

302'D (or *ALMOST*) Narrative Samples

Adam Valen Levinson

I'm sitting in a hot tub when the cops show up. Sweet Jesus, I wish I could tell you just how convivial they were — standing over me, the two of them, the quiet one and the one with his arms crossed, his back to the back door from the deck into the house.

I say: "Sixers fucked it all up, eh?"

"Man."

"It's like those guys — 'trading Redick was a good idea.' Idiots."

"Idiots. Dumbest move we ever made."

"I mean, how are we supposed to have hope in Philly. Dumb decisions. First round playoff shit."

"I hear you. I'm just waiting for the Eagles — if we even have a season."

"Ditto." A little pause. "Hey listen, if I can ask you, have the protests been hard for you guys?" At this point I think they're here just to check in. I think this conversation still means something.

"Well you know how it is around here. Swarthmore's quiet. There've been a few protests in Upper Darby, but they march and we watch and some people say things and some people don't and it's all okay. That big day in Philly was crazy though. National Guard coming in."

"Man, yeah."

“But we just went in and stood by.”

“I hear you. It’s a tough gig.”

Officer Smiles never loses his smile. (Officer Arms Crossed stands in front of the only other egress from the porch.) “But at least it’s outside!” says Officer Smiles.

“So true, so true,” he says too, an hour later when we’re swapping tales of our favorite gig, yard work. I’m still in the hot tub. Chlorinated lobster. He tells me a story about cutting down a tree and having to run from it. “I wish I could go back into landscaping,” he says. “The ball and chain though. The kids.” Another moment. “Best job of my life.” He slides the bolt into my handcuffs.

Three hours later and I’m in the Crisis Center at Crozer-Chester Medical Center. My irons are off. The waiting room — this whole place is a waiting room — is four chairs against two, a TV so high and faint on the wall it feels like punishment. On tap: a Sixers game (they lose). The heavy doors beeping entry, they slam.

Cries from next door. *I don't want to go back there, don't make me, you made me.* A woman shuffles in gazeless. Blue Scrubs. “Hello,” she says to me. I’m surprised, eyes like that rarely speak. Still, her weight is palpable. A hopelessness covering her the way the hospital blankets do, too heavy, not heavy enough. She asks for a ginger ale and they bring it to her. Styrofoam cup. It's warm, they say.

“They been playing the same damn game for three days,” Blue Scrubs says. “The thing that really bugs me out — they've got a camera in the room where I sleep. So I just go all out, ass out, titties out — *are we doing this?* You're not supposed to have a camera in the room

where somebody sleep in it. But I guess I'm 302." Three-oh-two: involuntary commitment. It's a different police code in every state but here in PA, locked in here, 302 flows off the tongue. 201, voluntary. "You three-oh-two or two-oh-one?" Blue Scrubs asks everyone. Everyone is 302. That's why we're here.

"Denise," she says.

"I'm Adam."

The patients are maskless here and I'm still caked in hot tub chlorine. The AC is too high for a hot day and I know that soon I will be colder. I know Wynton's name because he is young and the reigning nurse had asked him his name as he pled some fault in the system: *I shouldn't be here*, Wynton says. But first I met one who never argued his own presence here. Young, bearded. Blanket on his hunched form — in another life he could have been a prophet. Now he says: *I told them I'll kill myself so you can't arrest me and I'll kill myself in jail so you can't bring me there. So they brought me here*. He holds out a hand — I can't tell if it's bloody knuckles or a missing finger. I fist bump, my first contact in here. He says he got here yesterday, and soon I see him sleeping on a mattress in the hall.

In the waiting room, no one is moving except for the youngest woman who was crying, begging not to go back to wherever they had taken her once as they took her back again. As the stretcher takes her she looked back over her shoulder and our eyes catch. I hope she saw that and recognized — I am with you, in part, in pain.

At the intake counter, a thick pane of plexiglass. There are faces that look away. They get up from their computers counter-clockwise so they never lock eyes with us, and if they do — what then? They sip water and you become a cloud with a question no one will answer.

Patients window shop for answers at the intake. *I've been here almost 24 hours already*, says a Philadelphia accent with a tattoo on his head that shows through a short crop. The tattoo reads: *Jesse James*. Through the speak-thru, a nurse says something about him as a psych patient. He yells and yells at this funny reception desk.

I recognize myself now as psych patient too. I see the intake rules allow for a 120-hour hold, not 72 as I'd heard before. Different states, maybe.

But the nurse comes, Chris, and while he doesn't laugh at my jokes, he does everything he should, and fast. I don't know if my obfuscations land right. (*Do you have thoughts about hurting yourself?* "Philosophically.") He asks if I've been in a place like this before. "Anchorage," I say. "Twenty-twelve." He doesn't write it, or doesn't spell it, or thinks 8 years is long enough ago to let the forms forget — like collection on a bad debt. I feel lighter for a moment, knowing better credit is possible if time permits. Later, when I ask for my records from the Alaska Psychiatric Institute, I see I have done it all again, practically step by step. Suggestions of suicide thrown at the same girlfriend — now wife-to-be. But — it was out of step too, these same acts now after eight more years, when foundations are supposed to get stronger. Chris gives me two mini bottles of water and tells me to go pee.

(Do you ever wonder how much pee is the right amount of pee for one of those cups?)

A book and hat and magazines my fiancée-in-flight had brought are somewhere else. I have nothing warm. This makes me know there are many more stages.

"They'll go where you go," the doctor, Allison, tells me. (Denise, gazeless, whose eyes do light up from time to time, calls her "that blonde lady.") Allison is letting me know I'll be going to a hospital. (Aren't we in one?) Whatever hospital will take me. Then they have five days (is it

three?) to decide what to do with me and where I'll go. I'm freezing. But I don't think I want the prophet blanket, to be treated then the way I look. Who am I kidding — we all look the same in here, crazy little objects spinning our own stories.

My fiancée (is she now?) committed me because she needs a break. Maybe that is a reason in itself — if a person needs a break from you, should you be locked up? I am a pitless peach without her, half a wheel. Desperate already. I know what I've done. I know that this is the Last Time but I hope also that it isn't. In here it is hard even to think about — I have already given myself over to Forever so the minutes don't feel so slow. But she signed the papers. *She* did. We used to think of ourselves as *bashert*, "fated." Does a soulmate just mean someone who *decides* your forevers, even if you will never see each other again?

If anyone's listening, someone here wants to talk. Bloody knuckles: "I want to sign myself out. I'm a grown ass man I'll sign myself the fuck out." He says this and retires.

Young Wynton, on the phone to his mom near the intake. (A superhuman feat to hang yourself with its short cord.) "I've got a bed, yeah but people are on floors sleeping without a bed, it's ridiculous. I shouldn't be here. I don't need — it's not fair to everyone else here. I'm level headed — dad knows. Yeah I signed the form but now they're saying I have to be here for two months. I just want you to know it's not fair to everybody else that I have a bed and they don't." He turns to the nurse: *I shouldn't be here at all. I've been here since yesterday.*

Jesse James is getting heated: "Uh-huh. But I want to get out of here now. Pronto. Immediately now." That blonde lady comes with my prophet robe and I put it on and shuffle across the entry way to Denise and the TV. Shaq talking to Kobe or about Kobe. A big man and a dead man.

For as much money as insurance and I'll have to pay together, we could be staying at a five-star resort in the Maldives for 47 nights, tossing oysters to catch in our mouths like M&Ms. But instead: this cold desk, cold chairs, cold floors, cold feet, cold light, cold people, cold architecture, cold teeth clacking against cold words falling on cold ears.

[...]

[Part 1 "DOWN" Excerpt]

Friends ask: why-how? I say: where should I start.

It's a Sunday night, and I've gone missing.

No: it's the Thursday before, and my fiancée M— comes downstairs to where I'm working, the sunroom I've known since I was born, to where I'm failing day after day to make progress as a doctoral student, to where I get farther and farther away from finishing some small piece of a small piece that even in its completion offers no prize worth having. So: depression à la futility, on top of the lifelong usual. Anxiety: and what will happen after? A conveyor belt to a cliff.

"Don't worry so much," M— says. How could I not, I think. The cliff cometh.

She comes downstairs and puts her hand on my shoulder, as she has been, saying *Can I do anything to help*. I can never think of anything (I can now) and I say so. I am always grateful to feel her close.

But today, Thursday, my diaries are open on the screen. Today there is something that looks very much like a suicide note. It's nothing like a note I'd write if I'd write a note, but I ask myself: did I leave the screen open on purpose? Did I freeze as she walked in behind me, facing the corner against the windows that look out on squirrels and birds? Say, pornography. I'd hit the keystrokes without thinking. *Command M: Minimize window*. Did I want her to see? I can't say, even now.

But M— is on red alert now. She calls R— to come, to watch me, to make sure I don't do what I've said I will. Now R—, an old friend, my former professor, a surf buddy, a teen rock star-turned-anthropologist, a friend of too many young dead — is here. We watch sports for seven hours. At night, we scream about solutions. Nothing changes. We sleep, they trust me to sleep alone — my childhood bedroom, nearly untouched, ceiling papered with posters of athletes fallen from grace, immortal musicians.

Friday: shouting. *Just go to the hospital, let them talk to you*, they say. I know what happens then. I can't bear it, the lockup. I say, *if the cops come, I'm running*. Excitement, I won't lie — I don't know if I wanted them to come chase me or not. The empowerment of a winnable challenge with stakes? I'm in it deep, but goddamn do I know this town and whose yards you can run through and where the woods begin. Compromise, M— and R— say: an intensive outpatient program.

In my head I say *yes, yes good*. But, that unresolved tension. Out loud I say nothing.

Saturday R— leaves. He has a family. Sunday my old friend from town comes with his wife. We play video games and talk about absolutely nothing. They leave; work in the morning. In the evening, M—'s friends come, to be with her. They sit on the deck. I hide — what

would I say? *So good to see you!* That's how a sociopath acts, isn't it? They know why they're here. They leave, maybe 8:30. At 8:16, I order a rope on Amazon.

At 8:36: I text R ——:

almost found a place to do it yesterday but ppl watching so i didn't want to freak them
out kinda ruined the moment

It was a true enough thought, however big the *almost*. R—— often got my darkest. He'd been around it and into it: I hoped for pushback. I am my devil's advocate; so — anyone — advocate for me? Tell me to stop vicariously living my escape just to feel less trapped. Tell me not to plant my fantasies in real places just to feed off their closeness. I think, as always: what I send to R—— I send into a one-man vacuum like a diary.

At 9, M—— goes upstairs. I am alone after four days of close watch. All that tension from their attention — now release the slingshot. I open the front door to the front yard to the curb to the old car that I plan to sleep in. Dirty on the inside meets dirty on the outside: resonance. (That couldn't be so crazy. I'd gotten just that in a text from a friend M—— didn't like: *do you ever just not shower because you want to be as gross as you feel?*) And a bit of nostalgia for dirtbag surf trips, sleeping in the car, waiting for the sun to rise. I feel a little comforted and a little honest.

And now, there are two stories:

I told myself: my fiancée had gone up to bed. I could hide here in the driver's seat until sunup, and maybe tomorrow there would be calm. I wasn't trying to hurt her. That dirtbag's solace, it was going to be good for me: I could feel the discomfort of the car and the discomfort

in my head and recalibrate. And I could say I was asleep when the cops came. Tuesday I'd start the outpatient thing, the thing that would make everyone happy enough. M— and I had gotten better at this: let the depressive days lie, don't pick the scabs, don't ask for reasons; just wait for tomorrow.

But this story was bullshit, and I knew it even then.

For three decades I have known the deep groan of that front door. It could wake the neighbors' dogs. And I did see M— with a flashlight outside the house. If it were me knowing what I knew, scanning the hedges would have been panic before release — but for all she knew, I'd gone to *a place to do it*. I did see the police arrive in pairs, headlights aimed straight at me in the driver's seat. I expected a knock on the window, the end of a crisis. No one knocked. (I still wonder: did they not see? or were they not looking?) They talked to her, they circled the neighborhood. When the lights were gone, I walked to the meadow, took off my clothes, and jumped naked in the dark creek. Back to the car to sleep knowing full well every minute was a minute she (him, them, my family) imagined I was dead. I wasn't matching my pain with grossness, to feel at least a little more at ease in my own body. I was matching my pain with the pain of other people, to feel a little less alone in my panic, to feel seen — and I kept thinking they had to be right down in Panic Land, too, to see me. Irony isn't it, *I went hiding so I'd be seen, what the hell did I expect?*

I wasn't *expecting*. No future, no past. Those parts of my brain were in the backseat trying to shout over loud thoughts.

At every moment: a choice. *M—, I'm here. Officer, I'm here*. And in the morning: an apology first, a partial explanation, before trying to wash the night off in a hot tub. But I didn't.

There was a sick comfort in this space between calming down and letting her know I was calm. Knowing my hand and showing it. That inpatient program, too — accepting the deal and signing it. I could be calm enough for now, but until *she* knew I was calm enough for now, I existed inside unresolved tension with resolution right in reach. These were the rare moments of certainty I had in my life, and they were generally of this kind: suffering with an eject handle. *Pull to turn pain into pleasure.*

As I spent the night in the car, it was as if I was outside it all. A kind of a bird's eye view. Nice to be a bird for a moment even if you're still also a man (and even if you're looking down on Pennsylvania). Ecstasy. It's what the Greeks meant by *ekstasis* anyway: "standing outside oneself." Sure sounds like ecstasy to me — I don't want to be in *me* all-the-time. Too often, I've needed to step outside myself for a hoagie and a cigarette, even if I'm lighting the building on fire as I go. That night was one of them.

Seven a.m. Monday morning, M——'s friend's car back in the driveway, she opens the screen door to the deck. I am in the hot tub. Later, someone tells me I was holding a *New Yorker*.

"Where were you," she says, voice like a ship leaving.

"You were sleeping in the car?" Hints of disbelief, the near-unmissable flavor of certainty on the finish.

*

Under the just-after-dawn birdsong, the officers lobstered me in the hot tub. *Crisis unit will be here soon.* I'd tell them, no, no intention to harm myself. I'd go to that out-patient program tomorrow.

An hour passes. *The pandemic — they won't come but we'll get them on the phone.*

Another hour — they stand over me so that I stay boiling. I am glad that I am not pregnant for many reasons. Just stay there, they say, they'll call soon.

Half hour later and the third officer apparates. He seems bigger than the other two — maybe only because he seems to bear bad news. *We have to take you in*, he says. For a moment I am in disbelief. But they have me cornered like a kitchen cockroach — two and half hours of stalling (I get it now) while the commitment papers were signed and processed.

I can't shower, they say. She'll bring you clothes, they tell me. Red track pants and an undershirt tossed from behind the screen. A glimpse of her, in a white sweatshirt we steal back and forth from one another: peeking from behind the door as they slide the bolt into my handcuffs. This is the last I will ever see her.

I was distracted by metal — I understood the tightness, but why couldn't they be softer? It's an intimate act, after all, taking someone's freedom away. But in this snare: an immunity. Three cops corner only to capture — foul language, genitalia — it's all irrelevant. And since I feel no need to expose myself, I mount my soapbox, bolted and dripping:

Do you think this is going to do good? Take a person who really doesn't feel good and put them in handcuffs? Lock them up for time undetermined? Do you think this will help? When I am released I will return to what has been, but I'll have to get over this too. Not tomorrow. Not in two months. Not in two years. Is this good?

"We empathize," Officer Arms Crossed says, looking halfway down at his feet.

"It's just protocol," says the family man I've been talking to for half the morning. "There's nothing we can do."

Now I'm on the Mount: "You have feet, don't you? Point them somewhere else. You have a mouth, don't you? Say something!"

"It's already been called in," someone says. "We can walk around back if you want. So the neighbors don't see."

[Part 2 "IN" Excerpt]

"You have to tell them what you want or they'll give you dog shit on a stick. Like for real," says Gold Tips. I hadn't told anyone anything — when should would could I have? Oatmeal in a styrofoam tin. Fruit cup. Powdered eggs. Home fries. Orange juice in the Cups of No Hope.

And — strike me down — coffee. Not like car-rental-in-Puerto-Rico bad or the Kings Inn in out-of-the-way West Virginia. Bad bad.

A young man — my age? younger? — sits to my right. "All I need is some fruits and vegetables and I can rock out. Man they fucking my shit up!" To his right, backed up against a window that seems uncleanable: a woman who is older and lighter and silent.

I eat a couple of potatoes, a bite of the other things as confirmation of my prejudice. The silent woman, waif short hair eyes down, has two breakfast trays — heavy clunky things you could hijack an airplane with — one with an english muffin and yoghurt that looks hard to ruin. I make a mental note for tomorrow, if I can find where tomorrow is planned. The young guy asks for my fruit cup. The woman, as I stand up, picks potatoes off my plate, a half-eaten muffin.

I float down the hall to the kitchen-size break room, the only other place we can sit save the windowsill and our own beds. Jeff the Chef is standing watching TV.

"Man my berries is moldy," he laughs.

ESPN is on. The playoffs are in mid-swing and star Paul George has had what became known statistically and in the gut as the worst performance in playoff history since the dawn of NBA

time. He gave an open press conference and offered an explanation that — there — was never spoken: anxiety. ESPN anchors felt the tide shifting, or couldn't fight it.

"There's a stigma in our community that you shouldn't talk about mental health," the TV said. I could understand how being here for a couple months you might start to think the TVs are talking to you.

Are you experiencing auditory hallucinations? The psychs and nurses ask every single day.
Am I?

*

Gold Tips is here now, holding court for all of us.

"Nineteen psychotic medications in three days, my temperature was 110. So I'm not taking any more medicine in here. They can eat my dick. I have a right to refuse medications because of my religion. It's Olisha — we believe in all things natural." A nurse asks to speak to her in the hall, but she's back soon.

Now Ellen is here, and I'm starting to feel like we're at Central Perk, a group of Friends watching the world join. A young woman and a young man, an older woman with her eyes to the ground, a burly Cowboys fan, a lost white boy from the green burbs. Do I like it here?

Ellen sits. Begins sobbing.

"Is she laughing or crying?" Someone says, and another.

"Crying bro — certain things just trigger her," says the guy who saved me from wasting a fruit cup. "What's wrong Ellen?"

She's sobbing. Head in hands. "Men are lazy," she says.

"Men, Ellen? Yeah they are."

I look around and nod slowly — there are five of us now. I need to learn names. Fruit Cup says: “Well people gotta recognize she was abused before she got in here — she has reason to be upset.”

“I did everything for him, breakfast for him, lunch for him, dinner — I stayed in the house. I was his slave.”

Gold Tips is standing over her now, hand on her chair back, locking eyes, giving so much attention. “You felt like his slave, Ellen?

Those locked eyes. So much compassion in this place.

*

I meet with the doctor and two social workers and a young medical student. He talks with me about surfing. We’d be friends outside of this, I’m sure of it, without this first step. I charmed, I think. Is that good? Is that the mark of a sociopath? I tell them about how I like being here to listen to other people.

“Stop worrying about how to be helpful. Just worry about taking care of you,” the panel says.

*

Education — a long block on the schedule on the wall — is group therapy, led by Kenya the social worker. The dozen of us who sit in an open square around the room have been handed the Self Esteem Checklist:

- I am practicing positive self-talk
- I am being accurate in my self-appraisal
- I am accepting responsibility for my actions

- I am showing care and concern for others
- I am accepting and handling criticism
- I am setting goals for self-improvement.

Bring this to Washington! I think. Then: Fuck me. Just jokes. Anything to avoid the real work.

I'd been in and out of therapy since my first attention-grab "attempt" at 19, on pills for short periods, ultimately judging none of it worth the time and money and all else. The therapist Dr. Cho in *Rick and Morty* had me so pegged. She said: "I have no doubt that you would be bored senseless by therapy, the same way I'm bored when I brush my teeth and wipe my ass. Because the thing about repairing, maintaining, and cleaning is it's not an adventure.

There's no way to do it so wrong you might die. It's just work. And the bottom line is, some people are okay going to work, and some people ... well, some people would rather die."

Friends ask why I'm so willing to look for work and adventure in risky places. I'm more afraid to live than to die. That's the real, everlasting cowardice. A full-of-shit fearlessness facade. I hoped someday I could leverage that willingness into a life I wasn't afraid to live. And while I waited, I shunned every single bullet on Kenya's list. As Dr. Cho said: "You are the master of your universe, and yet you are dripping with rat blood and feces."

"See how everything starts with I?" Kenya says. It shouts from the page. Me me me. But I still want to escape myself, to see the world in terms of *you* and *them*. How can I let this first person have seconds and thirds?

"Damn, all these things, some people don't like that. But I have to look out for me," Gold Tips says.

“If you spread yourself out for everyone else, you end up everywhere — nowhere,” Kenya says. “Hang this up. Where you can see it daily. Tell yourself these things. Even talk to yourself in the mirror.” In here, this can cut both ways.

A woman in yellow sits down next to me. Soon she is bawling into her sweater. “You okay?” I hear. I don’t know if it comes from me. I hear her: “I’m so scared,” she says.

Gold Tips and and Fruit Cup bring her a box of tissues. “You can have the whole box,” Gold Tips says. A nurse calls Yellow Sweater — Stacy — from the room. Stacy is back soon, to hear more about the Checklist. Some masks have fallen below noses.

“Say you’re working at McDonalds,” Kenya the social worker says. We’re talking about self-esteem and processing critique. She wants to know how we’d react to *you’re not doing a perfect job*.

“Yeah. Taking criticism — yeah I have to work on that, I don’t do that,” says a woman in the corner. “Like ‘mopping has got to be side to side, why you mopping like *this*?’” The room erupts. Stacy is bubbling now with laughter.

I’m laughing for real for the first time in here. But look, I say to myself — what do you know about working at McDonalds you coddled little shit? And still, we are all here for wide reasons still narrow enough to have funneled us all into this room.

It’s over quick. When I’m leaving Education, Gold Tips — Tanya, her name is Tanya — is confronted by the roaming doctor. She mentions the 19 medications. “And what religion is that?”

“Olisha.”

“I’ve never heard of that — is — is it practiced in a certain part of the world?”

“In Africa, and also other parts — Beyoncé practices it.”

“Does she?”

“Yeah she does, charges crystals under the full moon,” says Tanya. I remember that I have friends who do this, and I have never yet made fun of them. Not for lack of desire, but lack of... something. “After I’ve been off the meds I’ve been feeling really good,” she says. “My head doesn’t hurt my stomach doesn’t hurt. I’m really good today.”

All of us retire to the dining/common/game/open room next door.

Talladega Nights is on. “This is my baby daddy movie,” Tanya says. This is all our movie. I gotta show this movie to my son — all he wants to do is go fast.”

“Help me Oprah Winfrey!” a pantsless Will Ferrell shouts. “Lord is my shepherd, give me everything I want,” he says later. “That’s not how that goes,” I say. We’re cracking up. Tanya is pacing. Seems like someone has given her something.

“Once they shoot you with that booty juice you need a tranquilizer,” someone says.

Away from the movies and the chatter idle and deep, Education is the main event on the ward. It’s a meeting half of us come to, and attendance is recorded in a book like sick days in school. The social worker isn’t Kenya this time, but some guy I remember as Some Guy.

Fruit Cup — *Eugene* — says when he left football “bruh, my life — just one thing after another, it fell apart. I took fast money over football. I could’ve had it all long term but I took the short term.” When Some Guy asks if there are parents here, Eugene raises his hand, with Tanya and half the other eight in the room.

Some Guy gives us a photocopied tree with four branches to fill in with the names of our support systems: Parallel Play, Listeners, Advice Givers, Tough Love. When he asks me, I tell him advice givers is my weak suit. “It’s hard when you have the same problem but neither of you has the solution.”

Eugene leans in, alive: “Facts. That’s real shit.”

“Can’t jump a car with two dead batteries.”

“They say what you need in an advice giver is two things,” says the social worker with an M.S.W. in oversimplification. “Trust. And competence.” He asks *who is the worst person for this*. Immediately I question the research design and his methodology. “Trump,” a bunch of us say.

“Homer Simpson,” says Some Guy. There is apparently a right answer. “And who was the best — who is the best person for advice, the model we’re looking for?”

“Ghandi?” I offer. Echoes around the room.

“That’s a good guess,” says Some Guy. “It’s Oprah Winfrey.”

A beat.

“Help me Oprah Winfrey!” Eugene calls from the back. I feel serendipity and the true joy that comes from it, and no closer to looking to Oprah for advice.

*

If anyone can tell me how to eat paperback-thick slabs of brisket with nothing but a plastic fork and spoon without looking crazy, I’m all ears.

*

After dinner, Ellen is trailing Eugene down the hall. “Ooh I like the shape of you,” she says. Eugene turns.

“Oh, you’re black,” Ellen says.

*

The end of the hallway feels like the end of every hallway you’ve ever walked and always forgotten. There’s another window that seems like it’ll never be washed, or can’t be. The view is of a parking structure and Upland Avenue that can’t deign to run in a straight line. Even geometry is against us. But at least we have the windowsill — it’s maybe the calmest, freest place in here. Right next to the psychiatrists’ office, but they only pay attention to us once-a-day max. And far from everything else — if anyone comes for us, comes to ask us something we’d rather not be asked, comes to look at us in a way we’d rather not be looked at, we can see them coming from fifty yards.

Eugene is rapping to himself. It’s good. “That you?” I ask.

“Yeah man, I write music. That’s what I’m gonna do when I get out of here. Music saves man.”

“My dad’s a musician — different kind of shit, but—”

“Music is music man. That’s what I believe, like, for real. Like gun to my head. I was sitting in my car ready to pull the trigger. And then a song came on.”

This is it. Eugene’s way in here. I bought a rope on Amazon just wanting to look at it. However easy they are to find in a backwards nation, guns fall easier into the hands of Eugenes than Adams.

“Shit. I know that,” I say. “You remember what song?”

"Gotta keep your head up, mm-mm." He smiles.

"And then what — what did you do after?"

"Just sat in my car and cried man."

"Dude I know. You're just a millisecond away. Standing on the ledge. I remember being in China, 18 floors up 'cause they give no fucks about safety — and you know how close you are."

"Damn man — how have you managed to travel all around the world like that."

It's wild how I didn't hear that *I've-been-half-a-world-away* privilege as it came out of my mouth. Always always always I feel like I am filtering my words for the audience, self-conscious and narcissistic, I don't want to lose them. But here — what is it? — I speak like I'm happy drunk.

"I was lucky. Went to college. Had a friend that had a small company out there. He kept calling. Never wanted to go to China. But then — bad break up, no reason to be here, wanted to get away, and I went. But obviously I brought my head with me."

*

I'm sitting on the railing of the 18th floor balcony of a friend of a friend's apartment in Shanghai. In China, eight is the luckiest of digits because it rhymes with the syllable for prosperity. In Judaism, 18 is the number that represents life. (M — and I had placed an offer on a house that went back on the market when the cuffs went on. Bayview Drive number 18: *life* didn't win the moment.) I have my feet against the sliding door and two hands on the brick wall. I was perched, waiting for an impulse to push off, waiting for the moment where the impulse to *do* would overcome all those who said, *Do not*. Can/will anyone blame me? It's bloody-spot-on Steinbeck: "Sometimes a man wants to be stupid if it lets him do a thing his cleverness forbids."

I had fantasized about my own death, in dreams and in waking despair, hidden in jokes or on-the-nosed in poetry that still hid behind a fake name. I tapped into those fantasies like relief: *this is always possible. I am not trapped.*

It wasn't my first night on the railing, but it was the closest. Of course: it is hard to jump off a building.

"You can't," my friends said, the ones who knew. My freshman year roommate was crying like I'd never heard him when I called to say what I was thinking.

"Don't be stupid," he'd said before.

I wanted to be. In China, the number four represents death — the same syllable in different tones. When I got the first digits of my passport wrong buying Chinese rail tickets I gave it as two fours and an eight, instead of two eights and a four. Twice the death and half the prosperity.

I could feel my heart slow and my brain align. Waiting. I could visualize the empty back lot of the apartment building below and I could imagine my trajectory. I had already googled "consciousness death from falling" and I had balanced myself so that if I flexed one calf and pointed my toes, I'd be gone. Nothing to grip but cheap glass. To flex or not to flex.

I sat perched, as I had the night before and the night before that. I wanted this.

If you dream of something for long enough, is *happening* just *reliving*? A life lived and a life imagined — uniting them is living the dream, no? The trouble with depression, see, is that the imagined life is all too often a conveyor belt to a cliff, a carpet of mouse traps, a grand sack of shit.

And so I sat there, toes eager to spring, imagining falling. A new feeling. An old one resurfaced. A moment so long imagined that I already felt relief. But the kind of thing that kept my calf from flexing — is there still something I don't know?

*

Ellen finds me in the hallway while I'm on the phone. Pale skin. Thick black hair, slightly wild. She moves only slowly. On the ward, she is unmistakable from any distance.

"Do you know the president?"

She doesn't take *phone* as an answer. "Of what?"

"The world. Yeah, Trump. I'm the president, I'm God. There needs to be a woman. Men mess everything up. I'll vote for Biden. I'm 63, but really I'm 13. My father was a healer, he could put his hand over any part of your body with pain and make it go away. The only reason God killed him was that he cheated — I don't have any other explanation. He was so good to me — bought me Barbie Doll, Barbie — Barbie House, Barbie everything. He never had sex with me or anything like that, because that's against the law. My mother was jealous. She cut all my hair off, cut it short. I like long hair. I like swimming — I want to swim in a pool — I haven't swum in a pool in 12 years, but now I put my hair in a cap. They never showed love to my brother, just me, but now he has a kid. I'm the mother. Not the real mother. My stomach is flat, my tubes are burnt. I'm everyone's mother — who will do it but me?"

What I hear: Ellen was raped by her father, resented by her mother, and pitted against her brother. Why would she mention *sex with me* unless... I mean, fathers don't refrain from evil because it's *against the law*. No one is conscious of the unconscionable for no reason, right?

Ellen's shadow nurse says, to me: "You can't be on the phone for more than 15 minutes, so either talk to her or finish your call." I was calling someone just to call, or to commune with The Outside — but I find this particularly cruel. No one's waiting. No one's caring. The rules bear down as they always do, because fuck-it-why-not.

*

If anyone can tell me how to eat a tough hunk of chicken alla basketball with nothing but a plastic fork and spoon without looking crazy, I'm all ears.

[Part 3 "OUT" Excerpt]

"It's about Earth, but I call it 'Outer Space,'" Elena says. She has written a book — bio-fiction, she says — and she brings it to the windowsill for me to read. It's short, she says — a few pages in a composition notebook, round letters and crossings out and hardly a word out of place.

It begins: *There is a place wear I hide my demons.*

Community meeting is starting down the hall, and I hold Elena's words with mine as we move to the *EDUCATION* room. She and Eugene volunteer to be President and Vice President of the congregation, symbolic titles but honorifics nonetheless.

Tanya enters: "I am Empress Tanya. You can call me T."

Some Guy the social worker asks for our goals. "To get out of here," Empress T says. "To get out of here and watch Medea with my kids. To be present. Discharge. Discharge. To do what I gotta do. To be positive. To relax, and eventually get out of here — and to another planet — plan — to write direct and act. To leave here, but to solve my problems first. To be good."

"Let's get that on the board," the presidents say.

"I don't have an eraser," Some Guy says.

Can we not have a blank slate, man? Or, fine, are slates never blank again? (My mind falls into metaphors again. *Do I need them because pain is prettier in the abstract?*)

The community shares issues again. No hand sanitizer. There is a better reason, at least, than for the moldy fruit. "In the past people have drank it," Some Guy says. But the pandemic still exists, and we are still here. *No one wiping down the phones?* someone says, to no answer.

*

I am the mafia don, back to the wall, greeting everyone, missing no one as I sit on the windowsill. My back is to the glass window, sure, but Outside isn't real yet. MLK went to seminary there, just past the parking lot, seventy years ago when he was Eugene's age, shaping himself and being shaped, but I didn't know Upland Avenue from a railroad tie in Atlanta.

Masked, Eugene is next to me on the sill, Elena is sitting against the wall. "Those who sit on the floor cannot fall out of a chair," I say. "Proverbs 5:12." It's a good joke, for the occasion. I have Elena's notebook on top of mine.

The big world we live on is called Outer Space but the difference is we are all tryen to get out.

We have law enforcement hear you can say they try to keep us strait but there main purpose is to take the life out of ower hands.

Earth is where they deside bye birth if you stay or they ship you to outerspace. One thing we like about ower new planet is that we can dye ower hair.

There is a nurse approaching. "Still feeling suicidal?" I put Elena's book down to take three pills in that tiny cup. The water stings my teeth.

"Cold," I say.

"Tastes better that way," the nurse says. "This Chester water."

Empress Tanya drags a chair down to the sill. "It's good water. We call it city punch."

There is a wild balance here between talking and listening. Outside, there is so much talking to talk, talking to be heard — and there are the ones who absorb, say little, offer ears more than a tongue. And then here — almost everyone seems willing to talk *and* to hear. I

have the sense that I am hearing too, and now not only because I want to learn how to be a better performer for them, to shape myself in their images.

There is a forced narcissism in depression. *What's wrong with me? How do I fix me? Work on yourself.* It's a cliché that helping others is a way to help the self. On the windowsill, just thinking about anyone or anything else is enough. Getting waterboarded by depression, it's not easy to think about what's for dinner. But we all got 302'd and sent upstairs, so we'll think about one another like-it-or-not. *Take this home*, I think. For the love of all things soothing and good, *take this reflex home*.

"I don't take nothing serious, that's my problem," Empress Tanya says. "But now that I've done something serious, people won't take me serious." Her children are being shuffled around Chester, to parts of the family that don't want them. But she's not fit, they say. "When you have such a high vibration, low vibration people — they get offended."

"When did you come in?" I say.

"August first." A month.

"Had you been in before?"

"Seventeen years ago when my mom 302'D me. Before that I was 10-13 in Atlanta. My mom did that too — my mom's the one who keep doing it."

"You never get a chance to talk for yourself. It's involuntary immediately."

"That's how they got me the last time, they said I shot a police officer. They tried to say I had delusional thoughts and I said — I never said that. They searched me and everything and put me in 302. I didn't know they was 302ing me, I thought I was signing myself in."

“Yeah that’s the thing — you’re like ‘Ok, I’ll come with you,’ so doesn’t that count as voluntary.”

“The cops called me big booty Brittany.”

“Fuck that shit,” I say.

A few moments. Eugene and Elena are still sitting sill and floor. No one isn’t listening. No one is listening too hard.

“I just want my life back. It wasn’t all roses, but.” There are words chosen and there are words released — these are the second kind. “I did have a mental breakdown yes I did — kept trying to please everybody. I have a good heart. I couldn’t do it anymore — *nah, you’re not gonna do whatever you want to me*. Now whatever I do, I’m the crazy bitch.

“At least my brother doesn’t judge me — he lets me see my nephew. I’m family oriented. The fact that no one wants to see me anymore — at least I have visitation rights. But every day, he’s been acting like a jerk — *bro, you can eat my dick!* You’re only magnifying the person I am. I’m still gonna stay the same.”

And then she talks of Georgia. Every time anyone in here talks about Out of State there is a sense of Athenian Amphitheater, of myth and oration — or maybe that’s just how I heard it. Faraway lands. Jeff on his Greyhound journey from *Kentucky* like Odysseus with meth for wine; Empress Tanya in a place called —

“When I was in Atlanta I got raped. That was a part of my mental break.” I retreat into anger, I think, to shield me from the Empress’ pain.

"I was tired of being homeless and I went to Atlanta," Empress Tanya says. "White guys tried to rape me, hung me from a tree. I beat the shit out of them. No one believes me, the psychiatrist won't report it to the cops. They say, *if it happened in Atlanta*."

"I was getting harassed by the cops. Not only harassed — they said they observed me hearing voices in my head. How would they know what I was hearing inside my own head?"

Are you experiencing auditory hallucinations?

Who doesn't? Listen to your gut, the angels on your shoulder, the voice inside. Can you hear the My-Grandfather-Would-Have-Said?

Are you experiencing auditory hallucinations?

"They said I killed a cop." (Later, she suggested the charge was hitting a cop.) "I didn't kill a cop — I look too good to kill a cop, I'm trying to get married!"

And then: more time locked up. Homelessness transplanted from north to south, abuse and a mind looking to escape it.

But there was another story, vine-tangled with the other.

"I went to Atlanta. I achieved my dreams. I auditioned for Tyler Perry. I got the part." The way she says *Tyler Perry* echoes like one of the 99 names for God. "Outside Fox Studios, he was in character playing a homeless person. And I'm a homeless person. And he already knew who I was, because I was already in Atlanta, talking to people, connections. He had heard that I was there — everybody kept pointing me in his direction.

"I met him and when I met him he was directing me — we just had a fabulous time."

Listen, I tell myself.

"I can't explain what happened — I just went my own way. I figured I must've died and gone to heaven. So I threw my phone and pocketbook in the trash. I was walking in Piedmont Park — sign say: *You must enter through water*. I guess to get to the other side — my dumb ass takes all my clothes off and jumps in the water. It was very shallow, bricks..."

She had given Tyler Perry her phone. He called her mother. What followed followed.

I sometimes have trouble with my hallmates' chronologies. I want to know, maybe because that's my culture, my training, my compulsion. But how many scavenger hunts care about order? I mean, too often I'd obsess over what-happened-when, over linearity, when there was so much more and bigger to listen to. But still, I can't shake the urge to know.

When she leaves, I ask Eugene and Elena the question. I shouldn't have. Or, I wish I didn't want to know. *Do you think it's true?*

"I hope so," Elena says.

"So Adam, what brought you in here," Eugene says. "No judgment man, no wrong answers."

Then — and just then — I connect. I remember the time between the cops' looking and the cops cuffing, between the headlights and the morning nightsticks: I had also taken all my clothes off and jumped in the creek.

*

Earlier in the summer, M— and I had bucked every lesson I'd learned as a kid about the creek at the bottom of the slopes of the town meadow: *Don't swim in the Crum. Pollution*. But during the pandemic's quarantine, we'd rolled the dice over and again: it was hot, and the Crum became our oasis. Our hot skin said thanks and our eyes stayed black circles in brown circles in

white circles. The Crum's best spot, under a train bridge a hundred feet above — a two-foot waterfall into a waist-deep pool — looked different than it had when I was a kid. New construction had replaced the oxidized trellis with wide open space. When I texted R— *almost found a place to do it* — this was it, looking down on the pool, from the highest jump in town.

It's funny now, now that my brother has told me. That night, when I was "missing", watching the cops look for me from that dirty seat in the car, R— called him with all he knew: *...a place to do it...* My brother told the police without hesitation: "The train tracks. Go."

And when I saw the cop cars leaving the house I walked immediately up the street, across Route 320 and into the college, down through the meadow and crow-straight to the creek. I wasn't wearing much but I shed it.

It's funny now that the police flashlights were there above while I was down below, swimming. I have always loved the water.

I was tired of being homeless — in the sugarcoated way the French say *sans domicile fixe*, without a fixed home. But here I was, on the verge of buying a house with my would-be-wife, on the verge of Whacking the Mole of where-do-I-live anxiety into its hole. Another Mole: money money money. *Whack*. Another Mole: solitude, loneliness, connection. *Whack*. The great Mole: Love. No whack — I'll grab you and hold you until the game breaks.

That game... all those anxieties...could have been over.

I figured I must've died and gone to heaven.

What does a man who has lived on anxiety like bread and depression like water do with paradise? My dumbass takes all my clothes off and jumps in the creek.

[Part 4 "UP" Excerpt]

Do you ever think of this as a metaphor for life? When I was a kid I learned a cool game. Not a game, really, just: I'd stand in a door's threshold and hold my arms straight at my sides. Elbows locked, I'd push them hard against the doorframe, harder, as long as I could take. I knew the longer I held them the better the reward. When I stepped out and let my arms loose, they'd rise weightless toward the ceiling — if I pressed long until the wood made grooves in my skin, my arms would float for many breaths. If I could hold just a little longer, I was sure, I would have been flying.

I have only ever known that space between rooms, between lives imagined and a life in progress. And I am the doorframe — needing its pressure as if it were the only thing keeping me together. I thought like this: the longer I hurt, the longer I might be free from hurting later.

And it's easy to hold out for relief when relief is there for the easy taking. Don't you get hungrier when there's no food in the house? Before the cops came to the tub, relief from all this uncertainty was there for me — and so: a reflex to hurt more. Oh imagine the relief. Oh imagine now that it might last.

*

In the all-purpose room there is orange sherbet like the 1990s. Coleslaw like the end of a used mop. Ellen is split with sobs. "I can't take any more of this. I can't take any more. My head hurts."

"C'mon Miss Ellen," the nurse says.

"My babies, my babies," she bawls.

*

“Man, your fingers must be hurting writing all this time,” Tony says.

I remember I have hands. Mine don’t seem to matter much — Tony might not hold his weeks-old daughter for years. A little blood where my thumb and index finger fight over the pen. I’m running out of pages and I’m running out of time here. Vonnegut’s *Sirens* will outlast me.

“Just a little bruise,” I say.

Tony’s as Italian American as a name of hard consonants and ending vowels suggests, sharp jaw and stubble, skin and teeth and hair and all he needs is a well-fitted suit to find love in a bar in Chelsea. “What are you in for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Suicide,” I say. I wanted to beg M — to know the difference in my head between fantasy and intent, to know that our life together wasn’t at gunpoint. But in this moment, to Tony, I don’t think the difference between Attempt and Ideation matters much. How many dreams of jumping *would* make one jump?

“No shit,” Tony says. “I wouldn’t expect that. You’ve got so much going for you. Education. Good looking guy — they say it takes one to know one.” A laugh through a short smile.

He’s saying it to himself, too. The how-did-it-come-to-this when we had so much to work with. And he knows and I know that I had so much more to squeeze advantage from the world. Loving parents, if overly so. Their money. A private Quaker high school where (as the youngest in my class and before my college growth spurt) my worst bullying was being called baby goat *cute* and not go-to-prom-with-me *cute*. It was like Tony saw all that privilege that might and

would make someone else see me as a coddled baby among people with Real Problems — and put it aside for something else.

He acted like our histories were like descriptions on a wine bottle. Asses on hospital linoleum, we are whatever we are Now, whatever our ancestors did or didn't do. No history, all present. We are in this place, we got ourselves here, we share an answer even if we don't share every step of the process.

"I want to see my kid. I just want to fix things so I can be with kid. My girl said I was her rock. I never got to be a kid, I had to be a man. I couldn't accept failing."

"You're a human, you're not a God."

"I believe in God."

"But you don't have to be him. And when you fuck up — that doesn't mean you're a fuck up." Oh, how easily the words I tell myself bubble out as advice, my hypocrisy like a fart only I can smell.

"Oh yeah, I'm at work like *you fucking idiot how could you do that you worthless* — I'm a good guy, man, I really am. I've messed up and I know that but I'll do anything. Drug tests every day. I want to see my baby grow up."

It seems so simple. Keep the meth away. Let him grow with his child.

"They all turned out pretty good," he says about his siblings. "I'm the oldest — I guess I absorbed all the trauma. But I'd do it again."

"My dad — my mom only told me this later — I was about nine, getting into fights at school. She could tell my head was all messed up and she decided to tell me why. Between zero and

one my dad would hold a pillow over my face, hold it and let it go and I'm gasping for air. I'd try to climb out of my crib and he'd push me back down.

"When I was four my mom saw me choking myself out, hands on my throat til I turned purple. I don't know why."

"Sounds like your dad choked you so you started choking yourself."

"Well he was doing it with a pillow."

"But... lack of oxygen or whatever... doesn't seem unrelated."

"Maybe," he says. I drop it.

"Your fingers aren't hurting?"

*

In the afternoon I will be released. Maybe I tell my father I am going for a walk. Clear day, sun, that arms up doorframe feeling, a broad sense of it all. These are good things, no?

And as I imagine my walk, I see myself walk through the campus to the meadow, up the hill to the tracks and across to the high point. I look down on the grass and rocks and shallow pool — I can't tell you if the distance seems farther in the day.

I stand on the first rung of the railing, knees against the top bar, feeling the breeze as if it were the will of a real-enough god, as if — even now — I refuse to make a choice. (Doing nothing is a choice too, I know I know.) The sun kisses the air the air kisses me and I feel easy.

A breeze comes, or doesn't, and in a few seconds I am dead on the ground where my fiancée and I once played bocce.

If I make a sound, no one hears it. A dog finds me in the pink afternoon, running ahead of the boy whose parents had surprised him with an early birthday gift. The boy doesn't

understand the difference between sleep and death. Police come, and my family knows soon. No one is ever the same and no one forgives me — mostly because I gave them no one to forgive.

There is not so much blood when you die in the grass. Internal things puncture and break and the outside looks like context. I've never meant to make a show. You might see my body and think, that guy could be okay. Almost.

And my mother says: *no no no no no no no no no! no! no no no no no no no no no! no no no no it isn't he didn't it couldn't no no no no no no.*

*

Why would my road be different? Not all of us in here will die natural deaths. I know that getting out has precious little to do with getting on up. What would be my version of Tony's drug test everyday? Tony's dirt is clear as crystal. But how do you clean up despair? You know when you have that pericarp of a corn kernel between your back teeth — oh you're frantic like it's a diamond rolling off a cliff. *Get it.* Maybe you get a fingernail in there, gum bleeding now but *no pain no* — you wonder something. Is the kernel still there or is this just the feeling it left behind?

Keep me clean and let me believe — will this work? — that despair is only the feeling despair left behind.

*

Joe smacks the plexiglass window in the small TV room where the NBA star told the world that depression was important.

"I'm supposed to be out today, been waiting since eight a.m. What's going on," Joe says. He bangs the window again. "I'm so close to *right* here."

"Where you going after?" I think I was the one who said that.

"Smoke as much weed as I want, drink as much as I want. Straight to the prostitutes. Nah, I'm playin. Gonna get a hotel."

But Del offers a place for crack.

"You got guys down there?" Joe asks. They exchange info.

Joe will springshot out into the funnel. In here we forget that the only real escape from this cycle — yearning for escape from life, yearning for escape back into it — is going cold turkey on escape. I don't blame anyone who would rather lose teeth and run from demons than live with the knowledge that neither life nor the pursuit of pharma-less happiness are guaranteed.

Tony... no meth. Me... none of these fantasies... stay off the bridge, even in dreams. Takes a whole lot of faith that any of that'll help break the cycle. What, leave our only escapes to face reality in all its absurdity uncertainty melancholy pain grief ecstasy fear? Sisyphus and that myth of his, what would he say — *come join*? How could we? *One must imagine Sisyphus happy*. It might be fun to push a rock up a hill every day, to feel the little differences, the joy of a new pebble, the gratification of working in the sun. Why couldn't Sisyphus stop smoking crack and fucking love it?

We sit in the hallway joking that together we're not 302, we're 906. "Hey Nurse!" Del says. "We're nine-oh-six."

*

I know exactly how to eat a chicken salad sandwich without looking crazy, and I am grateful.