

A Short Story About Burgers

Generalized Content Warning: This story contains descriptions of violence, death, suicide, and hamburgers.

It is the 0th iteration.

Today is a day like any other. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west; the clouds loom in the sky, under the blue expanse yet over the treetops, and I take the city bus to work.

I work as a secretary at the local investment firm, though I'm pretty sure my boss only hired me for my looks.

Today is a day like any other. I take the city bus home from work. I have a slice of microwaved week-old pizza for dinner and go to bed. The day is mundane and brief and surely couldn't have been a 24-hour period, but it was.

It is the 1st iteration.

Today is a day like any other. I travel to work in my 2003 Ford Orrery Nexus on the I-86 interstate highway. I work at the local investment firm. As a secretary. Though I'm pretty sure my boss only hired me for my looks. One of the salarymen told me in passing that the old secretary was fired the day she turned thirty.

Midway through my commute on the I-86, I'm caught in a head-on collision with a semi truck. The pain renders me unconscious; my spinal cord is severed in two places; my ribs, broken, are forced into my lungs.

I die of pneumothorax before the ambulance ever leaves the station.

It is the 2nd iteration.

It is a day like any other. I drive my 2003 Ford Orrery to work. I work at the local investment firm. As a secretary. Don't you forget it.

On my trip on the I-86, I make the executive decision to take exit 13-C towards Springfield a third of the way there. There's too many trucks on the I-86 to drive safely. God forbid, someone could get seriously hurt or killed in these conditions.

I arrive late, in the back parking lot, and on the short walk to the main entrance I find a moss-covered brick. I don't really remember picking it up, but I know that it's in my hand, so I must've found it, so therefore it's definitely got to be real. A tuft of moss clings to one corner.

I decide to throw the brick through a window, kick the lobby water cooler over, unplug the front desk computer and plug it in upside-down, and then drive my 2003 Ford Excursion to a McDonald's off the I-86. I don't know why I do any of this, it just feels important.

The sun beats down on the fading, cracked parking lot. It is a small, forsaken stretch of American soil: all mowed grass and bits of shredded plastic and the fumes from the highway. There's an artificial stormwater lake around back, sparse woodland and suburbia and a dry, stale breeze that does nothing to ward off the heat. The sun beats down on the cracked, faded parking lot. It is a forsaken patch of American soil.

I walk into the McDonald's. The woman at the cash register seems confused— she's visibly studying the clothing of the customers.

She blinks rapidly as I walk up to the cash register, eyes darting to look me over. You weren't here yesterday, she says. But everyone else was. They're doing the same exact things as yesterday. Having the same exact conversations, ordering the same exact foods, wearing the same exact clothes.

Yeah, okay, I say, that's cool, I say, but can I have a Daddy Burger?

The woman at the cash register says, sorry, ma'am, but we do not serve a Daddy Burger. She seems agitated.

I place my palms onto the McDonald's counter and lean over it. I stare her dead in the eye. I say they serve a Daddy Burger. *Please*. I'm begging her. They have to serve a Daddy Burger. For the love of god.

The woman at the counter asserts that ma'am, we do not serve a Daddy Burger. She produces a Taurus G3c from her waistband and discharges it once into my forehead from point blank range.

A single Hornady hollow point round travels into and through my skull. The bullet blooms into a flower as it carves a jagged path through me. I am instantly killed.

It is the 3rd iteration.

I do not drive to work in my 2003 Ford Orrery. I drive to a Mcdonald's off the I-86. I'm unsure if this disqualifies it from being a day like any other.

The sun beats down on the cracked, faded parking lot. It is an American stretch of forsaken soil.

The woman at the counter looks a little upset when I walk in. I ask her if she recognizes my face.

She says she does. She says she killed me yesterday. She says she watched a nine millimeter-diameter hole appear in my forehead and she watched me collapse onto the counter and slump to the floor and my body go cold.

You sure did, I say.

She's quiet for a little moment and then she asks me if I know what's happening. Why the day won't just pass, why it's the same as yesterday the same as yesterday.

I ask her if I can please have a Daddy Burger. With extra sopsauce, and sprinkles on top.

She looks disappointed and produces a Taurus g3c from her waistband and fires it once into my head. A single Hornady 9x19 hollow point round punctures my skull. It blooms into a flower as it carves a jagged path through me. I am instantly killed.

It is the 4th iteration.

I wake up at exactly five thirty-three in the morning. I drive to a Mcdonald's off the I-86. I take a minute to watch the sun on its rising path over the cracked, faded parking lot. The colors cascade across the sky, dying the runoff basin's water all reds and golds and blues.

I'm not sure if there's such a thing as a forsaken stretch of American soil. I'm not sure if any two days have ever been even remotely alike. Not with the new dawn's rays shining on my face, that is.

The Mcdonald's opens at six-thirty AM, though by then I've already long since broken a window with a rock I found in the runoff ditch. It leaves a whitish grit on the palm of my hand that I have to wipe off on my khakis.

I watch the Mcdonald's employees file in, groggy and reluctant, from my perch atop one of the playplace tubes. They form a confused group around the broken window and I lean forward to better catch their conversation and I lose my footing and slip.

I plummet eighteen feet, landing head-first on the linoleum tile floors. My skull is pulverized by the force of the fall. I am instantly killed.

It is the 5th iteration.

I travel to work in my 2003 Ford Orrery, gunning it down the I-86 at 90 miles an hour. I break the sliding glass door with a moss-covered brick found in the woods behind the office park. It doesn't say "MANSUS" on either side.

Content, I drive to the Mcdonald's in my 2003 Ford Orrery. It's a restaurant off the I-86, all mowed grass and grody sidewalks and tarmac. There's a stormwater basin around the back. The sun beats down on the cracked, faded parking lot. It is an American stretch of Forsaken soil.

I walk in, stride confidently up to one of the registers, and ask the woman if they serve a Daddy Burger.

No, she says. One of her lower eyelids starts to twitch in anger. They do not serve a Daddy Burger. They have **never** served a Daddy Burger. They **WILL** never serve a Daddy Burger. There is not a **single** fucking point in time, past, present, or future, in which a so-called "Daddy Burger"— she makes air quotes for that part— will **EVER** be served at a Mcdonald's establishment.

She's panting by the time she's done. I blink.

Oh, I say. That's okay, I say. I must've been thinking of some other restaurant, my bad.

She asks me what I'd like that's *off the menu*.

I ask her if she can pretty please check in the back. Just in case there's one in the far corner of their freezer or something.

She snarls and rolls her eyes and says she'll look.

When she returns, she isn't holding a Daddy Burger. I'm immeasurably disappointed by this turn of events.

Instead, she's holding a Taurus g3c, and she discharges it five times into my chest. I am hit in the abdomen three times and the shoulder once; my left lung, spinal cord, liver, and stomach are punctured.

I collapse, and she steps forwards and shoots three more times, emptying the weapon's magazine into my center mass as I'm on the floor.

The bullets deform into flowers as they carve ragged paths through me. The pain renders me illlucid and I fall unconscious from blood loss. Exsanguination quickly follows.

It is the 6th iteration.

It is a day like any other. I pull into the parking lot outside the Mcdonald's off the I-86. It's hot enough that there's several auras above the tarmac. I can barely see the parking lines against the gravel-covered, crack-riddled, sunbleached grayish-whitish-blue surface of the road. The sheer amount of trouble I have parking qualifies it as a forsaken stretch of American soil.

She opens fire on me before I ever touch the door to the Mcdonald's off the I-86. I'm struck by flying glass shards from a broken window and six of the eight rounds fired, and die in the ambulance during the ride to the ER.

It is the 7th iteration.

I take my 2003 Ford Orrery eastward on the I-86. Midway through the trip, I make the executive decision to ram my 2003 Ford Orrery through the side of a Mcdonald at 27 miles per hour. Broken glass, cinderblocks, injured bodies, tables, and several burgers are sent flying into the restaurant floor. None of them are Daddy Burgers. Almost immediately people start to evacuate.

Today, I decide as I unbuckle my seatbelt, is a day like any other. I step out of the 2003 Ford Orrery. The woman is at the register, where she usually is. She is holding me at gunpoint.

I'm doing this, she says. It's my fault, I'm keeping her in some kind of fucked-up groundhog day scenario.

That's stupid, I say. Fucking stupid. I work at the local investment firm as a secretary and drive a 2003 Ford Orrery and I'm five-foot-two and I die when I'm shot and I genuinely lost my grip on the playplace that one morning. How could it be me doing this? How am I anything other than a tiny part of a cosmically greater whole?

She asks me why I drove my car through the wall.

I tell her, to be completely honest, that she shot me when I tried to use the door. I could have been stopping by to ask a sister how her day's been, but instead, I got gunned down in cold blood because *somebody* jumped to conclusions.

She sighs. That's fair, I guess, she says. She lowers her pistol just a little bit.

I ask her how her day's been.

She says it's been busy, but fine. She says she's not entirely sure why she shows up to work when nothing matters, if she's being honest. It just feels like the right thing to do.

I nod, sympathetic— I comment that I'll occasionally drive to my workplace as well— and ask her if I can order something.

Fucking hell, she says. You *really* don't have to do this, she says. She tells me I can climb back into my car and we can go our own separate ways and the day can end without bloodshed.

I ask her if I can have the Daddy Burger.

I am killed by a single 9x19 Hornady jacketed hollow point bullet. It deforms into a flower shape as it carves a jagged path through me. I am instantly killed.

It is the 8th iteration.

I wake up at five-thirty AM. For breakfast, I have cereal. Before I leave, I tuck my Taurus g3c into its concealed carry holster, then slip into my Cashier's uniform and drive to work. It is a day like any other.

I work at a Mcdonald off the I-86. As a cashier. Ask any retail worker and they'll tell you their job is a forsaken stretch of American soil.

At midday, a black-haired woman in a buttonup and tie parks a 2003 Ford Orrery in the lot outside. She looks extraordinarily confused as she walks into the Mcdonald's and to the register. I think she looks good in my clothes— much better than the Mcdonald's uniform she's always in— but I don't bring this up.

She asks me if I'm going to shoot her this time.

I don't think that's how this works, I say. I think it's always meant to be me, no matter what.

Oh, she says, I'm sorry.

I think I'm okay with it, I say. Here's your gun, I say.

I place a Taurus g3c on the Mcdonald's counter, next to the transparent donation box full of one-dollar bills and pennies. It is loaded with Federal Premium full metal jacketed bullets, since they chamber more reliably than anything Hornady makes. Hornady always makes unreliable slop. This isn't even a loose fact, I just want to feel like they do.

Thanks, she says, and tucks it into her waistband.

By now, the customers are all filming us on their phones. They think we're acting out a script; our actions dictated by ritual, pre-planned, intimate, and hierarchical.

We are. I think.

I ask her if she'll be ordering anything.

Yeah, she says. I'll get a quarter pounder, one of the apple pies, and a vanilla soft serve. If the ice cream machine is working.

I tell her the ice cream machine isn't working. She says that's okay, she understands, and swipes her card through the reader. She spends three minutes pretending to read about the recent shooting on her phone.

A little while later, I hand her the order and tell her to have a nice day. I will be fired if I don't say this.

Thanks, she says, even if I haven't done her any favors.

Just before she grabs the bag, I yank it back out of her reach. The brown paper crinkles slips between her fingers.

Oh, I mention, we're doing a special deal today. I can't help but grin. For just fifty cents extra, you can get a Daddy Burger with your order.

I am shot in the head by a Federal Premium 9x19 full metal jacket bullet. It deforms as it carves a jagged path through me, though not into a flower because it isn't a hollow point bullet. This does not change the fact that I am instantly killed.

It is the 9th iteration.

I drive my 2003 job to my Ford Orrery at the local secretarial firm. I work as an investor. Today is an other like any day.

I think I'm a little queasy from all the highway fumes. I take five in the women's restroom so my head stops spinning.

At eleven twenty-three AM, she walks into the air-conditioned lobby, stopping on the black rug with the company's logo on it to look around. It's an unpleasant rug: the material is too stringy and plastic too rubbery and the surface is too faded and filthy.

She says she's a new hire. She thinks. She *really* isn't sure what's going on anymore.

That's nice, I say, ignoring that last part. Welcome aboard. I ask her how she feels about being a secretary.

She says it surely can't be worse working the cash register at Mcdonald's. She tells me about how there's always some malconditioned freak heckling the cashiers at Mcdonald's.

I spend the day introducing her to the scheduling software my boss uses. It's an obtuse, lethargic program from the early two thousands, but we use it anyway— it's what the old secretary used and my boss is afraid of change.

At the end of the day, I'm cooling off in the back parking lot, shirt unbuttoned halfway down, and she comes to me upset and I wasn't expecting anyone but myself back here and I hasten to button my shirt. She pretends not to notice or care. There's redness in her face as she turns to give me privacy.

She tells me her car broke down and she doesn't know anyone else who works here. The check engine light's been on for a while, she says, but she doesn't have the money to get it to the mechanic's.

That's okay, I say.

Standing up from the curb, I click the unlock button on my 2003 Ford Orrery's key fob.

I can give her a ride home, I say.

She says she's not sure if she should get into a coworker's car on the first day of the job. She also says there's no such thing as a 2003 Ford Orrery, either. She's never heard of it and there's no way I drive a twenty-one-year-old car.

I shrug and tell her it's what I drive. I also tell her it's fine to break character now— we're the only ones around and we both know who's going to die by the end of this exchange.

Thank god, she says. A weight seems lifted off her shoulders. Your job sucks and I hope we don't ever have a repeat of this day again, she says.

Well, I say, you definitely just jinxed yourself there. I climb into the driver's seat of my 2003 Ford Orrery as she struggles with the door, finally opening it by the time I've buckled my seatbelt.

Anyway— I pause to start the engine— take comfort in the little things: at least you don't have people waltzing in and asking for Daddy Burgers at the firm.

She mutters something under her breath, pinches the bridge of her nose, sighs, and then empties her Taurus g3c through the now opened passenger side door. I am struck in the neck, head, and abdomen several times.

I die within minutes.

It is the 10th iteration.

The sun hasn't risen yet, so it's impossible to tell if it's going to be a day like any other. An electrical fault in my radio alarm clock overheats a capacitor at approximately two in the morning. The plastic catches fire, then my lampshade, then my mattress.

By the time the heat and light wakes me up, I have already inhaled a lethal volume of smoke produced by burning plastic and consumer electronics.

I die fading in and out of lucidity as the fire continues to spread.

It is the 11th iteration.

I drive to a Mcdonald's off the I-86. A little restaurant where the sun beats down on the cracked parking lot and there's a basin and there's some woodlands and it's a forsaken patch of american soil and it's a day like any other. I know all of this by now.

I'm holding a billhook machete I found at the foot of my bed this morning. I move quickly into the restaurant floor and I'm able to take three customers by surprise. I leave it embedded in one. He was an older man, and I'm pretty sure I saw him with kids during one of the previous days.

You weren't here yesterday, she says.

It's just us in here.

I think I might've died in my sleep, I admit. I hop up on the counter and sit on it skee as we chat, legs dangling.

Oh. Well, that sucks, she says.

A period of silence lingers in the air.

You know, she admits, things don't end when you die. I usually spend the rest of the day in police custody while they take pictures and ask questions.

But you don't ever hesitate, do you? You take the shot.

Not even for an instant, she says. She tells me she doesn't know why. It just feels important. Like whatever obsession you've got going on with that stupid fucking burger.

Hey, I say, don't disrespect the Daddy Burger like that, it's not even *remotely* stupid. Hell, I bet it could outsmart you nine days a-

I cut myself off, flinching instead, as she suddenly reaches for something in her waistband. A spell of embarrassment crosses her face. She freezes, then glances up at me sheepishly.

She admits, a little quietly, that she forgot to bring her gun to work today.

Don't worry about it, I say. I hop down from the counter. I'm pretty sure the father over there has a 1911. He pulled something last week when I drove through the wall.

As I bend down to take the Kimber Pro TLE II out of his concealed carry shoulder holster, she plants the billhook machete into my back. Several of my ribs are bisected, two are pulverized and my right lung is destroyed. I collapse, paralyzed by the pain, and she clumsily cuts my jugular.

It is the 12th iteration.

I drive my 2003 Ford Orrery to my job at the local investment firm. I work as a secretary. But my boss only hired me for my looks.

It is a day like any other and I have decided to wear a halter top and open mesh shirt. My boss approves of the change of costume, though I'm not dressed up for his sake.

At eleven sixty-seven AM, she walks into the air-conditioned lobby. She's a new hire, she says. I really shouldn't have jinxed myself, should I, she says.

That's nice, I say, ignoring that last part. Welcome aboard. What was up with the machete yesterday.

I don't know, she admits, I think I got tired of shooting you.

Yeah, well, I say, it hurt a lot more. I say I wonder if there's any pattern or meaning to our violence, or if we're all just flailing to the whimsy of some sadistic demagogue a-

Demiurge, she blurts out, interrupting me.

Demiurge?

Demiurge, she says, again. She's leaning forwards on my desk, head resting on one hand as she looks up at me, idly twirling a pen in the other. She slow blinks. A demagogue is a rabble rouser, she explains. I think you meant demiurge.

Right, I say, sitting up a little straighter. I say I wonder if things get weirder when she doesn't shoot me.

She asks me if that's why I'm not wearing my usual buttonup and khakis and tie. I tell her it isn't. I was feeling confident this morning and wanted to express it by showing off a little skin. A girl can look pretty for reasons that have *nothing* to do with the increasingly incoherent purgatory she's trapped in, you know.

She says it looks good on me.

I'm not sure how to respond to that. I ask her what she thinks about my hell theory.

It's not hell if there's anything more to this than you asking for your fucking burger and dying over and over again, she says.

Good point, I say, nodding in assent. I ask her if she wants to do anything with the day now that we've got it to ourselves.

She says she does, though she's unsure whether or not her car's going to break down again.

That's fine, I say, I have a 2003 Ford Orrery.

No you don't, she says, I looked it up and that *still* isn't a real model of car.

I take my key fob out of my pocket and show her the text on the back. Across the plastic surface, in little raised black letters, are the words "**2003 FORD ORRERY NEXUS**".

She huffs and rolls her eyes and buckles into the passenger seat. We drive to the local mall. The parking lot, once wilderness, is now a massive waste of tarmac. Despite being unreasonably huge, I can't find a parking space. It must be due to the fact that it is a forsaken patch of American soil.

We agree on the Five Guys' drivethrough.

I get a good view at the bank behind the restaurant. Separating the two establishments is a small, ratty patch of grass covered in cigarette butts and plastic shredded by lawnmower blades. It is ugly and also a forsaken patch of American soil.

I think I'm developing a sunburn through my mesh shirt as we bake in the line. That must have something to do with the forsakenness of the American soil that the drive-through was built upon.

Good morning ma'am, the man at the counter says when we finally pull up, what can I get for you toady.

I ask him if he meant to say "today". He says he didn't. I think that's funny but don't bring it up.

She says she'll get a milkshake and a large fries and some of the peanuts but NO burger.

I say I'll have a Daddy Burger with extra sopsauce, please. And sprinkles on top.

He's quiet for a moment as he shares a desperated glance with the woman in the passenger seat, who rolls her eyes in disapproval.

The man at the drive-through then sighs wistfully, shakes his head, bends down, and produces a Winchester SXP twenty-gauge shotgun from beneath the counter.

He toggles the safety, chambers a round, and discharges it once into the center of my upper chest. Twenty pellets of copper-plated buckshot penetrate my abdominal cavity, destroying my heart, right lung, and left lung. My halter top is ruined by the blood and burning gunpowder.

Shame. I really liked that shirt.

I'm immediately rendered unconscious and begin bleeding to death in the driver's seat of my 2003 Ford Orrery. I die from neither blood loss nor organ failure, however. I am killed by a 9x19 Hornady jacketed hollow point bullet fired into my skull at point blank. It blossoms into a flower as it carves a jagged path through me. I am instantly killed.

It is the 13th iteration.

Today is the next link in a long chain of days that stretches back sickeningly far. I am woken up at five thirty AM by an alarm ringtone that is not mine.

There is a man in my room and I recognize him as the Five Guys drive-through clerk. He is in sweatpants and a t-shirt, and is sleeping in my desk's office chair at the other end of the room.

I ask him why and what he is doing in my house.

I got your address from your driver's license, he says, and I wanted to see if you'd reappear at midnight.

I'm surprised he came up with that. I ask him what he saw.

He tells me he fell asleep. He seems a little embarrassed by this admission. It's cute.

I am not wearing a shirt and a man has broken into my house and slept in my bedroom. I tell him to leave my house or I am going to kill him with a ball peen hammer.

That's fine, he says, I need to go to work today anyway. But why the ball peen hammer, he asks.

I don't know, I admit. I tell him it just felt important. I don't know how else to describe it.

I ask him if he really needs to go to work today. I'm still shirtless under the covers and I'm still about to cave his skull in, but there's something about his initiative I find interesting.

He says he just feels like it's important he goes to work today as he stands up. Important as a ball peen hammer or a Taurus g3c or falling to your death from the Mcdonald's playplace.

I can feel my cheeks burn furiously. He **wasn't** supposed to have known about that.

He stands and hovers in my doorway as I wrack my mind over whether my hammer's in the garage or the shed. I don't even think I own a ball peen hammer. I don't think I've *ever* owned a ball peen hammer. Why a ball peen hammer?

You know, he continues, she told me about you yesterday. He flashes a smile. You seem nice, he says, as he leaves.

I drive to the local Wall-mart in my 2003 Ford Orrery. It is a blue-shaped, towering-colored, squat, ugly monolith that is indisputably a forsaken patch of American soil. I walk to the gun section.

The .38 special revolvers are cheaper than the .357 magnum revolvers. I purchase a Ruger LCRx, chambered in .38 special. I purchase a box of .357 magnum jacketed soft point ammunition.

The checkout clerk at the Wall-mart gun notices this as I'm filling out the paperwork. I shouldn't load the Ruger with .357, he says. The rounds are too long and the overpressure will ruin the barrel, he says.

Oh, I say, signing off and giving him the form back, thanks for the heads up. I shove the bullets down into their casings so they'll fit and load the Ruger LCRx with five .357 jacketed soft point cartridges and leave the rest of the box on the counter.

He calls after me as I walk out of the Wall-mart. I drive home in my 2003 Ford Orrery. I spend five minutes looking for a ball peen hammer that I don't actually own.

My search does turn up my dad's claw hammer from my basement. I hope it counts as close enough and I stash it in the glovebox of my 2003 Ford Orrery and I drive to the local mall in my 2003 Ford Orrery.

The parking lot, at one point a forest, is now a massive expanse of tarmac. I can't find a parking space and it is a forsaken patch of American soil and in a fit of frustration I drive over the curb and through the front entrance of the Five Guy's. It isn't as satisfying as I hoped and my car's entire front is damaged.

The manager asks me what the fuck I'm doing as I step out of my 2003 Ford Orrery. I tell him I'm going into the kitchen. I am holding a claw hammer and a Ruger LCRx loaded with .357 magnum soft point ammunition. He makes the tactical decision to retreat into the men's bathroom and call the police.

I walk into the Five Guy's kitchen.

There is a man standing at the drive-through line. I shoot him in the upper chest before he can produce the Winchester SXP from beneath the drive-through window. The temporary cavitation shatters several of his ribs, and the bullet passes through his left lung. He collapses, and blood starts to fill his lungs.

What gives, he rasps. I begin rifling through his pockets. I can feel his skin through the cloth; physically tangible, warm and soft. It would be totally unforgivable for me to touch him like this if I wasn't about to crush his skull.

Sorry, I say, I couldn't give you a chance to shoot first. There is a McDonald's off the I-86, I say. Next to a retention basin, I say. The mowed lawn spans off into the suburban treeline and the parking lot shimmers as the sun beats down on it, I say.

He asks me if it's a forsaken patch of American soil as I find his wallet and pull the driver's license out.

I tell him It's only forsaken if we fall into the trap of letting ourselves think of it that way. By the way, I tell him, I think tomorrow's going to be my shift here.

I smile and wink and hope I'm being obvious enough and send the tempered iron striking surface of the hammer through his forehead.

I find myself hoping he's there tomorrow as I drive down the I-86 in my damaged 2003 Ford Orrery and to a McDonald's.

It's a quiet stretch of land, suburban wilderness half-drowned in the excesses of tarmac and trash-strewn grass and sun and the drainage basin. It's a patch of the American tapestry, no more or less sacred than any other. A tiny part of a nationally greater whole.

I drive my 2003 Ford Orrery into the runoff basin because I haven't done that yet. The water, brackish and radiant with a thick organic scent, is cool to the touch. It's not as unpleasant as I was worried it would be. I spend two and a half minutes floating on the surface, watching the clouds pass by, and then doggy paddle to the shore. I don't actually know how to swim for real.

Water drips off my clothing, spattering against the tile floors as I walk up to the cash register. It is one establishment of thousands. The customers stare at me, and the father of two draws his Kimber 1911 and escorts his children out of the McDonald's. Several otherwise frozen bystanders follow in his initiative.

You're wet, she says, and you're wearing your office clothes again, she says. I thought the halter top was cute, she says.

I still don't know how to respond to that and I forget everything I was going to say as my heartrate begins to race. I really should have dressed up if I was going to visit her today but now it's too late and I look bad and I can feel my cheeks burning up a little.

I tell her I went for a swim.

Yeah, she says. I, uh... I saw you in the lake.

Wordlessly, I place the driver's license on the Mcdonald's counter next to the plexiglass donation box full of one dollar bills and pennies. The counter's material has worn down in the center, revealing an unpleasant white composition.

I need you to memorize this address, I say.

It's him, she says. She smiles to herself. Her eyes flicker over the same line of text again and again. A minute passed and she looks up and she winks at me. By the way, she says as she looks up, can I get you anything else toady?

It isn't as cute or funny when it isn't him saying it.

I sigh and ask for a Daddy Burger.

She reaches for her concealed Taurus g3c, though I am already holding my Ruger LCR and the hammer is already cocked and she never gets to touch it before I've lined up my own shot. The sound in the confined space is shockingly unpleasant; a physical contention between a hard pressure wave and my own soft tissues.

The first round hits her center mass, dropping her instantly. I fire the remaining three rounds over the Mcdonald's counter and at her vitals. Her left lung, right lung, stomach, spine, left shoulderblade, and several of her ribs are destroyed.

She lets out a guttural sound, nonverbal sound and several painted wheezes. I had a feeling you'd shoot first, she manages.

I ask her if she really did.

She says nothing in response. She is losing both blood and consciousness quickly. By now only adrenaline is keeping her lucid. She wriggles on the ground, reaching for something beneath the checkout counter.

Later today, forensics teams will conclude that prepared beneath the McDonald's checkout counter was an improvised explosive device.

The shockwave stuns and blinds me; thousands of shrapnel fragments are propelled into my head and chest. The little ragged shards of metal tumble chaotically as they carve jagged paths through me, and I bleed out through uncountably many trickling wounds.

It is the 14th iteration.

Today is a day like no other. Anyone who says otherwise just doesn't have their head on straight. I travel to work in my 2003 Ford Orrery. I work at the local investment firm as a secretary.

Today, I have decided to wear a tube top and an open mesh shirt. It is a bold look, though my boss approves of the change in costume.

Aww, thanks, I tell him. I would've worn my halter top, I say, but it was ruined by burning gunpowder and blood.

He gives me a discerning stare for an uncomfortably long period of time as the wide grin melts from his face.

You're funny, he finally concludes. There's not a lot of confidence in his voice.

By the way, I say, quickly changing the subject, do you think I can take the I-86 uptown and get lunch at the Five Guys, I say. They have a two-for-one Daddy Burger deal, I say.

Something changes about my Boss' demeanor. There's a rage that begins to develop in his gaze: broiling, silent, potent fury, primal in inexorability. His arms shake, violently trembling on a slow path towards my unguarded throat, tendons on the back of his fuzzy hands bulging periodically as the fingers spasm in anticipation. His mouth is slightly open, upper lip pulled away the tiniest bit, and froth clings to the corners of his mouth.

And then he blinks, and the light behind his eyes returns. Sure, he says, shrugging. Just make sure to be back by 2. He folds his hands on his desk like nothing happened.

I take my 2003 Ford Orrery to a Mcdonald's off the I-86.

I walk into the Mcdonald's, though the woman at the counter is nowhere to be found. Her beat-up old car isn't in the parking lot, either. I ask the teenager in her place if he's seen the woman who usually works there, and he says she hasn't shown up at all today.

The air-conditioned atmosphere of the Mcdonald's is somehow both sickeningly clean and violently filthy. Goosebumps dance on my arms, and the mesh does absolutely nothing to insulate me. I knew I should've worn my button-up today. I look stupid and she's not even here and I swear I'm getting odd looks behind my back.

It is a forsaken patch of American soil.

I take my 2003 Ford Orrery to the local mall. The parking lot, at one point a forest, is a massive expanse of tarmac. I still can't find a parking space. It's almost funny at this point.

I park at the laundromat across the street and take the crosswalk into the Five Guys.

Hey, I say to the manager, I'm the new hire; I'm supposed to start working the drive through. But my uniform hasn't arrived yet, I say. Sorry about that.

He purses his lips and says that's fine but he'll still have to write me up, procedure and all, and asks me whether I know how to work the drive-through window.

Don't worry, I say, I was at a Five Guy's not long ago, I say, smiling.

At one twenty-seven PM, he drives a Subaru up to the window. He's in jeans and a polo shirt, but she's still in her Mcdonald's uniform. I can smell mint gum on his breath, but she's the one who's chewing. His hand is on her thigh.

I don't know how to feel about any of this. I feel stolen from and happy for and jealous of both of them, all at once. I feel like it should be me in both of their seats and I feel a little dizzy and like an idiot for not having picked up on any of the clues from earlier.

I rip my voice out of the lump that's started to form in my throat and I don't really know what to say. I ask what I can get for them toady.

Nothing, she says, we've been circling this drive-through all day long for your sake. You finally did it, she says, and kisses him as she congratulates me.

It takes me a minute to realize what I've did. IT. I HAVE done IT. I'm where I need to be, right now, and I can work everything out afterwards.

I walk into the kitchen of the Five Guys. I begin the process of creating a Daddy Burger.

Entire cow carcasses are emulsified, attenuated, liquified into a soup-like homogenate and strained until they can no longer be considered fluid. Pickle fragments potato ejecta pelt my tube top, made shrapnel by the sheer forces involved, steaming a little as they cool. Onions are atomized; rendered outside-in, spinwise, ahomotopic, transposed outside affine space. Fryer grease mixes with the sorry remains of the cows as it flows in rivulets, pooling at my feet. I let it. Beads of sweat cling to my temples as I push the Five Guys burger griddle to levels hitherho unthinkable to the feeble limits of the human mind.

I make a Daddy Burger.

I walk out of the Five Guys kitchen with a Daddy Burger in my hands. I hold it as I would an infant son: carefully, with sacrosanct reverence. It takes up more space than the volume it inhabits and seems to be spinning without any rotational velocity and is slipping katawise and out of three dimensional space. Despite my attempts to the contrary. How the hell do I stop it from falling into the fourth dimension?

I walk to the drive-through window of the Five Guys where they're waiting. Their eyes seem to have trouble focusing on the Daddy Burger, but they watch me, equal parts curious and proud, as I take a bite.

I chew.

I chew some more.

Y'know, I comment, speaking with my mouth full, this actually just sucks. No wonder I couldn't find a restaurant to sell me this. This shit might as well be inedible slop. I can't believe I ever wanted a Daddy Burger.

She leans over him, transfixed by the fractal pattern that the patty has started to deform into, and asks if she can have a try.

I tell her, frankly, that she can get her brains blown out for two weeks if she's really so curious. This is my own triumph and failure.

Her face sours, but a look of concern crosses his. You're upset, he says, gently. Is there something you want to talk about?

I tell him that that wasn't my intention when I gave you her address and I'm mad even if I can't blame anyone but myself for acting sooner. But I'm happy for you two. I doubt things would have worked out any other way and you'll be a great fit for each other.

There's sympathy and something else I can't read on his face as he nods. He asks me if I want a ride back to my investment firm.

I hate that dump, I say, but sure, I say, there's no such thing as a 2003 Ford Orrery anyway. I don't know what was up with that. I've always taken the bus to work.

I knew it, she says. She makes a triumphant, barking sound. I fucking knew it this whole time.

He puts a hand on her thigh to say wordlessly, not now, and turns to me.

That's okay, he says, climb in.

Four days later, she calls me.

It's 2 PM when the shrill, chipper tune of my phone ringing atop my nightstand wakes me up. I can't remember much of the previous night, but it definitely didn't involve me leaving the house. There's a molten tub of ice cream at the foot of my bed. My hair is, undeniably, a bird's nest. I still haven't cleaned my underwear off the floor.

My phone keeps ringing all the same.

I pick up, and hesitate, staring at the white glow of the call screen. I almost don't want to ruin the silence, and all the possibilities contained therein, by talking. Three seconds tick by on the timer.

Hello?

Hey there! The cheerful tone of her voice is distorted by my phone's crappy reception. Distorted. We were thinking of going out to get dinner today, she continues, and wanted to know if you were interested in coming with us. It'd just be the three of us.

I can't tell if it's a date or not. Am I really being invited? Is it really okay for me to come along?

O-oh, I stammer, no, no, I'm not- I mean- I don't have any plans today. I'm all free, I manage. I can feel my heartbeat begin to pick up. My hand reaches up and starts fidgeting with my hair of its own accord. Did... uhm... you have a place in mind?

The Chipotle, she says, and adds, if you're okay with that. But no burger joints.

I can hear a faint laughter from the other end of the phone line. I manage a chuckle of my own that hopefully doesn't come across as embarrassed. There's a rustling sound, and he presumably has the phone now, and he says, it's the one at the mall, by the way. We'll see you there.

His voice is like warm cream, even through the tinny modulus of my phone's speakers.

I spend about a goddamn hour combing the tangles out of my hair and almost another getting washed and dressed. A lot of my favorite clothes are ripped or bloodstained so I have to fall back on a camisole top from college that's a little too tight around my chest and khaki short shorts and a lacy blazer that probably doesn't go with the rest of my outfit. I practice feigning a confident smile in my mirror and grab my purse and take the bus to the mall.

It's a beautiful day out. The skies are mottled with the occasional cloud, and it can't be more than seventy degrees, and the cicadas' droning song washes over me in waves from the tree canopies. I pull my phone out and I'm about to call her when I spot them across the parking lot. She waves at me. I wave back. He joins in the waving.

The hour we spend talking and eating together feels like a drug. It feels like we could do this forever.

Midway through the meal, a man in a sequin jacket and a cropped t-shirt and rolled jeans kicks one of the chipotle's double doors open. He has short blonde hair and a pair of peace sunglasses.

The man at the cash register is tall and dark and wears copper charms in his dreadlocks and a silver ring in his nose. He buries his face in his hands as the man in the sequin jacket struts up to checkout, cutting several people in line.

Sequin man slams his palms down on the counter. I want the mommy taco, he says.

The cashier frowns. We *don't* serve a mommy taco, he says, enunciating very clearly.

Please. Sequin man leans forwards, almost close enough to kiss the cashier, and adds, quietly, you serve a mommy taco. I know you do.

The cashier sighs, rolls his eyes, and draws a Hi-Point C9 from his waistband, levelling it with the other man's head.

He just licks the barrel of the gun, definitely on an impulse, and looks embarrassed afterwards. He blushes a little. Pretty pretty please? He asks.

The cashier sighs and rolls his eyes and fires the pistol once at point blank range and we all jump, despite expecting the gunshot, and several of the restaurant patrons run for the door.

The three of us share a glance as we turn back to our meals.

She shakes her head wryly. Some people, she says.

I laugh in agreement. I know, right? I say. I mean, just what kind of idiot would want something they know they can't have?