

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!” Fred’s friend craned his head out over The Loop’s elevated tracks and voiced what really was heartfelt appreciation for the unfailing tardiness of Chicago’s public transportation.

“Isn’t technology wonderful?” Fred chimed in. “One second it’s a dirty wheezing iron heifer and then *bam!* It’s a gilded train to Galapagos Two, a flying carpet to El Dorado, and everything is beautiful.”

“It’ll be here any fucking second!”

“And I’m ready for it.”

Fred’s friend wanted to smack him; to scream, cry, and hold him. He haggled with God and regretted being an atheist—then he broke, and the words trickled out of him: “I’m not.”

Nothing moved except for the man in the moon, who looked away, and Fred’s friend, shifting from foot to foot, who wished he could.

Whether an answer to his prayers or another shining example of American exceptionalism, twenty-seven minutes passed without a train.

Fred sighed and picked himself up off the tracks. “Do you think Margie’s Candies is still open?”

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It was, though it shouldn’t have been, and it was good.

They split the 25-scooper Royal George Sundae, waited just long enough to regret the decision, then stumbled ass-backwardly back home, like a pair of men who’d discovered they were pregnant and nauseous, mostly nauseous, adding with each lurch another cross-stitch to the quilt of eternity, superimposing themselves now once again onto the same spiritual journey they’d made as kids and teenagers and twenty-somethings and it was poignantly nostalgic because they hadn’t made it since Ella died six years ago.

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On the following Tuesday, Fred lost the Next Thursday game. He’d been the 274-time-consecutive reigning champion, but that loss on the 275th bout was all it took. Despite his nearly perfect record, people only really remembered the one that he lost. Maybe it’s better to say that nobody had paid much attention till then.

That evening, after some reflection on the ugliness of our age — the shit that passes for fine art these days — he took out a double barreled shotgun, put the muzzle in his mouth, then left the world a textured tribute of a Jackson Pollock painting on the wall.

It was kind of beautiful. Or, at least, he thought it would be.

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Fred's friend checked up on Fred the next day. Opening the door, he wished he hadn't. Then he did. Then he didn't think much at all for a long, long time.

\* \* \*

*Sorry, Hank. Fred's letter read. I didn't want to do you like this, but I'll tell Ella you said hello. On the bright side I suppose we'll all be back together before long — and if the universe don't work like that, all it means is that death is a lot like life. That sounded more eloquent in my head.*

*I thought I'd have more to say, considering, but I don't.*

*Thank you. I love you. I'm sorry. Please don't hate me.*

*FRED.*

\* \* \*

Hank sat at a bar table with Jimmy, Jamal and TJ, each staring into the pint of beer in front of them so that they wouldn't see the empty chair beside them. Fred had been the talker. Jamal's hair was black again — three years previously he'd dyed it red after losing a game of pool to Fred, but actually liked it so much that he began booking appointments with a stylist in order to keep it that way. Then he ended up marrying the stylist.

"To Fred," TJ eventually said, and the rest of the guys picked up their pints and mumbled "To Fred," too.

Hank's hand was shaking so damned bad that he spilled his beer all over his pants, looking like he'd pissed himself. Shortly after he began crying (loudly), and his buddies had the courtesy to look away and pretend like nothing had happened.

Nobody ever talked about it again, either, so some days Hank wasn't sure if it really had at all.

\* \* \*

Hank got married and had a son — Fred. Fred grew up and after entering kindergarten walked to Margie's together with his dad, the first Tuesday of each month, for twelve years or so; then went off to college and didn't come back home to visit till Christmas.

"How's school?" Hank asked.

"It sucks," Fred responded.

"Atta boy!" Hank clapped his knee.

Hank's wife rolled her eyes.

"I— I wanted to ask for advice," Fred said.

"College boy needs his stupid old pa's wisdom, is it?"

Fred dropped his gaze. "Tommy tried to kill himself."

The grin froze off of Hank's cheeks; little childhood shaped blocks of ice fell to the floor and shattered.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Fred finished.

Hank blinked. "Help him."

"He doesn't want help."

"*Fuck* what he wants!" Hank jumped off the couch and grabbed his son's shoulders. "You be there for him. Drag him out to do stuff sometimes even if he doesn't feel like doing it. Leave your phone on full volume, even at night time. Convince him that he matters to you." He enunciated the words with stabs of his finger. "Find a way to convince him that he matters. And if someday he doesn't call you, then you call him! You got to fight for his life 'cause some days he won't be able to, and all it takes is once."

"He'll hate me—"

Hank slapped Fred.

"Hate you!" A flare of anger scared off the tears brimming in his eyes. "At least he'll be *alive* to hate you, God damnit!"

And then the tears fought their way out and Hank fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around his son's waist, fingers scrunching up Fred's new shirt.

Fred looked to his mother, only to find that her eyes were just as wide and shocked as his.