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Awake & Asleep

By Iván Brave

*In the middle of all this recurrence, however, is the central recurrent cycle of sleeping and waking life, the daily frustrations of the ego, the nightly awakening of a titanic self.*

—Northrop Fry, “The Anatomy of Criticism”

## PART I

### 1. Texas, 2030

The night I burned the manuscript, Sam returned. We had not seen each other for sixteen years.

Now here he was—my blond, stout, Nordic-blooded cowboy with fjords for eyes.

“Juan.”

“Sam.”

Outside, lightning flashed, thunder cracked, and gale-force winds toppled one fiber optic tower after another. A hurricane was thrashing onto land and birthing a storm surge. Still, that was less surprising than my old friend’s knock on the plywood of the sliding back door. I was

pushing out a third board, then a fourth, when he kicked his muddy boots through the opening, sat on the couch and cracked open a beer from the case he was carrying.

“What’s cooking?” He pointed to the fireplace.

“Just a nothing,” I said, hearing the middle chapters of my botched memoir emit a wet hiss, as flakes of purple prose mingled with the air being siphoned through the chimney. I wanted to cite how “fiendishly difficult” it is to burn a manuscript, borrowing a line from ole Bulgakov, as well as mention the sheer coincidence of Sam dropping in. But the ass had to make a joke.

“That board job you got, a chihuahua could have blown it down.”

“You didn’t want to try the front door?”

“I thought that was—hell—pass me the hammer.”

As I watched Sam patch up the gap from inside the living room, I thought about how no amount of planning can prevent the unexpected. Because of this, most of my neighbors, and people I knew, barely even bothered, past the frantic stock up on bottled water and ammunition. One would think by now, the fourth decade of the third millennium post the death of Christ, we would have solved the seasonal issue of floods. Or at least have agreed on some standard, city-wide protocols, like we do with school children for the occasional structural fire. But no. Every deluge comes at us as it did in the time of Noah. Most of us are unprepared, surprised even, fluttering from one urgency to the next from October to May, postponing that one-percent increase in property tax that would improve drainage, then bemoaning the twelve inches of rain come August. Dread or panic, bread and games, repeat. And Sam. How was I supposed to know he would call—not message—to say, “I’m in the city—can I come over?”

He was clapping his hands clean and getting my carpet dirty, then knocking back his beer. “No two pieces alike. Did you nab the wood from a construction site?”

“Borrowed it.”

“You knew I was in town. You could have called. I would have sawed the scraps for you. Aligned the boards, too, so you could use the sliding door.”

“I thought I would keep the riffraff out.”

“Guess you didn’t.”

“Yeah, hardly.”

He hummed through pursed lips.

“Since when do you say *hardly*?”

The living room lights flickered.

“Since you missed the funeral.” I walked over to the bar. “Want a drink?”

“I uh, brought a case, remember? The brewery I did a shoot for gave me one too many.”

He groped inside the twenty-four pack, before reaching a can and popping the top. It looked warm. Sam looked drunk. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

“I’m just glad I didn’t change my number, so you could crash at my place sixteen years. . .” Damn key wasn’t where it was supposed to be. I kept the cabinet locked—not sure why. “So you could crash here *sixteen years later!*” Rain splashed the plywood outside. The boards croaked.

Another flash. Sam drew steel from his belt and, before I could move, he sprang at the lock. And before I could thank him, he was back on the couch, kicking his boots onto the coffee table. “How’s Pee Pee?” he asked. It was the name he had given my wife because of her initials and because of how we had met.

“Pilar’s good,” I said, pulling out a near-empty bottle of Chartreuse. “She just stepped out.” The herbal liquor swished in the glass, as I brought it bottoms up. “You still in Da Nang?”

“You could say.”

The cabinet was easier to open than Sam. He hadn't shaved. His blond beard was halfway to ash and wiry. There were bags under his eyes and bags under his jowls, as if he had binged cheap beer for days, stuffed himself for months, and overworked the last thirty years. “Goddamn, Sam. You look like you just got out of jail.”

He shrugged, crushed an empty can in his hand, and whipped out another. “You look like you just got into one.”

I swiped his feet off the table and joined him on the couch, Chartreuse in hand. “I got tenure last spring,” I said, polishing off the first glass and pouring another. “The summer's been rough. You?”

No reply. And I was glad. It reminded me how much I liked having him around, how we could weather anything, in comfortable silence—or banter. We sat like that for a minute, until my grandfather clock struck nine. Meanwhile, the fireplace reeked of torched dreams, smoldering into embers, with its gray fumes caking the glass of the framed paintings and portraits around us, while the A/C quit on us, and Houston fell to pieces. I brought up his wife, just to hear his voice.

“Anaïs died.”

My stomach tightened. Another minute ticked by, then another; he barely blinked. When a tear finally broke, I slackened the tie around my neck, tossed him my square handkerchief, and asked, “When?”

He blew one side of his nose. “Two weeks ago. Cancer.”

“What kind?”

“Does it matter?” Sam blew the other nostril. “Liver.”

For the next hour, he bared his soul, stopping only to clear snot and once to vomit in the guest bathroom, before picking up where he had left off with the beer and his story. Sam eventually slowed to a lower-cased whisper when his brew ran out and a litter of tabs decorated the coffee table. He leaned back, crunching the brown leather of the couch with the black leather of his jacket, and at last took in a lung-full of the pale, scorched air. He seemed at peace, if for a moment. We were facing the same wall.

I told him I was sorry about Anaïs.

Sam pawed the bottom of his empty twenty-four pack, before he told me he was sorry too.

“For what?” I asked. “For the mess you made?”

“No.” He looked away, collecting the tabs he had strewn about and quietly nudging the dirt on the floor. “For Valentina.”

## 2. Texas, 2014

Sam and I met almost two decades ago, sophomore year of college. It was in a Philosophy of Yoga class, Room 420, Waggener Hall, the University of Texas at Austin. The professor was Archibald Swords. He was a cross between an urbane intellectual and a surfer bum—hair the color of sriracha, half in a man bun, and dressed in pressed khakis and collarless button-ups—lending him a dapper yet mystic look. Charismatic, yes. Intelligent, highly. Strange how the guy had no enemies. We all loved the somber, rich gaze he would give us as he reformulated a question better than you had asked it, and then answered doubts you did not even know you had,

all with a crinkly smile. That I am a professor today is in no small part thanks to him adopting me as his first and only undergraduate TA my junior year. From him I got book recommendations, life advice, and proverbial slaps to the face.

The winter break of my senior year, for example, when I got around to applying to master's programs in comparative literature, he agreed to write my letter of recommendation, but last minute, less than a week before the January deadline. When he was done writing the letter, he said he would not submit it anywhere, unless I helped him clear his spare bedroom for sublease, also last minute. He was flying overseas at the end of the month and hadn't even posted about it. I told him that putting things away in boxes was the least I could do.

When I got to his place, the first thing he said was "Help me take apart the Buddha."

In the spare bedroom of his unassuming, two-bedroom apartment in central Austin, there stood nine feet of expressive elm-and-fig woodwork, stained a dark umber finish, except where the artist had brushed spiraling rainbow mandalas over etchings of chakra nodes at the stomach, chest, and so on. It smelled just like him, of musty earthy and lake bottom. "They unscrew," he said, slapping his wooden alter-ego. "The arms, hands, legs, feet, head, every joint."

Twisting those handcrafted parts was not easy. We had to exercise precaution, especially to dismantle the head. It was a two-person, life-sized puzzle in reverse. As soon as one limb came off, Swords would recall a detail from the story about acquiring the piece in Thailand and bringing it back to Austin, two decades back. Now he was going to donate it—not sell—to the university gallery. When we were done, I rubbed the aged grime from my hands onto my jean shorts and asked, "Is that where you are going now—Thailand?"

"Indeed." He lit up. "First a residency in the spring, then a tour in the summer. You should come. I could use your help."

I told him I didn't know the first thing about planning a tour. How hard would it be to get around, anyway. "You've been there before, no?"

"Yes, yes." He changed the subject. "I watched your video essay on *The Poetics*." He was referring to a thirty-minute bit I did online on Aristotle.

My face got warm. "You did?"

Professor Swords used one of the hands of the Buddha, in teacher position, to scratch his back. "Your analysis gave me pause."

"Is that good . . . I mean, do you agree? Character over plot?"

"Absolutely not." The professor humphed. "And I am sure you know just how far you will get in academia by citing the Greeks without first establishing a theoretical framework. You should have consulted different translations, the original *Poetics* is, after all, one of the worst-preserved texts from antiquity." He sighed, mumbling something about the Classics department at the university, before speaking up again. "But I'll give you this. Showing how Aristotle would have to accept the Forms of his predecessor, should he value plot over character, well, that was remarkable. 'The *Odyssey* without Odysseus,' you said, 'would leave us only with the question *why*.' As for your other examples, I found *The Penelopiad* to be a stretch, and no one reads *The Fénelon* anymore. But Homer? You really twisted the old master's arm with that one." The professor pointed the wooden hand at me. "I was impressed, Juan, even if I don't agree with your thesis. It proves I did not write your letter for naught." The object came flying at me. "If we do cross paths this summer, I have a project for you."

I had barely caught the first hand when the second one came flying. As soon as I had both secured, but before I knew where to put them, I noticed the professor concentrating on the head of his idol, holding it out at arm's length. Why was he donating it? Why not sell? And why was

he going now, my last semester in Austin? There was so much I wanted to ask; so much I wanted to learn. All at once. If only I had asked every question burning in me. But I could not bring myself to interrupt his train of thought. Instead, I waited for him to say something more—a quarter of a minute, half a minute, three-fourths of a minute, who knows—until it became clear nothing more would be said about the sacred items in his room or the mysterious project he had proposed. That’s when my attention turned to the wooden throat cavity. Inside was a pile of tiny paper cut into various shapes. Stars, triangles, and squares, all scattered inside the dismembered Buddha. “What’s all that?” I asked. “Looks like leftovers from a hole punch.”

“Oh, boy.” Swords picked up a circle and tore it to shreds. “LSD.”

“These can’t be from your graduate school days.” My mouth watered. “You won’t take them abroad, will you?”

“No,” he said. “They are likely expired. I should throw them out.”

The toilet seat was just about to touch the tank cover when I raised my voice. “Now wait a minute, professor.”

He turned to me with sadness and disappointment. I knew he knew what I was about to say, just as he knew I knew what he would rather avoid, and yet I asked: “You think I could . . . you know?”

“Don’t, Juan.”

“Professor, it’s not every day I trip. Plus, they came from the Buddha himself!”

Swords shook his head. He was, at heart, someone who believed in saying *yes* to everything. He said, “Okay. But don’t be selfish. There are enough hits here for six people to have peaceful trips, or for three to blast off. Take some friends out in nature, go to the Greenbelt.”



“Right, right.” I held out my hand.

“Juan.”

“Professor?”

“Promise me you won’t take these on a bad day.”

I am sure I promised. Just as I was sure I would break that promise.

\* \* \*

A few nights after Swords left for Southeast Asia, I told my supervisor at the library some story about needing a week off to apply to master’s programs, but really, I just didn’t want to go to work. That meant no shelving books for me. The pain in my wrist from answering too many paper finals had disappeared and the first day of classes in January was ignorably far away. Sam, my roommate, had a videography gig with the local astronomy club, filming nerds being nerds. And those tabs of acid sure had waited long enough for an evening alone in my belly.

I remember sitting in my room that cool, winter evening, enjoying the smooth, spicy rise of Nag Champa smoke in my bedroom, while the oak leaves of 37<sup>th</sup> and ½ Street whispered to one another in the language of an easternly wind. And a new moon watched it all from behind the veil of earth’s shadow. It was beautiful.

That’s when Sam’s girlfriend Loren Stephanopoulos’s name appeared on my phone. She had texted me, “Juan. Sam said he would help me move tonight?”

A pair of acid tabs were already barreling down my esophagus, with a third one receiving a Thai massage from my back molars, when I thought of what I should reply.

“Damn, that sucks.”

She replied immediately: “I can’t reach him. Where is he?”

I knew if I replied one more time, it would be considered a conversation. But I didn't want a conversation. In fact, I wanted nothing at all except to space out at the start of this new lunar cycle. I also knew that if Sam wasn't replying, it meant he didn't want to be found. It wasn't like he didn't carry his phone with him everywhere. But just then my incense ran out, as well as my patience. What was I going to say when Loren stated her needs so clearly—"Can you help me move the TV?" It was easier to go with the flow, as the professor might have suggested.

Narcotics coursed from my gut to my heart chambers, while an imagined suntan ached the skin under my olive-green jacket, as if exposed to a summer sun, yet it was January and the dead of night. The smell of jasmine from North Campus accompanied me south, then west, into the rambunctious student neighborhood of low-rent apartments and fraternity housing on West Campus. I pulled out my phone and made sure the timer was still on. In about thirty-two minutes and fifty-five seconds something big was going to happen, should those Buddha tabs prove to activate in normal time.

"Almost there," I messaged Loren. "TV, then I'm out. You caught me on acid."

Loren typed something, then deleted it.

Her apartment had two floors—one for the kitchen and dining room and another for her massive bedroom upstairs. Out of the whole front façade, her unit was the only one in the complex with plants hanging from the window. But now there were no plants. Only the lights were on, and boxes piled high.

She was waiting for me at the door, under a florescent light. I saw her face scrunched like the cotton disk she must have used to clean off her makeup. Now she was tying back her blonde hair and chewing me out for showing up high.

"I'm not high yet." I looked at my timer. "But in twenty-eight minutes."

“Sam is an asshole.”

I tried to get inside, but she was blocking the way in. I said, “I thought girls liked assholes?”

She swung her elbow at me, still in the air from tying her hair, and then we stepped aside. It was my second time helping someone move that week, and in a sense everyone does it the same way: boxes, boxes, and more boxes. There were bankers boxes, moving boxes, clear boxes and broken boxes, piles of boxes, stacks and heaps of boxes. Another man’s treasure . . . the proverbial junk to me. I was there for one thing.

“The TV is upstairs,” she said.

“I remember,” I said. “Sam and I installed it for you.”

She faked a smile, then showed me up to her bedroom. “I would have left it for the girl moving in, but she told me she doesn’t watch TV. I bet she doesn’t shave her armpits either.”

“Where’s she from?”

“Argentina.”

“Is she pretty?”

“She’s not your type.”

“What’s my type?”

From three steps up, she looked over her shoulder, wiggled the back of her Mrs. Claus pajamas at me, then kept climbing. Maybe I’ll stick around. To meet the roommate, I mean. I made conversation to not give off the vibe I was checking her out, neither up the flight of stairs, nor at the top of the landing.

“So, LA.”

“LA or die. My agent is flying me out to redo my headshots, says they’re too artsy.”

I reminded her that Sam's portrait of her had won an award in the student newspaper, but she replied that it's her face on the picture that gets her on shows, not the award, "especially not from some rag." Her mounted flat screen was the only thing in her empty room, besides us. And I could feel the timer in my pocket burn.

She handed me her electric screwdriver and offered me some water.

"Save the water for your plants," I said. But then regurgitation surged up my throat.

"Actually, I'll take a glass."

By the time Loren returned with the water, I was done spinning out the drywall screws manually with the drill bit, because the battery in the electric ended up being dead. I tried to wedge out the plastic anchors with my fingernails, but it hurt, so I whipped out my driver's license and shoveled them suckers out one by one, absolutely fascinated by the way the white dust spurt out in tufts through the air, of which I took deep breaths, in order to resist lashing out at the spatter of complaints coming at me from my best friend's girlfriend's mouth. I didn't interrupt Loren, though maybe I should have, instead of letting her play a set of her greatest hits: Sam preferred his to-do list over her; Sam said one thing then did another; Sam would rather be here than there, "Oh, and the least the asshole could do is answer his phone to break up with me, if that's what's on his mind."

"I thought girls . . . liked assholes."

She didn't hear me, while I lugged the forty pounds of electronics by myself. We were down on the first level again. Wiping the sweat twinged with drugs off my forehead reminded me to get out quick. I noticed she had tears welling up.

"You good?"

"I'm telling you no, I'm not." Loren began bawling.

“Moving sucks, huh,” I offered, resisting the urge to pull out my phone and check how many minutes or seconds I had left before my trip would really kick in. Maybe if I ducked out now, I could catch the midnight bell of the university tower on my walk back. Maybe. But Loren was drinking out of the glass meant for me, wiping her snot with her matching Mrs. Claus pajama sleeve, and asking me if Sam and her could make their relationship work long distance.

“It’s known to happen,” I said, stepping towards the door. “Pick a date, close the distance. Sam . . . he is—joining you, out west? Damn, it’s boutta hit.”

“What?” Loren snorted. “I told you he would rather stay here with you.”

My alarm went off and I almost reached for the metal of the front door’s handle, but a voice in my head told me that that would be the pinnacle of rudeness. So I dropped my arm and stood there, explaining.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“I said I took some acid. This alarm was reminding me to get home.”

Loren replied, but I didn’t catch it. She was at the door, unlocking it, talking. My body wobbled like those magnetic decision maker toys, all the options telling me to get the hell out, except for one that said to stand there swallowing vowels. And this was the option that attracted me.

Without meaning to, I put my hand on hers and she fell into my arms. She continued sobbing. And I let out mucus too. Then she looked up, her maple eyes, teary, mouth agape with lemon breath, saying things steeped in a flavor I could not name.

“You never told Sam about us, did you?”

My mouth filled with saliva and every bubble in its every drop popped. I leaned in for her, inching my lips towards hers, which I had stared at for so long and had even known. Her silver earrings glittered under the light of the doorway.

But then chimes flittered around us softly. It was the midnight song, coming from the tower. I turned towards them for the length of the melody, then turned back to Loren at the stop. Her jaw was trembling, and she reminded me of Sam. Her face actually looked like his. Peach fuzz grew into sideburns. Her teeth darkened. And she howled. I shoved her aside and darted through the numbered streets of West Campus and across real campus, in the direction of those bells which shook my every molecule.

Nearby, red and blue lights flashed. Two officers asked to see my ID. But I had left it at Loren's.

\* \* \*

Sam was twenty-three, and in his final semester of college, when he first exhibited his photography in a formal setting. Before that he had only presented projects in class, or at friends' get-togethers, garage shows, or bonfire parties on a ranch. After those all-nighters though, no matter how many compliments he got or bubbly toasts were made in his honor, hosts would end up using his pictures as dividers between their laundry machines and their dryers, which is to say they barely cared, if at all. That all "changed overnight," as Sam ironically put it. What had happened was Swords called in a favor from the same gallery that had received his Buddha, to allow Sam his first ever show.

And the show rocked. It made me feel like all that mattered was photography. At least more than my own problems. The other guests seemed to agree.

Sam had, over the past four years, cast close to a hundred models, set across dozens of locations, to produce fifty images—each a scenic portrait of a chapter from the book of Genesis. Because Sam had taken his time creating the collection, one could admire the chronological progression of the story as his personal journey toward becoming a better and better photographer, taking greater and greater risks. The second photo in the collection, for example, “The Garden of Eden,” was in the courtyard of the campus dormitory; later, “Mount Moriah”, which is where Abraham takes Isaac, was shot at the top of the 425-foot pink-granite batholith between Fredericksburg and Austin, called Enchanted Rock; more unbelievable still were the last thirteen chapters of the book. Sam had won a competition that funded his travel to Egypt, from where he snuck into Israel in a cattle wagon, and shot ten stunning images in deserts and temples. The crowd particularly enjoyed the image of Joseph interpreting the Pharaoh’s dream. Guests stood slack-jawed in front of it for so long that the gallery had to haul out additional chairs for more people to stare at it for as long as they did.

The image that struck me the most was of Jacob on his deathbed—in the second to last chapter of Genesis—where he gives his children the poetic blessing of his last dying words. Scene: Sam plays Joseph and his real father plays Jacob. Sam is at the foot of the bed, eyes red with tears, because it was shot at the actual hospital where his father had been diagnosed with heart disease. His father verily blessed him and his project, right before passing away. It was Swords, I remember, who helped Sam file the death certificate. When I asked Swords why he did that, he muttered something about Sam reminding him of himself when he was young. I imagine Sam felt indebted to the professor after that, although I never asked. I hate to admit it, but I envied the bond they shared. But, like I said, the show rocked, and my pettiness took second place behind his art.

Sam, for his part, was hard on himself. Or maybe he sensed what was about to happen.

He vomited in the gallery's bathroom, while I stood outside the stall with his girlfriend Loren. She had played the part of Eve, Lot's wife, and even Leah, the cold sister who gave birth to all the mean sons of Israel—basically all the villains in the second half of the book. She never got over that, not least because she was an absolute smoke show, and could easily have passed for the cuter sister, Rachel. I tried my best to not be awkward around her, while she stepped in to pull Sam's long blond hair out of his mouth, while he hugged the toilet seat and retched his guts.

"There you go, buddy," I told him. "Hey, the show's a hit. Let's—alright, alright—let's go out there and celebrate."

After puking a third time, he wiped the tangy dregs of spicy curry off his mouth and replied, "Bro. I can't go out there." (More vom.) "The professor was right. He said I wasn't ready. I'm not ready."

Loren, already on shaky ground with her boyfriend, not to mention her moving out of her apartment, and with a flight to catch in a few days, restroom lights shimmering in her eyes . . . shouted, "Stop pretending. I know you like the attention. Let's just get through the night."

She planted a kiss on the back of his head and turned towards me, expecting me to help drag him out, but I played dumb until she ordered I grab the other elbow. "Juan, elbow. Sam, we are dragging you out, one way or another. Move!"

After pulling open the restroom door, I made space between the man of the hour and his barrage of groupies. Sinister classmates, sappy reporters, even the capital's finest collectors decked in star-studded belt buckles were all there, drilling at Sam like he was a gas-rich layer of unfracked earth, prodding him for this and that piece of Genesis.



“The chapters stay together.” Sam held his back upright, straightening his fast-fashion sports jacket and swallowing a mouthful of puke. “One of y’all buys everything, or no one buys nothing.”

“I am afraid that is out of the question.” It was the gallery owner. “We have already accepted payment on two-thirds of the photographs.” He kept talking while rubbing his hands together, before leading Sam to his second-floor office, where he wanted to show him the flourishing evening’s ledger.

“But I didn’t set these prices!” Sam’s voice could be heard downstairs, even over the din of the crowd, the gawkers, the hawks. Before long, bless his heart, Sam stormed out of the office, stomped down the stairs, threw his jacket into the air, and silenced the crowd with a “Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention!”

One by one, Sam unhinged the pictures from the wall and slammed them on the ground. He stomped, kicked, and tore them open with his fingers. If glass shattered, he used the glass to rip open the next chapter. If a frame bent upon impact, he used it to threaten security who approached him. One by one, he got to destroy chapters three, six through nine, twenty-five, twenty-nine, and half of the thirties, before rent-a-cops pinned him down. On his way out to the back of a black-and-white Ford, I managed to slip in between Sam—who I believed had every right to destroy those pictures—and the reporters taking stills of this artist under arrest, because I knew that whatever the cops were doing could not compare to the damage the reporters might cause.

The next day, the headlines ran: “He giveth, He taketh.” And Loren’s angry, panda-eyed, mascara-dripping face showed up too—the fiery starlet of the night—next to a statement from her explaining why what happened, happened.

“She made it about herself,” Sam said, pushing my phone screen out of his face and spitting on the ground of the city jail’s parking lot, after I had bailed him out the next morning.

“She should have been here picking me up, not you.”

“Hey, don’t blame Snuffleupagus.” I locked my phone. “You kinda did smash all the pictures of her and threatened her in front of a hundred people.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Bruh, yeah, you did. She was trying to calm you down, but you chased her away, waving the butt of a broken champagne bottle at her. Look.”

I showed him a video sent to my phone. In it, he’s calling her a bitch, a whore, a wench, meanwhile Loren is brick-red with rage, yelling, “That’s all you ever saw me as! Fine, go ahead. I don’t care. It’s all saved on my computer!” at which point Sam picks up a waiter’s tray and discs it at Loren. The crowd gasps. Even Sam is surprised. Loren claws whatever of his face she can, and Sam picks up the broken bottle and chases her with the sharp end of it before the cops take him down.

“Shit! And you just filmed us?”

I looked my friend in the eye. “Don’t you see me in the video throwing wine at the press cameras? I missed Gaspar, though. He’s the one who shot this video.”

“Did he send it out to—”

“Yeah.”

“Damn Gaspar.”

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Sam and I didn't talk for a couple of months after his blow up and my blowout. Even though we were roommates, few words were exchanged. I chalked it up to a combination of us buckling down for our last semester of college, him isolating, and me having to work double shifts at the public library, while I tried to get my intoxication case expunged from when I left Loren's place. But, even realer than that—my conscience had caught up with me. At some point I would have to tell him about Loren. On my last day of court-ordered AA meetings, by the city's tax office, I couldn't avoid him anymore. Sam gave me a call.

“Where are you?”

“Stepping out of circle. You?”

“Let me pick you up.”

Five minutes later, I was climbing into the passenger seat, and we were on our way to the Greenbelt “for a walk.”

“Nice,” I said.

“So,” he said, after a minute, “how was the session?”

“Some people have it bad.”

Sam nodded as he got on the highway ramp. For a while he didn't say anything, so we listened to the playlist I burned for him on his birthday. It was part serious, part gag. The weeks prior, he had been calling Yoko Ono “Yoko Oh-No,” without knowing any of her art. So I did him the favor and put her album *A Story* on it, then filled up the rest of the CD with tracks I was into at the time, which kind of made the whole thing spiral out in a random direction—I think Ono would approve.

1. Yoko Ono “A Story” – 2:38

2. Yoko Ono “Loneliness” – 3:33
3. Yoko Ono “Will You Touch Me” – 2:39
4. Yoko Ono “Dogtown” – 3:32
5. Yoko Ono “Tomorrow May Never Come” – 2:52
6. Yoko Ono “Yes, I’m a Witch” – 3:11
7. Yoko Ono “She Gets Down on Her Knees” – 4:50
8. Yoko Ono “It Happened” – 3:52
9. Yoko Ono “Winter Friend” – 3:17
10. Yoko Ono “Heartburn Stew” – 2:09
11. Yoko Ono “Hard Times Are Over” – 4:37
12. Yoko Ono “Anatano Te” (Demo) – 3:35
13. Yoko Ono “Extension 33” (Demo) – 1:27
14. Yoko Ono “Now or Never” (Live) (A cappella) – 1:18
15. Real Time “Bubbles of Water” (*Visitor Q*) – 4:08
16. Kathy McCarty “Living Life” – 2:36
17. Daniel Johnson “im a baby” – 1:38
18. Coldplay “Every Teardrop is a Waterfall” – 4:10
19. Vance Joy “Riptide” (FlicFlac Edit) – 5:43
20. Kiesza “Hideaway” – 4:35
21. Todd Terje “Inspector Noise” – 6:37
22. Karsh Kale “Milan” – 8:58
23. LCD Soundsystem “Someone Great” – 6:26

We hadn't even gotten to Coldplay yet when we reached the Greenbelt. It was a special, natural reserve in Austin, known for its nature trail that cut across large limestone cliffs, through dense foliage, and alongside shallow bodies of water. It was also our spot during college, a place to get away and be ourselves.

Not too far off the main path, we found our favorite spot—a kind of small waterfall, cool, even on a hot, spring middle-of-the-week day. The best watering holes around, which other unemployed folks, kindred-souls, students, and stoners took advantage of, even that day.

The sun was beating down, the wind was at zero miles per hour, and the shock of it all to my system reminded me just how long I had been indoors. I unbuttoned my shirt and turned the hair on my chest towards the light of the sun, stretched my arms as wide as I could, from my shoulders to my fingers, trying hard to get as much of the day in me as possible, and as much of the previous day out. When I opened my eyes, I almost fell back into the calm, dizzy creek, but I stopped myself in time. The specks in my vision had nearly dissolved and my head stopped spinning, when I caught sight of Sam looking at me from the edge of the water. He was under the shade of a lush tree, half-squinting, his guitar case still closed beside him, when his hands landed on either side of him on the ground. I flexed my arms at him to show him that I saw him, and he flexed back.

“You motherfucking sexy Latino!”

“I ain't Latino, *wey*,” I shouted, turning my back to the sun. “I am my own species.”

“But your mom's from Uruguay.”

“And my dad's from Brazil, so?”

“Whatever. When are we hitting the gym?”

“Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, or Friday, you already know. I'm there.”

“You only ever take me on core day.”

People could hear us. I guess that was part of the fun. “Every day is core day,” I shouted.

Sam leaned back into the soft, cool ridges of the mossy stone he sat on and clasped his hands over his potbelly. “We should do something this summer. Loren left. Sword’s gone. I’m tired of Austin.”

“Right, right.” I trudged to where he was, my big toe kicking small rocks underwater, until I reached him. I should have said something about Loren and me hooking up once, in the bed of his pickup, while he shot stills for a student film which he had cast us in. But, instead, I asked, “What do you wanna do this summer?”

“Something crazy,” he said.

“Something crazy?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I looked around and counted the gorgeous women. “Let’s go talk to those two over there, see them? In crochet halter tops, they look pretty cute.”

“That’s not what—”

“You’re right. They’re probably lesbians.”

“You can’t just *guess* that.”

“They look like a double shot of lemon-lime soda. One’s got bright yellow, the other—”

“Maybe they’re friends?”

“Maybe. Now they’re holding hands, see that?”

“Shut up for a sec,” said Sam. “What I meant was let’s get out of here.”

“To a bar?”

“Out of the country. To another continent!”

I pointed at his guitar case. He popped it open and threw me a warm beer from inside.

“What do you say?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

He snapped open a beer for himself. “Where did the professor go?”

“Thailand, for a residency and a lecture series.”

Sam smashed his drink. Then opened another.

Meanwhile, I got my phone out and looked for flights, just to humor him. “Word,” I said.

“Word, word, word! The cheapest tickets are only \$1,000.” I was trying to be ironic, but Sam didn’t take it that way.

“That can’t be right? Only \$1,000?” He looked at my phone. “\$998! Absurd!”

“Look at the whole trip though, it’s all sorts of fucked up. We have to fly to Tokyo first, stay there five hours, then go to Singapore, stay there for fourteen, and later come back via Tokyo again, but, oh look, at least that layover is only twelve hours.”

He flattened his can with the ball of his foot. I winced. He shouted, “Under \$1,000 bucks! That’s not even half a wedding’s worth of work!”

“Right, half a wedding for you, or two and a half weeks of me staring at the LC call numbers. Did you know there’s no *I* class—”

“Don’t change the subject. We’re going to see the professor in Thailand, then we are going to travel around Southeast Asia!”

“Hell to the no,” I said. “No. If we go to Thailand, then we stay there. Like Goethe said, it is better to draw a circle around oneself and dive inward, than to run a circle around the world and never meet oneself.”

“Goethe said that?”

“I think. Or I made it up. Ow!”

Sam had slapped my chest and raised his voice to the leafy vault of branches above:

“We’re going to Thailand! We’re going to see the professor!”

### 3. Texas, 2030

Sixteen years later, and in a larger city three hours east, the Houston City Council urged us to warn family and friends, albeit as serenely as possible, that we must prepare for the worst hurricane of the last hundred years. Those who had survived not a few cycles of overblown, so-called catastrophes, made a show of solidarity. Some said, with a name like that, Hurricane Jacques was nothing to be taken seriously. Many crossed their arms, turned up their chins, and walked out winking at one another during the last town hall meeting; blue-white lightning not far off. A few even stepped into their self-driving vehicles, waving fellow citizens goodbye before the craftier among us flipped our guidance systems to full manual, ran red lights in pitch darkness, and raced to whatever superstore was still open. Before the end of the hour, news had spread from neurosurgeon to barber that one had better acquire as many shelves of supplies as possible.

The official category-5 alert rang in everyone’s pocket the week before the academic year. I was a newly-tenured professor, teaching freshman composition, a graduate-level literary workshop, and two sections of an Art of Criticism course that I designed for the downtown campus of our city university—plus a ghostwriting side hustle that year, no committees. Normally, I would have biked north from my townhome on Lovett to Buffalo Bayou, and then



down Memorial to my university office, which is the long way. That's because I would rather swerve around the fissures of our swamp-cracked sidewalks of streets with no bike lane and risk being thrown over the handlebar and into the loosened-bowels of our slow-moving river, than peddle through the shank district we call downtown. That preparatory week, however, if it wasn't the crime-killing transients, then it was onslaught of acid rain, perverting all modes and directions of transportation. I stayed home like my colleagues, who chose to sit fat at their home computers, electing to teach semester after semester in virtual-reality halls.

My problem with working from home was not the clutter of last year's unsigned paperwork, nor the stacks of ungraded homework, nor the other signs of my refusal to partake in the digitalization efforts of my Jurassic institution. The problem was that when I was home, in my study, I could only think of one thing: the project, this *thing* that lynch pinned all my anxiety and rotated my insides like a torture wheel, even away from the impending rain of doom overhead. In place of going to my wife's parents' house in Dallas, or anywhere else, my wife and I stayed in Houston. I was nearly done writing the last pages of the stupid, goddamn memoir, right before the start of the semester. It was now or never.

Titled *Asleep & Awake*, the book spanned some 1,300 pages—all written in my voice, no artificial intelligence. It was important that I write it myself and that I finish it at home, precisely in the study, which had been my daughter's room. That's because the book was my attempt to square my will to live with the loss of my daughter, Valentina. She had died at the hands of a convicted pedophile, in that bedroom, in the middle of the night on Christmas eve, just weeks after he had been let out of prison on a twenty-year felony sentence with two priors. Where is he now? Death row. And where was I that night? Down the hall, sleeping.

This paradox, of wanting to die and of needing to live, of wanting revenge and of hating myself, twists me. I can't end his life, much less my own—not to mention I have Pilar—and yet this doesn't stop the fantasy, replete with mechanical instructions featuring remote suspension bridges, whenever I remember how I failed to protect my girl four years ago, and then failed to get my wife pregnant again every year thereafter. But I don't do myself in, despite the undefined, indifferent future ahead that promises no bloodline. I'll never know why.

Whenever that image of her in bed flashed before me, I could not help but fall back into my desk chair and write. Unfortunately, this raised another problem. In place of coherent sentences, all I could draw from the hollow of my mind were handfuls of blood-blackened tissues from the chest pocket of a clown. The memoir went experimental almost immediately, as my eyes fried and my fingers cramped to find the right combination of words to frame my grief. Almost always, my efforts were doubtful and vague, I suppose from not saying what I really had to say, because I feared what I had to say wouldn't ever be enough. Whenever I reached a phrase that might set me free, some glimmering, hopeful sentence, I hated it for its weakness. Maybe I should have used robots to write, maybe then I wouldn't have had to face that pie-eyed fool staring at me in my mind, flashing anger, flaunting sadness, begging delight, inspiring hysteria. If only I could pen just one line that would equal a breath of free air, then I could be happy. I wanted to be happy. I did. I wanted to live, to have another child. I tried writing that way; I tried living that way. But it didn't happen. Putting untrue things on a page or into your life only creates ghosts.

My wife wouldn't read it either. Soon I stopped reading it, too. I never imagined anyone—the public?—would understand. Not out of some elitist pride, but straight up because my writing flew in the face of the literary formalists I taught, of the wisdom of the ancients, of

the advice I passed on to my students. Write something simple, I would say; write something honest, meaningful. And I knew that my thousand-plus-page stack of shame was a far cry from it. Why would somebody step into that labyrinth, dead-ended by articles about the incident, packed with breadcrumbs of police notes, strung between copy-pastes of her drawings in crayon, and long passages of rumination, pockmarked by roman numerals, telling the story of all the little dreams of Christmases past that led me to the one when I found my daughter slashed at the throat. Why would anyone care enough to understand? I couldn't anymore.

Now, the only simple, honest thing to do, really, was to cut the dead wood and toss it into the fire. The case, my ruminations, everything. It was time to move on. I needed to. I decided to burn the manuscript.

\* \* \*

As the nearly three reams of paper printed out, I thought, how mundane. But the gesture was symbolic. Around six p.m., there came a knock on the door. I swiveled from the desk inside the childhood bedroom turned study. It was Pilar.

"I'm leaving," she said, careful not to step into the room and avoiding my eyes.

I pushed away from the desk and watched her until she gazed back at me. "Party animal."

"It's not a party," she said.

"But they are animals." We embraced in the hallway. "You look beautiful."

Blushing, Pilar pulled on the straps of her backpack and softened in my arms. "You haven't called me beautiful in a long time."

"You are. And I told you today at breakfast."

"Exactly. Too long."

Thunder shook the house.

“Are you sure you have to leave?” I asked. “You’re just a volunteer.”

“They’re waiting. I just came to grab my charger.”

“Do you have your—”

“Why would I forget?” She shook a baggie of fertility supplement—illegal in this state—and dashed downstairs, but not before I called out from the top: “Babe!”

“What?”

“You sure you don’t want to take the Wrangler?”

Pilar held her breath, as she watched me hunker down, step by step, towards her. She waited, said, “What if you need it?” and then locked the front door, got into the back seat of a driverless vehicle, and left for the Zoo.

\* \* \*

By the time I got back to the study, the printer had finished cluttering the floor with two and a half reams of paper. I had forgotten to extend the output tray, but seeing the sheets drop inspired me to let it flow like a verbal cascade. Once it was all out, I grabbed at it in two fistfuls, moseyed downstairs to the living room, and cast the manuscript into the fireplace. I even stood some logs around it, popped the cap of an expensive bottle of lighter fluid, and sent my thoughts to hell with the strike of a long, long match.

Of course, it was “fiendishly difficult.” The pages didn’t burn right away. There were too many, tightly tossed. I poked the pile with an iron to aid its immolation and burn the shreds fluttering about. Rain trickled through the chimney’s cowling above, and a 160-mile-per-hour

wind fought its way in, uninvited. As far as the burning went, things were getting clumsy: one of the sheets even swirled out of the fireplace, half charred. From between my feet, I picked it up.

It was a page about my long-lost, old roommate: Samuel Tory. I actually laughed when I read his full name. An ocean of memories surfaced. Our busted apartment in Austin, our late-night talks, watching the sunrise, Loren's face in the interview, the photography he was publishing all these years, which I had kept up with, never a word exchanged between us, though, not after that wacky trip chasing Professor Archibald Swords around Southeast Asia, from May to July 2014, searching for answers to questions we didn't even know we had. Not then, not now. But "what's the difference?" as Sam once said. His other words, the ones quoted in the seared paragraph wavering in my hand, read, "I love you." I figured we couldn't be friends after that. At least not in any—

My phone rang.

It was Sam. We had not seen each other for sixteen years. Now here he was—my blond, stout, Nordic-blooded cowboy with fjords for eyes, speaking to me through the blue smoke of the living room. He had lost both his wife, Anaïs, and his best friend, me, and wanted to relive our misadventure, the one that tore us apart.

Maybe things would turn out differently this time.