Clarkson began to stir in the other room.

“It’s me.” Sheila knew the voice immediately.

“What?” She felt in an odd sense of relief with the timing of this return, the return of the boy’s real father. “Why?”

“I’d heard you were in some trouble,” Otto declared.  
“And by the looks of it... My god... your eyes.”

“Please,” Sheila pleaded. “Help us.”

“I will. I’m going to do three things. In return, I am going to ask for only one.”

“Yes...”

“Okay,” Otto took a deep breath and licked his lips. “I’m going to kill and dispose of this vile man. I’m going to shoot him in the head with this rifle and destroy his body.” This was the first thing and Sheila nodded in silence.

“In between the time that I put a bullet in his head and get rid of the body, I’m going to drive you to the hospital, the Cary Medical Center. We’re going to take his truck. You’re going to say that you were attacked while the three of you were sleeping by an unknown assailant. You’re going to say that he chased the attacker into the woods and you were able to escape with the boy in his truck.”

“But... my eyes? I can’t see. I can’t drive.”

“You’ll need to believe in miracles. Even if they aren’t true. The people at the hospital will.” Otto continued.

“The third thing that I’m gonna do is be a part of your son’s life from now on. And the thing I need from you is you’re going to move to New Jersey. You’re going to start a new life with that little boy somewhere in New Jersey, somewhere in the middle of the state. When you’re settled, I’ll find you. But I won’t be me. I’ll be someone else.”

Sheila began to weep loudly, which awoke the baby who also began to cry in turn. Otto couldn’t stand the sound of it all. “Why? Why New Jersey? New Jersey? Why!”

Otto pulled out his gun and shot Clarkson Maxx in the head. Sheila screamed and fell to her knees. “Get the kid!” He yelled.

“I can’t see! I can’t see anything!”

Otto realized she was fully blind now. He looked with pity at her bloody face and the painful sounds swirling in the cabin hushed to a whisper in his mind. He went to the boy’s crib and gently picked him up. “Hello,” he said in a fatherly tone. “It’s going to be alright.”

He got mother and child into Clark’s truck and dropped them off in front of the hospital. “You never saw me,” he said. Otto put the truck keys in Sheila’s pocket and ran off into the woods back toward the cabin.

...

I couldn’t take it anymore. The old man was certifiable. He wasn’t making any sense. All this time I had never

once dreamt the origins of The Egg Queen were anything but scientific in nature. This disgusting and disturbing, all-together mystical chatter was something else entirely. I needed to get out of that office, that bird's nest.

“Where’s the bathroom?” I shouted. Truman directed me and I exited his office in a panic. I dreamt I was still married to Melinda, curled up next to her expecting midsection, our pre-deformed Rottweiler Penny cuddling too.

I barged into the empty bathroom high atop the arena and went to the sink. I cupped water into my hands and looked in the mirror. I screamed at what I saw.

It wasn't me.

I began to yell, as if my voice could undo this dissonance. Luckily, my voice was still my own. I tried to talk my way through it. “Calm down. Maybe you’ve always looked like this.” I retreated to a stall and sat on the toilet. I peeled my palms and fingers against my face, attempting to find the edges of this mask or some other sensory clue as to what might have happened to my appearance.

I thought about Alecia and my unborn baby daughter. I wondered if they were enjoying the finger sandwiches. I wished all my fingers were finger sandwiches and every inch of my face an animal's mouth. If I could devour myself, inside out, and escape this strange mess...

**APRIL 16th, 1995**

Sheila Maxx and her beloved son kept their surnames out of deference to Otto Zimmerman, who showed up, true to his word, not a month after they were settled in a modest duplex in Bridgewater, New Jersey. But his name wasn't Otto Zimmerman anymore.

"Call me Sky," he said. "Truman Sky." He explained that by keeping the name Maxx it would lower suspicions around the disappearance of her late husband, still an open investigation in Aroostook County, Maine.

It was Easter morning. Young Clarkson was making a mess out of a chocolate bunny. "Chocolate bunny is my favorites," the toddler announced.

"Won't be terribly long before I'm fully settled here," Truman told them. "Well, a year or more maybe. Still working things out." Sheila sat in the corner, quietly, red Ray-Bans covering the space on her face where her eyes used to be. "I'm extremely sorry about everything, you know," the man she knew now as a voice and not a body who called himself Truman Sky said.

"Previously," Sheila answered. "I knew you as only a body. You never told me your name. Your body did terrible things to my body."

"Not all terrible," Truman said, gesturing at the little boy, forgetting for a moment Sheila was blind.

“You had a voice then, too,” she continued. “But I do not remember it. You may as well have been a creature. I don’t think you’re human now.”

“Be that as it may, you’d probably be dead if not for me. I know you don’t want to hear that.” Truman paused to sit on the living room couch. “And little Clarkson, well—“

“Please!” Sheila yelled. “His name is Jimmy. I’m going to call him Jimmy.”

“Call him Jimmy!” The chocolatey mouth parroted.

“Jimmy, sure. Colloquially... that’s fine. I’m not trying to make things harder on you than they already are. Just don’t do anything official.”

“Are you done?” She asked. “The helper is due back any moment. She left for Easter brunch.”

“Yes,” Truman Sky said. “Take good care of him... and yourself.” He saw himself but not before making deep eye contact with his son.

“Bye-bye,” said Clarkson waving.

Sheila made her way to the front door and listened for his car to start and pull away. When she was certain he was gone, she went to the kitchen and dialed a number on the new phone she’d just installed. The phone had extra large buttons.

“He’s gone. Are you coming over?” she asked. The voice on the other end said yes. “Are we going to do this now?” The voice said yes again.

**APRIL 15, 1955**

Gerald Wear watched the sunset in Manila. “Gotta light, Otto?” He asked his friend, his partner.

“You know,” Otto replied. “For someone so consumed with finding the key to immortality, you sure love smoking.” He handed him a box of matches. They shared a hearty chuckle.

The duo were in the final year of medical school at the University of the Philippines, but the whole gig was a front. They were working in secret on a special project with their mentor, Phylcia Altschul.

Phyl, as she liked to be called, had pegged the two as potential candidates for the secret project during their freshman year at Princeton. They had a rare aptitude for complex science and biology, and even greater one for keeping their mouths shut.

Phyl, as it were, was never going anywhere professionally in the states because of her gender. Such was academia in the 50s. So she relocated to the Philippines, just as the war was ending. The medical school was rebuilding their facilities from scratch.

It was she who discovered, or perhaps invented, The Egg Queen. Her grand theory stated that a genetically mutated being could be conjured that would have the

magnitude to spontaneously generate, at will, eggs. Eggs that would hatch and unleash smaller creatures, her minions, insect-like animals that could infest other animals and symbiotically live in harmony, together, feeding off and repairing each other's cells, for the rest of time. "The end of death," she'd said. "The end of nearly all death."

"You can think of them as insects," she'd told the duo. "If you need a visual. It's purely theoretical but they would most likely resemble insects, or small amphibians."

"Did you see the paper?" Otto asked. "The Wings won the cup."

"Ah, Detroit," Gerald replied. "What a run they're on."

Ice hockey was about as foreign to the Philippines as apple pie. And Otto and Gerald missed it terribly.

...

I barreled out into the parking lot in a huff. I had gotten turned around inside and was on the opposite side of the arena. I jogged around until I came upon Alecia and Joe who, sure enough, were sitting with the large man around a small table, eating finger sandwiches.

"Alecia, my..." I didn't know where to begin. She stood up quickly, sensing my complete anguish. I noticed her stomach. It was huge. She looked ready to pop. It didn't make sense. How was she so far along? It looked like she was carrying triplets. None of it made any sense.

**JANUARY 1st, 2006**

Gerald laid on his deathbed, the victim of advanced lung cancer. It would be any moment now. His nearly ten-year-old twins were playing in the yard. It was a beautiful day in Southern California.

“He’s here,” Gerald’s wife said, surprised. “And sure enough he’s got an animal with him.”

A week earlier, they’d received a mysterious email which only read, in all caps: “MIGHT BE ABLE TO SAVE GERALD WEAR’S LIFE. REPLY BACK ‘OK’ IF INTERESTED. A MAN WILL ARRIVE AT YOUR HOUSE ASAP. HE WILL HAVE AN ANIMAL WITH HIM.” Gerald’s wife let them in. The animal was in a medium-sized travel container. She couldn’t make out what it was. She showed the man the master bedroom and closed the door behind her.

“Mr. Gerald Wear,” she heard the man say brightly. “Today’s your lucky day.” To Gerald’s wife, the voice sounded female.

“Well,” Gerald said, barely able to speak. “Let’s see who’s in that cage.” The extreme weirdness of the situation provided some levity from the pain and he was able to smile for the first time in weeks.

The man placed the compartment on the foot of the bed and released a large rodent, which sat elegantly before Gerald like an obedient dog.

Gerald laughed. And then violently coughed.

...

“What the hell is going on here, Alecia?” I yelled. “My face? And your... belly?”

“Calm down, Julio,” she said, coming over to me. She waddled as if she was three weeks past her due date. “Everything’s fine. The baby’s fine.”

I gave her that one for the moment. “Well what about my face? I’m... not me. I look nothing like me.” She gave me a worried look in return.

“Julio...” she cooed. “You’re... you’re you.” Everything started to swirl. I couldn’t focus. I glanced at the video board outside the arena. The logo for the Berlin Polar Bears struck a chord. They were a D.E.L. proper squad. Why were they playing a second tier team?

“What year is this?” I said, unhinged with fragility.

Just then a robin flew down from the sky at an incredible rate of speed. It landed on Alecia’s shoulder and... spoke.

“It’s time, my friends,” the bird said. “Jimmy, go fetch your father.”

The skin around the little bird’s right eye began to wiggle, revealing silver, mechanical rings and a cold green glow where its pupil had been.

**FEBRUARY 3rd, 1972**

The work had stalled.

Phyl was growing weary with the lack of progress in locating The Egg Queen. She was on the verge of abandoning the project altogether. It had been a decade and a half of tireless work, and they had gotten nowhere. They didn't know who or what she was. It was all theoretical.

She was ready to move.

"I'm ready to move on," she told Otto and Gerald. The three were eating large bowls of fettuccine with white clam sauce. "It's been too long," she said, slurping a long noodle.

"Really, Phyl?" Otto groaned. "You don't think we're making headway?"

"Robotics. Have you heard about this?" She said.

"Certainly," Gerald replied. "Can you pass the grated cheese?"

"I'm moving to Japan. Waseda University to be exact. I've accepted a consulting position and I'll be working under the tutelage of Sumisu Jin on a special robot project." Phyl dabbed her lips with a napkin. The white clam sauce was very greasy.

"Well," Otto began, feeling betrayed. "I won't relinquish the fight." He stared at his friend Gerald across the table.

“And I know Gerald Wear feels the same way. We’re going to find her. We’re going to find The Egg Queen.”

Gerald nodded, somewhat reluctantly. “Waiter,” he called. “I think we’ll need some doggy bags.”

•••

The scene that was unfolding was surreal. When I think about it now, of course, it all makes perfect sense. But at the time I’m not certain how I experienced it without passing out.

Special Agent Gregor had appeared out of nowhere and was holding a gun to my head.

Joe Marbles had a knife to Truman Sky’s throat.

And the robot bird had pecked out the eyes of the large man who was apparently named Jimmy.

As Jimmy writhed in pain on the parking lot ground, the bird instructed us to move our little party inside. “To the basement,” it said.

Before we left, Joe removed his shirt, revealing a set of at least a dozen toaster slots dug into his chrome torso. The toaster slots were of various shapes and sizes. He picked up a finger sandwich and inserted it into one where his right nipple would have been. It seemed unnecessary. He stared at me with cold eyes as he did it. He was a robot too, but a humanoid one. “My god,” I muttered.

In the room, well beneath the ice of the hockey arena, there was a hospital bed and various medical tools for childbirth waiting. I looked at Alecia and frowned. She climbed into the bed.

The vicious robin with the glowing eye laid it all out.

“Welcome. We are here for the true birth of The Egg Queen,” it said. Its voice was that of a computer-generated male. “This was, of course, attempted once before under the supervision of the Target Corp. Death Squad in 2012, nearly six years ago.” The date was wrong... or was it? I thought it was Christmas, 2014. But that didn’t add up. The bird continued, “They failed because they did not have knowledge of the final step. But it wasn’t a true failure. Born of their experiment was Wendy the God of Time. Wendy, sweet Wendy, recently deceased. Rest in peace. She was eaten by a dinosaur.”

“Most likely,” Jay added.

I looked at Truman Sky who was already staring back on me, a peculiar smirk plastered to his wrinkly face.

“Yes, most likely,” the robin replied. It then flew and landed on the corner of the hospital bed closest to Truman. “I ask of you this, Professor Truman Sky... do you have any idea what the final step is?”

“Why yes, Gerald,” he answered. “I have a pretty good idea.”

I was so thoroughly confused. This robot bird did not look like a Gerald.

“Hahaha,” the bird said, a clear facsimile of fake laughter. “My friend. My old pal. Even in your withered state, you are still so quick. If I was wearing a hat, I’d tip it to you, Otto.”

Otto?

“I’m sure you would, Gerald. I’m sure you would.”

“Now,” the bird continued. “Tell your son what’s going to happen next.”

Son?

The man I’d known as Professor Truman Sky, my predecessor as the head of the Egg Science department at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey, looked at me with complete sincerity. “Julio,” he said. “I’m your father.” I was speechless. Now it really felt like I might pass out. “The boys I was telling you about earlier. The mistakes? Well, you’re one of them. You have a brother out in Montana. His name’s Ed. He’s still in Anaconda. He’s lived there his whole life. He doesn’t know about any of this. He sells insurance and has three kids. My real name’s Otto Zimmerman. I’m very sorry about all of this.”

“What...” I felt like crying. My whole life had been a lie. Alecia began to push.

“But. That’s. Not. All,” the Gerald the robot bird said dramatically.

“No,” Otto answered. “If my calculations are correct, you’ve got us in this precarious scenario for a reason. I reckoned the Target boys didn’t have any luck when I didn’t hear anything, so I knew we’d missed something, or there was some kind of extra step. My best guess is a father-son sacrifice at the moment of birth?”

“Bingo,” Gerald replied. The bird was clearly beaming at the deduction powers of his apparent, former friend.

“The fuck?” I yelled. “They’re going to kill us?” I screamed. And on top of that, the damn robotic robin had stolen my line.

“Don’t try anything funny,” Special Agent Jay Gregor said, pulling one of my arms tighter and lifting the gun closer to my skull.

“And who the fuck are you? F.B.I.? The F.B.I.’s in on this demented bullshit?” I was livid now, ready to go out in a ball of glory.

“Let me field this one, son, if I may,” Otto said.

“Please,” Gerald told him.

“That man with the gun to your head isn’t likely who you think he is. If I had to guess, he’s the proud papa, no?”

“He’s good!” Alecia shouted, in between lamaze breaths.

“And so these are your children, Gerald. Congratulations. You were always the more nurturing one, in many ways. You clearly did a bang-up job delivering the message.” Otto sighed. “Of course, I have no idea why you’re a bird.” He laughed.

“Fuck you,” I yelled. “Fuck you, dad.” Whoever was holding me grabbed on tighter. “So what the fuck happened to my face? Answer me that—”

“Enough!” Gerald the robot bird declared, soaring straight at my face. He gave me a quick but brutal peck on the cheek and I collapsed.

“Let’s stick to the script,” Alecia said. “We’ve come this far.” She continued to be in what appeared to be advanced labor.

“We’re a part of this, Julio,” Otto told me as I wiped blood from my face. “It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“I never wanted this,” I said. I got to one knee and looked around the room. “And the Polar Bears and Penguins aren’t on the same tier. How are they playing each other? Why?”

Alecia chuckled. “They replaced the Hamburg Freezers in 2016. You know, that was the one wrinkle I thought had a chance of screwing this whole thing up,” she said. “You really are a diehard puck-head.”

“Lotta good it did me,” I told her. I truly had missed the net with that one, the clue which could’ve saved my life.

“Please,” Otto, my dad, said. “Try to embrace this.”

“My name is Alexander,” the man I’d known as Special Agent Jay Gregor told me, helping me to my feet. “She’s my sister, my twin sister.” He looked sick and twisted, nothing at all like the fast friend I’d made that night at the bar.

“Well,” I said, staring at Alecia. “That is fucking gross. This whole thing.” I wiped a bloody hand across my shirt. “You’re all disgusting. I hope that you do all live forever. Because you’ll be living in this hell you’ve created.”

“Please,” Gerald said. “Don’t insult my children, my beautiful twins. The creators and saviors of humankind...”

“Just a few more pushes,” Alecia warned.

“This is, what, 2017?” I asked.

“Correct,” Gerald replied. His bird body was only a few inches from Alecia’s womb where, allegedly, The Egg Queen would soon be emerging.

“So, how are the Pinguins doing in the big league?” I said, mimicking Alecia’s bad pronunciation from what I now guessed was several years earlier.

“Middle of the pack,” dad said.

Minutes passed in silence, save the grunts and screams of a woman giving birth. She was close.

Robot Joe, with his toaster chest protruding, geared up to kill my father. The knife in his hand, now touching the flesh of Otto Zimmerman's neck. And Alexander did the same with his gun, pressing it firmly against the back of my head. Maybe he was right. Maybe this was my purpose. It was far too weird to fight, that's for sure. I wasn't even myself anymore. So if I'd be dying, it wouldn't be me. It'd be whoever this was. On Christmas Eve in Germany, in the future. Perhaps the real me was somewhere else, with a different mind and voice. But the correct face.

Just then a woman came barging through the door in a furious panic. She had a Seeing Eye dog, a German shepherd, and was guiding the large fellow, Jimmy. "Gerald!" She screamed. "You said he wouldn't be harmed!"

"Mommy!" Jimmy cried out, still bleeding from his empty eye sockets.

The woman ripped off her sunglasses to reveal a gruesome eye injury of her own.

Alecia was giving birth.

The Egg Queen was here.

"Sheila!" Gerald the robot bird exclaimed. "Sheila, no!"

From the side pocket of her Seeing Eye dog's satchel, Sheila removed a large, automatic weapon. "Jimmy, hit

the deck!“ She screamed. She unloaded the weapon. Spraying bullets all over the room.

First she hit Alecia, the new mother, killing her instantly with a headshot. Alexander tried to save her but he took about ten bullets in the torso and was dead just as quick.

But the luckiest shot of all was the bird. Gerald had taken flight, up toward the ceiling, but she nailed him. He exploded in a tiny lightning bolt and fell to pieces.

I'm not sure if Robot Joe took a bullet but he keeled over and fell to the ground as well. Perhaps he was digitally rooted to the bird in some way and effectively 'died' when his 'master' was taken out. Perhaps we'll never know. I felt bad for Robot Joe, even though that stunt with the finger sandwiches was a real jerk move.

“Stop shooting!“ I cried. “They're all dead.“

“Who's that?“ Sheila called. Otto let out a groan. He'd been hit too.

“It's Julio,“ I said, catching my breath. “The, umm... son-half of the father-son sacrifice...“ I didn't know how much explaining I should try to do. “For the... The Egg Queen. A human sacrifice for The Egg Queen.“

“Oh god,“ Sheila collapsed, reaching out for Jimmy. “The baby... is she? Did I...“

With all the chaos, we'd initially failed to notice that a perfect, utterly zen-like, newborn baby girl lay unharmed at the end of the bed. The skin on her face began to glow

yellow and she let out a bellow, a sound I'd never heard before. A sound not of this planet.

Up above, hockey fans in their navy and red began trickling into Bremerhaven Arena.

**JANUARY 22nd, 2028**

On the day of Wendy's Sweet 16, she was finally certain that the last of the minions from the Target Corp. Death Squad had stopped tracking her. It was time.

Time to defy the logic and parameters of time, for she was Wendy the God of Time.

Her parents had organized the Sweet 16 at the El Campanario Ballroom in El Paso, near where they lived. God only knows what savings they unloaded to pay for the thing. Wendy would miss them terribly. They were truly great people, and she owed them everything. It was only through their love, compassion and patience that she was able to nurture her gift and discover who she truly was.

She went into the bathroom and locked a stall door. She started to insert her head into her own vagina. How she knew this would open up a portal for time travel is anyone's guess, but unleash a tear in the fabric of time it did. Wendy was off to the races.

Time travel came naturally to her. The discovery and responsibility that she was in fact a God? Less so.

Her favorite era was when the dinosaurs roamed the earth. She had seen the future and it was bleak. She liked the years on earth when the humans hadn't arrived yet. While her sad and gruesome death might not come as a surprise since feeding dinosaurs was her favorite hobby, she'd been doing it for the equivalent of thousands of years. It was during those hours spent feeding a brontosaurus from high atop the prehistoric trees that she came to terms with what needed to be done.

In fact, while she was eaten by dinosaurs (Compsognathus to be exact, a small carnivorous dino the size of a turkey), that's not how she died. She died when a pterodactyl knocked her from the treetops some eighty feet off the ground. She had been pondering the work she'd just completed in altering the future of humanity on earth, and she was so lost in thought that she hadn't seen the large flying beast coming right for her.

She died without knowing if it had worked or not.

In her travels to the future, she'd seen the dreary landscapes of a post-human society. They hadn't unlocked enough keys to the singularity in time, and the machines now ruled the world.

Wendy estimated the change occurred fully around 2223 or so. What remained of humanity were slave-like creatures, aided and controlled by the ruling artificial intelligence. For centuries, they tried to live forever and now that they could, now that those who remained were, they all just wanted to die.

Wendy also gleaned from her travels through history that the closest anyone ever got to finding the answers before the machines made those answers moot, was a trio of researchers in the 20th century. The machines knew that The Egg Queen was real, but they were certain it no longer mattered. No human left on earth was human enough anymore to be fixed organically.

This is when Wendy realized she was a God.

She was the God of Time, a spiritual sister to The Egg Queen. Or perhaps, “mother“ is a better description. Because without Wendy’s manipulation of history, The Egg Queen would never have been born.

•••

My dad, Otto Zimmerman née Truman Sky, had been hit in the fleshy part of the thigh with a bullet. He was bleeding badly.

“Come on, son,“ Sheila said, embracing Jimmy and getting a handle on her Seeing Eye dog. “We’re done. We’re done with all of this.“ They left the room, and me alone with a malfunctioning robot named Joe, my badly injured, elderly father and a newborn maybe who was potentially an otherworldly entity capable of delivering humanity the gift of immortality.

I didn’t quite know what to do.

I looked into the baby’s eyes. There were worlds inside those eyes, swirling, every color imaginable. Something

was happening. Her skin seemed to bubble and glow all over her body now, and the sound she emitted grew louder. I felt compelled to reach out but as I did, something blocked me, something like an electrical field. The bellow continued to enhance in volume until it was deafening. When the sound became unbearable, the entire room flashed with white. It felt as though I died briefly and maybe I did. When I could see reality again, the baby was gone. The Egg Queen had disappeared.

Her parents, Alecia and Alexander, were dead. I thought briefly about leaving old Otto to the same fate, and going upstairs to catch the hockey game. But you only got one dad in this life. I scooped him up into my arms.

“I’m gonna get you some help,” I said. “But you’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

I took him to the hospital where they performed surgery to remove the bullet in his leg. The next day I sat next to his hospital bed and he explained it all. The large man named Jimmy was in fact the infamous Clarkson Maxx. He had raised him like a son for most of his life. I felt oddly jealous. Not only that, but he was indeed a pro German hockey player. He had assumed the identity of Otto Zimmerman and was one of those most useful role players on the Fischtown Pinguin roster. Truman, the real Otto, secured a position as team personnel consultant. They had a real father-son relationship centered around the glory of the puck. I grew even more jealous.

“The anti-aging stuff is off the charts here,” he said. “He was able to assume my original identity. I was, after all, born in this country. I have dual citizenship. It really felt like I’d come full circle. In a way, I wasn’t really lying to Alecia. I was playing ice hockey professionally. Through my boy.”

He spoke of his long-time scientific partnership with a man named Gerald Wear, the robotic robin. About how they would plot to get Jimmy/Clarkson/Otto to impregnate his own sister, Joan Jane Marbles.

“It was, per our agreement, such that I would track the boy, and he the girl. We arranged for the ‘Truman Sky’ alias in case there was any heat on my end. There were curious circumstances surrounding the upbringing of the boy, let’s say. So I had a lot on my plate, securing the gig at Raritan Valley whilst forging an entire history for the would-be Professor Sky notwithstanding.

“And then Gerald soured, abruptly, on the whole project. Perhaps because of his health, which was failing him. More likely a spat of professional jealousy. I, of course, was the sire, the stud, and I’m sure at times it felt like Gerald was little more than my secretary.

“This was late April, 1996. Suddenly, I was in charge of supervising the lives of two toddlers, living a thousand miles apart. And, making matters worse, by the end of the year, Clarkson’s mom was completely out of the picture. She’d been blinded and couldn’t care for him anymore. She needed full-time care herself. I’m not sure where she wound up. Frankly, she was a liability before the whole mess with her eyes. Her family had disowned

her and the boy fell into the arms of the state. He bounced around foster families for a few years before I was able to wrangle him away. It was a complicated affair to say the least.

“Of course, that was her... Sheila. The blind woman who saved our lives. Her connection to Gerald, to all of this is, well, unclear at this juncture.

“Anyway, needless to say, with all that was going on, I did a poor job connecting to Joan Jane. At the end, it felt like she was onboard. But I’d never really hooked her. The truth is I have no idea what became of her or the baby. It’s unlikely that the baby, given what we’ve learned today, was The Egg Queen. That’s if she was really even born at all. But maybe we’ll never know. I don’t have a good feeling about any of it. It might be my greatest sadness. She’d be turning five soon. Wendy I think they named her, or claimed to have.”

“The Target murder squad?” I asked.

“Yes, the Target Corp. Death Squad. Target, you know, like the department store? Well, for decades their Board of Directors have been doubling as a super-secret agency specializing in the outer reaches of disruptive science. They have their meddling fingers in every futurist idea imaginable. Frankly, we should blow up that building in Minneapolis if you ask me. But that’s neither here nor there.”

He continued with the explanation.

“So I made it happen. I won’t get into the particulars but it happened. Got Joan Jane enrolled up there in Jersey and...” He trailed off. I didn’t want to know the details.

“She went back to Florida. She was on drugs. I didn’t have the strength or capacity to... contain her. It wasn’t like the time before...”

“And so I was grooming Alecia for the first half of another go at it when, well... not to be crass but my dick stopped working. I felt it was time to retire. Let Jimmy and I live out some dreams, live in peace. Give up the quest.

“But you and Alecia wouldn’t leave me be. We know part of the story of why that is now.”

Abruptly, a bulbous old man shuffled into the hospital room. He looked even older than my dad, a fat and grizzled, waddling thing.

“Ah, Mule,” Otto said. “Mule, meet my son, Julio.” I reached out to shake his hand but he ignored me.

“Are you dead?” He asked.

“Well, your brother sure tried,” my dad told him.

Apparently, this was Gerald’s brother, Michael who was nicknamed Mule on account of his being developmentally challenged.

“Gerald, on the surface, was very affable. But he always treated his brother like shit. I’ve had to look out for him.

Especially after we thought he'd died of lung cancer. That was back in, oh... 2006?" Mule took a seat in the corner of the hospital room and grunted.

It felt like there were still many more questions than answers, not to mention what happened to the magical baby, but I could tell my father was growing tired. I left to go for a walk. My father had Mule read him the game recap from the previous night. He struggled with the words, and I left before he got out the first full sentence.

They'd defeated the Polar Bears by a score of 2-1. They dedicated the victory to Otto Zimmerman, who had been the victim of a brutal and mysterious attack before the game. The strange story was currently sweeping the country, and the world. The hospital was flooded with press. Jimmy was being treated on the same floor as my father. It was only a matter of time before they'd connect the dots of the strange double homicide below the ice to Jimmy's assault and then to dad and me.

From the best I could tell gleaned from a German newspaper in the hospital lobby, the murder of Alecia and Alexander in the arena's catacombs was not yet public knowledge. That was good. That gave me some more time. I needed to find some chewing tobacco to clear my head.

Outside the hospital, smoking a cigarette on a bench next to her Seeing Eye dog, I saw Sheila. I wasn't sure how to approach a blind woman, never-mind a potentially uzi-toting killer one. But she had saved my life, and manners are manners. "Excuse me, ma'am," I said.

"Who is that? Julio?" She asked.

“Yes, how did—“

“I never forget a voice. I’ve been blind a long time now, my friend. Sit,” she instructed, patting the bench. “Want a smoke?”

“More of a chew-man myself,” I told her.

“I picked this up when my husband died. Or when he transitioned. He loved to smoke.” She let out a large, fulfilling plume of cigarette breath. “Hard to smoke when you’re a robot bird, though.”

#### **JANUARY 20th, 2006**

The large rodent, which was a copybara, identified herself as Phyl. She had been uploaded into the body of the animal, itself a robot, just a few months earlier. In her mouth she held the flash drive containing the essence of Gerald. She was speaking to a grief-stricken Sheila, who was in shock, mourning the death of her late husband in the one of the backrooms of the Conejo Mountain Funeral Home, Memorial Park & Crematory. She did not know the voice she was speaking to was a copybara. In fact, she thought it was a human. Under the guise of the man who had brought her to California in the first place, she explained that she was an old scientist friend of Gerald’s, named “Phil.” She wasn’t totally lying.

“It’s to our benefit that the wife is blind,” she’d told the android handler some three weeks earlier on their way to the Wear household in Malibu. “I’ll lower my voice’s tone in the audio settings so that I can do the talking.”

Sheila was onboard. She'd been onboard since Gerald reached out to her over a decade earlier with a plot to double-cross the man who had led her down the dark path her life had taken, Otto Zimmerman. Then they fell in love.'

Everything about the plan was completely insane, not to mention totally disgusting and morally abhorrent. But her life had already been so twisted. If this last, massively fucked-up event could "cure death," as Gerald claimed, then perhaps it would be worth it.

The one thing Sheila and Gerald fought over was her insistence on reaching out to Jimmy. A few years earlier, Sheila had made contact with the boy, her son, and was trying to be a part of his life again. Abandoning him was her greatest regret. Gerald was furious, worried it could derail the entire venture. But now, he was gone. While Phyl, the oddly cold and feminine voice, explained that he would be returning shortly.

"But there's a catch," Phyl the capybara admitted. "He can't come back as... well, he won't be a human being."

"What do you mean?" Sheila questioned. "I thought he was going to be, like, half-man, half-machine?"

"He has to come back as an animal," she explained. "That's... the catch."

...

I wound up bumming a cigarette from Sheila, unsure of the quality and availability of German chewing tobacco. What a story she'd told me. I walked down to the Weser River to clear my head. The nicotine blast wasn't as strong as a good wad of chew but it still felt nice.

My phone vibrated. It was a text from Joe Marbles. It read, "Julio, please call me if you can. I think you might be in trouble. I heard you woke up."

He was right about being in trouble but that last part... I had no idea. Also, I thought he was a deceased android currently in the possession of German police. I called him back right away.

"Joe?" I said. "Is it really you?"

"Julio! Yes. You're alive. Thank god. I really thought you might be dead."

"Why?" I didn't know how to go about this. It sure sounded like Joe but was Joe ever really alive himself? "What... where are you, buddy?"

"I'm in Branchburg. I'm a T.A. in the E.S. now," he told me. "You sound... great. Where are you? When did you come to? The hospital wouldn't tell me anything. Just that you'd been discharged. I've been really worried. I finally got this new number, Melinda. She's really worried too."

"What hospital? Joe, I'm sorry. Melinda? What are you talking about?" It was clear that Joe had some answers but I didn't know how to ask the question.

“Look,” he said. “Where are you?”

“Joe!” I exclaimed. “I’m in fucking Germany for god’s sake. Please, just tell me what happened. I’m... I’m not myself. I don’t look like myself. So much strangeness has occurred. I don’t... I don’t really know where to begin.”

“Germany? Well, okay...” Joe paused. “You know you were in a coma, right? For three years...”

This was news to me. I hadn’t known I was in a coma for three years.

“No,” I said. “What... what happened? Why was I in a coma?”

“Penny,” he replied. “Melinda’s old Rott? She mauled you something fierce. Totally ripped off your face. They reconstructed it during your coma. She had started to eat your brains, too. That’s why you were in a coma... brain damage.”

“Fuck,” I said, touching my face. “Fuck me. Is that... Oh my god, I remember now. That night after the bar. She wasn’t wearing her Scream mask...”

“They put her down, obviously. She’s dead now,” Joe said. “Melinda felt horrible, felt like she was somehow responsible. She came almost everyday to the hospital with Leigh. She really—”

“Leigh?”

“Yeah, Leigh...” Joe paused. “Shit, you don’t even... That... Leigh. Your... Julio, Leigh is your daughter. Melinda’s and your daughter...”

I was a daddy. I’d forgotten. I started to weep a little bit. I didn’t even know what she looked like.

“I’m so sorry, Julio,” Joe said. “We hadn’t known you’d married Alecia over the summer. She tried to freeze us out, but we—”

“I never married Alecia,” I interjected. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“She had the documents,” he told me. “Marriage certificate and everything. It was from... the summer before. August, I think. Right after your divorce. She was in total control. When you came to, she had you discharged almost immediately. We didn’t even get a chance to see you. Melinda was so distraught. She still is. She thinks this is all her fault. She’s had a hard time trusting anybody, including me. That’s why it took so long for me to get this number for you. Alecia was only legally obligated to give it to her because of Leigh. It’s been a tough go of it... for everybody.”

It was starting to come together. Clearly, Alecia had forged the documents and duped me into thinking no amount of time had passed when I awoke from the coma. Was the whole thing one giant, long con from the get-go? To get me over here and in place for the botched human sacrifice. No doubt. And clearly she had played my affinity for Joe as well, what with the creation of bad robot Joe.

“Thank you, Joe,” I said. He truly was like a lost son to me, even if a robot version of him tried to slit my father’s neck. “This info has been invaluable. And I have a lot to share with you,” I told him, verbally winking.

“The Egg Queen?”

“Bingo,” I said. “But I can’t discuss it over the phone. How quickly can you fly out to Germany? I’m in Bremerhaven.”

### **SEPTEMBER 21st, 1988**

For Wendy, and anyone really, time travel wasn’t just as easy as sticking one’s head into their own vagina. No, it took concentration and, more importantly, a spiritual connection to the cosmic glue which held the universe and the very essence of reality together. And Wendy was a pro.

By her best estimation, she had been jumping through time for over 5,000 years. Of course, time was completely subjective to her existence as the God of Time, so this figure is largely arbitrary. But when she manifested in Shinjuku, Tokyo, in the late 80s, it’s safe to say she was an expert on the matter.

Phyliscia Altschul was closing in on retirement. She was an old lady now. She had come as close as anyone to fixing “the human problem“ in both the fields of biology: The Egg Queen, and computer science: artificial intelligence, A.I.

She was perfect.

Wendy found her reading in the atrium of her cottage near the university. She startled her.

“Please,” she said. “Don’t be alarmed.”

“Who are you?” Phyl, perplexed at this sudden appearance of an American teenager in her Japanese house, an intruder. One of the other confirmations that she was, in fact, a God, was that she had stopped aging upon beginning her travels through time. She was permanently sixteen, which often helped in cases like this of necessary intrusion.

“It’s okay, Phyl. I’m here to help. You’re going to want to hear what I have to say.”

They went down to the robotics lab at Waseda University and Wendy got to work.

“You will technically be dying, yes,” she said. “I will have to kill you. It will be painless, I can assure.” Wendy had transported various, pocket-sized computers and was furiously typing codes into all of them. Phyl was not necessarily certain she was a god, but she believed her truly to be from or of the future. She watched in awe at the technology.

“There is just one catch?” Wendy said, stopping momentarily to look at Phyl.

“What’s that?”

“You have to come back as an animal.“

“An animal? Why?“

Wendy sighed. She knew this would be the hardest part to explain. While she wasn't totally sure and couldn't prove it, she believed that the future machines had also cracked the time-space continuum. She believed there could be nanobots observing parts of, or all of human history. To be on the safe side, she would have to transform Phyl into a robot animal.

In reality, the future A.I. was not capable of time travel. They never had to have been animals in the first place. Even Gods make mistakes.

Phyl was, needless to say, not pleased with this development. But she ultimately decided on the capybara as that was her favorite animal to observe back in the Philippines. Wendy had attempted to persuade her to choose a smaller animal like a bird because, ironically, it would take less time to create.

This would be the near identical spiel Phyl would deliver to Gerald on his deathbed, and then to his wife Sheila. After her transition, Wendy spent months in secret training her on the art so she could fashion androids herself in the future.

Or the past.

They became quite good friends over this period. When it was time to depart, they were both very sad.

“What will you do now?” Phyl the capybara asked.  
“Travel through time, I guess.”

“Yes,” Wendy replied. “I love the dinosaurs. I’ll probably go there now.” Even though her eyes were robot animal eyes and not human eyes, and even though Wendy herself was more God than human, she could sense the true and utter despair which their parting ways was unloading on Phyl. “Hold on,” she said. “I have an idea.”

She fashioned a computer back at the lab for the specific purposes of sharing her whereabouts and activity. “Here,” she said, handing the device to Phyl. It was essentially a smartwatch. “This will automatically broadcast where I am and what I’m doing. Does it fit your android rodent wrist?”

“Like a glove,” Phyl responded, smiling. And with that, Wendy the God of Time inserted her head into her vagina and was gone.

Phyl waited out the years, per their plan. She concocted and built the android handler, who went by the name Tom Carson. They moved back to America, where Tom Carson became an animal expert and took Phyl the capybara to grade schools for small assemblies for most of the 1990s. It was a weird life: not speaking and being repeatedly touched by children. But they needed a cover. The years went by.

Tom Carson and Phyl made it to California by the end of 2005, per their plan, and reached out to Gerald Wear who would die on January 16th, early the next year, in Malibu.

It went about as smoothly as one could expect. Gerald was uploaded into the body of a robotic robin after his death. He seemed to be “all there,” as Phyl described.

But it was during the moment of his death, his transition, when the final puzzle piece slid into view. In a flash, in the very moment the change occurred, Gerald had a vision. He saw a baby being born and in the background something else: death. A sacrifice to be exact. He described it later to Phyl and Sheila as the sacrifice of a father and son.

Phyl was extremely weary, but Gerald was adamant that in order to “activate” The Egg Queen they would need to kill a father and son at the exact moment of birth. What was even more concerning was Gerald’s insistence that this father-son duo be Otto, his old partner, and Otto’s firstborn, Julio McManus, who didn’t even know who his biological father was.

The years went on. Sheila and Gerald’s twins, Alecia and Alexander, grew up. Gerald was in charge of organizing the plot to get Otto and Julio together at the right time, and “Aunt Phyl the capybara” was in charge of delicately bringing the siblings together in time for the most unholy act. It wouldn’t be easy, but they both agreed that a rodent explaining it was somehow better than a bird.

Then, in 2010, tragedy struck. Every morning Phyl would wake up from a computer sleep and check her wrist to see where Wendy was. It was her most favorite thing to do in the world. Sure, life was intriguing: living in the body of an android animal in a century you had no

business seeing. But Phyl always wanted more. She was envious and in awe of Wendy, and their time together so many years earlier, however brief, was the best she ever had.

She glanced at the blue text on the screen on the device on her wrist, and it read, “TRANSMISSION ENDED. HOST EATEN BY A DINOSAUR. 161.1 Ma - 0616:39.” Phyl was devastated. She thought about the timestamp. 161 million years ago. She was incapable of crying, and for the first time she saw this as a design flaw.

Gerald’s response to the news of Wendy’s death was predictably cold. Whereas he should’ve owed her, a God, everything he had, his life, his entire existence, he felt an odd obligation that truly miffed him. Her presence in the world, in whichever point in time, was a constant burden. The fact that she might return and want something was on Gerald’s mind daily. And he resented Phyl, his former mentor, for her blind adoration.

Phyl was truly a wreck, and in Gerald’s robot robin eyes: a liability. He knew what had to be done.

He met in secret with his daughter, Alecia, whom he knew was capable of carrying out the deed. Alexander had always been the softer twin, and he could never know what was about to happen. It would be their only secret, forever until their deaths.

On the eve of Alecia’s Sweet 16, she asked Phyl to come along to the venue Sheila had rented to help decorate.

“Wendy was forever sixteen, right?” Alecia asked, deviously.

Again, Phyl wanted more than anything to be able to shed tears from her manufactured copybara eyeballs. But that was not an option. “That’s right,” she said, without emotion.

“I bet you miss her, don’t you?” Alecia was just taunting her now. “Anyway, can you go in the walk-in freezer and check on the ice cream cake?”

Phyl did as she was asked and Alecia promptly locked the door behind her. The Sweet 16 venue was Moongazer’s, a Wear Family Property. They had never scheduled a party in the first place. In fact, Sheila went ahead and cleared the schedule for the next two weeks, about the exact amount of time it would take to freeze-out and permanently damage Phyl’s software.

It would be a long, cruel death. Much different than the first one Phylicia had to endure.

She looked at her wristband computer and wondered if its mechanisms would cease to function before her’s. It didn’t matter. She closed her eyes.

•••

I sat and stared at the Weser. It was beautiful. I thought about my childhood. I knew I was adopted. I had never tried to look for my real parents. My mom and dad were good people, a former Mexican prostitute and an Irish

drunk. Maybe not the best of lives, but I felt like I was lucky.

I thought about Truman or Otto or whoever he was... dad. Did I look like him? Well, not now since I had a different face. But had I?

And why did they choose this look for me now? So utterly different than it had been. Another mystery.

I put out Sheila's cigarette and threw it into the river. I loved littering about as much as I loved chili dogs, chewing tobacco and even ice hockey. But it was a part of my life I kept hidden. Often, early in my relationship with Melinda, I would sneak out late at night to empty some of our trash onto the streets of New Jersey. I did this under the guise of taking Penny the Rottweiler on a walk.

I thought about Penny and how if we hadn't gotten her that nose job, none of this might have ever happened. And now that dog is dead. Poor Penny.

I thought about my dad back in the hospital with that Mule fellow, desperately trying to read aloud hockey recaps with the capacity of a dumb child's mind.

I thought about Melinda and my daughter Leigh who were real. They were real people living in New Jersey, a place I could never return to.

I thought about Joe, sweet Joey, the son I never had. I hoped he would never find out the truth about his poor sister.

I thought about Alecia and “Alexander“ and how entirely screwed up they were, and how it probably wasn’t their fault.

And then I thought about my long-lost brother in Montana. He didn’t know about any of this. I had to find him, not to tell him but to not tell him. He was my last chance of escaping this sick world and slipping into something pure.

I had to meet him: Ed.

But first, I went back to the hotel to write all this down. That’s where I am now, the beautiful Atlantic Hotel here in Bremerhaven, which I highly recommend. And so my final thoughts on The Egg Queen that I’d like to share with you all is that she isn’t real. She never was. Everything I saw was just a constructed reality. Sure, it “physically happened“ and “I was there,“ but it wasn’t mine. None of it was mine. You can live a million years in this life and if you don’t own your actions, everyday, hour to hour, what good are they? You’re just an actor in someone else’s script.

I hit save and close my laptop. I rub my eyes. I look around the hotel room. I go to the microwave and take out my wallet.

Oh no, I need to book flights. I shouldn’t have closed my laptop just then after writing all that stuff down. I open my laptop again. Anaconda, Montana is very far away. I need to fly to Frankfurt first, then to Seattle, then... my

new home. I no longer have Alecia's connection to wads of cash. She's dead.

Still, a one-way ticket is only gonna cost around \$650. That feels like a good deal. I'll need to rent a car when I land in Bozeman, Montana. It's two hours from there to Anaconda. What if Ed doesn't live there anymore? What if Ed's dead?

My tube socks are loose because I like them like that. I pat the skin around my ankle. My hand fits inside the looseness.

I've made it this far. Now it's time to write my own story.

I'm surprised apps haven't changed more in the three years I was in a coma. Uber looks the same. Or maybe I don't remember how it looked before. Graphic design is different from, for example, how someone's face looks. I call an Uber.

I feel free inside the car, a Ford. Hello, American car. I am an American. I don't speak to the driver. I'm sure he knows. Must be the tube socks, or the ignorance.

The Bremen airport is small. I wonder if it is smaller than the one I'm heading to in Bozeman. Every building, every structure, anything, is either bigger or smaller than every other thing. When I get to Bozeman I will say a prayer for every airport in the world. I won't need to leave Anaconda when I get there. I will live inside the belly of that snake until the end of my natural life.

Snake. Snakes lay eggs.

I wonder how I got the job at R.V.C.C. in the first place. Sure, I was an alum but I didn't have a science background, not to mention any teaching experience on any level. How much of my life had been dictated by the result of meddling, outside forces?

I tried not to think about eggs.

The flight to Frankfurt is a short one, the shortest air portion of the trip. I wonder if Joe Marbles is really heading this way. I hope not, but I'm not going to reach out either way. He's on his own now. Like me.

No one in Germany, maybe no one in all of Europe, is heading to Anaconda, Montana right now. My plan is trudging forward, swimmingly. I'm a real original American boy. And I'm coming home to make good.

The lady next to me has been glancing in my direction quite a lot. She finally speaks, and in perfect English she says, "You're American, aren't you?"

"As the crow flies," I say, a bit flirtatiously.

"Oh I just knew it. Where are you heading? Oh! That is... if you don't mind me asking?"

"No, not at all," I tell her. "The great state of Montana. Visiting my brother."

"Stop!" She shouts. "Me too! Unbelievable. It really is. You looked like a Montanian, if I may add. Where in Big Sky Country are you headed?"

“Anaconda,” I say. She hits my arm below the shoulder, and hard.

“No! No you are not! That’s where I’m heading!”

I feel dejected. My original plot had hit a snag and I still have two more planes to board.

“What are the odds,” I say.

“I do not know the odds but maybe I know your brother? Heck, maybe I even know... you?”

“Well, no,” I reply. “Not me for sure. I mean, I’ve never been there. Never been out west actually.”

“Oh, you’ll love it. It’s so beautiful. What’s your brother’s name?”

I didn’t know his last name. His name is Ed. If I just say that his name is Ed then this lady is going to ask what his last name is. And then I’m going to have to tell her that I don’t know what my brother’s last name is. But this is my story so I have to live with the lines. Even if they’re still, somehow, predictable. “Ed. His name is Ed. He sells insurance.”

“Ed Berry? Well, stop right there.” She, again, hits me on the arm. “He’s married to my second cousin Janice. We’re... we’re practically related!” The lady smiles and sighs. “You know, I actually never knew he had a brother...”

She wants more from me but I'm not sure what to give.  
"We've never met. It's complicated," I tell her.

"Okay," she answered, satisfied. "Family stuff. I get it.  
Well, still... small world, right?"

"Right."

She then proceeds to pull out a tablet and types word after word into various apps. Swiping here and tapping there. She begins salivating. The saliva drips onto the tablet and it begins to smoke. She's escorted into first class, through the curtain. I never see her again.

When I get to Bozeman I'm going to throw all my electronics in the toilet. I'm going to jam my laptop in the back part of the toilet, under the lid, and I'm going to throw my phone into the water where the piss and shit go. I'll try my best to flush it down the hole. Maybe it will go down the drain, maybe not.

The plane lands.

The Frankfurt airport is busy. It's the day after Christmas now. Of course it's busy.

Frankfurt to Seattle is long. Impossibly so. I think it might rewind to Christmas Day by the time we land. I buy a notebook and pen before boarding. Maybe the flight will be long enough for me to invent a new language, or at least a new alphabet. Yes, I should start there.

The thing about inventing a new alphabet, I decide, is that it's impossible. It's slightly less impossible than flying from Germany to Washington state and that is why I must do it. I put the pen to paper and think about what my "A" is going to look like. I let my fingers do the work as my mind rests.

The man in the seat next to me guffaws. "That's not a new alphabet," he says, chuckling. "Boy. That's a cypher."

He's right. I tell him that I knew that all along, which I did. And I tell him that the lie is okay because the lie is my own. He appreciates my candor. His name is Dennis. He's heading, eventually, to a suburb of Vancouver, Washington. I tell him I didn't know there was anything besides the Vancouver in Canada, home of the National Hockey League's very own Canucks.

"There's at least two of everything already on this damn planet. So don't worry about creating anything new," he tells me. Dennis goes to the bathroom and he never comes back. Eventually another man takes his seat. This man looks like Dennis, only smaller.

"Dennis?" I say. The man looks at me like he doesn't speak my language. He pulls out a doll and begins combing its hair with a tiny brush. The doll's skin is yellow and bright, a very similar hue to that of The...

I try not to think about Her. The trying not to think is hard.

I try to sleep but all the trying not to think only leads to more thinking, powerful thoughts. The best thoughts, I think. And I think I don't need sleep, only these most powerful thoughts. What a terrific fuel! We could fly to Seattle then around the whole globe again without stopping, just for fun, if we could harvest this fuel. If only we could.

The new Dennis is brushing his doll's hair so vigorously that a flight attendant asks him to stop. She's speaking French but I believe the gist is he's freaking out the other passengers. Let him be. That's my take on this hair-brushing situation.

The entire plane begins humming "Pop Goes the Weasel," even new Dennis. It's unsettling. I feel like we're going to crash. But we don't crash. Not now. And not now either. We continue to advance through the clouds high up in the sky. We still haven't crashed when the humming finally stops.

It's now definitely Christmas Day again. I think perhaps we have flown around the globe a few times. Perhaps my thinking about the new kind of fuel manifested itself into reality. We have unwound time. The entire flight crew is dressed like Santa and the original Dennis is back, chuckling his familiar chuckle, and... Hey! I'll be damned if it isn't a very "St. Nick"-variety chuckle at that. The sound of it tickles my ears, which are my original ears. Penny the Rott did not maul my ears. And I laugh too.

We land in Seattle at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning. I thank Dennis for lightening the mood. "L'ambiance a toujours été sans poids," he says. "La

perception de son allumage est elle-même la plus grande farce humaine jamais jouée.“ I don’t understand a word.

He reaches into his pocket and hands me the yellow doll. Its hair is completely gone. “Here ya go!” Dennis says, slapping me in the same place the lady from Montana did. “It’s a boy now!”

I put the doll in my bag and tell him thanks.

I walk through the terminal in the Seattle-Tacoma Airport, affectionately called Sea-Tac. I think about a literal “sea tack” and how useless it would be to try to pin anything up underwater. It’s three hours till my flight to Bozeman.

I walk into the men’s bathroom and rip out all the pages containing the alphabet I’d made, the cypher. I get them wet and stick them on the bathroom mirror. The ink is running a little but it’s still legible. To the layman’s eyes, I’m sure it just looks like scribbles. But it doesn’t matter. It exists. It houses a language in code, in story, even if the only person who sees it is an airport janitor before they throw it in the trash. Shaking their head in confused disapproval, I imagine.

I like airport terminals, each one so different yet essentially the same. There’s no escape. You can only live the life that is offered by the garish choices set in front of you. You’re temporarily living inside a commercial. Everything is bland and unwanted, yet people are either incredibly happy or frustrated and sad. There are no in-betweens and the limited, horrible choices act as the

perfect buffer for this swirling, ever-changing bundle of collective emotions.

I think I'll throw my wallet away when I get to Bozeman, as well. After I rent a car. Maybe I'll find some carrion on the side of the road and stuff it in the animal guts. I don't want to be me anymore. And I'm more than halfway there.

As I board the small plane to Bozeman, I wonder who'll be sitting next to me this time. I take out the book I bought, a nonfiction account of the making of a fictional movie, not wanting to talk to anyone. I haven't slept in days.

A young woman enters the cabin with a big dog in tow, a Rottweiler. They stop at my aisle and damn if this beast doesn't look just like Penny. That is, if the nose job had taken. "Good grief," I mutter under my breath.

"I'm sorry," the lady says. "This is my therapy dog, Jebediah. They instructed me that the seat next to you is open. I hope he doesn't get in the way."

"It's fine," I say. "As long as he doesn't bite."

"Oh no, he's friendly." Old Jeb was basically too big for the aisle and inserted himself right next to me, Julio George McManus, previously the owner of this flight's only empty seat. Just my luck.

"Hey." The dog is speaking to me.

"Not another talking robot animal. I can't take it."

“Well, half a bingo, friend,” Jeb says. “I’m not a robot.”

I was clearly delirious. I had finally lost my mind.

“Well,” I say, embracing this insanity head-on. “What do you want?”

“Me? Oh, nothing... Maybe a little friendly chat if you’re up for it, but I don’t want to be of any trouble.”

“No,” I say. “It’s fine. I’m sorry. Just been a weird couple weeks, months. Years, actually. Come to think of it. You look like a friend of mine... well, a dog I used to know.”

“Get outta town. That right?”

“Yeah, her name was Penny.”

“You saying I look like a girl, fool?”

“Well, no... it’s just—”

“Relax! I’m fucking with you,” Jeb the Rott says. “This plane is definitely crashing.”

There is a huge flash and crunching sounds. I wake up from a dream. The young woman passenger is looking at me with a meek yet concerned facial expression. “Excuse me,” she says. “You were talking to my therapy dog in your sleep. Could you please not do that? It’s hard enough being a therapy dog...” I don’t know what she means by that.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” I say, wiping some drool from my lips. We’re almost to Bozeman. The dog is looking at me. I don’t want to make life harder on a therapy dog. She’s right about that.

The car I rent in Bozeman is a navy blue Hyundai Accent. The airport is north of Yellowstone National Park by about the same distance as Anaconda, to the west.

I head west on what I discover is the first day of the new year, 2018. The years and days seem less important than ever before. It’s morning, beautiful and cold. That’s all I know for sure.

I think about how I will find my brother, Ed, when I get to Anaconda. There are only 9,000 inhabitants. How many of them could be insurance salesmen named Ed?

The ride is a good two hours and very flat. I scan the radio repeatedly but I only pick up static. I flip to AM and I finally get a clear signal. The man talking is upset. “We’re all going to hell!” He screams. I leave the station on and listen. He recites from the Book of Jeremiah. He yells, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations!” As the road gets flatter, so does the man’s tone. By the time I get to the outer limits, he’s completely calm. “They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” the man says in a whisper. “Good luck out there.” It feels like he’s speaking directly to me, and only me.

I pull up to a miniature golf course called Goosetown Mini-Golf. Despite the holiday and weather, business is booming. The cold, dry sunshine is actually perfect putt-putt weather I decide, disembarking the Accent. This feels like the perfect place to ask around about “Ed the insurance salesman, father of three and my twin brother.”

The teenage girl working the counter looks at me with a glum, confused expression. “You’re not coming in here to play miniature golf alone on New Year’s Day, are you?” Her face is saying.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hello,” I say, taking a deep breath. “This is a bit of an odd... request. But I’m looking for a man named Ed. Insurance salesman?” Her face is blank now. “He lives here in Anaconda. Maybe I can ask around?” I request, gesturing towards the hordes of families and groups shuffling around the course outside.

“Hmmm,” she replies. “Actually my boss, the owner... He might be able to help better,” she tells me. “His name is Ed too.”

She goes into an adjoining room and returns trailing a man who looks like me, I think. Well, what I looked like before my face was reconstructed while I was in a coma.

“Hi,” the man says. “I’m Ed, how can I help you?”

I’m taken aback. His voice sounds like my voice but maybe not my real voice: the voice as it sounds inside my

head, conjuring and dictating all of these stories and events, original or otherwise.

“Hi,” I say, taking his hand. I imagine the hand as the hand of a fetus and touching that hand inside the same womb. The womb of our mother. Who is she?

“Hi,” he says again. “Is everything alright? Justine says you’re looking for someone?”

“Yes,” I say, composing myself. “Yes, I am. I’m sorry... this is pretty random.”

“It’s okay,” Ed replies.

“I don’t even have a last name. But I’m looking for someone also named Ed. He’s an insurance salesman? I’m sorry. This is probably a shot in the dark.”

Ed’s face goes pinkish before answering. His mouth contorts. “I... used to sell insurance actually.” There’s a lengthy pause with some stuttering. “Maybe you’re... looking for me?” He giggles nervously.

“Well, I’m not sure,” I say. “Do you have three kids and happen to have been born on May 6th, 1981?”

Ed’s face goes from pink to gray. The shape of his nervous mouth shifts into an agitated, hyper-aware one.

“Who...” He looks at Justine before continuing. “Let’s talk in my office.”

He gently pats my elbow and looks at Justine as if to say everything's alright. I follow him into the other room and then through another door which leads outside. We maze our way around the mini-golf course. Big, fake smiles are plastered on our faces.

We get to another small house which is attached to the special 19th hole. The bonus, "win a free game" hole has been made up to look like a chicken coop. There is a large egg on top which appears as if it would glow if someone were able to get a hole-in-one. Tiny mechanical chickens, bobbing up and down, are manning the gap between the incline of the green ramp and the actual hole, which is maybe twice the size of a regular one. It looks very hard but certainly not impossible.

Inside the office, Ed immediately asks me to take a seat. He does the same behind an old desk. "Who are you? And how do you know all that stuff?" He stops to swallow, his mouth so obviously dry. "What's up?"

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I didn't mean to alarm you. I didn't think I'd find you... here," I say. "But I... well." I stop to catch my breath. "I have reason to believe we might be related." I pause to gauge his reaction. He seems as confused as before. "You're adopted, right?"

"No!" He exclaimed. "Certainly not. I'm... Who told you that?"

"The man who I have reason to believe is your... our father." Still, nothing. "I think we might be brothers, half-brothers."

“This is...” Ed fidgets and takes out his phone. “This is pretty nuts. I’m just... I’m real sorry, buddy. Looks like you were given some bad info. Maybe you can tell me who told you all that personal info? Maybe that would help. Because I did sell insurance around here, for many years. And I do have three kids. And, well, May 6th... Bingo.”

I scoff, happily. “That’s my word... ’Bingo’. I say that a lot.”

“It’s a pretty popular expression,” Ed says dismissively. “Listen. Who told you all that stuff? Your... father? I can’t help you if you don’t give me a name.”

I struggle with how to continue. “It’s complicated,” I finally say. “I don’t think any of his names will mean anything to you.”

“His names?” Ed replies. He’s growing more agitated. “I think—”

“Can you maybe contact your parents?” I ask, cutting him off. “They might be—”

“My parents are dead, dude. Jesus Christ.” He looks at me with daggers for eyes. “They died five years ago in a car crash. My biological parents.” He stands up. “I think you better go.”

I feel utterly devastated. I sink my head in my hands and begin to weep. I can hear Ed sigh, loudly.

“Hey,” he says, sighing again. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can help you. If you can’t give me any more information, I definitely can’t help you.” I look up and see Ed reaching into a small box on his desk. “Here,” he says, handing me a slip of paper. “A free game, on me. Maybe clear your head and then we can talk some more if you think of anything that might help. What do you say?”

I look at the piece of paper. It has the Goosetown Mini-Golf logo on it and it reads “Complimentary Free Game, good for one player.” At the bottom is a note that it never expires.

“It’s a beautiful day for it,” Ed says. “Go to the front building and Justine will hook you up with a putter and a ball.”

“Okay,” I say, wiping my face. “Sure. Why not?” I force out a bit of laughter. Ed looks at me with pity and goodwill.

“Great. Just knock on that door when you’re done if you want to talk about this. Maybe tell me, you know, who told you his... tall tale.”

Perhaps the looming egg atop the 19th hole is keeping me around. Whatever weird synergy that might bring. But really, I’ve got no place else to go.

When I had thought about finding Ed before, I’d figured he would be aware of his status as an adopted person. I hadn’t really considered he’d never been told. That just seemed like some scenario from the 1800s. And I couldn’t consider the real alternative.

That maybe none of this was true. We weren't brothers. And the last few years...

"We were never properly introduced," Ed says, opening the door for me.

"Oh, right. I'm Julio McManus," I tell him.

"Edward Herman." He shakes my hand a second time and now I can feel thousands of miles in between our clasped fingers.

Next to the first hole is a sign explaining why Anaconda is nicknamed Goosetown. It reads, "In the early 1900s, saloons in this part of the East Anaconda neighborhood used to raffle off geese and turkeys."

"Why not Turkeytown?" I wonder aloud. Each hole has a unique animal theme, with a large papier-mâché goose obstacle planted in the middle of the first. Turkeys are, in fact, present as well: wooden cutouts of the bird act as border walls up the ramp on the first level of the fourth hole. The funnel which spits your ball down to a second, lower section is made out to be a horn of plenty. This hole has a Thanksgiving theme.

There are no mammals represented on the entire mini-golf layout: just reptiles and birds. This strikes me as odd, but I roll with it. I'm playing the game of my life. I've hit a hole-in-one on every single putt. By the time I get to the bonus 19th, I'm so in the zone that the world around me evaporates. I can only see angles and I can only feel the weight of the air around my wrists above

where my hands are touching the rubber grip of the cheap club. I stare at the giant egg atop the chicken coop. I've conquered geese, turkeys, osprey, pigeons, bald eagles and more. Not to mention all the scaly friends: lizards, snakes, salamanders and the fifteen-foot croc whom I nimbly guided my ball across its back, among them. No one is paying me any mind. They are all completely unaware of the magical, historical performance I am about to complete. When I take my final swing, I won't be thinking about Ed just a few steps away. And I won't be thinking about any of the strange events which led me here. I won't be thinking about anything. My mind will be completely blank, completely open.

I take the swing.

I hit the ball with enough velocity to clear the ramp. It narrowly avoids one of the bobbing, mechanical chickens and goes in the hole. Dead center. Another hole-in-one. Just as I'd imagined, the direct hit has triggered the large egg atop the coop. A light inside it begins to shine, rotating and blinking like a strobe. A siren blares. The light is yellow and bright. The sound is deafening. Its magnitude quickly increases until I'm forced to my knees. The sound and light, together, are eating me alive. I retreat into the darkness inside me. When everything feels blank, deleted, all quiet and black, I try to open my eyes. The blankness is replaced with another, different blankness. There are subtle gray outlines of the place I'd just inhabited but this is not that place. I hear the sound of something, not quite a voice. Maybe the voice of a human baby merged with the shrieks of an extinct animal. It subtly gets less and less muddled until I can

make out words. It's telling me, "Congratulations." The world's gray outlines begin to fill with color and the black erodes. The voice continues to say "Congratulations" over and over again. Eventually I'm standing in front of the 19th hole again. But the entire Goosetown Mini-Golf course is now empty. And the large egg is shattered, unrecognizable.

The voice returns, now crystal clear. It's female and directly behind me. I turn around.

"You've found me," she says. But her lips are not moving. She's communicating this sound, this voice, directly to my brain, telepathically I assume. It's a soothing, familiar voice. She's a beautiful angel, literally glowing. I've found The Egg Queen.

She says we need to go to the South Pole. It's there where we'll find the secret entrance to the center of the earth. "The earth is an egg," she tells me. "Inside this egg is another egg. And this is the egg we'll need to crack." If anyone knows a thing or two about eggs it's gotta be The Egg Queen. I nod my head, yes.

I wonder how we'll get there, not quite ready for the strain of some more international travel. But, of course, The Egg Queen travels in style. Per command, I hold her around her waist, from behind, and she bursts into the air. The Pole is 9,000 miles from Anaconda. We're there in what feels like seconds.

"We're here," The Egg Queen says. "Where all the meridians meet. This place exists outside of time, always, eternal." I'm enamored by the vast ice and wonder why I

don't feel the cold, which must be incredible. I think about hockey. I see imaginary goals to my right and to my left. Twin Wayne Gretzky ghosts skate a perfect figure 8 around us and then score with the most beautiful slap-shots I've ever seen. The sound of their sticks striking the pucks cascades into each of my ears in perfect harmony. Everything is white. "Because time does not exist here, it is time." She points toward the ground. There's a hole.

"Goodbye," I tell her. "And... thank you." She leans in and kisses me softly on the forehead.

"Thank you. It was always meant to be you."

I jump into the hole, leaving The Egg Queen behind on the surface of Antarctica. But I know she's still with me, spiritually. She's keeping me safe from the elements, this part of the earth which only exists to kill and to try to remind us.

The center of the earth is a fire. It is not happy when I finally reach the core. It spits hot lava and sprays flaming, gaseous vapors at me. But I am protected by Her energy. I am all glowing yellow. The heat and the fire cannot harm me, so they retreat. I see an egg. The space it exists in is not molten, but smokey and pink. I am inside of the womb of the center of the earth and I pick up the egg. It's the size of a large watermelon. For some reason, I smell it. It is odorless. I look around but there's nothing to crack it on. There's no countertop edge, no side of any frying pan. I panic. I'm suddenly a force outside myself. I'm cracking the egg on myself, my torso. And then I become the egg itself. The egg is my body. I

punch at my stomach. I punch at my stomach until it opens up and what is unleashed ascends and reenters the world, born again.