

The image shows the front cover of a book titled "yellow springs" by William Squirrell. The cover is painted with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The top half is a vibrant yellow, and the bottom half is a darker, more muted yellow or ochre. A horizontal line of darker paint separates the two sections. The text "yellow springs" is centered in the upper yellow section, and "william squirrell" is centered in the lower ochre section. Both are in a simple, lowercase, typewriter-style font.

yellow springs

william squirrell

Yellow Springs

William Squirrell

Part I: The 4 a.m.

Cold and dark. Even the air seems to freeze. It condenses into a malevolent wind that spills out of the hills, out of the black trees, scuds across the glittering snow. Snow as hard as granite. Black trees like broken ribs. The wind is a knife, thinks Ersatz. A sharpened spoke. The house creaks, the beams ache, the pipes groan. He has not turned on the kitchen light. He sits at the table in the dark listening to the coffee percolate. He stares out the window at the yard falling away into blackness, towards the railroad tracks that run along the edge of the woods.

Ma is asleep.

Marcy is asleep.

Grampa used to sit here, just like this, drinking coffee, before he would leave for his shift, before he would leave for the mine, for Yellow Springs. And Dad. Dad sat here too. Now Ersatz does.

The 4 a.m. should be coming through any minute now. The shuddering roar of the damned. A white light that annihilates color, annihilates shape and form. It will fill the house with its unfeeling intensities. When Ersatz was a child it seemed to him that the 4 a.m. was inside the house trying to get out: clattering against the quivering windows, pounding on the doors and walls, making the roof and gutters shiver and shake, threatening to split the place apart, shatter it, destroy it entirely.

Back then it carried coal away. Now it carries the bodies in. Packed in their cases. The galvalume vats. Not alive, not dead, just there, just bodies.

Ma is asleep.

Marcy is asleep.

Neither will wake until the sun comes up.

Ersatz drains his coffee, goes to the fridge for his lunch, laces up his boots, grabs his coat. As he opens the front door the 4 a.m. arrives and the world vanishes in the unity of its blinding desolation.

It is too early for the protesters to be on the road when Ersatz gets to work. They don't even bother trying to block the 4 a.m. anymore, they just let it roll through the camp, through the gates, and into the long shed to get unloaded. Let it roll out again at six. Just one of them is up, throwing brush into the barrel they use for their fire. Smitty said they had stolen a truckload of fifty-five gallon drums from some gone-bust fracking company or another. They had all gone bust. Coal is bust. Oil is bust. Timber is bust. He looks familiar, the guy at the barrel, a big fella, a pale shadow in the predawn light. Ersatz blinks a couple of times, rubs the sleep out of his eyes. The man's mass of dirty blonde hair and frosted beard just turning to dreads. Old work boots, torn jeans, faded flannel shirt stretched over a hoody, fingerless gloves. He looks like a guy Ersatz played football with in high school. Kubinsky? Kaminski? Kubiak? Looks like Chris Kubiak. Maybe his son. Or a nephew. The kindling flares up and the fellow's eyes shine in the light. Acrid spike of wood smoke, diesel fumes and tar, porridge and cornmeal, weed, cat piss and human shit.

"You coming in or what?" Smitty is shivering at the gate.

"Who's that guy?" Ersatz nods in the direction of the protesters.

"Just some fucking scumbag. Come on, man, its cold."

"He looks like Chris Kubiak. You remember Chris Kubiak? Didn't you used to run with him?"

"Kube died years ago."

"I thought maybe it was his son or nephew or something."

"It's not his son. It's just some fucking scumbag."

The man by the barrel is warming his hands. He looks up and sees Ersatz and Smitty staring at him. He gives them the finger. Holds it for a five count, then back to rubbing his hands. More protesters climb out of their tents. Birds chatter in the leafless trees. Black hills against the pearl sky.

"I think it's about time to clear these motherfuckers out again," says Smitty.

“Why bother? They’ll just drift back in a week or two.”

“Come on. Move your ass. It’s freezing out here.”

The tunnels of the old mine stretch for miles under the town, under Indian Hook, just on the other side of the ridge. Generations of men worked down there. Smitty says the company still owns the mineral rights. He says the mortgages of all those dingy houses up above are just basement deep. Palliative Prerogatives, a subsidiary of Fidelis Insurance, owns everything underneath. The only worthwhile concern in town. They bought it all up. Just in case coal makes a late late come back. The wealth around here was always under the ground, waiting to be dug up. Still is. The unconscious clients that come rolling in on the 4 a.m. in their galvalume vats are stacked up in the old tunnels like filing cabinets in rows and rows. Miles and miles of rows and rows.

Ersatz is doing the walk around in his scrubs, making sure the automated system got the new shipment off the train, into the mine, and plugged in. It always does: the cranes move the vats out of the cars onto the trunk belt, the trunk belt to the elevator, the elevator into the deeps, the feeder belt to the correct slot. Once a week he is required to watch in person as the robotic arms do their work. The company calls it oversight. Once a week Smitty does the same. Often they keep each other company. Have a smoke. Shoot the shit.

Today Ersatz had done it alone. He stood on the platform beside the train enjoying the smell of oil and diesel and tar, the smooth syncopation of the long, jointed booms as they swung the vats from the flat cars onto the conveyor belts, the whine and hiss of hydraulics and electric engines, the clash of metal against metal. Once the 4 a.m. was unloaded its engine sputtered and roared to life, slowly pushing the banging and jostling cars out of the shed. They snaked their way back down the tracks, locked into precisely the same route they always took, through the chain link fence and out of the lot, through the protestor camp, now come to life, a dozen or more figures gathered

around the fires, stretching, yawning, chatting, then picking up speed and rolling into the bush. Ersatz watched the cars clattering away until the locomotive shuddered past him, a massive caterpillar head, bulbous blank eyes staring back at him as they diminished, staring back at him until it finally slid away around a curve and out of sight. The noise of it passing his house would wake Marcy. She would have a pee and wash her face and start a fresh pot of coffee and have some time to herself before she woke Ma. Maybe watch the news. Maybe read one of her books.

Now as Ersatz does his rounds in the mine the lights drilled into the rough stone ceilings come on for him, surge gently into life, and fade into darkness as he moves past. It is dry and cool, the fans perpetually turning, the refrigerated air perpetually circulating, nutrients flowing, data accumulating. The super cooled vats are less filing cabinets, thinks Ersatz, and more honeycombs, the bodies in them winter pupae waiting for the spring.

It had been forty years since at the behest of the Christian right the Maier-Skrepenic bill outlawed passive euthanasia and do-not-resuscitate orders. Ever since then insurance companies had been raking in billions by maintaining comatose patients in long-term storage. At the Palliative Prerogatives' Yellow Springs Mine Facility in Indian Hook the unconscious population in the depths of the borough had long since surpassed the population that crawled across its surface. The town was officially a necropolis. Not a big one, like some of those in places like Ohio, but still, substantial. Enough money came in with the patients that they had resurfaced the streets up above, enough money that a couple of new buildings – six stories plus and encased in glass – had been built at the corner of 6th and Main, enough money that big stylish houses were appearing on the hill sides just outside the borough where the taxes dropped off a cliff, houses with solar panels that shone with glittering smugness, houses with geothermal heating, close-circuited houses, self-contained. All management types, administrators, assholes with business degrees and self-belief. New people arrived, new money, even a

new church or two: big ones with clean lines and chairs instead of baroque arches and wooden benches, cheap carpeting on cement floors instead of hardwood. That brand new box on the lot where the Walmart had stood. Our Lady of the Maier-Skrepenic, Ersatz calls it at home, the new creed, the new scam, St. Ponzi he calls it, and Marcy looks hurt because she loves that shit, that's her church, those are her good people, "hush," she says and he snorts at how soft she is, how naïve.

"They are all part of the same machine," he says. "The pastors demonizing the euthanizers and atheists, lurking about hospital rooms like giant bats, praying over bodies, turning meat into money, the congregation voting like they're told, the insurance agents signing up the faithful, the police watching the skeptics, locking up the deniers, the bankers lending and collecting, lending and collecting, lending and collecting, so we can all keep paying. All those suits with their fifty dollar haircuts and their cologne and their silk ties and the air conditioned houses, all cogs in the machine, grinding up the poor like they always have. Same as it always was but now we gotta work to keep the dead solvent as well as the living."

After the rounds through the mine it is paperwork, kill some time doing the office inventory, watch a bit of the news. The news is always on in the office. The company news. Smitty loves the news. Smitty loves feeling like he knows what is going on. Smitty loves pretending he is the smartest guy in the room.

Ersatz could do without the TVs on. The incessant salesmanship of the anchors, the breathy enthusiasm of the reporters. Ersatz would prefer muzak. Or silence. Ersatz would prefer death. A white hot and violent death. Smitty isn't around. He is in the front office harassing Big Boss, begging him to turn him and his boys loose on the protestors. The remote control is lost somewhere in the catastrophe of Smitty's desk. Buried beneath requisition forms and gun catalogues and sandwich crusts and mugs stained with evaporate. Ersatz doesn't want to touch anything on that desk. So the TV stays on. The talking heads keep talking.

Ersatz dusts the plants, pours himself a coffee and holds the cup out, tries to hold it steady, watches tremors ripple the taut black surface.

They were excited on the TV about some new process, some new technology.

“Here’s the deal,” the woman was saying. “We know we can stimulate brain stem activity in some clients. If they have the right profile. We know we can produce certain effects.”

The man nods enthusiastically and then cocks his head.

“Effects?” he asks.

“Yes,” says the woman. “We can produce happiness.”

“Happiness? But they are in a coma, Nancy, aren’t they? They are unconscious, how can they be happy?”

“They dream, Brad,” says Nancy. “They respond, as you know, to the voices of loved ones, which is why we, at Palliative Prerogatives, always offer that option.”

“The recordings, you mean, Nancy? Of the loved ones?”

“Yes, we offer family members the option of recording messages and conversations for their beloved unconscious, and with our various telecommunications partners they can even make real time audio interventions with the sleeper during family gatherings, during important events, graduations and weddings, or just when the customer thinks of it.”

Nancy dials her tone back from bubbling bright to funeral home sentimentality: “When they miss their beloved unconscious, when they feel the need to make a connection, they can just call them. Let them know they still love them, still miss them, still pray for them. When they have those precious feelings they can have their voices projected directly from their phones into the clients sleeping space. And we know, it has been scientifically proven, that this has a beneficial effect on clients.”

“Of course, Nancy, I guess I knew that already, that there is always some sort of mental activity.”

“Not in all our patients, Brad, not quite all, just those that fit the right profile.”

Ersatz tastes the tepid coffee, grimaces, pours it into the sink, rinses out his cup, wipes the work space clean.

“But now,” Nancy is brightening up again, “just for premium customers initially, but eventually everyone, we can manage the moods of our clients. With the right hormonal and electrical calibrations we can keep them happy for eternity, or at least for as close as we can come to eternity. We can make palliative sleep less purgatory and more heaven.”

“That’s fantastic!”

Nancy beams.

“And how much does this new application cost, Nancy?”

“That’s the best news of all, Brad!”

Ersatz gets up and goes for a leak.

Ersatz has finished the last of his three daily tours of the catacombs and is sitting at his desk, still in his scrubs. He feels exhausted but there is no particular reason why he should. He is breathing heavily through his mouth. One of his hands twitches. He holds it up: watches it tremble. Smitty walks in and Ersatz puts his hands on his lap. Stares at the TV instead. Stocks. Charts. Scrolling numbers. Marcy will be getting dinner ready. Ma will be watching the TV just like he is – but the news, the real news, not this corporate bullshit: Ma will be watching flood, fire, famine.

“Check these out,” says Smitty from his workstation.

Ersatz squints. Smitty spills a handful of translucent marbles onto his desk. Glistening. Peeled grapes.

“Come over here,” says Smitty. “Come look.”

Ersatz hauls himself up and walks over.

About a half dozen little spheres are hovering just above the desktop. Just a quarter inch or so in the air.

"What are they?" Ersatz asks.

"The new mobile units."

"What?"

"The new cameras. The new surveillance system."

"Those are cameras?"

"Prototypes or something. Brand new anyways. Not on the market. Head office sent them."

"How do they do that?" Ersatz squats down and peers beneath the little spheres. "How do they float?"

"Photoelectric levitation."

"What?"

"I don't fucking know," says Smitty. "Something to do with static electricity. With charged particles or something. It floats in the electrical field."

"And it's a camera?"

Smitty delicately pinches one of the spheres between thumb and fore finger, lifts it up, examines it, and then tosses it up to the ceiling. It hangs there, quivering. Smitty turns to his computer and hits a few keys. A window opens up on the monitor and they look through it. They see the tops of their heads, their thinning hair, they see the clutter on the desk, the other spheres.

"Walk to the door," says Smitty and Ersatz does.

The sphere trails after him, barely visible against the particle board ceiling.

"Down the hall," says Smitty and Ersatz steps out into the hall, walks towards the changing rooms. Stops. Squints up at the ceiling. Sees nothing. Walks back.

"Check it out," says Smitty and he plays back Ersatz's walk to the door, down the hall, the squint up, the walk back.

They both look up and can just detect its telltale shimmer.

"And look at this," says Smitty.

He hits a key and text starts scrolling across the clip of Ersatz walking down the hall.

"Frank Emmett Ersatz. 53. Principal Insurer: Fidelis Fidelis through Palliative Prerogatives. Standard HMO with two dependents. Primary Care Supplier: Indian Hook Regional Medical Association. Overdue for Biannual Physical."

"Hey," says Ersatz. "That's private."

"I've got clearance," says Smitty. "I can check your pulse with this thing. I can check your blood pressure."

He is hitting more keys.

"Jesus!" says Smitty. "Ersatz! Your blood pressure! You need to cut down on the caffeine there, buddy."

"Private," says Ersatz and flaps his hands at the general location of the sphere. "Private."

"Can even detect cancer," says Smitty. "Like one of those dogs. One of those cancer dogs."

"What the hell, Smitty," Ersatz raises his voice. "Stop snooping."

"It says here you got gonorrhoea, Ersatz," Smitty says. "And scabies."

"Jesus Christ, Smitty."

"Says you didn't wipe your ass the last time you took a shit. That's not workplace hygienic, Ersatz. Wattles is gonna ding you for that. Not workplace hygienic. Gotta wipe your ass."

"Turn it off NOW," shouts Ersatz.

Smitty sits back and raises an eyebrow. He reaches out and taps a key. The window closes.

“I was just playing with you, Ersatz,” Smitty says. “I would never tell you if you had cancer. It would be inappropriate to tell you. I’d tell Wattles and then Wattles would tell you.”

At home Ersatz tells Marcy about the new mobile units.

She frowns.

Ma is watching the news while she eats. They’ve been carjacking people on the highway. Hackers stealing cars with the passengers still in them. They don’t know where they are taking them. What they are doing with them. There is talk of Satanic cults. White slavery. Organ theft.

“It seems very intrusive,” says Marcy and Ersatz laughs.

“I don’t see what’s so funny about that,” says Marcy.

“Maybe it’s a little funny that you still feel outraged at an insurance company intruding into your privacy. After all these years. Maybe it’s a little funny that you are still frowning at the world and finding it wanting when it’s been so totally shit for so very long. Maybe it’s a little funny because aren’t they just doing what your precious God does? Looking for imperfections? For sin? Watching and judging?”

“I don’t see what’s funny about any of those things,” says Marcy.

“No,” says Ersatz and yawns, stretches. “You’re right. I guess none of it is really that funny after all. I guess it’s all just sad and depressing and not funny at all. The whole lot of it.”

A bus of seniors going to a casino got jacked. It has vanished entirely.

“Foreign powers,” says the anchor. “Non-state actors, rogue elements, artificial intelligences, UFOs, anarchists.”

Ersatz is sitting in the early morning dark having his coffee and waiting for the 4 a.m. Just like he did the morning before. And the morning before that. And the

morning before. And before. And before. When it arrives the house shakes and shimmers and melts into the shuddering white roar.

The protestors are sleeping in their camp between the road and the railway. They must wake up when the train barrels in and roll right over and back to sleep. Except for the one guy. That one guy is up. The same guy is lighting the fire. The guy that looks like Kubiak. Kube. Smitty is waiting at the gate. Stamping his feet and blowing into his hands.

“Going hunting this Sunday,” he says. “Up past Gipsy. Want to come along?”

“How you getting there?”

“Company truck,” says Smitty and winks. “Going to give the new surveillance units a thorough testing. Mix a little pleasure in with my business.”

“I promised Marcy I’d stick around this Sunday. She won a ham in the church raffle and I said I’d make her an old fashioned Sunday dinner.”

Smitty shakes his head in disgust.

The hum of the cooling systems washes away all dissonance. Ersatz does his rounds in a state of calm stupefaction. He studies the blinking lights, he evaluates the numbers, he notes discrepancies, he notes irregularities. In theory he is making sure there are no dead heads that need to be culled. It is a procedure that could be done from his desk but Palliative Prerogatives is an upmarket brand. The customers pay for human observation, they pay for the labor, they pay for Ersatz to walk quietly amongst the unconscious as they sleep. They pay for his scrubs and his clipboard and his attention to detail.

He is enjoying the conditioned air. Outside, despite the cold, it is almost the allergy season, almost time for the trees to wake into life, to start pumping the air full of their spume. Green haze will soon hang over the hills, drift into the valleys, into the

towns, filling noses and ears and lungs, burning eyes, choking breath. It is harder on Marcy than him. She will complain all spring that she feels like she is drowning in acid. She will sit at home and wheeze and gasp and itch, unable to sleep, to relax, to think. She will cry and cry, her tears mingling with the mucus. Ersatz will wake up to her tears, congested himself, go downstairs, drink his coffee while she gasps for breath upstairs in her half-sleep. Ersatz will go to work and breathe the distilled air while Marcy gasps for life like a fish on the bottom of a boat. He is thinking it might be nice to go hunting with Smitty after all, to enjoy the last of the winter's sterile chill, the snow creaking under their boots, the endless procession of the stately black trees, breath hanging in the air, the crack of the rifle. He is thinking of the warm body of the deer, the cut throat, the steam rising, when he finds himself in front of his grandmother's berth, Gramma's galvalume vat, noting the vital signs, assessing the data. They could never have afforded a premium brand like Palliative Prerogatives for her without his employee rebate. Gramma would have been down some deep hole in Kentucky or West Virginia with nary a soul checking up on her. Poor Gramma. She would have been 97 this year he thinks, and then corrects himself:

"IS 97," he says out loud. "Still alive. Still alive. She is 97. She turned 97 this year. Almost a century. Almost."

And his thoughts turn to playing sick and skipping school, to Campbell's Tomato Soup poured from the can into the pot, grilled cheese sandwiches squashed flat in the pan, endless soaps on the color TV in the basement, the chatter of a sewing machine upstairs, the faint mustiness of the old couch she refused to let Dad take to the dump.

Smitty and Ersatz are having a smoke on the train platform where there is some shelter from the breeze. It is a cold afternoon with a clear sky and the protestors have all retreated into their tents or wandered off into the woods. Smitty is in the throes of one

of his get-rich-quick schemes and as always he is trying to convince Ersatz to participate. It is like being in the water with a drowning man.

"It's all set up," says Smitty. "I just need a little more capital."

"We have no money, man," says Ersatz. "We're barely scraping by as it is."

"Which is why you gotta throw the dice while you still have a chance," says Smitty. "Can't fail. Cash in the retirement plan."

Ersatz laughs.

"Dying on the job is my retirement plan."

"Remortgage the house," says Smitty.

"What?" says Ersatz. "Again?"

"Your mom's inheritance?"

Ersatz snorts.

"This Amish guy already has everything in place," says Smitty. "He already has the 3D printer in his barn churning out the parts. And a baker's dozen of kids to put them together. Free labor, man, free labor."

"I don't understand," says Ersatz. "I thought those guys hated technology."

"Is a buggy technology? Is a plough? Is a hook-and-eye?"

"I suppose," says Ersatz.

"Yes," says Smitty. "Yes, they are all technology. These insane religious rules are always negotiable. It's a case-by-case kind of a thing. As long as the women are churning butter by hand and beating laundry with broom handles and otherwise staying out of trouble everything is cool with the long beards."

"Cool?"

"Yeah," says Smitty. "Cool."

"So, they're cool with 3D printers?"

"Oh yeah," says Smitty. "This guy, my guy, has been making hollow points for the Shelocta County constabulary for decades. And zip-tie cuffs. And drone

components. And they've started experimenting with pharmaceuticals. They got a connection in India who is in the business of reverse engineering American drugs and he sends them the formulas."

"You expect me to believe the Amish have a pharmaceutical connection in India?"

"You're such a condescending prick."

"They're making knock off drugs? Seriously?"

"They're thinking about it," says Smitty. "Once the patents timeout there is a fortune to be made."

"Your techno-capitalist Amish engineers are fucking with my worldview here, Smitty."

"As long as it's not for their use they can make anything they want. As long as it's for sale and not personal use. Mars rovers, land mines, big purple vibrators, whatever. So long as there is money in it."

"Tell me your plan again?"

"He produces furniture parts in the barn with the printer and then his kids in their overalls and little frocks get in the shop window with the maple syrup and the needle point and they put the pieces together. The tourists love it. The show and the furniture. Authentic Amish children slapping together genuine Shaker rocking chairs or whatever the hell you call them. They love it. The Chinese and the Japanese and Germans. The rich retirees from Arizona fantasizing about the good old days. They all love this primitive down home pioneer bullshit. They lap it up. But the real money is online sales."

"People can't tell its fake?"

"It's the Amish," says Smitty. "Everybody trusts the Amish."

"I don't know," says Ersatz. "It sounds pretty dubious."

“Oh my fucking God,” says Smitty. “Of course it sounds dubious, it is literally fraud.”

“And it’s moot anyways. We don’t have any money.”

“Moot!” Smitty is practically purple with frustration. “What the fuck does moot even mean?”

Marcy laughs when Ersatz tells her Smitty’s Amish furniture scheme. She laughs first because Smitty thinks they have money to spare, and then because he is such a character.

Supper is fried potatoes, fried eggs, fried spam, and hot sweet tea. They watch the news with Ma as they eat. Ma loves old fashioned farm fare, this was always one of her favorite meals. It used to be poverty nostalgia for her. Now it’s back to actual poverty but she’s too far gone to notice the difference. She hums to herself as she eats it and then settles into her chair to enjoy the tea and the news.

The militias showed up in Detroit to help the National Guard with the riots and now they are fighting the National Guard. Someone in a suit is shouting at the cameras about travesties but Ersatz can’t tell if the angry man in the suit is referring to the riots for which the National Guard was called out, the National Guard being called out, the militias showing up, the militias fighting the National Guard, or the National Guard fighting the militia. Or all of it. What everyone on TV seems to agree on is that it’s hurting the economy regardless of who is to blame. The news cuts from the shouting man in a suit to some Canadians on the Ambassador Bridge.

“We just want to buy some shoes,” say the Canadians.

The camera pans to heavily armed bearded white men in body armor blocking their path.

“Are those militia?” asks Marcy. “Are they guarding the borders now?”

“I don’t know,” says Ersatz. “I can’t tell anymore.”

A long string of pharmaceutical and insurance ads follow the Detroit story and Ersatz starts feeling dizzy again. Tired. He wants to tell Marcy about the dizziness and the exhaustion and his extremities always falling asleep but the thought of the anxiety she'll feel if he does makes him feel even sicker than just feeling sick does.

"I was talking to Sandra today and she said she heard from her minister that Doctors Without Borders might be coming back again this summer," says Marcy.

"Really?" Ersatz is skeptical. Last time they were in Indian Hook they set up at the old mall and within hours of their arrival the line snaked back and forth through the parking lot until the whole space was full of desperate, jostling people. They had to hire a security firm just to keep order. The borough said they'd never let Doctors Without Borders back again because it made Indian Hook look like some kind of a backwards shit hole.

"Sandra's minister used to be a missionary pilot in Myanmar," says Marcy. "He knows some of those Doctors Without Borders administrators. He says they are coming for sure. They already have their visas."

"That would be great," says Ersatz. "But I don't think they'll let them come back here again."

"Sandra said they're coming back and they're bringing a dentist with them this time," says Marcy. "And a surgeon for cataracts."

"I can't see it happening," says Ersatz. "Not so soon after the last time."

"Well," says Marcy. "You keep doubting it, and we'll all keep praying for it, and we'll see who is right in the end."

Up for work. Marcy asleep. Ma asleep. Coffee percolating. Ersatz once again, but very briefly, considers going hunting with Smitty. Up at Gipsy. He suspects there would be detour to visit the Amish colony near Shelocta. A tour of the machine shop. The barn with the printer. A mouthful or two of homebrew. How long has it been since

I've been wrecked on homebrew? thinks Ersatz. Was with Smitty, he's pretty sure. Out hunting. Acetone and turpentine. The hangover nearly killed him. Was like he was turned inside out. It would finish him off it happened again. He hears the rumble of the 4 a.m. coming around the bend. He drains his coffee. The train's light slices through the blinds. Scalpels, he thinks. White lightning. The world on fire.

Ersatz is just back from his rounds and at his desk trying to stamp the sleep from his feet when Smitty strolls in.

"Hey, man," he says. "Wattles wants to see you."

"Me?" Ersatz blinks.

"Yes: you. No one else here, is there? Just you."

"About what?"

"I don't fucking know. But it's Wattles – the shylock prick. So it'll probably be about the company's money and how to keep you from getting any of it."

Ersatz stands up and sways. Dizzy. He catches at the desk to steady himself.

Smitty is staring at him.

Ersatz thinks about those new surveillance units, the little spheres, Smitty's floating eyeballs, the data scrolling across the screen, his pulse rate, his blood pressure. He feels ill.

Wattles' eyebrows are drawn together and his lips pursed. He gestures at the chair in front of his desk and Ersatz collapses into it. He feels like he's going to be sick. All that is on the desk is the computer terminal, keyboard, mouse, a neatly stacked pile of paper directly in front of Wattles, and a framed photo of a young woman holding a fat child on her lap to the side. Ersatz can't recall seeing the picture frame there before. The woman is pale, thin and dark haired like Wattles. Her smile strained. A sister, thinks Ersatz. Maybe a niece. Maybe some refugee his church is sponsoring.

Wattles clears his throat, opens his mouth, closes it. Clears his mouth again.

"I'm afraid this is quite a sensitive matter..." Wattles trails off and then blurts out: "Insurance!"

They both wince.

"Insurance," Wattles repeats and takes a deep breath. He stares out the window at the black and white hills, the snowy clouds blowing in over their tops.

"As you know, we receive you and your family's medical reports directly from Fidelis Fidelis and are required by our shareholders to peruse them before we pass on them on to you," Wattles says.

"Yes," Ersatz is lightheaded, dizzy.

"Your wife," Wattles says and Ersatz starts.

"Marcy?"

"Marcy?" Wattles' frown deepens. "Marsha. I thought."

He looks at his monitor, flaps around the papers on his desk. Ersatz leans forward, trying to seem alert, encouraging.

"Marcy," Wattles finally says. He blushes deeply, blinks suspiciously at the form he holds. "Marcy."

"Yes?"

Wattles glares at Ersatz.

"She's pregnant," he says.

"She is?"

"Congratulations," says Wattles and clears his throat.

"Thank you," says Ersatz. The bottom has fallen out of the world. The office walls are circling about him. The void pressing in on the ceiling. Bile burns his throat.

"Unfortunately..." Wattles trails off and stares out the window again, eyes watering.

"Yes?"

“As a matter of course Fidelis Fidelis checks the paternity of the fetus,” Wattles is glaring at him again. “It’s all the same test now. The new test. Automatic at every checkup: pregnancy test, paternity test. Patient doesn’t even notice. They do it every checkup. Just in case. It’s the law. Anti-abortion, you see. And to protect the father’s rights. Good practice.”

“They do? It is?”

“For dependents. They check the dependents. Not the policy holder. It is the requirement. She is not the policy holder. Marsha.”

“Marcy.”

Wattles waves his hand impatiently at Ersatz.

“It isn’t her baby that’s insured, is it?” Wattles snaps. “You are the policy holder so it’s not her baby that is insured. It is the policy holder’s baby. It’s yours.”

“Of course,” Ersatz leans even closer, tries to smile. “I see.”

“But it’s not.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s not your baby.”

Ersatz sits back in his chair.

“It’s not your baby in there,” says Wattles. “In Marsha. Insurance won’t cover it. The pregnancy or the baby.”

“I see. Of course.”

Wattles waits for Ersatz to say something else.

“So we’re on the hook for the pregnancy?” Ersatz says and Wattles winces at the word hook.

“Well,” Wattles says. “Marsha is. You aren’t. Because it isn’t yours. And Fidelis Fidelis certainly isn’t. So it’s Marsha’s sole responsibility.”

“I see,” says Ersatz and they both look out the window. A shifting curtain of snow blows between them and the trees.

Wattles clears his throat.

"I see," says Ersatz and stands up.

"Also," says Wattles.

"Yes?"

"It's not just the pregnancy."

"No?"

"Fidelis Fidelis is a Christian company."

"It is?"

"Yes."

Ersatz waits, trembling hand on the back of the chair.

"Chastity clause," says Wattles. "Married spouse. Infidelity."

"Yes?" Ersatz is feeling sick again.

"Can't cover Marsha anymore. She's out. She is, as of this instance, uncovered. Uninsured."

"Marcy," says Ersatz.

"Yes," says Wattle and turns to his computer. "Her."

When Ersatz gets back to his desk Smitty is on the phone vibrating with excitement. Taking notes. Making lists. Voice pitched high. Chattering.

Ersatz does a quick search for "pregnancy;" "uninsured;" "cost."

Not good.

Ersatz does a quick search for "mortgage rates."

He is about to do a quick search for "suicide" and "insurance payouts" but reconsiders. What's the point? Even if Fidelis Fidelis wasn't a Christian company those gouging bastards would never payout for suicide.

Smitty is off the phone and standing by his desk. Grinning.

"Head office big wigs coming in tomorrow. Big announcement."

"Oh yeah," Ersatz says and gets up.

He walks over to the coffee. Smitty follows him. Ersatz pours himself a cup, tries to get it to his mouth without spilling.

“You know what that means, right?” Smitty is still grinning.

“No,” Ersatz has a sip, winces at the taste of it. “What’s it mean?”

“We’re gonna clear out those hippie burnouts today.”

Ersatz sighs.

“What?” Smitty glares at him. “You feel sorry for those shiftless pricks?”

“No. No, I’m happy for you, I really am.”

Ersatz stares at the computer monitor for the next couple of hours. It must be one of the Bible study guys. Marcy spent a year asking Ersatz to go with her to her Thursday night Bible study but she gave up abruptly a couple of months ago. Started staying out with them later and later. Same guy always dropping her off. The new youth pastor. She introduced him to Ersatz the first time he gave her a lift. Big guy, cheerful, firm hand shake. Young. Blue eyes. Trim blond beard. Younger than Marcy by ten years. Younger than Ersatz by twenty. It’s got to be him.

Smitty has gathered up the security detail in the meeting room. Ersatz watches through the window. Smitty has drawn up some tactical scheme on the white board. Blue and red arrows. Now he is showing them his old clips of Russian riot police in action – cutting protestors off from the pack, surrounding isolated individuals and groups like an amoeba engulfing its prey. The guys are loving it. What a lot of thick necks, thinks Ersatz as he looks them over. What a lot of shaved heads and small eyes. Goatees. Tattoos. What a lot of meat. What a lot of angry laughter.

Ersatz is in the bathroom staring at himself in the mirror. Trying to decide what he feels. He goes back to his computer again and starts looking for insurance companies.

"Pregnant," he types.

"Over 40."

"Premiums."

The security guys are putting on their gear in the changing room when Ersatz gets off work. They are all independent contractors and bring their own equipment in hockey bags. One of them knows a guy near Pine Ridge who makes his own pepper spray. Laces it with LSD. He gets a commission and is selling it pretty hard to the other rent-a-cops.

"See you tomorrow," says Smitty as Ersatz walks past.

"You bet," says Ersatz. "Have fun."

Raucous laughter and a few of the men already in their gear follow him out the door.

Outside a billboard towers on a rusting scaffold over the protesters camp. Ninety percent of the time it is defaced but when Ersatz steps through the gate he sees a crew is up there rolling on new poster panels. A ring of protestors stand around the fire in the barrel watching. A couple more are standing in the drainage ditch right by the gate to the compound.

The poster is of an elderly woman reclining in a hospital bed. Brilliant white hair. Nasal cannula. Sparkling blue eyes. A small child hugging her.

Big bold letters: Life is a Gift that only God can Give.

Palliative Prerogatives logo in the bottom right.

Ersatz coughs and a couple of the protestors in the ditch look back at him. One of them is the guy that looks like Kubiak. A kid really. Not more than twenty. A boy. The other protester is a teenage girl with a narrow rat face and a wool cap jammed over her small head. Ersatz starts walking past them and the big blond kid steps out of the ditch and onto the road.

"Fascist pig," says the kid, coughs up some phlegm and spits a brown slug into the snow. "Judas."

Panic sweeps over Ersatz. He feels sick. Dizzy.

The kid frowns, steps even closer.

Ersatz takes a step back and staggers. The kid reaches out a hand towards Ersatz's shoulder.

"Hey!" Ersatz hears someone shout. Maybe Smitty.

"Hey!" it sounded tinny. Like it was on the phone. Or a TV in the next room.

"You're the fascist," Ersatz wants to say. "You're the killer. You're the squatter. You're the one who is morally compromised."

But instead he keels over.

Ersatz comes to on the couch in the lobby. Big Boss' secretary Linda is pressing a damp cloth against his forehead. It is the closest he has ever been to her. He smells soap and perfume. Her blue eyes shine, dark hair falls across her face and she smiles tentatively. Wattles is standing behind her peering down at him.

"You are OK!" shouts Wattles and Big Boss' secretary winces.

"He is Ok," says Wattles to Linda. "You can go. I'll send him in shortly."

"He should be taken to the hospital," she says.

Wattles shrugs.

"He needs to see a doctor," says Linda.

"OK," Wattles says to her and then frowns at Ersatz.

"You are due for a checkup anyways!" he shouts. "It's been over a year! It'll be covered!"

"Stop shouting at him," says Linda. "He just passed out, he hasn't gone deaf."

"Have you?" she looks at Ersatz and he shakes his head.

Wattles blushes.

"It's been over a year," Wattles says. "You'll be covered."

Linda rolls her eyes, stands up, and floats away.

"Smitty says that guy hit you," says Wattles.

"What?"

"That guy. That protestor."

Ersatz blinks, tries to clear his head.

"There isn't a mark on you but Smitty says that guy hit you," says Wattles.

"That's why it all went off like it did. That's why it was so violent. We could get sued.

Smitty always goes too far. He says it's because the guy hit you."

Ersatz shakes his head.

"The guy hit you," Wattles is frowning again. "That's what Smitty says."

"I don't know," says Ersatz. "I can't remember."

"When you are up to it Big Boss wants to see you."

"OK," says Ersatz.

"Are you up to it now?"

"I guess," says Ersatz. "Sure."

Smitty is sprawled on one of the chairs. Still in his boots. One leg crossed over the other. Dripping melt water. Truncheon dangling from his belt. Black shin and thigh pads still strapped on. Wearing a Flyers t-shirt. Flushed, sweaty, eyes bright. Big Boss is behind his desk.

"How you doing?" asks Big Boss.

"I'm fine," says Ersatz. "A little groggy."

He waits for Big Boss to offer him a seat but the man just stares at him. Late fifties, bald, years of muscle slowly melting into hard fat. Big watch, wedding ring, manicured nails.

"Smitty says that protestor popped you one," says Big Boss.

"Went down like a sack of shit," says Smitty.

"There's not a mark on him," says Wattles.

Ersatz blinks.

"It's a pretty convenient thing if he did take a swing at you," says Big Boss.

"Could smooth proceedings out."

"I can't remember very clearly," says Ersatz.

"Try to," says Big Boss.

"The security cams," says Ersatz.

"Not recording," grins Smitty. "We were switching them out for mobile units.

No eyes on it all. No eyeballs."

"Not a mark," blurts out Wattles.

"Let the poor man talk," says Smitty.

"I can't remember a thing," Ersatz says. "Have the police been called?"

"Police?" Smitty laughs. "I'm the police."

"Take the next couple of days off," says Big Boss. "Go to the doctor. Get your head straight."

"OK," says Ersatz.

"Take tomorrow off and see if you remember anything that might help smooth out the proceedings," says Big Boss. "If you remember this guy throwing a punch let us know. It would be helpful."

"OK," says Ersatz. "If I do remember something."

"Good," says Big Boss. "Because it would be helpful."

Ersatz turns to leave, he sees the secretary in the front office, she smiles at him. He turns back.

"Who should I go to? If I remember something? Your secretary?"

The three men stare at him.

"You should come to me," says Smitty. "If you remember something."

The gate is open. A few of the security detail are still hanging about. The sun is low already, just above the hills, the long flat beams catching the churned up snow. The shadows of the trees are long and black and tangled. The camp is gone, the barrel tipped over, ash stippling the bone white floor of the woods, here and there a startling splash of blood. Ersatz begins the three mile walk home.

About halfway to the main drag Smitty comes roaring past Ersatz in the company truck, two guys in the cab with him. Three more in the box, riot shields shining in the setting sun, and the kid that looks like Kubiak nestled between them: both eyes black, beard bloody, flannel shirt torn, hands behind his back. They vanish in a spray of snow and mud. When he gets to the turn off to the old dump Ersatz looks at the dirt track to see if they went that way but he can't tell.

"How was work?" Marcy shouts from the kitchen.

Ma is already at the table waiting for supper.

"Alright," says Ersatz and kicks off his boots. Kisses Ma. Kisses Marcy.

"Same old, same old," he says. "What you making? Smells fantastic."

"Potato and leek soup," she says. "Could you slice the bread?"

"Sure," says Ersatz. "How was your day? How was Ma?"

"It was fine," says Marcy. "Wasn't it, Ma? We even went for a walk, scattered the leftover pumpkin about the yard for the squirrels."

"Good for you, Ma," says Ersatz.

She is perched at the edge of her chair, head thrust forward, eyes watering, hands gathered into her lap like a couple of dead mice.

They have supper, and after he puts Ma to bed Ersatz and Marcy crack a couple of beers and watch the news. Images from out west: an activist attack on an insurance

convoy; burning trucks on a barren highway; dozens of galvalume vats scattered about in the blowing snow; wrenched open; bodies hanging out of them.

“Horrible,” says Marcy. “Horrible.”

They already caught them. All young folk. Punks. Kids. Standing in a row outside some small town courthouse somewhere. Hands behind their backs. Just like the kid in the back of the truck. They are all staring at the camera. Just like the kid stared at Ersatz.

“Why do they do it?” Marcy sounds like she is on the verge of tears. “I don’t understand. Those people were loved by someone. They weren’t just bodies. Loved!”

“They think the law’s unjust,” says Ersatz. “Maier-Skrepenic.”

“Even so,” says Marcy. “Those weren’t just bodies, were they? They were loved. They were people and they were still loved. They were still alive. It’s murder.”

Ersatz shrugs. He thinks about Ma upstairs. An empty cocoon. He thinks about Gramma in her galvalume lung deep under Indian Hook. He thinks about air being forced into her cold desiccated body, the oxygen forced into her blood, the blood forced up to her brain. He thinks about the day he signed the papers to put Gramma in storage. Ten years after Maier-Skrepenic. Ten years after thou-shalt-not-kill. Ten years after thou-shalt-not-pull-the-plug. He thinks about insurance premiums. Garnished wages. All the shit jobs he has had and will have to be pay the bills, the mortgage, the premiums. All the premiums. He thinks about even earlier when Dad found out he had the palsy. When Dad found out he had the palsy and the half-assed insurance package he had wasn’t going to cover even a quarter of what he would need for home and auspice care, and none of the cost of maintaining his comatose body once things began to shut down for good. Of course it made sense for Dad to shoot himself. At least if you didn’t think it all the way through. He didn’t want to fuck his family so he shot himself. Sure. But he didn’t think it through. He didn’t think they’d fuck his family anyways. That they’d fuck his family regardless.

Ersatz thinks about all the pointless phone calls he made to the insurance agents for Ma after the suicide. Only seventeen and all those calls to insurance brokers. To lawyers. To social workers. All the calls back and forth. Bad news after bad news. No payout for suicide and Palliative Prerogatives suing Ma for the money they would have earned for keeping Dad alive ad infinitum. Poor Ma never did understand how they could expect such a thing from her.

“But he’s dead,” Ma kept saying. “How can they expect him to keep paying his insurance? How can they expect us too?”

“They say suicide is a type of fraud, Ma,” Ersatz would say. “They say he robbed them of what they would have earned.”

“But he’s dead.”

“Yes, Ma. But he defrauded them so now we owe them.”

She never did get her head around it.

He cracks another beer.

“I got the day off tomorrow,” says Ersatz to Marcy.

“Oh?” Marcy blushes. “You should have told me earlier. We could have spent it together.”

“You got plans?”

“There is a pro-life parade tomorrow and I promised I’d help with refreshments. I was going to drop Ma off with the ladies at the church.”

“Pro-life?” Ersatz laughs. “There hasn’t been an abortion around here for forty years.”

“Do you think killing babies is funny?” asks Marcy.

“Not usually,” says Ersatz.

There is a long bad-tempered silence.

“I’m sorry if you’re upset about it,” Marcy finally says. “I can cancel. We can do something together.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m not upset,” says Ersatz. “I have some things to do downtown anyways. I’ll catch the bus in with you.”

“Oh,” Marcy frowns.

“A pro-life parade?” Ersatz asks again. “The church putting it on? Our Lady of the Maier-Skrepenic?”

“Yes,” says Marcy curtly.

“Ever vigilant,” Ersatz laughs again.

“I fail to see what’s funny about any of this.”

“They have insurance? Those Churchies? The ministers? The youth ministers?”

“Of course they do. It’s a good job. Christians take care of each other. Of course the ministers have insurance.”

“So is it Christian insurance?”

Marcy looks confused.

“Isn’t it all?” she asks.

“I sure hope not,” says Ersatz.

Ersatz keeps watching the news after she goes upstairs. Has another beer. And a fourth. Half of a fifth.

It’s a church bus, the Jesus Rose bus which belongs to the Jesus Rose Co-op where Marcy takes Ma to do the shopping. It is making its long slow cycle through the Indian Hook hinterland of rotting tarmac roads and peeling clapboard houses to pick up the retirees and the unemployed and the stay-at-home moms. The driver will stop to collect or drop off anyone anywhere along its route and it is free. Unless you count the cost of having to sit through the canned sermons and confessionals the drivers usually play. And sometimes earnest young evangelicals from the Bible College that occupies the deserted university campus will be clustered near the doors, handing out recycled Jack Chick tracts, trawling for sinners and self-esteem, trying to catch your eye, hoping

to save you. But today it is just hymns and Christian rock on the PA, no tinny sermons and no baby missionaries. Ma is at the window with her big purple purse on her lap, watching the scrubby hills go by, the deserted gas stations. Marcy in the middle, her purse on her lap, fidgeting. Ersatz's legs stretched out in the aisle.

They all disembark downtown. Ersatz declines the invitation from Marcy to tagalong with her to drop Ma off at the church.

"We can get some breakfast at Crouse's after," she says. "We haven't in years."

But he's got things he wants to do at the library and there is always a wait to get on the public computers so they separate. Some pro-choice activists outside the courthouse are organizing a counter-protest. Hired security watching the scruffy kids with their "Hands off my Body" signs. Some of the muscle looks familiar. Part of Smitty's crew. Prison guards. Off duty cops. Some of the kids look familiar as well. Kids from the camp at Yellow Springs. He keeps walking.

The computers at the library are all occupied. He waits almost an hour for one to free up then signs in as Chris Kubiak and looks for affordable insurance companies. Looks for government assistance. Looks up "dizziness," "extremities falling asleep," "exhaustion." Looks up "cerebral palsy." "Multiple sclerosis." Looks up "Maier-Skrepenic." Looks up "Suicide," "Undetectable suicide," "painless suicide."

He is about to give up the computer to the next person in line when he sees the rat faced girl from the protestor camp at the photocopier. She has a giant book. It is so big she has to photocopy the pages in sections. She has a couple of other books besides, and when she is done with the big book she starts copying pages from them. After she puts aside the last book she tucks all the photocopies into her jacket and scoots out of the library.

Ersatz goes and has a look at the books. She has been making maps of Indian Hook. Topographical maps. Zoning maps. One of the books is a twentieth century

history of the Yellow Springs mine and that has maps in it too. Some books on the oil industry. An engineering text bent open to a section on coal mining and hydrology.

When he gets back outside three of Smitty's boys are beating a protestor on the courthouse steps. The rest of the kids are across the street shouting obscenities. The rat faced girl has joined them and throws a can of coke at the security guards. It bursts open on the concrete walk spraying brown foam across Ersatz's path. As he picks his way past she throws another one that bursts right at his feet. He jumps and she laughs. She says something to the others and the kids start chanting "never touched you never touched you never touched you" at him. He rounds the corner then doubles back around the courthouse to watch them. After about half an hour Smitty shows up with the company truck and they throw their semi-conscious victim in the back. The kids disperse and the rat faced girl jay walks across the front of the courthouse, pausing to spit at one of the security dudes standing on the sidewalk. The loogie hits his face shield but he just stares impassively through the drip. She spits again, this time on his bulletproof vest, and continues on her way. Ersatz follows her. She zigs and zags her way through town, across the old tracks into what used to be the old industrial zone: tumbled down breweries and warehouses and boarded up auto shops. The sidewalks are cracked and heaving, garbage is everywhere, deserted cars, a few of them burned out. After a couple of blocks she ducks through a ragged tear in a chain link fence and Ersatz waits a few minutes before he ducks in after her. Beyond the fence is a chaos of young trees and underbrush, an old concrete culvert spills a trickle of dirty water into a graveled ditch. A muddy trail cuts up through the bush and into the hills, towards Whiskey Run Road.

Part II: Zirvana

The two suits from head office are bending heads with Big Boss behind closed doors.

Smitty is sitting on the edge of Ersatz's desk giving him the run down on the presentation they gave to staff the day before.

"Heaven and hell," he says. "Easy upgrade. One floor at a time. A little rewiring in the clients but we don't even have open the cases. Just run a program."

"Heaven and hell?"

"Haven't you seen it on the company news?"

"That mood enhancement or whatever?"

"Yeah," Smitty grins. "Your family pays a premium and they flood you with dopamine. Pure joy. A perpetual high. Keep's the stiffs happy in their unconscious dreamland. A sort of postcoital bliss the lady called it. But that's not how they are going to advertise it. Going with more of a cherubs in the clouds kind of an angle."

"And the hell?"

Smitty's grin widens.

"Let's just say if those deadbeat motherfuckers out there don't keep up their payments on their loved ones' policies someone somewhere is going to flip a switch and it won't be to return them to their old purgatory but to something a lot worse."

"Jesus."

Smitty laughs: "Jesus? Jesus? He's got nothing to do with this shit except to help with the branding. Jesus is just for incentivizing the market."

At lunch Ersatz goes back into the crypts to get away from Smitty. He sits on the floor with his back against his grandmother's box and eats his sandwich. Pours himself a cup of steaming hot coffee from the thermos, milky and sweet. He imagines his grandmother's consciousness as void. As empty. He imagines flipping the switch and she wakes up to sunlight. To pure disembodied joy. To a glorious choir of revival hymns.

“Hallelujah to the lamb,” he hears her tremulous voice singing along. “Who purchased our pardon.”

He imagines her crying with joy. He chews his bologna sandwich slowly. The white bread a sticky mass in his mouth. He washes the bolus down with more coffee. He feels it as a lump in his throat. He imagines his grandmother weeping. He imagines her weeping. He imagines the sweetness of her waking turning bitter, he imagines the chorus of angels becoming discordant, chaotic, he imagines despair. He tastes bile in his mouth as the singing turns to screaming. He hears his grandmother screaming. He hears her begging for mercy. He hears her calling out for help but he can't help her because he's already broke. He has no money to pay his bills. He hears her weeping. He eats his sandwich. He drinks his coffee. Thinks about how much of his salary pays for Gramma's continuing existence and how Ma will be down here somewhere soon enough. Thinks about how much of each check is earmarked for the company insurance already and how the premiums will go up when Ma shuts down entirely and he's got to pay to keep her alive. Thinks about how much Marcy's pregnancy will put them back. He feels a surge of anger. Couldn't even bring herself to use a condom. They have done her head so bad she uses prayer as birth control. She used to put Bible verses under their pillows to keep God from opening up her womb. 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 5. “Defraud you not, one another.” That used to be their little joke. “How about a little 1-7-5?” He didn't care at the time. He was pretty sure he was shooting blanks so he didn't care. He thinks about how his hands won't stop shaking and his feet keep falling asleep. He thinks about Dad getting the palsy. Then Gramma. Then Ma. Now it's going to be him. Lot's of folks think there is something in the water. Lots of folks think the insurance companies put it there. He thinks about how he will lose his job when Big Boss finds out he's sick and that means losing his insurance. He thinks about how Marcy will have to try to find work just so they can eat. Nothing out there for her but changing colostomy bags and mopping up blood and vomit. Maybe some truck stop

waitressing but you pretty much have to know someone to get any kind of a job these days and who do they know anymore? Maybe the folks at her church will help. Probably not if the pregnancy becomes a scandal. She'll lose all her church friends. Poor Marcy. Ersatz thinks about Ma in a home. At some economy care center on the interstate. He thinks about Wattles reading his medical reports. Thinks about Smitty and his mobile units. Thinks about his search history at the library and insurance company lawyers and automated robot internet snoops.

"How you feeling?" Big Boss' secretary is smiling at him across the desk. He has been summoned for an audience. Because he missed the group presentation he gets to have a personal one in the Big Boss's office.

"Fine," says Ersatz. "Fine."

She has a big rock on her finger. Manicured nails. Beautiful skin. He can smell her soap and perfume from across the room.

"We were all worried about you," she says and Ersatz starts to sweat.

"I'm fine, really."

She smiles. She has perfect middle class teeth.

"That's great to hear, Frank," she says.

"Everyone just calls me Ersatz," says Ersatz.

"I know," she says and he is aware of the sweatiness of his palms and forehead, the dinginess of his scrubs, of how often he blinks his watering eyes. "They're waiting for you."

Wattles is in there. Big Boss behind his desk. The two suits – a blonde woman and a black guy. Both young. Well coiffed. Beautiful people from some big city. From New York or DC or Chicago.

"You got your memory back yet?" asks Big Boss.

"Sorry," says Ersatz.

"Oh well," says Big Boss. "I guess it doesn't much matter who hit who first at this stage."

"No," says the blonde woman. "It doesn't."

"This is Shelly Babych from the Palliative Prerogatives head office," Big Boss nods at her. "And Patrick Harding, from Fidelis Fidelis."

Ersatz nods at them. Clears his throat. He feels dizzy.

"So you know we are implementing a new program?" Big Boss asks.

"Heaven and Hell?" Ersatz ventures. Big Boss frowns and Harding smiles.

"That's strictly in-house slang," says Babych. "Get used to calling it Zirvana. That is what we and our partners at Fidelis Fidelis have decided to call it."

"I see," says Ersatz.

Babych begins to talk. She is explaining some of the technical issues of the implementation. He barely understands. It always comes down to following instructions rather than understanding them. Tapping out the right patterns on the keyboard. He hasn't understood the relation of those patterns to what happens in the galvalume vats for years. She is talking about longer hours. More frequent rounds. More rigorous observations. Harding occasionally interrupts with additional information. Big Boss stares out the window at the hills while Ersatz listens and Wattles takes notes even though the servile prick has heard it all before.

When Babych is finally finished and Ersatz is dismissed Wattles follows him out of Big Boss' office and stops him in front of the receptionist's desk.

"You haven't seen the doctor yet," says Wattles and glances at Linda. She is concentrating on her monitor.

"No," says Ersatz.

"You were supposed to go get examined. After the incident. I looked it up to make sure you did, but you didn't. You didn't go to the doctor after the incident. That's

why you got given the day off. You were given the day off to go see a doctor. You still have one visit this year. You didn't go."

"I didn't feel like it. I still don't."

Wattles flushes red.

Linda is half watching them as she types.

"This is not some kind of a game," Wattles says. "This is not some kind of pointless request."

Ersatz shrugs.

"This is not a game," Wattles raises his voice.

"Do not shout at him," says Linda icily.

Wattles flush turns almost purple.

"Go see a doctor," he hisses and brushes past Ersatz. Stops at the door and glares back at him.

"I will put a hold on your policy," he says. "I will put a hold on it. We will stop the payments for your mother's medications. Go see a doctor."

After he is gone Ersatz says: "It is touching how concerned he is about my health."

Linda smiles tightly.

"He is a horrible little man," she says.

Marcy and Mom at church. Ham in the oven. The ham Marcy won. A real ham. From a real pig. Raised by boutique farmers, fed on corn and turnips and slops. A real pig. Not some pink loaf grown in sterile tub in China. Potatoes peeled and in the pot under an inch of water. Green beans trimmed and cut. Ersatz keeps thinking about Smitty out hunting in the hills up past Gipsy. The new surveillance units floating through the trees, sniffing out the deer, listening to the thump-thump-thump of their hearts, measuring their temperatures, reporting their age and location to Smitty, telling

him where to go, which one to select, which to kill. Nothing to do but wait so he decides to go for a walk, puts his boots on, hat, coat. Pours some coffee into a thermos and packs a sandwich. He goes to the gun rack. Dad's shot gun is still in the wrapping in which it had been returned by the insurance company forensic guys all those years ago. Ersatz picks it up, feels the heft of it through the soft sponge of the foam wrap, but returns it to the rack and takes the old deer rifle.

Ersatz walks up the road to work and then turns off towards the old dump. It is not a long walk and by the time he gets there the morning clouds have blown through and the sky is a beautiful blue. The fence was overwhelmed years ago and the twisting chain link weaves in and out of the trees, in some places it slips beneath the bark of one like a knife and comes out the other side. There is still the faint smell of garbage, and a few old appliances lying around, but it seems just a random patch of toxic soil in the middle of the woods now. There is no dead blonde kid who looks like Kubiak here. No one lying there in the mud with a bullet in the back of their head. There are no bodies to be found at all and Ersatz can't tell if he feels relief or disappointment.

He is up in the hills and it is warm enough that he has opened his coat and taken off his cap. The sweat is cold on his brow and neck. He has just skirted a massive yellow jacket colony. The hills are full of buzzing, seething patches of ground. The yellow jackets are a menace. They wake earlier and earlier each spring and each spring more and more hunters are attacked. Last year a man was killed. Once clear of the yellow jackets Ersatz stops, opens his thermos and has some coffee, fishes a bologna sandwich out of his pocket, listens to the birds, the wind in the trees. When he is done he continues to climb the ridge he is on. It rises up out of the valley in which the old dump is nestled and spills into a jumble of gorges just north of Indian Hook. He can look down through the trees and catch glimpses of Whiskey Run Road, barely a scar now,

untraveled, winding its way through the tumble of the wooded hills, slipping past the corroding well heads and overgrown commercial lots. Ersatz plods his way up through the melting snow, boots slipping on the rotting leaves. At the crest of the ridge he hears the trucks on the highway, even farther away than Whiskey Run Road, the highway that circles around the town and, after walking a little farther, he hears thin, bright voices, human voices, nearby, breaking up the seismic rhythms of the traffic.

Ersatz creeps through the trees and down the steep incline towards the voices, boots skidding in the slick mud underneath the mulch, clutching at trees to maintain his balance. There is an old industrial site below him: a Quonset warehouse, the tatters of another chain link fence, old pumping trucks, and beside them on the ground rows of rusting fracking hardware like the bulbous twisted ribs of some beached monster, tangled miles of metal and rubber piping, grass and saplings growing up through and around it all.

“Cudd Energy” is stenciled in peeling paint on the side of the warehouse. Through the trees on the other of the side of the ruin he can see the glittering blue surface of the Whiskey Run Road reservoir. The voices have stopped and all he hears now is the wind in the trees and the occasional bursts of bird song. He squats down in the muck, back against a tree and lifts up his rifle so he can study the place through his sighting scope. The soil is churned up and there are crushed beer cans lying about, bottles, a filthy blue blanket. He hears a door creak and looks up over the scope. The rat-faced girl strolls around the corner of the warehouse. Ersatz ducks his head back to the scope and finds her in the sights. She looks much softer close up, her sharp features softened by the hint of baby fat. She stops, drops her pants and squats. Ersatz sees a flash of white thighs and the dark thatch of her pubic hair. He experiences a sharp shock of anxiety as she starts to pee, and immediately lowers the scope in shame.

Monday is a clear sunny morning and the snow is gone. The breeze hisses through the trees, spilling their spew into the thickening air. Wildflowers are already beginning to bloom on the verge. Nothing is left of the protestors but trampled mud and an overturned barrel. Smitty no longer guards the gate and Ersatz walks in unwelcomed, past Big Boss' car, past Babych and Harding's rental, past the company truck.

After Ersatz has completed the morning rounds Smitty shows him footage of the deer he hunted at Gipsy on the weekend. The images are eerie and disconcerting. The camera bubbles drift through the canopy, fixing the game in a disembodied gaze that transforms their vitality into data: pulse rates, mass, age.

At lunch Wattles comes into the staff room and harasses Ersatz about going to the doctor. Smitty watches. Ersatz spends the afternoon running diagnostics in preparation for Zirvana. Babych and Harding are holed up with Big Boss all day long. Just before knocking off work Ersatz does an extra round through the vats. Checking and rechecking the systems. Making sure everything is running perfectly before the transition. Halfway through he gets dizzy and stops to catch his breath, sucks the cold air into his lungs, looks up at the light and his vision is suddenly swimming with translucent threads and spots. He thinks of a microscope slide of pond water, of parasite eggs, he thinks of Smitty's floating cameras. Smitty's eyeballs. His hands are trembling again. He feels exhausted.

Ersatz is trudging home, shivering in the cold air when Smitty pulls up beside him in the company truck and rolls down the window.

"You look beat," he says. "If you don't mind a bit of a detour I'll give you a lift."

"Detour where?"

"You remember Patty Wagner?"

Ersatz nods.

"She still owns what's left of the family farm and since she moved to North Carolina I look in on it once in a while for her."

Ersatz climbs in and sinks into the passenger seat.

"You really do look terrible," Smitty says. "Wattles isn't wrong, you know, you should go see a doctor."

"I'm alright," says Ersatz. "I don't like that guy snooping around in my shit."

"Can't blame you for that," says Smitty and swings back out into the road. "But still, you need to see a doctor."

"Marcy says Doctors Without Borders is coming out again this summer so I figure I'll just hold out for that."

"You figure you'll hold out, do you?" Smitty laughs.

"What?" says Ersatz.

"One," says Smitty. "Wattles will yank your insurance long before then, and two, the country club Republicans have heard those Doctors Without Borders rumors too and they're freaking out."

"Why do they care?"

"Why do they care about French and Chinese and Cuban doctors handing out charity in their back yard? Are you kidding me? It's fucking communism. It's anti-American. It's unchristian. It's bad for business. And it won't happen."

"How they planning on stopping it?"

"Posse comitatus," says Smitty.

"What?"

"They'll organize a militia and hang those foreign agitators from the trees."

"They'll lynch them?"

"They will if they come here trying to give away shit for free that the Chamber of Commerce don't want given away for free."

"Where you hearing this?"

“Big Boss. He’s already asked me to organize the boys. All we got to do is get sworn in at the courthouse when the day comes.”

“Jesus Christ.”

They’re on a ragged old road winding its way up a heavily wooded hill. When they emerge out of the trees Ersatz almost gasps at the view. Acres and acres of green overgrown fields fall away into a deep winding valley. Beyond the valley the hills roll off into the hazy distance.

“Quite the view, isn’t it?” says Smitty.

“This is Patty Wagner’s land?”

“Yeah. She got it after her brother shot himself. You remember him? You remember Mason?”

“Not really,” says Ersatz. “I was too young to know him. I remember he was pretty wild.”

“That he was,” says Smitty. “He tried to make a go out of it up here after he got out of the army but it didn’t work. Well water poisoned from the fracking run off and the basement full of radon. Birds get cancer just flying over. Now Patty is stuck with it.”

At the top of the ridge is a tottering barn, a silo, and a crooked house with boarded up windows. They park next to the house and get out.

“Wait here,” says Smitty and walks over to the barn.

Ersatz leans against the truck and has a smoke, watching the sun sink slowly towards the fading hills. He’s tired and depressed. He was counting on Doctors Without Borders. He knows he’s sick but so long as he doesn’t know how sick, and the insurance company doesn’t know how sick, and Big Boss doesn’t know how sick, he’ll just keep working until he drops dead. That’s the million dollar ticket. Dying on the job. Dying fully insured. But Big Boss will have no compunctions about firing him if he finds out he has something debilitating. Then he’s fucked. And Marcy’s fucked. And Ma is fucked. The baby too, he figures. The baby will be fucked too, and the thought of

it makes him want to vomit. Marcy's baby being born into all this shit that is none of its fault.

He butts out his cigarette and walks up to the front door but it's padlocked. He wanders around to the back and finds a recently used fire pit, a disintegrating picnic table, and some battered lawn chairs. A four-by-four has torn up the ground pretty good. There are scorched beer cans and bottles in the fire pit. Lots of spent rounds. Out buildings in the tall grass where the yard turns to bush with all their windows shot out. An old tractor that is almost an entire block of rust. He wonders how long the Wagners have owned this piece of land. Since before the Great Depression, for sure. Probably longer. Gramma knew them. The Wagners. He wonders if they settled this land or bought it. Maybe they broke it. It's possible. Maybe they were in that first batch of settlers that came over the mountains after the Revolution and chased away the Indians. Or killed them. He'd known Patty pretty well. Since kindergarten. She married young. Moved away. Got divorced he thinks. Probably married again. Almost certainly no longer a Wagner.

By the time he gets back around to the front Smitty is waiting for him.

"What's Patty paying you to look after this place?" Ersatz asks.

"Who says I'm not doing it out of the goodness of my heart?"

They both have a laugh.

"She's letting me keep some shit in the barn," Smitty says.

"What kind of shit?"

"Shit that falls off the back of trucks," says Smitty. "Why you always asking me questions you don't actually want to know the answers to?"

Marcy is quiet and withdrawn at dinner. Ma is silent as usual. He has a few beers in front of the news: the usual shit: stagflation; the courts backlogged with robot lawsuits; fire in the mountains and flooding on the plains; protestors; rioters; the

National Guard; talking heads ripe with indignation; general despair. Marcy flees his angry outbursts to call a friend and then heads to bed with a book. He joins her late. A little drunk. Marcy, pretending to be asleep, stiffens as he climbs under the sheets. When he reaches out to try and reassure her with a touch she jerks away. He feels a wave of raw emotion wash over him, he can barely breathe, he trembles with incandescent rage at the thought of the young pastor, at the thought of his firm handshake, at the young man's obliviousness to his role in all the heaving, barely repressed agony of this place, of this town, of this county. He rages at the thought of the churches and the banks and the courts and the hospitals and all the comfortable livings they manufacture for their administrators and stockholders out of the misery. He wants to shake Marcy by the shoulders, shake her into an admission of consciousness, of awareness, into a recognition that everything is shit, shake her into an argument he knows he can win, that he always wins, he wants to rant and rave, but he sighs instead, and the rage begins to recede, to disentangle itself from him, from his wants and desires, to resolve into its chemical components and disperse. In its wake he feels a curious resignation, he feels like he is drowning in a thick, stupefying syrup of shame, of embarrassment, and of tenderness. Tenderness for what he wonders? For life, after all? For himself? For the woman suffering beside him? Because of him?

Ersatz has a dream. His father sitting in the office chair. Utility and medical bills on the table. The shotgun in his mouth. He stares at Ersatz down his nose. Down the barrel. His eyes are flat and grey. He blinks once. Twice. Pulls the trigger. His head explodes not into a cloud of blood and brain but into a massive tornado of yellow jackets. The room, and then the house, is filled with a grinding, buzzing roar. Ersatz and Marcy flee, carrying Ma down the stairs in a wheelchair as the yellow jackets attack them. The insects writhe in their hair, getting into their ears, their mouths, stinging and stinging and stinging. Marcy is screaming in agony as they run through the kitchen but

she does not drop Ma. They are both screaming but they do not drop Ma: out of the door, down the porch stairs, across the yard, into the empty street. The house buzzes and grinds and shakes behind them. They shake the yellow jackets out of their hair, from their skin, they spit them out. Ma is a mass of boils. They cannot wake her. Later Ersatz returns to the house and the yellow jackets are gone. A few of their dead left behind. In the office his father's headless body sits in the chair. The shot gun on the floor beside him. Ersatz looks down the neck into the papery ruins of a yellow jacket nest; hexagonal cells instead of muddled mass of fat and muscle and bone. Then Ersatz is at work. At his desk. His stings are fat as ping pong balls. He is examining one on his forearm when it splits open and he almost faints from the pain. Spots swim before his eyes. A yellow jacket crawls out of the mess. It sits there. Pulsating. Takes a few tentative steps. Launches itself into the air. Another of his lesions starts to split. A yellow jacket emerges. And then another lesion splits. And another. Ersatz is in agony but through the pain he feels the tickle of the insects light touch. Wattles is watching.

"I told you to go see a doctor," Wattles says. "I told you."

Ersatz thinks of his mother. Of her body covered with the same boils. All of them splitting at the same time. He thinks of Marcy.

"Ma," he cries out in his dream and in his dream he falls out of his chair onto the floor. "Ma! Ma! Marcy!"

Smitty has released all his new surveillance units into the world beyond the company fence. He is searching for the protestors. Ersatz watches over his shoulder as Smitty follows trails through the woods: deer paths, mossy gullies, old drainage ditches thick with giant weeds. The world is opening up like a wound. Wild flowers and mushrooms and crawling vines and lichens feast on it like maggots. Even the trees seems to vibrate with hunger. Smitty explores industrial ruins dating back to the

beginning of American history: deserted drills, rusting tanks, well heads, open mine shafts, the sun dappled craters of quarries that preceded independence.

Ersatz has everything up to speed and the transition is good to go. Babych and Harding are waiting to hear back from some other lawyers and then they will give the OK to flip the switch that will send the premium clients to their biochemical heavens.

On his late afternoon rounds Ersatz comes across Linda deep in the tunnels. She is standing in her own island of light in front of a vat, hands clasped in front of her at about waist height, staring at her feet.

He clears his throat and she startles, hands fluttering to her chest, eyes wide.

“Oh my goodness,” she says.

“Sorry about that,” says Ersatz.

She laughs and it echoes along the corridor. It occurs to Ersatz he has never heard anyone laugh down here.

“Oh, that’s OK,” says Linda. “I was so lost in thought.”

Ersatz glances at the unit she is standing before. A long term patient. One of the earliest.

“Family member?” he asks.

“Oh no,” she says and flushes slightly. “An old friend. A high school friend. Car accident.”

“Sorry,” says Ersatz.

“That’s OK,” says Linda and after a pause says: “I come down here sometimes because it’s so peaceful, so quiet. To pray. To pray and also just for a chance to think. To be by myself. Which is weird because it’s full of people down here, isn’t it? And I do have quite a few beloved unconscious down here myself, not just friends but family too. I guess almost everybody does by now. Have some beloved unconscious. I like to visit them. Maybe talk to them a little, even though I know they can’t hear me, I feel like

maybe they would have some kind of awareness, some feeling that someone out there is thinking of them still. That's right, isn't it? That they can hear you?"

"Well," says Ersatz. "No. Not through the metal casing I'm afraid. But if they are premium guests there are the conversations apps. You can call them. Leave messages."

"Oh," says Linda. "I know about the apps. It just would feel funny to use a phone. It feels nicer to come down here physically."

"In the old days, when I first started here, they used to let people in on Sundays to leave flowers, stuffed animals, make memorials," says Ersatz.

"Really? That's so nice."

"It was. But I guess head office felt like it was sending the wrong message. Making it seem like folks down here were actually dead."

"And I guess they're not," said Linda. "Actually dead."

"No," said Ersatz. "I guess not. Not actually."

In the pause they can hear the hum of the fans.

"I should get on with it," says Ersatz at the same time as Linda says: "Do you have anyone down here?"

"Sorry," says Ersatz. "Excuse me. Yes. My grandma. I get to visit her every day."

"Were you close?"

"She pretty much raised me. My ma worked and wasn't home much. And my dad died when I was in my teens. A lot of the time it was just me and Gramma. Until she got sick and Ma had to quit her job and look after her."

"That's so nice, isn't it? To maintain a sort of connection with her."

"Yeah," says Ersatz. "I guess it is. We're lucky to have our people so close. Most folks in long term storage get shipped hundreds miles away from friends and family. We're lucky to be here in Indian Hook."

The hum of the fans again.

"Well," says Linda. "I should let you get on with it."

“And I you,” says Ersatz.

For the rest of the rounds he can't stop thinking of her, how pensive she looked, how angelic down there in the catacombs, her skin bone white under the industrial lights, he can't stop thinking about her.

“You should come hunting with me and the boys next Sunday,” says Smitty in the dressing room. Wattles is there too, staring at them.

“I can't get away,” says Ersatz.

“You should,” says Smitty. “You need to spend time away from Marcy and your mom for a bit. Get away to somewhere other than work.”

Ersatz shrugs.

“What's the downside?” asks Smitty. “A hunting accident? For you that would really be an upside. For Marcy too. If you made it worth my while we could even reach an arrangement to ensure it was quick and painless.”

“That's not funny,” says Wattles. “Assisting a suicide in any manner whatsoever is a felony murder.”

“I wasn't talking to you,” says Smitty and Ersatz walks out.

Smitty chases Ersatz out the door and catches him at the fence, grabs his arm.

“Really,” he says. “Come out. I'm not actually going hunting. Not for deer anyways. I found the protestors. They're up at the old Cudd compound. Me and the guys are going to get fucked up on homebrew and then put on some balaclavas and go scare the shit out of the little bastards. You can get some of your own back.”

“I don't want some of my own back.”

“Why not? That piece of shit hippie coldcocked you, didn't he? Come smack some of them around. It'll make you feel better.”

“Nobody coldcocked me,” says Ersatz “And I feel perfectly fine.”

Smitty's hand drops from his arm.

"You always were a pussy," he says.

Ersatz is walking home and thinking about turning off the road at the dump and climbing the ridge, retracing his steps to Cudd Energy. He is imagining warning the protestors. He imagines helping them trap yellow jackets in glass bottles to throw at Smitty and his goons. He imagines Molotov cocktails. He imagines armed men staggering about on fire. He imagines helping the protestors release bottles of yellow jackets into the air conditioning at Yellow Springs and sealing it off. Hundreds of yellow jackets crawling in through the vents. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands. The whole building filled with the quivering gold light of the swarm. Smitty and Wattles thin screams cutting through the unholy buzzing roar like razors. Big Boss screaming, screaming.

He is so engrossed in his fantasy he doesn't hear the car behind him until its wheels are growling on the embankment. He jumps back and nearly falls into the ditch.

"What the fuck!" he shouts before he realizes it's the rental. It's Babych and Harding. The window rolls down. Babych is driving. Grinning at him.

"Sorry," she says.

Harding pops out of the passenger seat and smiles at him over the car.

"Come on, Frank, hop in," he says. "We're taking you to dinner.

"What?"

"We're taking everyone out once before we go," says Babych. "And picking up the tab."

"We want to get to know the team," says Harding. "Like they taught us in all those leadership seminars we have to go to before they turn us loose in the field."

"I can't guys, Marcy," Ersatz stumbles over the words. "My wife. She's expecting me."

"Just give her a call," says Harding. "Tell her you have to. Tell her it's a work thing."

"I don't have a phone," says Ersatz.

"Are you serious?" Babych is horrified. "Why not?"

"We haven't had coverage outside of Indian Hook for years."

Babych is uncomprehending.

"Do you folks have a land line?" Harding asks.

Ersatz nods.

"Then call her from the hotel," says Harding. "She'll understand."

"The hotel?"

"Yeah," says Harding. "It's the only place in town that serves fish which used to swim in the sea. Babych refuses to eat meat that has at any point been poured into a plastic cube."

Babych smiles ruefully.

"It's true," she says. "I'm a food snob. Now get in the car. I'm starving."

"You can ride shot gun," says Harding.

Ersatz walks around the car and climbs in. Harding closes the door behind him and then clambers into the back. Babych turns the car around and heads back towards Indian Hook and the hotel.

"How long you lived around here?" asks Babych.

"My whole life," he says.

"Wow, really?" Harding in the back. "You must really love Indian Hook."

Ersatz laughs.

"Couldn't escape?" Babych.

"Couldn't escape," says Ersatz.

“Harding is a boojie city boy,” she says. “The idea that you can’t just move from one uptown condo to another on the other side of the country merely because you feel you need a change is entirely alien to him.”

“And you?” asks Ersatz.

“Small town in Ohio,” she says. “Not so different from this.”

Harding snorts.

“Don’t you listen to her,” he says. “Since she was five all she has ever drunk is sparkling water from Italy and she’s never worn any item of clothing that hasn’t been featured in a glossy magazine.”

“Didn’t even leave town for college?” asks Babych.

“Didn’t go.”

“No service? Never enlisted?”

“Had to stay here and take care of my ma.”

“Good man,” says Babych.

He called Marcy from the lobby phone and she was very excited that he was at the hotel restaurant and the company was picking up the tab. All she wanted to know was what he was going to eat.

“Steak and lobster? Surf and turf?”

“That’s the same thing, honey,” he said.

“Scallops? Salmon?” she ignored his condescension and kept listing the fancy foods she’d read about in her novels and seen in movies. “Fettucine Alfredo?”

“What about drinks?” she asked. “A martini? A champagne cocktail? A cosmopolitan?”

“Oh my god no” he laughed.

“A Manhattan?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe a Manhattan.”

Now Ersatz is nursing one and wishing he hadn't had the scallops. Shellfish make him nervous. Filtering all that crap out of the sea and then releasing it into his stomach. He analyzes every quiver and gurgle, every anxious moment, every queasy thought.

Babych and Harding have been interrogating him about Big Boss, Smitty, and Wattles.

"How long you worked at Yellow Springs?" asks Babych.

"Ten or twelve years," he says.

"And how long you known Smitty?"

"Oh wow. Maybe forty. Since kindergarten anyways."

"So you're the same age? You best friends? You good pals?"

"I don't know," Ersatz feels clammy, feverish. "I wouldn't say that. We ran together in our teens. Played football and hockey together. But we're just coworkers."

"So he didn't get you the job or anything like that?"

"No, not at all," Ersatz mops his forehead with a napkin. "Not that I'm aware of anyways. He'd have no reason to."

"You OK?" asks Harding. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," says Ersatz. "Just not used to fine food. What's this about? All these questions?"

Babych and Harding glance at each other. Babych leans back and picks up her glass of white wine. Harding leans forward.

"Just before you got hired there were some shenanigans at this franchise," he says.

"Shenanigans?"

"Shenanigans," says Babych.

Harding laughs.

“Shenanigans,” he says. “The guy who had your job before you was a little shady.”

“Oh?”

Harding looks at Babych and she shrugs. He continues: “A whole section of the third level lost power for a full half hour one night and not only did he neglect to tell anyone, he covered it up.”

“Half an hour!” Ersatz sits up. “But they’d all die!”

Harding puts his hands up: “Keep it down, Frank.”

“Sorry,” says Ersatz.

“So yeah,” says Harding. “Some fifty people died and the head office only found out two months later when an AI ran an overnight upgrade Yellow Springs knew nothing about and we discovered a lot of unexpected corpses. He’d been feeding us fabricated data the whole time.”

“Wow,” says Ersatz. “Why?”

“Scared of losing his job,” Harding shrugs.

“Or the franchise owner didn’t want to lose the income,” says Babych.

“Wow,” says Ersatz.

“Yeah,” Harding continues. “Wow. They collected the premiums and the federal funding for fifty dead people for two months and we only found out because of that upgrade.”

Ersatz has another sip.

“Everyone at Yellow Springs but your predecessor claimed ignorance of course, and the guy got canned and Palliative Prerogatives took him to court, and we bought off the families who lost their loved ones, and stepped pretty hard on the press to keep things quiet, but it was a big unnecessary and avoidable expense.”

“I assure you nothing like that has happened since I’ve been here,” says Ersatz.

“Oh, we know,” says Babych.

"Yeah, we know," says Harding. "But head office is still a little nervous about this franchise. About who knew what when."

"I see," says Ersatz. "Well no one has ever mentioned anything about any of this to me."

"We're especially interested in your pal, Smitty," says Babych. "Because he was tight with your predecessor and for the guy in charge of security seemed a little naïve about his activities. But your boss seems to love the guy. To love Smitty. So we let it slide. But now with the switchover to Zirvana we're expecting a little push back from certain elements of the public and we need things to go as smoothly as possible so we're feeling a little sensitive about PR. Yet when we come out here we discover there has already been an incident with protestors."

"An incident with protestors?"

"Yeah," says Babych. "Things got a little out of hand, didn't they?"

"That's what Wattles told me," says Ersatz. "But I was unconscious. I had passed out."

"Passed out?" Babych raises an eyebrow. "We had been told knocked out."

Ersatz shrugs.

"The point is," Harding says. "This franchise can't afford to have any more dead bodies associated with it. They're harder to keep buried than you'd think."

"Dead bodies?" Ersatz tries to look shocked.

"It's a figure of speech," says Harding.

"I see," says Ersatz.

"We don't want any trouble with Zirvana," says Harding. "Unnecessary disturbances."

"No shenanigans," says Ersatz.

Everyone laughs.

"So, tell us about Smitty," says Babych.

"Ah, Smitty," says Ersatz.

He remembers working with Smitty at the UPS warehouse just out of high school. The summer before Smitty signed up and shipped out to the Middle East or South America or Africa or wherever it was they were sending the boys that year. Smitty could sniff out the illegal drugs in their packages and knew people that would buy them, not just users but retailers. It was a good hustle but you ran the risk of pissing off some serious people. They didn't care. They were flush with money that summer and cocky as hell. The stand out memory was when Ersatz dropped a crate that contained glass jars of honey. It got written off so Smitty took the mess home with him and turned it into mead, then laced the mead with meth he'd pinched from another shipment. The university was still open, on its last legs, and that fall Ersatz and Smitty sold the mead to the college kids. They told them it was shipped in from Turkey, made from the honey of bees that pollinated hallucinogenic flowers. Smitty called their scam the hillbilly gentrification hustle.

"Smitty's OK," says Ersatz. "He just talks a lot of shit."

"He's got ex-wives, right?" says Harding.

"Three or four," says Ersatz.

"Four," said Babych. "One of them is dead. But that's still a fair bit of alimony."

"Dead?" Ersatz frowns. "Who died?"

"Sharon," says Babych. "Number two."

"I didn't know her."

"Was when he was in the service," says Babych. "North Carolina. Carbon Monoxide poisoning. Was investigated."

"I see," says Ersatz.

"Do you, Frank?" asks Babych.

"Smitty's OK," he says. "He's just talks a lot of shit."

“Smitty stinks of violence and swindle,” says Babych. “And like we said, it’s not just the issue of your predecessor hiding corpses in the Yellow Springs basement. We are not happy with this protestor situation. What happened? What happened to those kids? They aren’t in jail. They aren’t showing up in any of the other camps in the vicinity. We watch. We keep an eye on things. Where did they go? Did you guys kill them all? Shallow graves in the woods?”

“No,” says Ersatz. “They got roughed up and ran off. They got scared. They dispersed.”

“They don’t get scared,” says Babych. “They’re committed radicals. They don’t disperse, they regroup. Communists and environmentalists and anarchists. There is a whole network of them stretching right across the country and beyond. They are a presence at nearly every facility we have.”

“They’re just kids,” says Ersatz. “They just want a better world than the one they got. And Smitty’s alright.”

Harding is driving Ersatz home.

“Don’t mind, Babych,” Harding says. “Palliative Prerogatives has been worried about the Yellow Springs franchise for a long time and she’s the one they have watching it. It’s her ass on the line if it goes belly up.”

“Why would it go belly up?” asks Ersatz.

“Doesn’t everything in Indian Hook go belly up?”

They are driving past the old university campus and Ersatz is aware of the deserted buildings out there in the dark as a heavy, brooding presence. When he was a kid they used to skateboard down the long curving walks in the summer, under the leafy trees, they used to hang out in the groves and on the steps of the red brick buildings, throw a football around in the empty stadium and dream about scholarships, dream about rich college girls looking for a bit of rough. But he was never good enough

to get a sniff from any college program. And once Dad was gone there was no way he could manage work and school and loans. There was no way.

All gone now anyways. Ruins in the desert. All the money that had once flowed through those buildings has long since dried up. Money from Pittsburgh, from Philly, from the state capital and the feds, all those loans being spent in town evaporated, all that surplus accumulated by the banks and the landlords and the bars dwindling to residue. It seemed like every middleclass family in Indian Hook had once had a few rental properties, folks at the country club and the respectable churches were always bitching about their tenants if they got bored of bitching about the weather. Everyone was skimming off the years and years of future labor those poor kids were trading to get past the gate keepers and into a job at a savings-and-loan or a department of housing or a generically massive insurance conglomerate. Even Smitty was skimming their futures. Even him and Smitty with their hopped-up hippy mead had briefly put their hands in those kids' pockets, taking them for beer money and the price of a couple of Penguins ticket.

But they burned it all down to the ground. The landlords and the bankers and the businessmen raking it in turned around and burned it all down. They kept sending angry ideologues to Harrisburg and DC to cut the taxes that kept the university afloat. That kept the town afloat. They plotted against socialism by installing as chancellors and deans libertarian engineers imported from other floundering schools and encouraging them to cut labor costs cut labor costs cut labor costs kill the humanities kill the humanities without ever thinking it was their own veins they were opening up. A century of never ending bounty bled out of the town, a century of feeding off of other people's proliferating personal debt brought to a crashing end because they couldn't stand the idea of someone they didn't know getting a leg up from the government they thought they owned.

It never occurred to the middle class of Indian Hook that they were living off the government handouts of the people that got the government handouts, that they were the parasites which were killing the host. History in these parts was always going to end in murder-suicide. It is better to die than to give up control over stolen land and frightened families because without that control you're nothing. Just a dumb animal in the woods. The classroom shootings and the rape threats and the privatization and the funding cuts that drove the professors and the teachers out of their jobs seemed a reasonable solution to the problem of women's lib and black power and having to rename the High School athletic programs in exactly the same way shooting the wife and kids before turning the gun on yourself seems like a reasonable solution to the problem of being a dick.

The last generation of profs at the university had been a combination of bewildered septuagenarians who had been unable to unload their houses before the market crashed, and hitchhiking grad students from state schools living in the dying motels with the meth heads and the hookers and the journeymen football coaches. The flailing university administration tried to turn some of the empty buildings into condos, and then educational malls where they sublet the facilities to fly-by-night vocational programs and coding nurseries, and finally they sold the whole lot to Sacred Blood Bible College and Business School Incorporated, which was still, to be fair, operational, but barely. It was running on the fumes of the exhausted local economy, propped up by a few pious rich kids coming over from Nigeria, the Ukraine, South Korea, Brazil. All that money that used to flow over the Appalachians from the east coast, from DC, all that money gone and nothing to replace it.

"You still awake over there?" asks Harding. They are out of Indian Hook now, just passing the turn off to Yellow Springs. Nothing is visible outside the splash of the headlights on the cracked tarmac of the road.

“Sure,” says Ersatz, puzzled why he is feeling defensive. “Yeah. Lots of places have gone belly up in Indian Hook. Things have been a little sluggish around here for a while.”

“Sluggish?” Harding laughs again. “Coal gone, natural gas gone, timber gone, the university gone, real estate tanked, no restaurants, no motels, no shops, no car dealerships. There is Yellow Springs, the hospital, the churches, and a Dollar General.”

“The banks,” says Harding.

“Mushrooms on a dead tree,” said Ersatz. “Once they have extracted what little of value is left they’ll die too.”

“The county courthouse,” says Ersatz.

“Petty crime won’t pay the bills. Even Smitty knows that.”

“Fine,” says Ersatz finally. “I give up. I don’t know why I bothered to argue. Everything in Indian Hook eventually goes belly up.”

“So why y’all are still here?” Harding asks.

“Nowhere else to go,” says Ersatz.

Harding laughs.

“No, Frank,” he says. “That’s not what I mean. Let me rephrase: why is Indian Hook still here? What’s propping it up? Why is Palliative Prerogatives here? Why does the hospital get the funding it does? Why is the state still helping maintain the roads?”

“I don’t know,” says Ersatz. “Why?”

“Republican votes,” says Harding. “In the eternal struggle between the red suburbs and blue cities you rightwing country bred crackers need to be kept at a critical mass. Fidelis Fidelis sinks millions into keeping Yellow Springs open, and we pay millions in local taxes, and we give millions to all the relevant charities. And why do we care so much? Because the GOP helps us pass the bills we want and the GOP wants to keep this place Republican, and for that to happen someone actually has to be living here, and that someone is you.”

"I'll have you know I'm a Democrat," says Ersatz

"Of course, you are," says Harding. "And so am I, but that doesn't matter. Not here. Besides, the Democrats have rotten boroughs of their own. Where's the turn off?"

"Right here," says Ersatz. "On the left."

Harding stops at the top of the driveway. The lights from the house are just visible through the trees.

"We're just here for the bodies," Harding turns to Ersatz. "And the politicians are here for the votes. You know Fidelis Fidelis is the biggest single source of donations for the Jesus Rose co-op? That it is our computers in the public library and the schools? That the town of Indian Hook is up to its eyeballs in high-interest loans that we guaranteed? This place contributes nothing to the maintenance of its own existence except in election years. It's just the bodies we need, the bodies with their votes, and it's getting increasingly expensive to keep those bodies alive. Which brings us to the punch line."

"Oh good," says Ersatz. "A punchline. I could do with a good laugh."

"After much consultation with their partners in government, and the steering committee of the National Association of Prosperity Gospel Churches, the grey suits in the boardroom of Fidelis Fidelis are very excited that a bill will shortly be passed by the United States Congress which makes it possible for individuals to designate in their living wills which political party receives their votes in future elections, so long as they continue to be held in stasis by a properly licensed insurance company."

"I don't believe it," says Ersatz.

"We both know it doesn't matter what you believe."

Ersatz frowns.

"So," he says, "does the vote count in the district in which you wrote the will, or in the district where your body is stored?"

"Good question," Harding winks at him. "The vote follows the body."

“So you guys can shift bodies about the country to influence elections?”

“We are entirely revolutionizing the tired old practice of gerrymandering. They will no longer need to redraw the maps.”

“How are they justifying this? The politicians?”

“No taxation without representation.”

“What?”

“Inheritance taxes.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense, Frank. It just needs to sound like it might.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“As the demographics here at Indian Hook change,” says Harding. “And as our technologies improve, and as our population of the beloved unconscious becomes increasingly more valuable than the dwindling population from which they are drawn, we will be looking to cut our labor costs and our investments in the local community.”

“Of course you will.”

“So you would be well served as we begin to plan for these eventualities to remember that what makes an employee valuable,” says Harding, “is loyalty, and what makes an employee loyal is the degree to which they understand their total dependency on the corporation that employs them. I think you, Frank, in your current state of utter hopelessness and helplessness, understand this better than your colleagues, and for this reason, you Frank, more than your colleagues, seem to me to be the employee to keep when the retrenchments come. Keep it that way.”

Part III: The Oldest Grift

The company truck is parked in the driveway and the lights are on in the kitchen. Ersatz feels a surge of utterly irrational panic and rushes in. Smitty and one of his security bros are sitting at the kitchen table and Marcy is serving them coffee.

"Hi honey," she says. "Look who showed up to take you out for a beer."

Smitty grins. His pal doesn't. Big guy. Good looking. Lean and hard.

"First a fancy dinner with the big bosses," says Marcy. "Now drinks with your friends. What a lucky day!"

"When it rains it pours," says Smitty.

"I feel like it isn't a coincidence," says Ersatz.

"Sure it is," says Smitty. "Me and Greg had just knocked off work and happened to be driving by. That's where my pal Ersatz lives, I told Greg. Great guy, I said. Always game for a night out, I said. Always up for a laugh. Never a dull moment with old Ersatz. Why don't we pick him up and take him along, I said. Didn't I, Greg?"

"You did," says Greg in low rumble. He hasn't taken his blue eyes off Ersatz the whole time.

"And what did you say, Greg?" Smitty continues. "It was pretty funny. It made me laugh. The thing you said. What did you say?"

"I said, yeah," Greg has a sip of coffee. "I said, yeah, why don't we pick him up and trip the light fandango."

Marcy laughs.

"I'm pretty tired, actually," says Smitty. He is still standing in the kitchen doorway. "If you don't mind I think I'll take a raincheck."

"But I do mind," says Smitty. "And you deserve a night out."

"You do," says Marcy. "You do deserve a night out and you have so few opportunities. Go have a drink with your friends."

"We insist," says Ersatz.

"Yeah," says Greg. "We insist."

Ersatz is squeezed between the two men on the front seat and every time Smitty changes gear he elbows him hard in the thigh. Greg is staring out the window, hands loose on his lap. Ersatz tries to decipher the monochrome tattoos on his thick forearms: regimental colors, white power symbols, weird Scandinavian runes. Nobody says anything until they turn onto the highway and head towards Pittsburgh. Ersatz hasn't been out on the interstate for years. It is late and there is little traffic except for the robotrucks with their attendants trying to stay awake at the wheel.

"So you had dinner with those head office shysters," Smitty finally says.

"Yeah," says Ersatz. "They said they were taking out everyone. One at a time. To get to know them."

"They're fucking rat fuckers," says Smitty. "You can't trust them, you know?"

Ersatz says nothing.

"What did they ask you about?" asks Smitty.

"Mostly how the Zirvana install was going."

"Are you a fucking ratfucker, too?" asks Smitty.

"What do you mean?" asks Ersatz.

"Hey Greg," says Smitty. "You think Ersatz here might be a ratfucker?"

"Almost certainly," Greg keeps staring out the windows at the deserted gas stations and diners lit up by the passing traffic, at the empty parking lots and office blocks and motels, at the ghost towns, at the graffiti on the sound barriers, the pro-life and shooting range billboards and the church fronts and the pawnshops.

"What are you guys talking about?" says Ersatz. "It was just dinner."

"What did they ask you about me?" asks Smitty.

"About you?"

"Yes, pal," says Smitty. "Because they sure asked me about you. And they'll have asked Wattles too, and while I might still be on the fence about whether you are a

fucking ratfucker, I have no doubt that Wattles is, and he'll have given them everything he has on both of us."

"Jesus Christ, Smitty," says Ersatz. "This isn't a gangster film. We work at an insurance company. Wattles doesn't have things on us."

"What did they ask about me?" asks Smitty. "And what did you tell them?"

"They mentioned some stuff about the guy before me," says Ersatz. "How there was a power loss and some dead bodies and he covered it up and they asked me if you had ever mention it."

"And what did you tell them?" Smitty is gripping the wheel tight enough that his knuckles look white.

"I said no, Smitty," says Ersatz. "because you didn't."

"What else?"

"They asked about the protestors. They asked if there were any protestors buried in shallow graves they needed to know about."

"And?"

"I told them there wasn't."

"What did they say to that?"

"They said how do you know."

"And?"

"I said I don't, but I had no reason to think there was."

"Quite the vote of confidence, you ratfucker," says Smitty but he relaxes his grip on the wheel.

They slow down to cruise past some state police parked on the side of the highway. Flashing lights. The troopers leaning against their cars, chatting, watching the traffic.

"You know those guys?" Smitty asks Greg and the truck is now at a crawl.

"One of them," says Greg. "From Greensburg. Piece of shit."

One of the troopers peers in the window and nods at Greg.

Smitty pulls up and lowers the window.

"What's up, Mitch?" asks Greg.

"Another diesel tanker jacked," says the cop.

Smitty leans across Ersatz: "How many is that this week?"

"That's need to know, sir," says the cop.

"Come on, Mitch," says Greg. "Smitty's OK. He's law enforcement. More or less."

"Three," says the cop.

"How they doing it? They hacking them?"

"They're just flagging them down and holding them up," he nods at one of the cars. A tired looking man in a ball cap is inside leaning against the window. "That's the attendant. Said it was a woman that flagged him down and then two guys with AKs popped up from behind the guide rails. They yanked out the satnav and the onboard computer and then just drove off with the truck."

"Old school," says Smitty.

The cop stares at him.

"You boys haven't been drinking, have you?" he asks.

"Not yet," says Greg.

"Well, take it easy when you do. A lot of drones out tonight and they'll flag you for anything."

"Thanks, for the heads up, pal," says Smitty.

"Mitch," says Greg.

"Greg," says the cop.

And they pull out.

"Those guys couldn't catch the clap in a brothel," says Smitty.

They are at a strip club called Honeydrippers that squats right on the highway. Smitty insisted they sit right up by the stage and a young woman is simulating masturbation on a blanket right in front of Ersatz and Greg. To very loud music. Ersatz watches the hockey on the TV while Greg stares at the woman. Smitty is at the bar talking to a middle-aged Amish guy. When the music finally stops the young woman folds up her blanket and leaves.

"Why you pretending you don't like that?" asks Greg.

"I wasn't pretending anything," says Ersatz.

"Of course you were," says Greg. "You're a fucking pussy hound. I know you are."

"Sure," says Ersatz. "Right."

"But you pretend you're not. Why?"

Ersatz has a sip of his beer and glances over at Smitty and the Amish guy.

"I was at the courthouse the other day," says Greg.

"Oh yeah," says Ersatz. He is exhausted and wants to go home.

"For those protests."

"What protests?"

"That abortion shit," says Greg. "It doesn't matter what."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because I saw you sniffing around that demonstrator's ass," says Greg.

"What?" Ersatz feels sick. He doesn't know why. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw you stalking that little hippie bitch."

"I've never stalked anybody in my life."

"You trailed after her on the way into the library, and then on the way out again, and then you snuck back around and stared at her some more."

Greg smiles at him. It's the first time he has smiled all night. He has white, even teeth that glow in the neon light of the bar.

"I saw you," he says.

"It was just a coincidence that I was there at the same time."

"Yeah," says Greg. "A coincidence just like me and Smitty showing up at your house tonight was a coincidence."

"I admit I circled back to see what was happening at the demonstration but I did so because I didn't want the demonstrators to see me. They knew I was from Yellow Springs. It had nothing to do with the girl per se.

"You admit," says Greg. "Per se."

Ersatz shakes his head.

"What the fuck is Smitty up to?" he says. "I want to get home."

"You want me to snatch her for you?"

"What?"

"I'll snatch her for you when find that camp and bust it up. Keep her in a van for you. A couple of grand. You can do whatever you want with her. No problem."

"Jesus Christ," Ersatz gets up and goes over to Smitty.

When the Amish guy sees him coming he leaves.

"Where'd you find this Greg guy?" Ersatz asks Smitty. "He's a real piece of work."

Smitty laughs.

"He get all offensive? All politically incorrect? He show you those pictures on his phone?"

"Pictures?"

"The dead Indians," says Smitty. "From when he was working for those ranchers in Brazil. He's got all these images of Indians he says he killed when they were clearing them off the land."

“No,” says Ersatz. “It wasn’t pictures. But I want to go home.”

“We just got here,” says Smitty. “A couple more and then we’ll go.”

Harding and Babych call a meeting. Big Boss. Wattles. Smitty. Ersatz. Linda. Harding and Babych have finished the oversight process, given the franchise the thumbs up, and will shortly be leaving town. Friday is the big day. It’ll all turn over on Friday morning.

“We expect a significant increase in productivity,” says Babych.

“She means profits,” says Big Boss. “Productivity means profits and that means bonuses for everyone when they kick in.”

“Even Ersatz?” asks Smitty and winks at him.

“Even you, Smitty,” says Big Boss and everyone has a laugh.

After Danishes and weak coffee Big Boss leaves and Harding and Babych chase every one of the conference room for a meeting of their own. Smitty vanishes.

Wattles calls Ersatz’s desk just as he is sitting down to lunch.

“You need to drive Linda to the hospital.”

“What?” Ersatz sits up. “What happened? Is she OK?”

“Yes,” Wattles sounds even more impatient over the phone than in person.

“She’s OK. Her son had an asthma attack at school. Allergies. Trees. Pollen.”

“Ok,” says Ersatz relaxing. “Sure. But why me?”

“No one else here to drive her. Smitty is out in the field. Everyone else in meetings.”

“The field? We don’t have a field. We have a hole.”

“He’s not here,” snaps Wattles. “I have the keys to the rental. Be careful with it. And have a medical examination while you are there. At the hospital. See a doctor. Give them a lift home when you are all done. Linda and her boy.”

Linda barely talks on the drive out. She sits in the leather chair staring out the window, arms wrapped tightly around her belly and, after he asks her if she minds the radio on and if the temperature is OK, Ersatz leaves her alone. It is a beautiful car. Responsive. Quiet. It is nicer than any car Ersatz has ever driven. Combustion or electric. He glances at Linda occasionally. She looks older now that she is under stress. About Marcy's age.

The hospital grounds are beautiful; manicured swells of green grass, meticulous flower beds, and stands of blue spruce. The building itself is built of mellow red bricks and sheets of shimmering glass. He drops Linda off at the entrance and leans over as she gets out.

"It'll be fine," he says. "This is a great facility. Great doctors. We're lucky to have it."

She looks at him blankly, mouth pulled down tightly, eyes watering.

"Yes," she says. "Lucky. Of course. Thank you for doing this for me."

"No problem," says Ersatz. "I'll wait for you in the parking lot."

But the door is already shut and she is gone.

The hot sunlight pours in through the windshield and Ersatz falls asleep. He is woken by Smitty tapping on the window. He blinks away his grogginess and rolls it down.

"Hey," he says. "What's going on?"

"Wattles said you were here on chauffeur duty," Smitty says. "I brought you a burger and a drink."

They eat together in the parking lot. Ersatz in the car with door open and one leg on the ground, Smitty leaning on the truck. When they are done Smitty shows him what

he has in the back: zip ties for handcuffs, rubber buckshot, flares, bolt cutters, and a sledge hammer.

“I told Big Boss I found those hippie motherfuckers up at the Whiskey Run Road Reservoir,” says Smitty, “and it turns out he golfs with the owner of the correctional work facility at Salt Lick so me and the boys are going to take them out there and lock their vagabond asses up.”

“Is that legal?”

Smitty just stares at him and noisily sucks the dregs of his drink up through the straw.

“They aren’t on Palliative Prerogatives property,” says Ersatz. “Surely you can’t just go round them up. Even if they are squatting. Wouldn’t that be kidnapping?”

“Bank owns that land,” says Smitty. “First Amalgamated. Big Boss knows those guys too.”

“It just doesn’t sound legal.”

“Uti possidetis, asshole,” says Smitty.

“What?”

“Possession is nine tenths of the law,” says Smitty. “And the bank possesses that land and Big Boss possesses a big bank account and so the law says we can go round those hippie motherfuckers up, because the bank don’t mind.”

Linda is in the back seat cuddled up with her kid – a skinny pale boy with glasses she calls Jaxon. Looks maybe ten or eleven but Ersatz is pretty sure he’s a couple of years older than that. Wheezing. Torpid. Linda is looking much calmer now, brushing lank hair from the kid’s narrow forehead. Still stressed but totally focused on her child. Ersatz has to ask for directions a couple of times. She lives up in the hills. In a gated community. The security guard looks in, sees her, and waves them through. The houses are big but not absurdly so. Manicured lawns. Manicured trees. Manicured

flowerbeds. Ersatz wonders how many have pools in the back. Finished basements with big screen TVs. Weight rooms. He drops them off in front of a two-and-a-half story Tudor with solar panels on the roof instead of the traditional shingles. Smitty once told him her husband is at the bank and Linda only picked up the work once the kid started going to school and she got bored.

"Thanks so much," Linda says as she guides the boy out of the car. "I really appreciate it."

"Sure," says Ersatz. "No worries. No problem."

"I mean it," she says and looks him directly in the eyes. "You're a good, kind man. A Christian."

Her eyes are a clear blue, lashes thick, bronze eyeshadow, perfectly arched brows.

Ersatz clears his throat. He watches to make sure they get into the house.

Instead of driving straight back to work he drives out to Whiskey Run Road and navigates the luxury automobile over the humps and divets and pot holes until he gets to the driveway of Cudd Energy. The grass is already filling the ditches and there is a haze of buds on the trees. He parks the car and steps out of the air conditioning into muggy heat of the afternoon. Wild flowers are in bloom, splatterings of blue and red and yellow, he feels the thick air in his nose, tastes the pollen on his tongue, feels it filling in his ears, nostrils. The gate hangs open and Ersatz walks through them.

"Hullo!" he calls. "Hullo! Is anyone here?"

He walks past the strange machinery, the old fracking drills. He can see the blue water of the reservoir through the far fence and the trees. The side door of the Quonset warehouse is open.

"Hullo?" he shouts and sticks his head in the door. It is empty of everything but rubbish. Empty cans and bottles, some old blankets. In a back room he finds a desk with

some mildewed books scattered across it. Instructional texts. Fracking how-tos. How to poison the land, thinks Ersatz. How to insert needles into the earth and fill it up with toxins.

Wattles is waiting for him at the front door. His face purple with rage.

"What took you?" he shouts.

"Scenic route," says Ersatz.

"You had no right!" Wattles is still shouting. "This is not your car! No right!"

Ersatz tosses Wattles the key and he fumbles at them in the air.

"You had no right," Wattles says. "Babych and Harding wanted to go back to the hotel."

"Oh yeah?" says Ersatz and moves to push past Wattles. "I'll be sure to apologize to them about that."

Wattles grabs his arm, bony fingers digging into his flesh, and leans in, eyes bulging.

"I'm onto you," he hisses. "Smitty is onto you."

"I don't know what you are talking about," says Ersatz but his stomach crumples with anxiety.

"Here's a hint," Wattles whispers and Ersatz can feel his breath, hot and moist. "Next time you are doing one of your secret searches at the public library look up "Parkinson's gait." Smitty has known for days. His floating eyeballs told him."

Ersatz is sitting on the edge of the train platform having a smoke, staring past his dangling legs at the reflection of the sky in the polished steel of the rails.

"Hey," says Harding and Ersatz turns around and squints at him.

"I thought you guys were going," he says.

"We are," says Harding. "We were just waiting for our car keys."

"Sorry about that," says Ersatz.

"Hmmm," says Harding. "I just wanted to remind you about our conversation before we left. About the importance of employee loyalty."

"The importance of snitching," says Ersatz.

"Yes," says Harding.

"You asked me about Smitty," says Ersatz.

"We did."

"Smitty is the guy who buys into a Ponzi scheme five minutes too late," says Ersatz. "Smitty is the epitome of the sunk cost fallacy. Smitty is the patriotic working class."

Harding waits.

"Smitty inherited a small piece of land up near Gipsy from one of his five hundred polack uncles," says Ersatz. "Just a couple of acres with a shed which the family called the Dacha. His uncles used to grow weed up there when they kids. Personal use and sell a little on the side. Just skunk weed. But when Pennsylvania legalized cannabis they thought they'd go legit and get rich so they spent their savings and their parents' savings and a couple of loans from the bank on licensing and seeds from California and a website and branding and all that shit and of course the whole thing tanked in a year because they didn't have a fucking clue and the big boys from out of state just came in and rolled right over them, and the banks and the government pocketed everything they had, except the actual piece of land which was practically worthless."

Ersatz flicks his butt onto the tracks and lights another one.

"You want one?" he asks and Harding shakes his head.

"Anyways," says Ersatz. "Maybe you don't know this, but after they go broke people die a lot faster, so Smitty got that piece of land when we were still in high school, and we used to go up there to drink and hunt when we were kids. There were

always plenty of deer around because the weed had gone feral and the deer loved the weed. They were always up there munching buds and getting high. It was pretty easy hunting. For years Smitty was always talking about how he was going to get rich making weed-infused venison sausages out of those poor stupid stoned deer, that was his big plan coming out of high school, he was going to realize the dream by turning his uncles' failure into success, he was going to become the weed sausage king of western PA, the king of Gipsy. That's Smitty. That's everything you need to know about him."

"How'd that plan turn out for him?" asks Harding.

"He had the same problem as he always does," says Ersatz. "He was a little undercapitalized."

"What was your plan?"

"My plan?" Ersatz thinks about it. "My dad's plan was for me to go to law school. He figured I was just about smart enough. And I was OK with it. It seemed possible. Even plausible. But then he died and the plan got flushed because I had to put food on the table and pay the bills."

"Law school?"

"Yup. I was going to be a heartless fucking shyster like you and Babych."

"You know what the law is, Frank?"

"I know it doesn't matter what I say, you'll just tell me I'm wrong and then say something complicated about capital passing on the costs of security to the state."

"Humor me," says Harding.

"I just did," says Ersatz. "Property is theft and the law is what the owners use to protect their take."

"That's very nineteenth century of you," says Harding. "Very Karl Marx."

"So educate me," says Ersatz. "Get me up to date."

"You own your house don't you?" says Harding.

"Me and the bank."

"And Smitty owns his patch of feral weed?"

"Yup."

"But you're both still poor working schmucks, right?"

"Yes, we are."

"Why?"

"Because our property is worthless."

"Because nobody else wants it, right? Nobody else has the least bit of interest in some rundown hillbilly shack in the woods or a ramshackle two hundred year old house sitting on a train track. Property is worthless if nobody else wants it."

"So?" Ersatz blows a disdainful smoke ring across the railroad. "If the law isn't about protecting property what's it about?"

"The law is a machine for constraining desire," says Harding.

"Jesus Christ," says Ersatz. "I don't think I can cope with this line of postmodern bullshit right now."

"It's a theology," says Harding. "It's the oldest grift. Empty words strung together that need have only the most tenuous connection to reality. The only real thing about those words is they contain the threat of violence. The way a vaccine contains the threat of a virus. The law is the way we get the threat of violence inside your head, because the actual violence necessary to control a large population is prohibitively expensive. By promising justice for all, by promising universal rules, and providing a few visible examples, the law gets people to internalize the violence necessary to force their desires to conform to the desires of the people that rule them."

Ersatz sighs.

"I don't follow," he says.

"Listen," says Harding. "There's a seething rage in you, white hot rage, because people like Big Boss and all his golf buddies at the bank are constantly making you do things you don't want to do. Like getting up at some ungodly hour and coming to

work. There is nothing you would like to do more in this life than kill Big Boss. You want to kill Big Boss and eat his liver and fuck his woman.”

“His wife?”

“You know what I’m talking about,” says Harding. “You want to kill the man and possess his woman and his house and his car and his kids but you can’t, because the law says you can’t, and you’re scared of the law. All that desire of yours, all that hateful energy, gets channeled by the law in other directions, gets constrained and redirected. ‘I can’t be Big Boss but I can be Little Boss,’ you tell yourself. ‘If I do what I’m told and I play by the rules of the law I can possess my own woman and my own house and my own things and my own children and have power over them. I can control my future and the future of my chattel with investments and insurance and hard work and the law will protect my power over them not just while I am alive but even beyond the grave.’ So instead of killing Big Boss you do exactly what he wants you to, even though you hate him.”

“I dunno,” says Ersatz. “I think your seriously underestimating how poor I actually am. At the moment all I really desire is to die without it costing anyone a lot of money.”

“Exactly,” says Harding. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. The law has made you the perfect employee by forcing your desire into exactly that form.”

It is pitch black out and Ersatz is having his first cup of coffee. He can feel the heat and the pollen rising from the wooded hills. He is exhausted, shaking, using both hands on the coffee cup. Marcy had a rough night, gasping and wheezing, drowning in the thick air. He hears her moving about upstairs. The toilet flushes. She comes down.

“Hey, hon” she says. “Want a hot breakfast?”

“You go back to bed,” he says. “You need to try and sleep.”

"I can't. I can't breathe. I lie there and feel like I'm stuck in an airless box, in a coffin, in one of those horrible vats you have at work."

"Sorry, babe," he says.

"Let me make you an egg."

Her blonde hair is wet from sweat, hanging in strands, her eyes red and puffy.

"Sure," he says. "Let's have some breakfast together. It'll be nice."

He gets up to help. He is cutting bread for toast and she is leaning over the frying pan, just about to flip the eggs when the 4 a.m. arrives. The house is flooded with light and noise, shaking, quivering. He glances at her and sees her eyes tightly closed against it all, grimacing. When it is gone she starts to cry.

"I hate that train," she says. "I hate it. I used to love trains. When I was a kid I loved them. They came in and out of town. The train whistle was sad and hopeful and strange all at the same time. I used to imagine it as a sort of a hymn. It always made me feel like there was a big beautiful world out there, out beyond the woods and the hills. A future beyond Indian Hook. But now it's just a horrible reminder about how everything is horrible here and the train is filled with nothing but bodies and the bodies aren't alive and they aren't dead they are just bodies. It's filled with bodies. Nothing but bodies."

"Filled with money," Ersatz thinks but he doesn't say anything, just reaches over and gives her a hug. Holds her tight for a few minutes and she leans into him and sniffles a couple of times before she remembers the eggs and gets back to work.

Smitty is at the gate having a smoke when he gets to work. Ersatz brushes by him and Smitty grabs his arm. Hard. The fingers dig into his flesh and feel like they have struck bone.

"What the fuck, Smitty," he says and Smitty leans in close, stinking of coffee and cigarettes.

"What the fuck YOU," Smitty says.

"Let go of my arm."

"You were up at Cudd Energy yesterday," Smitty says and squeezes even harder while he has a puff from the cigarette pinched between the fingers of his free hand. "I had my eyes up there. I was watching those hippy motherfuckers."

"So?"

"So what were you doing up there?"

"Nothing."

"Looking to join their half-assed revolution? Looking for a bit of liberated pussy?"

"Let go of my arm."

"If didn't know better I'd say you were up there to warn them about my little hunting party."

"They were already gone."

"I know they were gone," he twists Ersatz arm behind him and pushes him into the fence. "Because I was spying on them. I just want to know why they are gone. And what you have to do with it."

"Jesus, Smitty. I don't know. I got nothing to do with it. Nothing. You're hurting me."

"You're a fucking mess," says Smitty and releases him. "You know Wattles is trying to get you fired?"

Ersatz rubs his arm and turns around.

"It's occurred to me," Ersatz says.

"He says you're defrauding Fidelis Fidelis," says Smitty. "He says you got Parkinson's. He says you are going to end up in one of our pauper's vats while your cheating whore wife cleans toilets at old folks homes to pay your bills. He says you are planning on getting yourself killed by those hippies in some kind of fucked up work

place related incident to get your cheating whore wife off the hook for the cost of keeping you on ice. He says you're a bad employee. And although it pains me tremendously to agree with that officious piece of shit I think he is right. I think you are a bad employee."

Ersatz is feeling sick again.

"What I don't get," says Smitty. "Is why you just didn't come to me?"

"What?"

"Why wouldn't you just come to me with your problems? I thought we were buds. I could have set it all up."

"Set what up?"

"Your death."

"You could have set it up?"

"Yeah," said Smitty. "Greg has organized dozens of scamocides."

"Dozens of what?"

"Scamocides. They call them scamocides. Arranged deaths that look like accidents, heart attacks, pharmaceutical misadventures, car crashes, whatever. Big business since Maier-Skrepenic. Big bucks. And Greg's a professional. A real pro. He's got connections to a shady insurance company and everything. I'd have got you a deal."

"Really? Scamocides?"

"Can't do it now. Wattles is watching too closely. You fucked up. Should have come to me right away."

Ersatz can't concentrate. Babych and Harding have gone but Big Boss has him doing one last in-person double-check of the vats before they flip the switch, before Zirvana floods all those well-to-do bodies with endorphins and hormones and electricity, before it gets all those wealthy bodies humming with orgasmic energy.

Ersatz keeps thinking of what will happen if Wattles gets him fired, despite what Harding said about him being the perfect employee, he keeps thinking about being out of work and uninsured and at home sick and dying and Ma alone and motionless up in her room and Marcy working some terrible job while she is pregnant. He imagines being dead. He imagines being not quite dead but in a vat. He imagines a Marcy's baby in the Jesus Rose daycare. He imagines a baby wheezing and coughing in the poisonous air. He thinks of the rat faced girl spitting at the rent-a-cop. He thinks of the kid that looked like Kubiak dead in a ditch, dead in a dump, folded into a fridge in some dump. He thinks of himself and how helpless he always feels. He thinks of Wattles sneering at him, Smitty grabbing his arm. He imagines the vats he is checking are filled with honey, larval masses, pulsating insect masses. He imagines they are filled with yellow jacket hives. He imagines the kid who looked like Kubiak is in one, immersed in honey, bloated with wasp eggs. He imagines he is visiting his father's grave and yellow jackets boil out of the ground in which he is buried.

"Why can't we do it anyways?" he asks Smitty at lunch.

"Do what?"

"Greg," Ersatz says. "The scamocide thing. I'll pay double. Triple. Anything."

Smitty stares at him.

"If Wattles is a problem can't we just get rid of him too?" asks Ersatz.

Smitty starts to laugh.

"What?" asks Ersatz.

"I was just kidding," says Smitty. "I was just fucking with you. That shit would be illegal. And Wattles? That's a little more than facilitating suicide and insurance fraud, isn't it? That's murder."

Smitty laughs some more.

“Illegal AND immoral,” he says. “You cold bastard. Poor Wattles. Poor, poor stupid Wattles.”

Ersatz rubs his forehead, looks out the window at the green hills, the yellow haze in the sky.

“You want me to make a call?” Smitty asks quietly.

“What?” says Ersatz. “But you said...”

“I said what?” says Smitty. “I say lots of shit.”

“I don’t know,” says Ersatz.

“Yes you do,” says Smitty. “Do you have any money? Or should we arrange a cut of the life insurance? Say five grand? That’s a deal by the way. That’s a great deal, five grand.”

Big Boss wants to see him. Ersatz is sick with fear. His head spins and he is sweating and he wants to puke. He is convinced he is about to get fired. Fired for being sick, for going up Whiskey Run Road, for Marcy getting pregnant, for refusing to see a doctor, for being superfluous to requirements. He stops in the bathroom on the way and dry heaves into the toilet a few times. Stares at himself in the mirror. Wishes he was dead.

When he gets to Linda’s office she is waiting for him, standing in front of her desk. She smiles at him. She shows him her expensive teeth and reaches out her beautiful hands. Ersatz is confused.

“Let’s pray,” she says.

“Pray?”

“We all know now what a hard time you’ve been having the last couple of weeks: the Parkinson’s, your poor ma sick, your wife pregnant.”

Ersatz feels the flush sweep across his neck and face, the sweat in his pits and back.

"I don't have Parkinson's," he says. "I'm just not feeling well."

"It's OK," Linda takes his sweaty hands in her cool dry ones. "We understand."

"We?" Ersatz's voice breaks.

"We know that you are feeling so overwhelmed you are thinking of taking your own life, and we want you to know that we love and care for you as our brother in Christ."

Linda is glowing, her eyes shining, her fingers feel strong and supple: "Let's kneel and pray."

They kneel on the cheap pile carpet in front of her desk. Ersatz closes his eyes. The room spins about him. He smells her perfume, her soap.

"Almighty God," her voice is mellow and confident. "You are the God who can do all things. You reign over all, power and might are in your hands. What you decree, comes to pass. We praise you today and always, and thank you for being God."

Ersatz could swear he hears singing, a choir singing.

"We pray to you today," Linda continues. "For Ersatz, that your word will have free course in his life. God, we pray Lord for his friends and loved ones. Especially those that are yet to come to the knowledge of Christ Jesus. We pray that the Grace of God will translate them from darkness into light. We pray they will accept Christ Jesus as their savior and Lord."

The singing is coming from all around him, from the air, from the walls, from underneath the carpet. Thousands and thousands of voices, a glorious cloud of heavenly noise which exalts Linda's prayer. It is the poor lost souls singing in their briny vats.

"Father, we pray that your truth will reign supreme in his heart and that your light will dispel every darkness," Linda says and the voices sing: "The voice of free grace cries: escape to the mountain!"

“We pray for Grace to abound unto good works that Christ may be glorified in us,” says Linda. “We pray that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”

And Ersatz hears that the voices of all the beloved unconscious in their thousands and thousands, in their millions and tens of millions, are raised to the Lord as well: “For Adam's lost race, Christ has opened a fountain.”

“We pray that Ersatz will be allowed to keep his job here,” says Linda. “That his insurance will be extended, and this disease shall pass over him.”

“For sins and transgressions, and every pollution,” the customers all sing, louder and louder, a buzzing, ringing roar. “His blood flows most freely in plenteous redemption.”

“We pray that he will give this unborn child, that is not his but yet is your gift to him, a loving and Christian home,” Linda squeezes his hands tightly. “And that his wife will finally submit to his authority and love him in wifely ways and that he will forgive her as we, his family here at Palliative Prerogatives, and at our parent company Fidelis Fidelis, will forgive him. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.”

“Hallelujah to the lamb,” the voices roar. “Who purchased our pardon.”

Ersatz feels like something important is about to happen, that he is about to finally have his big transcendental moment, that by the miraculous workings of grace everything will be made right again, and he will be saved. But when he opens his eyes the voices fall abruptly silent. He is drenched in sweat, his shirt sticking to him, and Linda is smiling, teeth shining, eyes shining, everything shining. She leans forward and hugs him, her breasts pressed against his chest, her belly against his belly, her hair like lilacs in his face, her soft cheek against his stubble.

“God loves you so much,” she breathes into his ear. “He loves you so very much.”

Wattles and Smitty are in the office with Big Boss. Wattles is pale with rage, chin trembling. Smitty winks at Ersatz.

“So,” said Big Boss. “Have a seat.”

Ersatz does.

“You know why you are here?”

“Yes, sir,” says Ersatz.

Wattles quivers.

Big Boss frowns and looks away.

“The thing is we should really fire you,” he says. “And not just for that dishonesty about the Parkinson’s or whatever it is, but this business with the protestors. Smitty says you went up there to warn them that he and the boys were coming to arrest them?”

“Dishonesty?” spits Wattles. “He flat out lied. He refused to go to the doctor when I ordered him to. He committed fraud! Fraud!”

Big Boss ignores Wattles: “Did you go up there to warn those protestors?”

“Yes, sir,” says Ersatz.

“Why?” Big Boss looks hurt. “They have been such a goddam pain in the ass.”

“I don’t really know, sir.”

“Smitty says you wanted to fuck one of them. Is that true?”

Smitty grins at Ersatz and gives an apologetic shrug.

“No, not really,” says Ersatz and frowns. “Not at all. I just felt... I was just...they were just kids, sir. I felt bad for them.”

“They assaulted you,” Big Boss says.

“Nobody saw that!” interrupts Wattles. “No witnesses. He could be lying about that to.”

“They assaulted you,” Big Boss ignores Wattles. “They harassed employees, they spit on people, they were out there on our drive for months, pissing and shitting everywhere like goddam animals.”

Big Boss runs a meaty hand across his forehead. He raises his voice: “They were a real pain in the ass.”

“Yes, sir,” says Ersatz.

“Insurance fraud, sir,” hisses Wattles. “That’s the critical issue. It’s not the protestors, it’s the fraud. That’s the legal issue. The law! The law!”

“Linda says you’re a good man,” says Big Boss.

Ersatz looks down at his hands, feels tears welling up, his throat tightening.

“She says you’re a Christian,” Big Boss sighs. “And that’s real important to her.”

Ersatz looks up at him, the tears are running down his cheeks.

Wattles snorts with disbelief and derision. Smitty is grinning again.

“Good judge of character, Linda,” says Big Boss. “An excellent woman. Excellent. Very intuitive. Very womanly. A good Christian woman. And she says you deserve a chance to make things right. To be a good employee. To be a good father. A good husband. Has real faith in you. And she is such an excellent woman. Her husband is at First Amalgamated Bank. He is a deacon at my church, you know?”

“Yes, sir,” says Ersatz and wipes the tears away. “She is a wonderful person.”

“The best,” says Smitty. “Linda is the best.”

Wattles groans and clutches his head.

“So. Good,” Big Boss pushes his chair back and crosses his legs. “We’re implementing Zirvana tomorrow morning first thing. Full steam ahead and all hands on deck. We’ll keep you on and talk to Fidelis Fidelis about your coverage. See what we can do. Linda says to call it a Jubilee. But no more funny business, right?”

“No sir, no more funny business.”

“Good, now go home and get some sleep,” says Big Boss. “All of you jokers. Big day tomorrow. Big day.”

Part IV: Universal Liberty Insurance, Savings, and Loans

The house is dark. Ersatz is drinking coffee and waiting for the 4 a.m. He is exhausted. His hands are shaking. The train will be rolling past any second. Ersatz wonders if the beloved unconscious will experience Zirvana coming online the way he experiences the 4 a.m. Will all the sleeping clients down in Yellow Springs mine wake up to the same blinding roar he experiences every morning? But he doesn't give Zirvana much more thought than that. He has his own problems. He needs to make an appointment with a doctor. He needs to go to the bank and see about a second mortgage. He'll go to First Amalgamated. He'll name drop. He'll mention Big Boss. He'll mention Linda. He also needs to talk to Marcy about her pregnancy. She's taking Ma to town today. To bingo. Though Ma just sits there and stares. It's an excuse for Marcy to get some visiting in and she likes to play the extra cards they give to Ma. He'll talk to Marcy in the evening. She'll cry and he'll forgive her and they'll have a child. They can do it with a second mortgage. They can do it with a little help from First Amalgamated. And Harding thinks he's the perfect employee. That should count for something. If people get fired it won't be him first. Smitty then Wattles then him. That's his guess. They'll be OK. Him and Marcy and Ma. They'll be good parents. They're good people. Marcy is.

It has rained and Ersatz can smell the soil. The bacterial exhalations. He can smell a hint of sulfurous rot. He is thinking about the kid that looked like Kubiak. He is certainly dead in the woods somewhere. Or up at Gipsy. Or Patty Wagner's land. Bullet in his bearded skull. Bones scattered about the underbrush. Picked clean by the yellow jackets. Consumed. Transformed into papery combs and pupae. Into a chrysalis. He is thinking about the rat faced girl. Wondering where she is. Where she fled. He imagines her living in a tent somewhere. Hiding from Smitty's floating eyeballs up in the perpetual freeze-melt-steam of the Appalachians. Up past the industrial ruins. Up past the ghost towns in the hungry wastes. Somewhere near running water. He wonders if she can hear the trains up there. It would be different so high up. The sound of the

trains. Far away. Not shattering annihilation, just the mournful wail of the whistle barely disrupting the bird song. He wonders what she thinks of when she hears it. Not the future certainly. Maybe the past. Maybe she feels nostalgia. Maybe she thinks of the house she grew up in. Maybe a house like this one. Maybe with a man in it like him. Sitting in the dark while the rest of the family sleeps. Waiting to go to work. Sitting in the dark waiting for the 4 a.m. to arrive and destroy the world. Just like it destroyed it the day before. And the day before that. And the day before that.

Wattles is with Big Boss in his office going over some numbers. Linda is typing. There is no sign of Smitty. Ersatz pours himself some lukewarm coffee and tries to convince himself that it is the caffeine giving him the shakes, the caffeine making him dizzy and lightheaded, giving him palpitations. He tries to convince himself the doctor will laugh at him, laugh at him and Smitty and Wattles and their amateur diagnosis, laugh at the Parkinson's Gait.

He drains his coffee and puts it down on his desk. Zirvana will be coming online in a few hours. Big Boss wants Ersatz down in the tunnels when it happens.

"Just in case," he said.

"In case what?" Ersatz asked. If something did go wrong that would be the worst place to be. He'd need to be at his computer.

"Just in case," said Big Boss. "And once we know everything is running smoothly you can come back up and we'll have mimosas."

"Mimosas?" Ersatz asked.

"Champagne and orange juice," Big Boss had said. "And croissants and shit. Linda thinks we should have a celebration."

Ersatz stretches. Yawns. A notification goes off on Smitty's computer. He wanders over. A window has opened up. One of the floating camera windows. One of Smitty's mobile units, his floating eyeballs. It's outside somewhere. In the early

morning darkness, using night vision. It's at Cudd Energy. Smitty must still be watching out for the protestors but there is no one there. They fled. They fled the law. The law, Ersatz laughs. Capital's mask. A desiring machine. The law. Wife-beating bondsmen and semi-employed sheriff's deputies and part-time high school football coaches. That is what those kids fled. That is what the law is. They fled violence perpetrated by small men. They fled murder. They fled a hasty burial in some privately owned landfill. They fled and the grounds are empty. It must have been a deer or a raccoon that set off the notification. A squirrel.

Smitty's drawer is slightly open and Ersatz takes a peek inside. Pokes through the documents. There are insurance forms inside with his name on them. Frank Emmett Ersatz. Life insurance forms. But not Fidelis Fidelis. They aren't the official company forms. They aren't the official Palliative Prerogative life insurance forms that Big Boss gets from Fidelis Fidelis. They are from some company Ersatz has never heard of: Universal Liberty Insurance, Savings, and Loans. "Because Insurance is a Right, not a Privilege" it says. And his name is on the forms, it his life the forms are insuring. He flips through them. Smitty has signed the documents as a witness. Big Boss has signed them as a witness. There is a blank spot for Ersatz's signature but they are dated from almost two years ago. Marcy is the prime beneficiary of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars but Greg is there too. Greg Kovalchik. Greg is in there to. Greg is in there for fifty grand.

"Five grand," he hears Smitty say. Smitty grinning at him. Smitty leering. "It's a great deal."

He is more outraged at the audacity of Smitty adding that zero than he is at the fact that he is looking at a contract on his life.

"Jesus Christ," says Ersatz. "Jesus Christ."

He imagines Greg driving towards Indian Hook. Greg in the company truck. Greg who has been trained by the US Army to kill people who get in the way. Greg

who has monetized those patriotic skills. He imagines Greg has a photograph of him on the truck seat beside Greg, a photograph of Ersatz, copies of medical reports, readouts from Smitty's floating eyeballs collated and stapled together. Maps of Yellow Creek. Plans. He imagines Greg has his home address memorized. His work hours. He imagines Greg smiling in the Beehive, the young woman simulating masturbation on a blanket, the Amish man talking to Smitty, he imagines Greg showing him pictures on his phone, images of all the humans he has killed to facilitate the flow of capital from one bank to another, he imagines Greg's teeth glowing in the neon lights.

"Jesus Christ," says Ersatz.

He grabs the life insurance documents and tucks them inside his scrubs.

"Smitty!" Ersatz is walking as quickly as he can through the tunnels. The lights coming on above him as he proceeds and turning off as he passes. Will-o-wisps. Ghosts. Drowsing spirits waking briefly and then drifting back to sleep. Like Marcy in the morning when he gets up for work. Rolling over into his warm spot.

He knows Smitty is down here on level three. He told Linda before he ducked down. A last minute check, he told her. A little hiccup. He's down here somewhere but it's a sprawling maze. The lights on the galvalume vats flicker and blink as they always do. Everything is good. Everything is fine. Everyone in their vats is exactly half-alive. Everything is functioning according to plan. Zirvana will be an orderly apocalypse, an orderly ascent into chemical heaven, but Ersatz is sick with anxiety. Anxiety about his own passage from this vale of tears. His own apocalypse. He doesn't want to die after all. He has changed his mind. He has hope. Linda's prayer and the Big Boss' promise have given him hope. Harding has given him hope. He has to call off the deal with Smitty. The deal he never made. Not really. They were just talking. Speculating. The killer has to be called off. The demon he summoned. The bargain he struck. The scamocide. Greg has to be called off.

“Smitty!” he shouts and he sees a glow up ahead. He speeds up.

Smitty is on his hands and knees. He has pulled up some of the flooring and is looking at the seam between a vat and the hard packed earth of the old mine. He doesn't look up.

“Smitty!” says Ersatz breathlessly when he reaches him. “You gotta call it off.”

“Yeah,” says Smitty. “I think we do. But Big Boss won't be happy.”

“Big Boss? What does Big Boss have to do with it? How did you get Big Boss involved? Was that his actual signature?”

“What?” says Smitty.

“I assumed it was a forgery,” says Ersatz. “What does Big Boss have to do with any of it?”

Smitty frowns at him.

“Look at this,” Smitty indicates the earth. “Touch it.”

Ersatz squats down and looks at the patch of earth.

“What?” he asks.

“Touch it,” says Smitty.

Ersatz does.

It is damp. More than damp. It is wet. He rubs mud between his fingers.

“It's wet,” he says. “It shouldn't be wet.”

“No shit,” says Ersatz.

“How did you find it? How did you know to look here?”

“My mobile units,” says Smitty. “My eyeballs. We have a half dozen of them floating around down here. My floating eyeballs. Just doing rounds. I thought it was stupid but it makes Big Boss feel safe. He was worried about the protestors. He was scared you had told them about Zirvana and they were going to break in here somehow and smash shit up. Dig their way in. And when I got in to work this morning the eyeballs had identified a number of locations where there was excessive moisture in the

air. And then I had a look at the regular environmental data and it checked out: it's been getting wetter and wetter down here overnight. The dehumidifiers can't keep up."

"What the fuck," says Ersatz and smells his muddy fingers.

"Yeah," says Smitty and fits the flooring back into place. "What the fuck."

"But how? From where? It's not even been raining."

Smitty shrugs.

"I guess we better tell Big Boss," says Ersatz.

"He's sure going to be pissed," says Smitty.

As they walk towards the elevator they notice condensation on some of the vats, soon they see water pooling along their bases.

"What the fuck," Ersatz keeps saying. "What the fuck."

When they get to the elevator Smitty says: "You go tell Big Boss. I'm going to have a look in the maintenance tunnels. I'll go up the ladder. I need to figure out what is happening. I need to check things out. Go up ahead of me and tell Big Boss to put the brakes on Zirvana. I'll catch up."

That's when Ersatz remembers the insurance forms. Big Boss' forged signature. The fraudulent dates.

"It's you," he says.

"What is me?" Smitty frowns.

"It's not Greg, you're doing it yourself. Greg's just going to collect the money and then you and Big Boss and Greg will split it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I know what you're doing," Ersatz takes a step away from Smitty. "You're trying to kill me."

Smitty looks at him in disgust.

“Get a grip,” he says. “Go tell Big Boss we’re inundated with water down here and we need to postpone the switchover until we know what’s going on. I’ll be up there in twenty minutes.”

“I know what’s going on,” says Ersatz. “You’re setting up some kind of industrial accident so you can get a piece of my insurance money but the deal is off.”

Smitty stares at him.

“The deal is off,” Ersatz repeats.

“There’s no deal, you entire idiot,” says Smitty. “I was just pissing around.”

“I saw the documents in your desk. I have them right here,” he pats his chest. “The deal is off.”

“I was just having a laugh,” said Smitty. “I just wanted to see how far you were willing to go. It was just a joke. It’s a fake company and fake forms.”

“Then what’s all this?” Ersatz waves his hands at the elevator.

Water is trickling down the face of the doors. They hear what sounds like rain coming from the other side.

“You think I’m flooding Yellow Springs to kill you?” says Smitty. “You think I’m trying to drown you in an old coal mine when I could just push you down a shaft or drop a galvalume vat on you when we’re unloading the trains?”

He steps towards Ersatz and Ersatz jumps back.

“Fine, the deal is off,” says Smitty and presses the up button. “So now go tell Big Boss we have a serious problem down here.”

The doors open. A thin veil of water is falling across the elevator entrance. They can hear more water falling against its roof. Rain on a tin roof.

“It’s the elevator,” says Ersatz and takes another step back. “It’s something to do with the elevator. No way I’m getting in that elevator. It’s a death trap.”

“I don’t have time for this shit,” says Smitty and he steps through the curtain of water into the elevator and turns around.

“See?” he says. “Perfectly safe.”

And he is gone in a roar of water.

Where Smitty and the elevator had been is now a deafening, rushing torrent. It is like standing behind Niagara Falls.

Ersatz stops breathing. He stops thinking. He is pretty sure his heart stops beating. The roaring of the water is the loudest sound he has ever heard. It is like the 4 a.m.

The heavy elevator doors slide shut and the sound is muted. Ersatz starts breathing again. He feels his heart beating. The blood pounding in his ears. He starts to think.

“Maintenance tunnels,” he thinks. “Maintenance shafts. Ladders in the maintenance shafts.”

He hurries off. Past the blank faces of the vats. Water is pouring down them in sheets. The puddles on the floor are becoming pools. The ceilings are dripping. The lights that follow him down the tunnel are flickering, struggling.

When Ersatz opens the door to the emergency exit shaft dim red emergency lights come on. The ladder stretches upwards towards its vanishing point. Water is running down the walls and the rungs are cold and slick. Ersatz begins to climb. When he gets to the landing for the second level he pauses and listens at the door. The door is too thick to hear through but nothing is seeping underneath so he opens it. A knee-deep flood of water knocks him from his feet and he clutches desperately at the ladder, banging his arm and forehead against the metal, barely managing to keep from being dragged down into the depths. The water keeps pouring out of level two at the same steady height and Ersatz struggles through it to have a look at the state of level two. It is unlit and inundated. The ceiling lights do not come on for him and none of the status lights on the vats are blinking. He stands there in the cold, steady flow until a body

appears, a mat of skin and bones floating down the aisle at a walking pace. It is face down and travelling head first, arms and legs trailing along like tentacles. The current pulls it towards Ersatz and the shaft. He throws himself against the door jamb to avoid contact with the bobbing lump of the head but an arm and leg brush against him. As the body goes over the edge it rolls onto its back and he sees open eyes and an open mouth, an oily tangle of pubic hair, the arms flop up and seem to reach for him as it topples into the void.

He starts climbing as fast as he can. He does not stop at level one but keeps going. Above level one the rungs are dry. The sound of the water pouring out of the door he opened to level two recedes into a whisper. He is nearly at the top when the emergency lights go out and the last five minutes of climbing are in the darkness.

Big Boss, Wattles, and Linda are standing at Ersatz's desk staring at his computer when he bursts into the office. The phone in the front office is ringing.

Ersatz is soaked through, shaking and terrified, wet hair hanging into his eyes.

"What the hell is going on down there?" shouts Big Boss, Linda goes pale at the sight of him, at the state of him, and sits down in Ersatz' chair, Wattles just stares, eyes bulging.

"It's flooding," gasps Ersatz. "It's flooded."

"What's flooded?" asks Big Boss.

"Yellow Springs," says Ersatz.

"Which level?" asks Big Boss.

"Every level," says Ersatz. "The whole thing. All of Yellow Springs."

"Bullshit," says Big Boss.

Ersatz staggers over to Smitty's desk and collapses into the chair. The phone in the front office continues to ring.

"Where's Smitty?" asks Big Boss.

"He's dead," says Ersatz.

"Bullshit," says Big Boss.

"He's dead," says Ersatz. "He went down the elevator shaft. The elevator fell. It was washed away. He was in in it."

Big Boss and Wattles stare at him. Linda begins to cry.

"He's dead," says Ersatz. "He stepped into the elevator and the water came rushing down and took him away."

The phone keeps ringing.

"Linda," says Big Boss. "Go answer the phone."

But Linda keeps crying.

"Wattles," says Big Boss. "Phone."

Wattles scuttles off.

"Every level?" asks Big Boss.

"I think so," says Ersatz. "Three was just beginning to flood. Two was totally flooded. And I assume one as well because so much water was coming down from it. I think it must have been one that flooded first."

The lights flicker.

"Where's it coming from?" Big Boss scratches his massive skull. "It hasn't even rained."

"Have you run any diagnostics?" asks Smitty and Big Boss turns the computer terminal around so Smitty can see the screen.

A window is open to the Palliative Prerogatives interface and the words "System Offline" are solemnly flashing.

"We thought it was a glitch with Zirvana," says Big Boss.

"Are you sure Smitty's dead?" asks Linda and wipes her eyes. "Shouldn't we go down and look for him?"

"He's dead," says Smitty. He nearly adds "and they'll never find the body" but catches himself.

The lights flicker and sway.

"Jesus Christ," says Big Boss. "I'm fucked. I'm bankrupted. We're fucked. We're fucked."

Wattles appears at the door. White as a sheet.

"What?" Big Boss asks. "What now?"

"The whole town," says Wattles and once again the lights flicker and tremor runs through the building.

The rest of them wait.

"Indian Hook," says Wattles. "Indian Hook is sinking."

They stare at him.

"Sinkholes," he says. "City Hall fell down a sinkhole. The library. Flooding and sinkholes. They're looking into sinkholes and seeing underground rivers. Rivers flowing through the storm sewers. Through the basements. Bodies. Bodies in the rivers. Galvalume vats spat up onto the street. Bodies in the trees. On the rooves. House and cars swallowed up. Eaten. Eaten up. Eaten up by Yellow Springs. A school bus..."

Linda gasps.

"Jesus Christ, Wattles," says Big Boss.

"I have to go," Linda stands up. "I have to go back home. I have to go to Jaxon. I have to go to my baby."

"Right," says Big Boss. "Right. OK."

"I have to go now," says Linda.

"Right," says Big Boss.

"You have to drive me," says Linda. "Now."

"Wattles," says Big Boss. "Take Linda home in the truck and then get right back here."

“Me?” Wattles looks confused. “We need to talk to head office. I need to start trying to save data. We need to start thinking about our liabilities.”

“Ersatz then,” snaps Big Boss. “Take Linda.”

“Ersatz?” Wattles is still surprised.

“Why not Ersatz?” Big Boss is now flushed. Rubbing the top of his head aggressively.

“I’ll drive myself,” says Linda.

“Ersatz needs to try and get the system back online,” says Wattles.

“For fucks sake,” shouts Big Boss. “Someone needs to drive Linda home to find her kid.”

“I’ll drive myself,” says Linda and stands up. The lights flicker and the whole building shakes. Linda sits down abruptly, Wattles is thrown against the door, Big Boss staggers against a desk.

“With all due respect,” says Ersatz to Big Boss when the building settles.

Everybody looks at him.

“Wattles and I need to try and get the system back up and running, and you need to call head office, which you can do while you drive. Besides, you need to check on your own family. Mine is safe outside of town, and Wattles is single. So you should drive Linda home, and make your calls, and check on your family, and Wattles and I will hold down the fort.”

Ersatz reboots his computer and while he is waiting for it to come back on he goes to Smitty’s. Wattles is standing stock still and glaring at him.

“I’m not single, you know,” says Wattles.

“What?” says Ersatz.

The window of the mobile camera at Cudd Energy is still open. Ersatz tries to open up some windows for the other cameras. The ones that Smitty said were down in

the mine. He gets three open but they reveal nothing except darkness. He opens up some menus to see what he can do with them. The floor shudders again. It is only eight-thirty. Ma and Marcy won't have left yet. They'll still be having breakfast. Plenty of time to keep them from heading into town.

"I'm not single," says Wattles. "I have a wife and a child. I have a five year old girl."

"What?" says Ersatz again.

"You told Big Boss I was single."

"Sorry," said Ersatz. "Congratulations. Whatever. I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't know," says Wattles. "Of course you didn't? How could you? When your head is so far up your own ass. Your own ass! How could you know..."

Wattles trails off. He is breathing heavily.

"All you ever think about are your own stupid problems," he says. "Stupid. Stupid, stupid problems. But really your only real problem is that that you are a narcissist. A narcissist. That's your stupid problem."

Ersatz is scrolling through menu options.

"I'm loved too," says Wattles. "And I love."

"That's great," says Ersatz. "It never occurred to me that someone could love you. My mistake. Sorry."

"Why?" asks Wattles.

"Why what?"

"Why did it never occur to you that someone could love me?"

"Really?" Ersatz sits back and looks directly at Wattles. The ceiling lights are trembling again. "You want to have this conversation right now?"

"Yes," says Wattles and his voice breaks. He looks like he's about to cry. "Why did you think I couldn't be loved?"

“Well,” says Ersatz. “You are really very officious. Very. And cold. Very cold. It really is quite off putting.”

Wattles flushes red and the building quivers.

“I’m sorry about telling Big Boss you don’t have a family when in fact you somehow do,” says Ersatz and turns back to the computer. “I really am sorry to have misrepresented things in that way, but I didn’t know about your life outside of Yellow Springs because I don’t actually care about you or your feelings.”

Ersatz has discovered the mobile cameras have an illumination function.

“If you have to take the company truck and go check on your family, be my guest,” says Ersatz. “I won’t even tell Big Boss you did so without filling out six forms in triplicate, although I do assume you’ll take the time to record the odometer numbers in the notebook Smitty keeps in the glove compartment for that purpose.”

Ersatz turns on the mobile camera lights.

“Is this some kind of quid pro quo?” says Wattles. “Are you expecting that because you will turn a blind eye to my leaving Yellow Springs without permission I will turn a blind eye to your attempts at perpetrating insurance fraud? Are you expecting me to ignore your egregious disregard towards company regulations?”

Smitty’s eyeballs are tumbling through the dirty water. Entirely submerged. And tumbling with them are all the many beloved unconscious; mouths and eyes open, hair like clouds of worms, arms and legs a confused, tuberous tangle. A kelp forest, thinks Ersatz; worms after the rain; salmon swimming upstream. They fill the screen.

Out loud he says: “Jesus Christ.”

Wattles comes over to see. They stare in silence.

Finally Wattles hisses: “It’s you.”

“What?”

“It’s you,” hiss Wattles. “This is all your doing.”

Ersatz looks up at him and realizes Wattles is not staring at the feed from the underground eyeballs but the window hovering above theirs, the window open to the mobile unit at Cudd Energy. That camera is lit up too, Ersatz must have turned on its light at the same time he turned on the ones underground, and there are people at Cudd Energy now, people staring up at the camera, staring up at him and Wattles.

It is the rat faced girl and a couple of other protestors.

"It's been you all along," says Wattles. "You and your anarchist friends!"

Ersatz turns off the illumination function and the windows to Yellow Springs go black. He enlarges the Cudd Energy window. The two other protestors have darted out of the yard and into the bush but the rat faced girl is still staring up towards where she had seen the illuminated eyeball.

"All the coincidences," says Wattles. "The fake fight with the protestors, the visit to the library to meet with them, the visits to Cudd Energy, the hijacked fuel trucks: it was you all along."

Ersatz ignores him. He is fumbling about with the controls for the eyeball. The rat faced girl has turned back into the bush and he is trying to follow her.

"Was the Parkinson's gait fake? Was the insurance fraud all a distraction?"

"There was never any insurance fraud," says Ersatz. "At least not until very recently."

"Is Marsha even pregnant? Is she in on it? Is your whore wife an anarchist as well?"

"That's right, Wattles," says Ersatz. "Marcy is an anarchist adulteress suffering from a hysterical pregnancy."

He turns on the camera audio and the room is filled with a loud, rumbling hum that is periodically cut through with a shrieking feedback whale song. The lights flicker again and the floor quivers.

"You've been in on it all along," says Wattles.

Smitty's eyeball follows the rat faced girl down a deer path and onto the shores of the Whiskey Run Reservoir. An old half dismantled drill scaffold is teetering on the overgrown parking lot by the boat launch and six or seven Cudd Energy pump trucks are sitting there too, sitting there and vibrating and humming and roaring. Long, thick hoses stretch from the trucks into the reservoir water. Up past the parking lot three fuel trucks are parked on the grassy lane that leads back to Whiskey Run Road.

The rat faced girl slips past the pump trucks and Ersatz follows her. Beyond the trucks is a chaos of pipes and tubes and hoses that vanish down a half dozen freshly drilled holes. There is water and mud everywhere. Ersatz sees a few figures on the far side of the lot disappearing into the thick bush that runs along the north shore of the reservoir and then crawls up the valley into the Appalachians. The rat faced girl passes through all the shuddering industrial mayhem and follows the other protestors into the wilderness. The sound of the trucks is deafening and Ersatz turns the volume down. He leans back in the chair.

"Well," he says. "I guess we know where all that water is coming from, they're pumping the whole fucking lake into the mine."

Wattles is silent so Ersatz glances up at him. The other man's face is pale, drawn, his eyes bugging out.

"What?" asks Ersatz.

"You," hisses Wattles and he is practically vibrating in anticipation of his final triumph. "You are pumping the whole goddam lake into the mine. You are the traitor. You are the spy. You are the Benedict Arnold. Big Boss is going to hang you high."

And the floor opens up beneath them.

Wattles is clinging to a panel of flooring, legs dangling into the void, debris slipping and sliding past him. One half of the room is now a muddy crater, the lights are flickering and blinking, the sound of running water rises from the darkness. Ersatz

is sitting on the edge of the crater, beside the teetering desk. His heart is pounding and the blood roaring in his ears. He is dizzy, nauseous, weak. He feels like he may faint. Wattles is screaming. The sound is coming through to Ersatz in waves. He tries to shake his head clear, forces himself to take a few deep breaths.

“Help!” Wattles is screaming. “Help! Help! Help!”

A squeaking mouse. A bleating lamb.

“Help me, Ersatz! For Christ’s sake, I have a family too! I have a wife and kid!”

“Yes,” says Ersatz. “You keep telling me.”

He looks around for a rope or a cable or a broom. Anything with which he can extend his reach.

“I’ll do whatever you want!” Wattles screams.

The floor quivers again and more debris slides down the crater in the floor towards Wattles. Croissants and plastic wine cups. A couple of juice boxes. Wattles ducks his head to avoid a champagne bottle and instead a stapler hits him flush in the face and bounces off. Paper is fluttering down into the darkness below him like snow. The desk beside Ersatz leans forward menacingly and he steadies it with a hand.

“I’ll help you with your insurance claims,” says Wattles. “I’ll help you get the coverage you need.”

Ersatz is thinking about sliding down towards Wattles. Reaching out to him. But there is not much to hang onto. Nothing stable to hook an arm around.

“Isn’t that kind of your job anyways?” he asks Wattles. “Helping employees with their claims?”

“Not when they break the rules,” says Wattles.

“Jesus Christ, man,” Ersatz stares at him. “Do you never stop? Do you never pay attention to context?”

“In this instance I am willing to make an exception about the rule-breaking,” says Wattles. “In this instance.”

"You mean the instance of you needing me to risk my life to save yours?"

Metal shrieks and a section of wall panels tear off their moorings and fall flapping in to the pit.

"Yes!" shouts Wattles. "Yes! In that instance! Yes!"

"Calm down," says Ersatz, "You have to calm down."

Wattles catches his breath. He closes his eyes and draws a sequence of deep ragged breaths. Ersatz watches his diaphragm expand and contract, expand and contract. Like a wasp, he thinks, a yellow jacket resting on the siding. Wattles opens his eyes and stares up at Ersatz.

"I'll even get Marsha's coverage back," he says. "I'm sure I can find a way. We'll just fudge a few things."

"Whose coverage?"

"Marsha's," says Wattles and looks up. "Your wife."

"My whore wife you mean?"

Wattles groans.

"Sorry," he says. "Sorry. It was unconscionable of me to call her that."

"What's my wife's name, Wattles?" says Ersatz. "What is my whore wife's name?"

"Marsha," he says. It is almost a sigh.

Ersatz stares at him.

"I don't know a Marsha," says Ersatz.

"Marla?" squeaks Wattles.

"Marisa?"

"Merina?"

"Mary?"

Ersatz crawls out of the crater and stands up and looks out a window. He can see golden light streaming through the trees.

“Melissa?” screams Wattles. “Matilda?”

Ersatz starts walking away and the floor shakes.

“Marcy!” screams Wattles and Ersatz pauses, looks back, considers returning to help the man. For his wife and kid. Because after all its not just him.

“Marcy!” screams Wattles. “Her name is Marcy!”

Ersatz sighs.

“Alright,” he says.

The floor shakes. The desk teeters. It is suspended briefly over the edge of the crater at an improbable angle, poised, right above where Wattles is clinging to the flooring, then it topples, feet squealing as it slides out of sight.

“Marcy!” screams Wattles. “Marcy!”

The lights start falling, chunks of the ceiling, the floor is slipping away under Ersatz, a section of wall crashes inwards and fresh air and sunlight flood in. He staggers across the debris towards safety, across the particle board and the dry wall and the cables, banging his hands and knees, falling over and scrabbling back up. He is outside. Outside the screaming metal, the crashing, the tearing. He pulls himself up a slope into the trees. He throws his arms around a trunk, scraping his face against the rough bark, pulls himself to his feet, and turns around.

Everything is vanishing into the ground. The whole structure is tumbling in on itself. The walls and the roof crumpling in and sliding down into the opening maw. The chain link fence is ripped out of the earth like thread from a seam. The railway tracks are twisting and turning in the sun, the ties popping up into the air. The train platform a wedge of concrete tipping over, vanishing, a slab of ice, thinks Ersatz, slipping under the waves, the crane booms reaching for the sky as they fall, the jointed legs of giant insects, crabs, spiders falling from trees. The tarmac parking lot ripples and twists as it is sucked down into the darkness. The company truck falls in backwards, headlights bugged out eyes.

And then stillness.

A clear blue sky.

The wind in the trees.

Sirens in the distance.

Black smoke is rising over the narrow ridge that divides Yellow Springs from town.

The billboard is still standing: an elderly woman reclining in a hospital bed. Brilliant white hair. Nasal cannula. Sparkling blue eyes. A small child hugging her.

Big bold letters: Life is a Gift that only God can Give.

Palliative Prerogatives logo in the bottom right.

Marcy and Ma, Ersatz thinks. I can catch them if I hurry. If I cut across country.

He is dizzy, breathless, weak. He holds up a hand: it is shaking. He stamps his feet: they are tingling, half asleep.

If I hurry, Ersatz thinks, and rushes off into the bush.

Ersatz is on a hillside blinking sweat from his eyes and peering through the trees at Ma and Marcy. They are patiently waiting for the Jesus Rose bus by the mail box. The bus is often late but Ersatz now suspects it will not be coming at all today. Ma is a little bird looking up into the blue sky. Hands clutching her big purple purse. Marcy is wearing a face mask against the pollen and reading one of her novels.

Ersatz is exhausted and wheezing, his hands and face covered with scratches and cuts from his hurried hike over the ridge and through the bush to try and warn Marcy not to take Ma to town, but by the time he arrived his plan had changed. Listening to the sirens as he climbed the ridge he realized there's no way the bus would take her into the catastrophe of Indian Hook even if it was running. Ersatz is convinced he's found a way out of the whole dilemma of his impending slide into penury and insensibility but his plan means Ma and Marcy must never see him again. They'll never find Wattles or

Smitty in the ruins of Yellow Springs which means they won't expect to find him down there either. If he disappears they'll assume he went down with the ship. There'll be a big worker's compensation package for Marcy and Ma. Plus the Fidelis Fidelis payout for accidental death. Plus the one Smitty took out on him with Universal Liberty Insurance, Savings, and Loan for the scamocide. If he gets the paperwork into the house and puts it somewhere Marcy will find it she'll be set. She'll be richer than she's ever been, than she ever had any right to expect. Her and Ma and the baby on the way. Ersatz just needs to make sure he disappears. He just needs to make sure he vanishes with Wattles and Smitty. He just needs to make sure no one ever finds his body. Ersatz has to vanish.

Marcy glances at her watch and then down the road. The Jesus Rose bus must be at least fifteen minutes late and while Marcy is very patient and would hate to miss bingo Ersatz knows that he doesn't have too much time before she gives up and returns to the house. He scrabbles along the slope as quietly and carefully as he can and emerges onto the driveway after it has curved away from the main drag out of sight from the bus stop and the mail box.

He lets himself in the house and shakes his head that Marcy hasn't locked the door. He half considers locking it just to remind her. Just so it doesn't keep happening after he's gone. Dad's shot gun is leaning against the wall, still wrapped up. He wants to take it but knows he shouldn't. Marcy would notice eventually, and it would raise questions for her. He touches it, thinks about Dad, fishing with him at Blue Spruce, hunting up near Gipsy, watching the Steelers. He remembers him as a quiet, kind, rather boring man who had very little to say. He remembers being small and holding Dad's hand as they walked up the driveway to wait for the school bus. Why that memory? From when? Why would Dad have been home on a school day? In the memory they aren't talking, just walking, and Ersatz is aware of his father's hand as a big warm paw engulfing the whole of his little one. He remembers Dad tucking him in,

giving him a kiss, the burn of stubble against his cheeks. And Dad in the days before he shot himself: tired, washed out, looking more bent every day, the weight of all his calculations about the future dragging his head down, the weight of all that despair dragging him down down down, the weight of the failure and shame of what had come before and what was coming next.

In the office he pulls out Smitty's forged insurance forms from inside his scrubs and smooths them out on the desk. He skims them before he signs, lingering over Big Boss' signatures. Was it forged or wasn't it? Maybe they were all in it together. The whole lot of them. Maybe they were all going to split the take. He should have asked Wattles if he knew anything about it. Shown it to him as he was hanging there. Shown him the signature and asked how it looked. If it looked legit. As he was dangling over the abyss. He should have asked Wattles. Poor, unlovable Wattles. He feels guilt. Shame. There was nothing he could have done. If he had tried to crawl down there to help him it would have been the death of them both. He shouldn't have walked away though, not like that. No matter how sick he was of the man dehumanizing Marcy with his forgetfulness. It was a wanton act to walk away. The minute he had a little leverage over Wattles, a little power, he indulged himself in a deliberate and cruel display.

"If I hadn't walked away I would have died," Ersatz says out loud and signs the document with his good pen. He folds it up neatly, pinches the creases nice and tight, and digs around in the bills for an envelope. He inserts the forms in the first one he finds, seals it, and writes "For Marcy" across the front. It is very austere. He wants to write her a note. He wants to tell her he loves her and that he is sorry but he is not sure what he is sorry for except that he has always been a generically unsatisfactory sort of a person. He wants to tell her its ok about the pregnancy and the youth minister with the firm handshake and all of that shit but he knows that's just his vanity. That's just him trying to insert himself back into her erotic life as a heroic figure. That it would just be him trying to ensure she feels a measure of guilt and gratitude towards imaginary,

symbolic, dead Ersatz. An Ersatz who does not exist in the world of things and never has. Better just to vanish down into dark void of Yellow Springs with Smitty and Wattles and leave nothing behind for her but a fat bank account. She can sort out her emotions and her memories on her own.

He glances out the window and sees them walking down the driveway: Ma and Marcy. Ma has her arm through Marcy's and they are both watching where they are stepping with exaggerated concern. The window is open a crack and he can hear them.

"Careful, honey," says Marcy very clearly through her mask and Ma lays her other hand on Marcy's arm for extra support, the big purple purse bangs against her knees.

"Watch your step," Marcy says and Ma looks up at her and smiles.

Ersatz feels like crying. Poor Marcy will be stuck with Ma. Stuck with her until the old lady dies or gets inserted into a galvalume vat. Marcy might put her in a home, he thinks, and feels a flash of panic for Ma. Marcy might wash her hands of her mother-in-law. But it would not be like her. She is loyal. She is true. She is kind to people. Even without the insurance money and a worker's comp payout she would take care of Ma. She would do whatever it takes because they have lived together for so long and they love each other.

Ersatz slips the envelope into the desk drawer and slides it shut.

He hurries to the back door.

Ersatz is walking along the tracks through the woods. The cicadas are screaming and sweat is dripping down his back. There is a junction about a mile from the house where a railroad that hasn't been used since the 1950s merges with the one Palliative Prerogatives had reopened for the 4 a.m. to Yellow Springs. The old, unused track is little more than an overgrown trail up into the hills, a half-buried snake crawling through the ruins of the past: deserted homesteads, abandoned mining towns, gravel

pit swimming holes, rusting water towers, badly capped well heads. It's the water towers he's thinking of, sprouting like mushrooms from the rubble, from the thin acidic soil. He'll keep hiking into the hills, past the first few ghost towns, then climb up to the top of one of those water towers, open it up, jump in, and that'll be that. He'll never get back out even if he loses his nerve. And no one will ever find him. No matter how loud he screams. No one will find him but the yellow jackets. They'll smell the blood and the rot, the sweetness and the sugar he leaves behind, all his unused potential, his surplus value. They'll come and pick him clean, transform him, remake him to suit their needs, leave his bones there in their sterile purity, his scrubs as a shroud. It'll be his pauper's grave.

They used to hike up there when they were kids. When they were teens. Him and Smitty and Kubiak and Patty Wagner and all the rest of them. Smoke weed and get drunk and fuck around. Nobody else ever went up there because it was a kind of desert. A toxic wilderness poisoned by two centuries of relentless extraction. The mining run off and the waste water from countless fracking operations made the land useless. Just stunted trees and mosquitoes and hornets and a few starving birds. Even the deer had deserted it. And the squirrels. He wonders if the protestors will come up through here. Not protestors but revolutionaries, he thinks. The real deal. They sure didn't fuck around. The rat faced girl. He laughs. Smitty shouldn't have fucked with them. They shouldn't have abducted that kid who looked like Kubiak. They shouldn't have driven him away in the back of the company truck. Ersatz wonders if the protestors will come up this way but he doesn't think so. They'll follow Whiskey Run up towards Gipsy and then head into the Appalachians proper.

He wonders if he is dead yet. He wonders if Big Boss has stared down into the crater and realized the full scale of the loss. All that wealth reclaimed by the earth, ashes to ashes and dust to dust. All that earning potential gone. All that human life. The lawyers are going to be busy. The adjustors and the brokers and customer service folks.

He wonders if Big Boss has started calling employee families. Wattles' wife. Smitty's exes – that'll be a relief for them, Smitty gone. Not much to divide though. He wonders if Big Boss has called Marcy already. He wonders if Marcy knows yet. That will be the moment Ersatz truly dies, when Marcy realizes he is gone. She'll try to tell Ma. She'll try but Ma won't understand. And when Marcy starts to cry in frustration Ma will stroke her hair with a blue veined hand, make reassuring noises, Ma will try to comfort poor Marcy, because even though Ma is beyond grief Marcy will try to tell her. Marcy will try to explain and fail and cry in frustration.

Maybe I'm already dead, thinks Ersatz. Maybe I'm already a ghost. A wandering spirit.

Maybe she's already remarried.

Maybe she's had her kid and she's living with the youth pastor who has the firm hand shake.

Maybe I'm in a galvalume vat and this beautiful sunshine is the Zirvana kicking in, thinks Ersatz. Because Marcy is paying the bills with the insurance money. Marcy is taking care of me and Ma and Gramma. The breeze on my skin. The screaming of the cicadas. Maybe this is me dissolving, thinks Ersatz. Disintegrating. Ecstatic.

Maybe I'm already at the bottom of some rusting old water tower, he thinks. Broken legs and shattered vertebrae. Delirious from pain and thirst and hunger. Deafened by the buzzing roar of the yellow jackets, their noise amplified in the tin can of the reservoir. Yellow jackets picking him clean. Transforming him into energy, transforming him into capital, into cash dollars. Maybe Marcy's already rich. The money is in the bank. Ersatz is in the bank. Honeycombs filled with gold. Ersatz is crying but he doesn't know why, he doesn't feel sad or sorry for himself, it makes no sense, really, to be crying, because given his actual circumstances, given the way things are, the way they actually are, everything has worked out as well as it possibly could.