

The Many Lives of Nicholas Dumane

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Abstract:

In this triptych of stories, I attempt to follow three generations of a family and capture the recurring issues that afflict this family; namely the tendency to slip inside of oneself and sort-of die there. The story begins in the format of letters written from Nicholas Dumane to his son, Nicholas Dumane Jr, in fire-bombed WWII Hamburg, in which Nick is stranded after his plane was shot down, and must now attempt to get out of the city with a group of escaped Soviet POWs. The second part assumes a third person omniscient of Nick Jr who has discovered these letters well into life, around maybe 60, and feels the need to go on a spiritual journey to Hamburg as a means of standing in the last known place his father stood, despite his family's pleas to stay and a post-triple bypass heart that is suspected to give out at any time. In Hamburg, he encounters a bizarre guide and Death, who detests her occupation, and the whole thing slips into a state of total absurdity. The last part is the transcript of the last therapy session of Nicholas Dumane III, who speaks of his brother, David's suicide.

I hope to achieve honest fiction in which the primary goal isn't some post-modern deconstruction, but instead an affirmation of the overcoming of emotional – and generational – pain, as a means of humanizing these characters and really getting at this sense of loneliness that seems to me so pervasive in modern society. Without coming across as heavy handed...

Publishability is always a concern too.

I'm not sure how exactly to answer the 'why did you take on this project' other than to say it's an idea that's been in my head for too long.

~Mark Mangelsdorf

Part One: Yours Is the World

Dear Nick Jr,

Hello. This letter will or will not be the only space you and I will ever meet. You may read this in the years to come and have it only be a confirmation for what I have already told you over the dinner table or in the car on the way to and from school, or baseball practice, or swim meets. Or this could be the only thing you ever witness of my existence, our only conversation, and you will grow up knowing your dad only from passed-along stories and photographs, of which there aren't many. Whichever way this ends, I just want you to know that I love you. Know this. Things about me will come to light in the following story that you will have a hard time understanding. Things that I did because I had to do them. Things that I am not proud of, believe me. Understand that it was all for you, to make things better. Read this and know.

I couldn't see the bodies. I saw only clouds and smoke. The smoke was white. I imagined the buildings falling and I imagined the people screaming, but then I stopped imagining those things because I wouldn't be any good at what I do if I thought of every man that died because of me. Dale told me to load another one. I did. John pulled the lever, the hatch opened, and I watched another bomb fall on Hamburg. A plume of smoke bloomed from the Earth. There was the roar of the engine and the phantoms of the sounds of desolation that were only in our brains because we insisted on creating them there. I lit up a cigarette in between my teeth and thought of you.

That morning, I woke up cold in an airbase south of London, still half-way in a dream in which I was back home in Philadelphia watching you enter the world through the snout of a glass

bottle. You come out in a rush of alcohol. Odd dream that left me uncomfortable and sluggish in the morning's preparatory routine. I was cold in a low sky with clouds in my hair. I helped load the crates of bombs into the plane, knowing the orders this time were to bury Hamburg in metal. A couple thousand people I've never met scorched by table-sized raindrops of fire, which is something the shrink I saw back home told me not to think about, at least not then. The thoughts and concerns that came with the war would be dealt with upon my return. Even so, it is hard to keep myself quiet, inside.

I see a shrink. That is something you should know; something important. I see him because there are times where I feel like I'm not present in the moment, with those around me. I sometimes feel as if I am being operated remotely. I cannot say this to him. Not this exactly. Shrinks are looking for reasons to send you away, so I have to rely on euphemisms. Vague ones. I have to lather the truth with venire, but I still feel these things. I am still distraught by them. They are feelings of desperation. I fear I will slip into myself without being able to get out. I almost told him this once, but caught myself. I almost told him that at times I don't know how to talk to my wife. At times I use your mother as a utility, like something necessary in order to create you, and if I don't come back, I know how this might appear. How this seems awful. Your mother is a labyrinth behind those big, pretty eyes. Know that I love her, but also know that perplexity dominates the way I understand her.

Once I took her to Central Park in New York City and I bought her popcorn and we walked under the trees until it was dark. It fascinates me how one can walk through that park in the middle of the sprawling city and barely hear a thing of the bustling mania. Can barely see a street. Anyway, we walked through it, and I remember we stopped at the base of this big boulder, I can't remember why, and we were under a street lamp, her olive skin radiating, and I think that

was when I really, truly noticed how beautiful your mother is. And I told her as much, of course. That was our first kiss. Under a street lamp in Central Park. That was where I first envisioned you, getting chased by all the girls in grade school. My shrink told me that I see her as a threat to my masculinity and that I'm afraid of her.

We took off from the base and I tried not to think. There was fog and then we were over France, looking down over burnt up cities. I've witnessed this war as a bird might: seeing but not really seeing. We reach Germany and prepare. Hamburg is below us. I couldn't see the bodies.

Then things go wrong.

There was God's clap in our metal tomb, and there was wind, I remember, and there was an invisible hand tugging me towards a ledge, where the plane had been blown in two. I heard screams. John sucked into the air. His coat flapped in the wind and his mouth was open to the roar of the sky. Stew was sucked out next. He had a son and I couldn't help but think of you, growing up without me. Dale held out a parachute pack and told me to let go.

We spun until the shoots caught us, and then we hanged there, over the phantom city of fire and smoking plumes. We watched the plane crash into the Earth and we thought that we would make it out unscathed until we heard the popcorn cracks of gunfire from below. Dale had two sons. He named them Andrew and Steven, and he told me once that little Steven had been born with a hair-lip and brittle bones, and I thought of another boy that would grow up with a metal tag and a government-issued letter for a father. I dangled in the sky until bullets punctured my shoot. Then, I fell into Germany.

With all my heart,

Nicholas Dumane, your father.

Nick Jr,

This is Hamburg.

Screaming faces of people who no longer care for those who are not family. Screaming faces of people who do not care for their family. Smoke. Total deconstruction, the reversion process of sending urban society into a rural state. The air turned black from the smoke of the bombs we've dropped where no one can see, where breathing is difficult and people search for places to hide from the soot settling out of the sky, where individuals walk through the streets openly wailing, collecting the bodies of loved ones cast down, where, it seems, even the air is on fire.

The Germans didn't find me under the tarp thrown over an old train engine. I hid behind the wheels. When I landed, I ripped off my shredded parachute and limped into the nearest building where escaped Soviet POWs hid in the dirt. When the Germans left, I crawled out from the tarp and saw the Russians poking their heads out from holes they had made in the ground. I was in that warehouse for five days. For the first, there were no words spoken. The Russians stared at me and then they forgot I was there. They left in the night and came back with bread and pails of water. I didn't eat. On the second day, a Russian man who introduced himself as Petrich Drofsteski asked me why I didn't join them in their burglaries, in astonishingly good English. I didn't have much of a worthy answer to divulge to him. He explained that if I wanted to eat, then I had an obligation to partake in their nightly raids, despite my injured leg, and that if I didn't, then I could enjoy the lengthy, emaciated death of starvation. There was also the matter of escape, which was optimal, they thought, in this time where the city was enveloped in chaos, and if I wanted to be included at all, I'd better consider partaking. Without any sort of

alternative, I agreed to the night's mission. I had specifically chosen my position in a plane for a reason, but it seems now confrontation with the face of the enemy is unavoidable.

You'll be growing up in a fascinating city where you won't be bored unless you're lazy, and no son of mine is lazy. You'll go to the park just down the hill from the house where the kids gather after school and on hot, sweltering summer days to play baseball or to imagine themselves as errant knights and lords over something important. You'll learn friendship and betrayal. You'll ride your bike down the hill to the park and have dangerous contests with your friends that will end with you on the pavement, bent aluminum. You'll learn how to think later. Now is the time for a sense of freedom. You'll enjoy this place I've made for you, I think. There's a city full of people to meet and hear stories from, a theatre with good music, a pond with an alcove of trees that's great to bring girls to, to kiss them in, when you're old enough for that sort of thing. The best summer days are spent in the rain.

I mentioned you to Petrich. The warehouse is very quiet, and when we aren't planning our escape, we're minding our own space, not interacting much. They tell me it's astounding anyone on the ground was organized enough to operate the anti-aircraft gun and that mine was one of the few planes, if not the only, that was shot out of the sky. This organization is cause for worry. It means the city is not in a total state of desuetude. I revealed to them that the raid wasn't over, and when it was, there wouldn't be a German left standing, or at least that was the plan, but, you see, this too is a problem. I am waiting for my comrades to destroy this city I'm stuck in. The urgency is palpable. We gather and discuss plans for escape.

Petrich and his comrades had been an undercover sect of the Soviet military sent to scout out outlier cities of the German war machine, like Hamburg, to learn the city's layout. Former specialists in a variety of fields ranging from civil engineering to a failed monk, these secret ops

were Russia's eyes and ears, trained in the necessary fighting skills to hold their own against any average German soldier, but more specifically trained in observation. Extrapolating large-scale political affairs from small local ones. The Soviet special ops are there only to monitor. They were instructed to use violence only when necessary. They were captured by the Germans when one of the secret ops was coerced into a brawl at a local bar, drunk, angry at a couple guys for trash-talking Lennon. Lennon is the father of Russian communism. You'll learn this.

The Soviet special ops became POWs (Prisoners of War) until our bombs started falling. They attempted an escape, but only made it to this old warehouse to take shelter from our flaming rain.

Tonight we tear apart a local bakery that evaded the desolation by some stroke of fortune. It is one of the few food-serving buildings left standing within a thirty-mile-radius. There will be Germans. Guns will be drawn. I'm thinking of you. I'm thinking of you.

With all my heart,

Nicholas Dumane, your father.

Nick Jr,

Seventeen men, twenty four women and twelve children, of whom five were infants. Huddling in the basement of the bakery expecting another round, lips chapped, pronounced eyes jutting out. You will learn of something called the Holocaust. You will hear of the images I've heard of; of hills of shoes and belt buckles next to box cars with small, broken hands hanging out of it, of bodies with arms where the bicep is smaller around then the elbow, phantoms still not fully extracted from corpses, of children digging holes and getting shot at the bottom of them. We walked into the basement where each person was gathered in petrified silence, holding a piece of bread. When we entered, one of the men stood up and displayed his gun, his Swastika arm band, and inquired as to why we had come here; who were we. In the Holocaust, Jews did not eat and did not drink and when they were found, the Allied soldiers were faced with the unpleasant task of giving small portions to the survivors, knowing that if unwarranted they would eat themselves to death. A friend I knew while in London uncovered Auschwitz. It was snowing. Nazi soldiers stood before piles of frozen skin and vacant eyes like proud skeleton lords. At least this was what he told me. He told me they lined them up and laughed as they spent twenty minutes unloading ammunition into what was, by the end, pulp.

The Nazi stood up amongst the squatting Germans and was shot twice in the chest. We took the bread in silence. A small child walked up to me, covered in dirt, looking old, shriveled and wrinkled, and handed me his bread before anyone could get around to taking it; said nothing, just looked at me until I took it, then proceeded to return to his sullen mother, whose look implied we might as well have castrated him. Indirect murder. Petrich asked for the baker and worked out the specifics of the deal he had in mind: in exchange for three loafs that day and the one after, no one would be killed. In the Holocaust, the genocide began with the demand that

Jews visibly display the Star of David on their clothing. The baker agrees, we go home with loafs of bread and a bucket of water, and one of the final Allied firebombers locks smoldering Hamburg in its sights.

You will grow up in a better world. You won't feel alone all the time and you won't need a shrink. The prospect of war won't terrorize the prospect of your future because this war really will be what WWI claimed to be: the war to end all wars. You will live in a perpetual state of bliss that will be the cosmic retribution for the misery it seems we have all, as a country, been in for too long. Be happy. I've risked too much for you to not be happy.

Welcome home. Your mother and I set up a room for you before I shipped out; painted it blue, a boy's color. We have taken the adequate precautions with the house, with the yard that will be turned into a playground replete with slides and a sleek swing set. Sit down for dinner. We say grace and then we dig in. Your mother is a fantastic cook, and you will have to be wary of gaining excess weight, though if you are anything like me, then your metabolism will be like the furnace of one of the industrial plants of the city you will come to love. Come with me. I have a room set aside for time for us. Where I can teach you things. It's not done yet, but the book collection you see will one day become gargantuan and impressive; a well of knowledge I encourage you to drink from. They will be yours. Everything of mine will also be yours.

Welcome home. You will live, play, work and love in this place, until you graduate from college and have a place of your own, and yet even then, if you chose, this home will still hold its doors open like arms, beckoning. It is here, if you want it. It is always here for you.

There is a heavy smog and I could hear the city outside grow quiet and still. This would have been the last day of our attack. I heard nothing until I heard the sky breaking, cracking open. A pungent, sulfuric odor. We made it back to the warehouse just in time. Then it happened

again, and I was under the wheels of the old train engine, and I could almost see the lights in the hospital and the hairs on your little head behind my delusional eyelids. I told myself over and over again that if this comes to an end with me still breathing, I will crawl through the fields and forests of Germany just to see you. But I'm lying when I say I don't have any doubts. I am supposed to be a man for you, but I ended up crying there in the oil-stained dirt, feeling the colossus of this world breaking me into the splinters of this old factory waiting for the next round of bombs to turn it into the dust at my feet. War makes insects out of men, and I bat my wings like the dripping eyelashes of wives at train stations. I would give every second of my life just to hold your hand.

With all my heart,

Your father.

Nick Jr,

In the Holocaust, in its infancy, the Nazi soldiers' method of disposing of The Problem was this: strip them naked, line them up, shoot them into a ditch, cover their naked bodies with lye, and bury them in mile long trenches that weaved through the German/Polish/Austrian landscape like a basilisk. Symbols of death. The basilisk is a monster from Greek myth that will kill anyone who looks it in the eye. When found, my friend said the emaciated Jews kept their eyes to their feet. The biggest issue, in the mind of the Nazi, was not whether they should eradicate the Jews; it was how exactly to go about doing it.

We returned to the bakery expecting bread or a crater. Inside, the Germans still cowered in the basement, and when we came with guns, they handed over the bread hastily. The young boy who had handed me bread was nowhere to be seen and his mother was wrapped in the arms of other Germans, weeping. She'd burst into an ugly fit of sobs when we walked in, started convulsing. We all thought he'd died, the son. We thought he'd died in the night. You won't die until it is your rightful time, and with the progression of medical advantages, maybe not even then. This will never happen to you. You will never know nor see this suffering. You will never know what it feels like to lose somebody.

I walked to her with the intent of comforting. I wanted to put my arms around her, though of course I wouldn't have really done this. I intended only to place a hand on her shoulder; say I'm sorry. Say something. It's natural to grieve, to blame others for their loss. It's natural for this woman to lunge at me with a knife from the kitchen upstairs, to think without a doubt that I must be responsible, and it's hard for her to believe it isn't my fault. It's also natural for me to shoot her after she stabs the knife into my leg. To empty her skull onto the floor. This is called self-defense; if someone were to break in with a gun and if you were to kill that person before he

could kill you. In the Holocaust, Jews were too demoralized and weak to fight back, in the end. Numbers were inscribed into their arms. They stopped thinking of themselves as people.

When she dropped dead, they all initiated what I supposed was a planned attack. Most had knives. Others had large dough rollers or wooden spatulas. They were all shot down before any damage could be inflicted, leaving a post-shot silence, with ringing ears, and still bleeding bodies, color depleting from their skin, draped over one another, looking like they had never walked this Earth as unique, independent people. Husks of insects hatched and feeding with the mouths of a different form.

Here is the church, the place of worship. You will come here on Sundays and on holidays, though the man behind the pulpit is only the shadow of the shadow of the man on the cross on the wall. You will learn how to appreciate things here, how your spiritual construction can be more important than the logic in your head. You will come here and learn how to give yourself to something. Learn to live for something other than yourself. Learn to turn off the great machine between your ears.

Breath. You're already headed for a life of anxiety. Geneticists have become the spokesmen for the philosophical claim that everything is predetermined. By this logic, the way you look, the way you think and the way you act was determined long before you had the ability to state your objection. Relax. You're already worrying about things you shouldn't worry about yet. You are much smarter than others think you are. You're a subtle kind of smart, the kind of young man that surprises people when he really has something to say. Learn to know when just listening emanates intelligence more than does any word spoken.

This is how to swing a baseball bat. When you're young, it's important to 'choke up,' but when you're older, this term will become a nostalgic phrase of the past. For now, align the top of

your right hand – if you’re right handed – with the top strip of tape. Step up to the plate and make sure you aren’t cowering from it. Pitches will hit you at times, but you need to see this as a good thing. This gets you on-base. Once at the plate, align your stance at about shoulder length and bend your knees; bring the bat back behind your right shoulder and lean into your right foot. This establishment of weight is vital for a strong swing. When the pitch comes, step into it; drive the bat through the ball, level with the ground, watching it all the way in, hear it thwack off the wood and go sailing into the air. You will have an average build, like me, so don’t swing for the fences, at least not yet. Get a solid line-drive out past the in-field. Get to first. Get to first, and then begin thinking about how you’re going to steal second. Learn that these summer days will hold something in the air that no other moment in your life will come close to. Live here, in this air swarming with insects birthed from the grass beneath your feet, seen in clouds, in this place smelling of seeds, tobacco and dust. This is the smell of the way of the things that ought to be. American youth is not American youth without baseball. Stay here. I will meet you. Stay here and I will find my way to the park that will be empty, where it will be just the two of us, practicing until the sun comes up and it’s time to go home.

We bagged the bread and returned to the warehouse to think more about how we would escape this place. Along the way, maybe a hundred yards away from our warehouse: the young, sullied boy from the basement faced down on the street, a gash in his back, insects gathering, a pistol clutched by small hands.

With all my heart,

Your father.

Nick Jr,

Learn that as men, we must do things for the sake of others.

It is 1939 and I'm watching television. War has started and it's Germany again. They've taken Austria, the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia and now Poland, even after the Munich Conference in '38 where Adolf Hitler swore these militarized actions were only for the sake of reclamation; of reestablishing themselves as a unified country. The US refuses to join at first because of the hallowing results of the aftermath of the first Great War. Three years later I walk into a recruiting office and sign up for the Air Force, something your mother begged me not to do. She sat by the fireplace in a quiet fury after spending hours screaming at me, crying, holding onto me. She placed my hand on her stomach. You must have been only a microbial bundle of cells then. I wish you'd have been older so I could have at least felt a kick before walking out the door. I told your mother that if I didn't join the Air Force then, I'd be drafted to the Army later. In the Army, I would have already been planted. I told her the same thing the advertisements told all of us; how I was an integral part of the orchestration of the fall of Hitler and his Nazi Germany. This is the devil. If not stopped, the devil will come here. You would be used as a tool, told to stand guard with a gun by a gate to a camp you've been told is used to rightfully eradicate entire races of people that are beneath you. In the Holocaust, little German boys would catch escaped Jews and alert the authorities without thinking. A reflex.

I'm going to be honest with you. Things aren't looking good right now. We figured we would head south until we crossed the Elbe, and then west on a road that seemed in-the-clear all the way to France. With the desecrated condition of the city, we didn't expect to run into many problems. We reached the outskirts and encountered this man, balding, a face that looked like

it'd weathered a number of strokes and mustard gas. Standing in the middle of the street, he saw us approach and scowled but didn't move.

We approached this man. Petrich displayed his gun and asked if any Nazis were near. The man said nothing. His eyes were so brown they were almost black. He stared at us vehemently, irises wreathed in coal. We asked again, but again, nothing. Perhaps out of training habits, or maybe out of pity, the Russians and I kept walking when – and this is terribly immoral but, in the end vital – we should have killed him right there. Pity or not, his existence is a walking testimony to our own, a mouth capable of reporting to the first official he comes across, thus making our own escape that much more unlikely. Blaming him for this is to blame me for doing anything I possibly can to come back to you. These are instincts. This is what he knows to be best. But we didn't kill him then. We took maybe ten steps before hearing the sound of a hissing clap. Bright light scattering our schizophrenic shadows. We turned back to see a flare falling from the sky, his arm longitudinally aligned with his spine, a flare gun in his hand, smiling.

I was the first to shoot him, and that's not something I'm proud of. But you have to understand what would happen if the Nazi patrol that turned out to be set up only two blocks away had shown up and talked to him, a final stroke of misfortune on top of the potential doom the flare itself had already wrought. We didn't have a choice. I didn't have a choice. If you're happy your dad is there with you, helping you with homework, talking to you about how to approach the girl you like, then know that this man had to die for that. It isn't simple being me, here, in this place. Know that you're life comes with consequences.

We moved immediately. We picked up his body and lugged it into a nearby house. There was a family: a mom, dad, and two daughters, and we raised our guns and forced them

downstairs into their basement, where we laid ourselves flat. Guns pointed at these people, one of the Russians saying something in German that I have to assume wasn't far from, 'make a noise and you die.' The dead body was thrown onto the floor between us, a sort of centerpiece dead sun capturing our orbit. We waited until we heard footsteps above us. We held our breaths. One of the men upstairs called out something in German, though not long after they left the house, leaving us in the basement inhaling calculated amounts of air to keep still. All of us in the dirt. The dead man's eye seemed like it was on all of us at once, a vessel of God, unblinking and vacantly omniscient. In the Holocaust, according to my friend, it is up for debate if the Germans in charge felt any remorse for what they'd done.

The family, the real problem, held their faces against the floor in silence. Petrich said something in German, and they raised their heads to meet our pondering eyes. Darkness and stale air. We were collectively wondering what was next. Their eyes with the look of trapped animals; a resigned ferocity. We must be ghosts seen by nobody. It's obvious what comes next, but no one can bring themselves to do it.

We've established ourselves upstairs. We've had our guns pointed at them for four hours, unsure and afraid, everything still and silent with the occasional whimpering of the younger girl, who can't help but cry. Each family member wears a small armband with a large 'O' on it. We are yet to understand what these mean.

Learn that if I don't come home, you will still live a full life filled with success. I am not a necessary component. I will complicate things for you the same way my father complicated things for me. It seems that's the way of things. So I'll give you the adequate amount of complication now; what I would spread out over the span of your adolescence if I was there. You will be better than me in everything you do. You're eventual passion will become the defining

thing about you, and whether that be physics, writing, music – whatever it is, you will come to redefine it, change it and bring it to a level no one else could acquire. You will be remembered a hundred years from now because of the spectacular innovations you made to that field.

Innovations that will really change things. I know this. It's what my father told me. We are each another step towards perfection, towards grandiose importance, and while it crushes me to know that I will quite possibly die without anyone knowing my name, who I am, I find reconciliation in the fact that you exist; that you will take the heritable torch and run miles with it. Rudyard Kipling once wrote a poem that I would read to you if I could that ended with, 'Yours is the earth and everything that's in it/And – which is more – you'll be a man, my son.' I know of the consequences to this kind of pressure. How it will make you feel, at times. How when you produce something that isn't the best, you'll break, inside. This takes patience. Control. This process is slow and painful. I will do everything I can to be a part of it all, of your long and magnificent life, so I can complicate things even more for you. But if I can't, then understand: yours is the earth and everything that's in it, and you'll be a man, my son.

Know this.

With all my heart,

Your father.

Nick,

We've reached the Elbe. There's a fountain of a wolf atop a silver mountain with water pouring out of its open maw. Things are looking better. We haven't encountered anyone since the man on the road and I think I'll make it home so we can

Part Two: The End Comes

The end comes. Nicholas Dumane Jr. is in a park in Hamburg, Germany at 6 PM on August 9th, 2012 with his head buried in his arthritic hands, rejoicing in the fact that he is having some very serious and real emotions. There are other visitors to the park who are uncomfortable with his doing this, who are torn between a place of wanting to help and social repulsion at such vulnerability. Nicholas came into the park wearing an ironed, eloquent black suit and he was carrying a brief case filled with papers thinner than insect wings. He sat down on a bench overlooking the river, under a tree, and it was summer, and he popped open the old case and pulled out the old pages and read until his old eyes secreted about two hours' worth of tears. He sat there sobbing with the pages held at an awkward at-a-distance length from him so there was no issue of dripping.

The average human adult will pay five or six seconds actively being aware of substantial social disturbances. Said person will perceive the social disturbance, make an immediate judgment on how dangerous or disruptive said disturbance is to said individual's life and/or safety, and run through a subconscious list of ways this might affect them before continuing on in feigned obliviousness of anything happening outside the norm. The folks of Hamburg strolling through the park – families, wandering drug addicts, etc – chalk up the Nicholas crying situation to absolute zero on any pressing personal relevance. At least at first. But then as the sun sinks into industrial clouds the whole thing becomes increasingly socially perturbing. Like maybe something is very seriously wrong here. Maybe this old man has hit a very disturbing bottom and is in need of immediate social assistance. Passers-by have gone from face-down-just-ignore-him-it's-probably-something-personal-and-it-isn't-my-business to should-I-maybe-be-calling-

someone-right-now? The difference that really makes everyone take notice is the seizure-in-appearance sobs that have sent him from the bench down on to the pavement in a flailed fetal position.

Three days before the end, Nick Jr steps off a plane with directions to a particular hotel in the heart of the city, that has been established as the ideal base of operations geographically and culturally speaking by a hired guide named Arty, who has taken the liberty of both setting up Nick Jr's room and paying for a cab to the hotel, where he, Arty, will be waiting. There were some issues with his employer that made a personal trip to the airport impossible without making Nick wait an uncomfortably long time, so the cab, while impersonal, was a sort of last-resort that Arty accepted reluctantly.

There is a hesitant plan in place between the two of them, where actually seeing the city is extraneous to Nick, and the actual plan is just for Arty to investigate the possible existence of an old fountain of a wolf standing atop a silver mountain spewing water that stood before the 1945 bombings, that should be in some river-front park. Nick Jr is ready to compensate for the adjustments to Arty's typical profession, which Arty is more than happy to take, already very aware of the location of the park, which is a detail he keeps to himself so as to avoid coming off as some kind of conning son-of-a-bitch.

Nicholas Dumane Jr. came to this park at this time in order to read a handful of pages so that he could cry. Break down. Become overwhelmed entirely by the totality of catharsis. It's almost scary how transcendent the entire experience is.

There have been multiple instances in the course of his emotional catharsis where someone's concern level gets high enough to bring in the police to see just what exactly is going on. The police step up to Nicholas, who's face is a glistening reflection of the surface of the river that slithers through Hamburg's urban sprawl and ask if everything is okay and if he is in need of any assistance here. Nicholas responds with a curt shake of the head and has a look on his face, underneath the dripping wet tear/snot combo, that tells the police that he would very much appreciate some personal space. Though the violent sobbing attacks, at his age, are reason for serious alarm, or at least appear to be, and so they do a check-up on his vitals, despite Nicholas' countless reassurances that he's fine and there is no reason to check up on him medically. They conclude that aside from a possibly concerning irregular heartbeat, his vitals are okay, so they stop paying much attention and leave him be, advising the individuals who'd placed the calls to not hesitate should any apparent health issue come up.

It's all a process. It's all something Nicholas Dumane Jr. is rejoicing over, in a painful way; something that has come, he would say, to be the one thing that has injected total meaning into his life. He can be seen carrying his case of pages with him everywhere he goes. The case has made the European trek from Paris from London from D.C. from Denver: a long, tiresome journey that began a half-year ago, that he is using the entirety of his 401K to finance, and now it comes to this spot, in a park in Hamburg. He spends ninety percent of his time reading and rereading the pages and the other ten percent thinking about Nick III, David and Victoria back home, who he left behind, who are angry because they can't understand Nick Jr's fundamental need to explore the truth of these letters, meaning an extensive trip to Europe to both physically and spiritually be there in the place his father perished. One in every ten tears is for them, his family. The period of furious rumination is crippling and he is considering the possible

ramifications of the things he has left his family with, as in: how exactly do I expect them to consider my existence as a new-found man and a born-again father when it is this journey to become this new-found something that redefines everything they loath about me? And how am I going to walk through the door and look them in the face after all this? Where will I look? The update phone calls have been exacerbating their frustration instead of alleviating it. They ask if he's done yet, if it's been long enough for him to 'find himself.' He is a man with obligations. He needs to acknowledge these obligations. He informs them the emotional journey is coming along nicely, and is in fact closing in on the last known location his father ever stood in. The letters get more and more moving with each read. He'll be home soon, but first, really, he needs to see this through.

The hotel is ornately designed, gothic, built post-war, though the nightly rates are inexpensive probably due to the soggy air, peeling walls, and just overall repulsion of the appearance and most of the guests, who are scattered about the lobby so completely absorbed in their own doings that they give off the impression of nearing senility. Soul-crushing foreign pop hummed through the speakers. The clerk was speaking to a man dressed in an abrasively yellow shirt, who greeted Nick Jr before the clerk did. "It's not as bad as it looks, promise."

"Just wasn't really what I was expecting. Not what the pictures looked like."

"Eh, when are they ever. Arty." Arty has immaculately kempt hands.

"Nick."

"So I could only get you a room on the fourth floor, which, and I'm going to be honest with you here because that's what good guys do, is a secret hub of prostitutes. Mostly female, I think.' He looks to the insect-like clerk who gives a curt nod of the head. 'Mostly female. If

you're into that kind of thing." The clerk types furiously at his keyboard, loud mechanical clicks rolling off his fingers, expressionless. One of the guests stares intently into nothing, holding each arm out perpendicular to his torso, fisted hands placed flush against each other along the knuckled ridge, each thumb orbiting the other thumb in small, slow moving circles. "Anyway, I know this city like the top of my cock. Seriously, that well. Moved here out of college and I've done my share of exploring, let me tell you. If you want a look around I'm happy to do it, really. I get a special kind of enjoyment in being the guy who shows off his city to incoming foreigners. What time is it? I know of a place that epitomizes what you think of when you hear 'German Beer.' Feeling one?" The guest leans his head back, shuts his eyes and opens his mouth to the ceiling. "Ignore him." Arty says. "Come on, let's go."

This is the last time he will cry over these pages, in this park in Hamburg, on this grass. A snot/tear combo forms stalagmites from his nose and chin and his skin is trying with fierce determination to fall off his face. It is sometime past 8PM, the Angel of Death is washing her hands in the industrial river, and She turns to him.

The sun has set and the lights have come on and the city is selectively engulfed in night, the empty park desolate and deserted and there is only the occasional prostitute applying vibrant red to chapped lips and Nicholas lying still, staring at these pages.

Death is leaving the shore of the river, dawned in purple with magnificent black wings that fade into the night around her, approaching him in small, deliberate steps.

Death detests her by-nature morbid occupation and this resentment has forced Her to assume certain techniques to alleviate both Her own discomfort as well as the discomfort of Her

‘benefactors’ to this exchange. She has practiced the art of empathy – would probably shatter the statistical curve of an EQ test – which has turned out to have the opposite effect she had planned for. The effect of such diligent care ends up being an unmanageable depression over having felt the detailed agony of a myriad benefactors throughout her very long career.

“Let’s just say I was homosexual in 40s’ Germany.” Arty and Nick Jr are sitting in a bar, comments like this stemming from absolutely nothing, perplexing an increasingly unsettled Nick, who is sipping on his fourth beer, staring off at an assortment of patrons engaged in a placid, almost tranquil drinking game. “Let’s say I take part in a German allegiance of very intelligent individuals who decide to harbor fleeing Jews/Gypsies/Blacks/Pretty-Much-Everything-Not-Anglo-Saxon and I have a farm with an underground cellar of refugees and I’m taking them out of Axis-occupied territory and into safety in groups, when the coast is clear of course. I’m obviously taking on some major risks here, and you’re probably thinking I’m a good guy right?”

Arty speaks with dexterous flourishes of the hand. Nick Jr hesitates. “Uh, yeah I think I’d say so.”

“Right, but then what if I told you I was sneaking down there at night to express my true sexual self, so to speak? Let’s say I go down there and caress some of the younger men in the dark, because that’s where I feel truly right, inside, like neurological gears and cogs are clicking into this cosmic alignment of biological need, want, and spiritual completion. Let’s say I play with them and know they’ll play back out of a need to just be touched in the way I’m bubbly and excited to touch them.’ He looks over the rim of his beer glass for a second before sipping, Nick very much not getting his inevitable point. ‘Do you think I’m still a good guy?’”

“Uh. I mean I guess you’re still a good guy, as long as it wasn’t rape or anything.”

The bar is electrified by inebriation and a seizure-inducing jukebox playing The Beach Boys, casting a nostalgic blanket on the vibrantly colored walls with a poster of the map of Germany that states: DON’T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS FIRST TWO CHAPTERS. The drinking game seems to be based around the trading of cards, whenever someone gets above a certain decibel level they are required to take a substantial gulp from their drink. But in regards to drinking’s close relationship with amplified speaking volume, this becomes a sort of two-faced mechanism to the double agent mentality the whole game embodies that punishes excess noise while at the same time forcing the consumption of a drink that pretty much guarantees just-short-of screaming, due to the bumping music.

“But even with the young Jewish adult’s family not far away at all? Possibly aware of what’s happening? Even if, say, he has a young wife who is either dead somewhere or there in the same dark?”

“I mean, it’s definitely very awkward, I’d say, yeah, and I think if the guy has a wife, that’s a little messed up on his part, and maybe you going into the cellar knowing he has a wife is crossing some possible lines, but no I wouldn’t call you a bad guy. Where’s this coming from anyway?”

Arty grins, finishes off his glass and offers to buy another.

“Just the story of a granddad of a guy I know. The friend and I are wondering if it’s bullshit or not.”

“And?” Nick Jr asks. “Is it?”

There came a time of unbearable melancholy and sadness that existed in the dirt of the place where Nick Jr. had lived his long life. It saturated the wood of an old house; birthed flowers from the old dirt. He felt every day of his life a man walking through a city of ghosts and memories, and they all surrounded him and wanted so badly to get close and personal with him; push themselves like water through his polypeptide membrane skin, but they wouldn't, and in the end it's just him, there, living, surrounded by phantoms. The last years he lived in the town, he pulled away from everything that he swore stared back at him, refusing to listen. His words swallowed by a vacuum before they could reach anybody's ears. His skin a hermetic seal forbidding the passage of even air.

The pain of living became the pain of living there. In the city of Littleton, CO, in the shadow of the front range of the Rocky Mountains, Nicholas Dumane Jr. lived an emotionless life. In the eves of snowstorms, in the stillness, when nothing moves, he is uncomfortable and in pain from arthritic premonitions, and when the first flakes fall, they fall, for Nick, on the constructed memory-replacements for what was once there but was then, at some unrecalable point, taken away. On the first snow of the season, he is standing in his yard looking up at a flock of luminescent air balloons traversing a low sky. In the seconds before consciousness leaves him with a concussion on the ground, he feels a numbness begin in his fingertips. He feels this numbness run up his arm on the backs of blood vessels, up into his chest, and there is the feeling of God squeezing him, and he does not register the movements of his body until they've already been made, and he ends up on the ground not remembering falling to it. He is looking up at the flock of air balloons, each decorated in aggressive, modernist artwork reminiscent of Dali – the almost exact painting, though barely discernable from this distance, of Remedios Varo's *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* – and a woman standing over him with massive black wings

erupting from each shoulder blade. There were screams, he would later recall. There were screams and, eventually, there were sirens.

Triple bypass surgery. Doctors give his heart a year. He starts to consider things.

Vast cavities and the frequent appearances of microscopic black holes: the feeling of really, truly, not feeling anything. The idea of not remembering the date or location of his first son's birthday terrifies him, as in it gives him the sense that he ought to be terrified. This is bad. This is bad that he had a horrendously hard time remembering to check up on Nick III when Victoria would leave for work or for a night out with friends or wherever she went, and he'd find him holding a hand out towards a brown spider with a bulbous, radiant abdomen – an indicative mark of the females – and he would pick up his son and hoist him away, simultaneously liquefying the spider, feeling an infinitesimally small dose of the anxious, heart-rioting panic that should accompany this sort of occurrence in any other parent. This is bad. This is scary. This is scary that he has since childhood held the belief that there is something else inside of him, frantic, burning to escape. At night, it would appear at the foot of his bed in the form of a phantom, and the phantom would stare at him, edging into a humanoid form, genderless, these androgynous features crystallizing and then fading back into the shapelessness like a tide, breathing before receding back against the wall where it would dissipate like milk in water, these tendrils of viscous white oscillating on his dinosaur wallpaper – concealing raptors; suffocating Brontosauri – and then everything was again black, and the room was silent. This is scary that he had been raised in an environment that strongly urged against most, if not all forms of emotional expression; a mother so devoutly fickle in her attachment to infant Nicholas Dumane Jr. that his emotional reaction became categorized as beyond-ambivalent. As in: I could not care less if you left the room right now and never came back. As in: I'm giving up on this, on us. Bad men come

from here, this place. Bad men raise children and continue this neglect. The only redemption is that he has not committed any horrific physical/sexual atrocity towards his own family. He is trying to care. He is lying in a hospital bed really trying.

Death has just come from the bedside of a Mrs. Alice Talibot, who has suffered from what she's called, 'the neurological horror-show' of ALS for the past two years. Death comes to her when her grieving, hoping-for-the-end family members exit the room to give her a break, and – and this is the reason she specifically relishes in the opportunity to work with terminally ill benefactors, specifically those with ALS, because they are of the minority that greet Her with wide open arms, delighted by Her presence – and She takes her. It makes the job bearable. What does it say about a sentient, and holy being charged with the shepherding of souls from here to what's after that suffers crippling anxiety attacks regularly? What does it say about Her and Her omniscience when She often thinks She's on the proverbial edge, nearing psychotic breakdowns?

Before Mrs. Talibot, there was a ten year old who got spinally reconfigured in a hit 'n run, in Boston. The physical deformations are fitting symbols for the emotional taxation She faces. It is moments like these...

She is there to claim him in a fraction of a second, still tumbling through the air, the kid.

The park is located on the northern bank of the Elbe, and it's small, and Arty withholds the information of its location for the entirety of the second day, guiding Nick around the city into a variety of local hotspots and restaurants that had schnitzel that'll "blow your fucking mind, swear to God." Nick pushes and inquires about the park, feeling a rising desire to acquire the

peak to the catharsis he has been building towards for a year, this symphony of elegant melodies and cacophony, rising, building towards crescendo.

“I’m sorry, it’s just important. I’ve come a long way.”

They’re in yet another restaurant in a shabbier area of town, a number of guests huddled in a corner table, whispering, raising their hands in a toast, each holding a nail-sized tablet between index and thumb.

“Let’s say I had this wife who never complimented me and I’m some variation of Peter, the Russian Tsar. You know the one. Decapitated his wife’s lover and all. Let’s say it’s nothing that outrageous, no cheating or anything, but just this overall kind of self-collected coolness that just makes me more and more desperate to get approval. I exercise regularly, because, you know maybe that’s it, but then I get big, toned, and still nothing, which makes me think maybe I’m thinking on too shallow of terms, and maybe she’s transcended all of that and is at a level of total comfort and commitment, making me feel horrible for not also being at that level. It’s the 1800s so I’ve obviously never been with anyone else, but I’m sitting there on my plush throne breaking because of the countless ideations I’d heard about love and how love felt; I’m just not feeling any of them, and I’m worried. Let’s say I find other ways to try to find the big *It*, with a capital *I*, because I just feel bad every night lying next to her, and at least when I throw the chamber maids onto the linens they’d just spent an hour lying out, I feel absolved, spiritually. Am I a bad guy now? For doing this?”

“It’s just that I’m sacrificing a lot coming out here. It’s just really important that I find this park, and it’s not that I don’t appreciate all of this, I mean really I do, but I’m on a bit of a schedule here.”

“Let’s say I can’t escape the feeling that in the eyes of a woman, I am a pocket of Paleolithic clay that she molds herself into, working with things and ultimately using me as means of verifying her own beauty and intelligence and kindness, and I feel that her giving one hundred percent of herself over to me is a self-satisfying process, deep down, and at the end, all of her sacrifices are just fortification’s she’s making to her own faultless soul. It’s all really for her. Let’s say she’s not exactly cold to me as much as she’s just flawless and perfect, and I just don’t *get* her. I need something full of holes and snaking cracks.”

“Let’s just finish dinner, and then let’s go to the park. Then after, if you want, you can show me the city for the rest of the night and all of tomorrow until I leave. Okay?”

“And let’s say I can’t break the marriage because she’s the daughter of some important diplomat from a neighboring country and this union is giving the people a rest from a century of brutal warfare, so I have to go about finding love without her knowing. It’s every person’s right to love, don’t you think? I wouldn’t be a bad guy for just wanting what’s my right, don’t you think? I just want to know your opinion.”

“I agree. You wouldn’t be a bad guy. So is that okay? Show me the park and then we can meet up later?”

The men in the corner contemplate and compare the textures of their food, beer, and tongues, stare off into nothing, letting themselves slip into their psychedelic high. Arty polishes off the remainder of the schnitzel, throws back a beer and nods his head. Once at the park, before leaving, Arty gives him an address and a set of directions he’s scribbled onto a napkin for a bar he will be spending the rest of the night at, for when Nick is ready and done with the emotional journey he is in such need to complete.

Death is there, for the first time in front of him since Colorado, and there is fear. Of course there is fear. Nick Jr.'s old eyes light up with vibrant terror and he picks up his pages that are everything to him now, and he tucks them away into his bag and forces himself up, turns away and walks, illuminated and then shrouded in snap-shot images, moving away in fractions. Death wishes he wouldn't do this: end it this way. It is always so much harder, passing, when it is forced to come to this: the victim aware and alive for every second of it, there to protest and confess and feel. She takes a step forward. He turns a corner, heads down a block, and She knows that he sprints now, flabby legs slapping against each other beneath expensive fabric, his lunges like old elastic, stretched and flimsy, face wet again, nasally congested. He runs a block before spending the next two wobbling and heaving. He will begin again shortly. He will keep running, down the block, through Hamburg, until the streets take a turn towards potential lethality. He will pull out a napkin with an address for a bar scribbled onto it, and he will find his way there and wander into it looking for help, refusing to accept his approaching finale.

She finds seconds to practice steady breathing. Is overwhelming empathy part of Her predetermined game? Callousness is something unanimously advised in favor of, and yet She seems incapable of accomplishing it. Her ubiquity is understated: She is in all places at once, claiming lives varying from microbial prokaryotes to eukaryotic behemoths, a seeming impossibility, and yet She maintains equal cognition of Her myriad fractioned selves, each feeling the resistance to biological shut down, all pretty much petrified of Her image. Crippling self-esteem issues.

The end comes. Strength leaves him. He knows this.

When he was young, Nick Jr was honored with regular visits from young men who claimed a very personal acquaintance with his late father. Each of these men would request time alone to talk to Nick and only Nick, so it would be just them, the strange man and Nicholas Jr who felt no sense of stranger anxiety even as an infant, who would just sit there a sack of skin. A wall to paint onto. It was a regular homage to acknowledge that even in infancy, he looked just like him, the dad.

In adulthood, Nick Jr knows of his father only from what he remembers in these early years, what he was told by sobbing men. They always began composed, spinally erect. This is one of his first memories: the transformation from composed to whaling emotional exposure. These men begin with the basics: place they first met the father, how they were supposed to be acquainted, first impressions (first signs of cracking). Then there is sadness. Then there are tears. Then there is the floor and staring at the infant/child, just happy that they get to see him after having traveled so many miles to witness the recreation of that face.

This is a four year pattern. Nick Jr begins to understand his father as a prophet. And these are his disciples. Moved to tears.

The exterior of the German Red-Light District's bar is demarcated by a large GLORY sign, a hallmark beacon casting its auburn radiance over a sea of concrete desperation. Squishy sacks of broken will. Inside, it is soon made obvious that this is a Gay bar, each sex clustered in friendly groups, without the general ambiguity and frustration of heterosexual want and needing-to-have. Epileptic beats bump at terrifying volumes. Nick rushes in, through the crowd, and finds Arty by the bar, to whom he explains that he is in need of a place to hide; Death is coming.

"Jesus what kind of shit are you involved in?"

“Listen,” the desperation abundantly clear, “I really am about to die. I was down by the river and I saw Her and I know She was looking at me because I’ve seen Her before, and I know She thinks it’s my time, but it isn’t my time yet. You have to help me.”

GLORY maintains a legally independent proxy to a sex shop next door, though over the years, the adjacent shop mirrored its own hours off GLORY’s absurdly late shifts, at first because of the explosive rushes these late nights brought, but gradually as a means of becoming a staple to the LGBT community of most of northern Germany. There is, known amongst The Community, a door in one of GLORY’s bathroom stalls that will lead directly into one of the eight private pornographic viewing theatres in the sex shop. A mutual arrangement, the two businesses keep the hidden connection alive but under wraps for legal reasons, and after a vibrant explosion of business on both ends, end up pooling money into these theaters, refurbishing them with state-of-the-art flat screen televisions, full couches, glory-holes – for which the bar is known – and separate rooms with actual beds for more personal encounters, each room replete with condom/lubricant dispensers.

“Death’s on Her way right now, huh? Well then,” he touches Nick Jr’s hand effeminately, “I know just where to hide you.”

Death, in war, morphed into a sort of omnipotent film that coated the components of the air, permeated everything; rode on the tops of bullets into the soft flesh of soldiers. She lived in the metal. Death held the heads of Jews in Auschwitz while attending to the emotional torment of a young Soviet girl banished with her family to Siberia to either cannibalize or freeze to death in the arctic desert; timeless, She inhabited the swords and metal-tipped arrows in the Crusades

and, simultaneously, sat captive in multiple airliners headed for important US buildings, the planes themselves her sad vessels.

Life flashing before the eyes is an understatement. Emotional collapse and full non-sequential reorganization of memories that have emotionally pertinent information that would, in a slide-show sort of way, sum up the person's existence. You would imagine a heavy emphasis on family and close-ones in this summing-up of things, but in this case, it would be fair to say that these kinds of memories are the minority. Heart rate picking up and then slowing down. Things are ending now.

The minority: Nick Jr. is holding Nick III up above his head and he is grinning and telling him that this is what it's like to be a bird. He needs to make fierce cries. Point out critters and/or objects down below that he would wish to rip up with his talons if he in fact had talons and not stubby hands that have yet to develop the Ulnar grasp. Grasping objects that he points at are very difficult to hold onto once Nick Jr. lifts the little guy back up into the air, 'kawing' because he is an eagle with widespread white wings. "Can you kaw for me, little guy?" He holds N3 close to his face. "Kaw! Kaw!" Large inquisitive eyes and a smile that should be melting things internally. "Kaw!" The sound is a squeak, and he flaps his little arms.

The majority: piecing things together bit by bit. It is 1955 and he is in Arlington by a grave. An old friend of his father's went to great lengths to convince Nick's mother to go out and take care of herself – check in to a spa, or whatever – and that he would love to just watch Nick Jr for the day before he takes off for good out to a station in Korea. It's all a guise because what he is actually going to do is take Nick Jr to see his father's grave because he finds it quintessentially important for a boy to see the place his father rests in. The stone slab is white

and bears nothing but a name and a span of time. Nicholas Dumane: 1918-1945. No epitaph. A slot of land geometrically considered; a slot in a filing cabinet. ‘That’s your dad, right there,’ the friend says. ‘Well sort of... this is where we go to remember your dad. I would be lying if I told you he was actually down there, beneath our feet.’ He stands up straight, salutes. Nick copies, and then it is done and they are walking back down the hill away from the empty grave, Nick very much upset by the fact that that was it. He does not consider his father again for fifty-four years.

With the incredible amount of expansion the GLORY/sex shop has seen over the years, the one secret bathroom door had to be implemented into every stall, both male and female. Arty leads Nick to the bathroom and tells him to go into a stall and through to the other side, of which Nick Jr is reluctant. “Don’t worry,” Arty opens the stall door. ‘No one’s going to find you back here.’

The entire thing is arranged in a circular fashion, a multitude of fifteen+ rooms aligned centrifugally around one large room filled with nothing but mats, used for something more adventurous than the more personal encounters the individual rooms can offer. The light blue walls resonate the feeling of infancy that comes across to Nick Jr as revolting and twisted, and they are adorned with pieces of modernist art that seem intended to distort the viewer’s impression of every-day items/events such as the banality of going to the bathroom or a baseball bat, all of which amplify the discomfort. The sound of sexual climaxing – both male and female – is a constant droning roar that resonates down the circular hallway that surrounds the complex of rooms. There is the amalgam of smells: water-soluble lubricant, sterile disinfectant, perfume/cologne, and post-sex sweat/bodily secretions. Nick Jr is in a vicinity dedicated to the

experimentation and exploration of a variety of sexual pleasures. He feels an increasing level of dread, and the need to leave. He says through choked words, “I think maybe you got the wrong impression of me,” and heads back towards the door to GLORY’s men’s room.

“Wait, wait, hold on.” Nick is already headed for the door. Arty grabs his arm. ‘Please, I’m sorry. This is too forward, I know. This wasn’t a smart way to do this, even though this really is a safe place and they even have beds and – no wait, I know. But please. It’s just that... Please. You’re safe here, and all personnel will flat-out deny the existence of this place, for legal purposes, so this really makes sense if you’re in danger. I won’t try anything I swear. Nothing. We’ll just stay in a room and wait for the danger to pass, and we can just talk, and... you’re just such a beautiful man and – no wait. Please. I know. But please stay. Just stay here with me and let me look at you and talk. Come on, I’m sorry. Please stay. Please.’

The anxiety is its own nightmare accompanied by trembling knees and a narrowing vision, veering into a narcoleptic attack in which She will lose it, this moment happening at all times in all places at once, from bacteria up the molecular-complexity ladder, a prominent issue in the general concomitants to the occupation. Death has read the DSM – all six editions (the IV and IV-R counted separately) and has come up with seven recurring psychopathologies, the bulk of which fall under the Anxiety and Dissociative categories, and being well versed in a variety of therapeutic techniques, She has established a meditative routine of constant slow-breathing.

On the international flight, Nick Jr thought of how his life might have been vastly different if the existence of these letters had been made to him upon their initial delivery, had his mom not hid them intentionally, and perhaps the countless psychological issues Nick Jr suffered

from would have been nonexistent hypotheticals had the letters come to him, and had he known of his loving, unfortunately-deceased father.

His mother did a fantastic job of concealing the pages in a plastic bag that she kept under a secret compartment of her underwear drawer, on top of which she kept a variety of sex toys (i.e. dildos, clitoral vibrators, plugs etc.) to discourage her son from continuing his search if his search ever happened to bring him there. There is something truly terrible about being jealous of your own son. Wanting the love he received. Competing. It gets hard, over the years, to look at his face that looks too familiar.

She holds the anger through a bitter life and when she dies, she leaves everything including the dresser filled with the lingerie and the sex toys and the bag full of letters to Nick Jr who decided to not attend her small, communally unnoticed funeral. Nick resigns the contents of the will to the garage with thoughts of landfills, but not before his son, Nick III discovers, in the drawer, under the pile of sex toys, a bundle of old pages packaged in brown paper. The letters begin as a nostalgic curiosity only to quickly mutate into a dangerous emotional obsession that leads to an anti-family, very self-centered catharsis that pushes him out of his home and into an airplane to follow his dead father's road-to-war, as close as he can follow it with his post-surgery heart. It terminates in Hamburg in effusive tears. Death gets closer to him.

Outside of GLORY, the luminescent sign casts the block in red. Nick Jr hurries to set as much distance between the place and himself as he can, leading him through the convoluted labyrinth of Hamburg's Red Light District, terrified at the idea that he truly cannot escape Her presence and this really is it, igniting a series of haunting memories revolving around his

inability throughout life to succeed in any sort of loving relationship, including the particularly soul-raising lack of a relationship with his son.

In 1991, the first of his two sons is born into an umbilical noose. He looks just like him, Nick Jr. He is already set on a genetically predetermined path, intuitive and emotionally complex, distant. He is already receding into himself, making demands to live with his aunt and uncle when he's fifteen, reading through Nick Jr's words with terrifying accuracy in a way that disarms Nick Jr and makes him fundamentally unsettled by the paranoia that there are no secrets kept hidden in conversations with his son. He already has the x-ray gaze of a seasoned therapist.

In 1998, Nick III comes crying into their room to explain a dream where he was standing in the mouth of a volcano on a bridge made of transparent stone, where there was a platform with both parents tied to a dead tree, and before him stood Death who told him he had to choose which parent got to live. His attempts to give both Nick Jr and Victoria an equal amount of tears so as to avoid giving away his answer are obvious and totally transparent and Nick Jr doesn't sleep for a week because he is haunted by the knowledge of who his son chose.

In 2005 his second son, David, who is the introverted equivalent of a physically abused turtle, attempts suicide for the first time. Both sons get involved in ski racing and one day, Nick Jr keeps David back from race training to inquire about his son's emotional state only to receive this vacant look equal to Nick III's in its terror, only in an entirely separate but equally perturbing way. Nick III's eyes penetrated, it seemed to Nick Jr, anyone who stared long enough into them, a spiritual Medusa, while David's eyes were always turned inward, Medusa's eyes plucked out and turned back onto her, staring herself into petrified stone.

In 2009, Nick III is desperate. Terrified of going nowhere. Ski racing is a sport of merciless brutality and Nick III is feeling that he has spent his entire life dedicated to the wrong

path. An inch can mean the difference between success and a crash that ruins his back and leaves him the next day on the floor, fighting to maintain consciousness. An entire life dedicated to an all-inclusive sport, sacrificed memories he never got to experience, and in return, he is given physical disability. He feels he has been all this time living on the wrong side of an inch. Nick Jr responds with the sneaking suspicion that his son's emotionally raw plea is secretly a missile heat-locked on his, Nick Jr's own failings as a father and as an overall human being. "Dad, I'm talking to you." Nick Jr once heard a fellow ski racing dad tell his son, who had just scored somewhere in the bottom ten out of one hundred-fifty racers, that he was the premier star of the entire hill; it was just that nobody knew it yet. He smiled at his defeated ten-year old and said, "Hey, don't be so upset. Every male in the Attson family has been a late bloomer. Just give it a few years and you'll be winning these things. I can feel it." A glimmer of hope in his young, unknowing eyes. "Dad, can you fucking say something? Anything. Can you just acknowledge that you can hear me at all?"

Nick Jr is deep into the contorted heart of the Hamburg urban sprawl, his chest tightening, feeling weak, and he leans up against the wall of some apartment complex and lowers himself to the ground, emotionally and physically exacerbated. "What are you running from?" An old man with a hockey mask on his lap sits on a blanket at the end of the wall, looking savagely meditative, a facial expression of perfect composure. "Before you say anything," the man says. "The answer is yes. I am John Lennon, and no, as you can see I'm not dead, making the question of why I have this mask probably pretty obvious."

Breathe. Time is closing in now. She is hear while simultaneously claiming a stray, Ukrainian dog with her five-puppy litter, who each fall ill after consuming the exhumed body of

a homeless man who was a month prior stabbed to death over a loaf of bread. She is under the ocean falling through layers of aquatic life with a Blue Whale bleeding out in the dark. Breathe. This will not be over soon. This will always be. There is this and that is all. Relax.

In his early years, Nick Jr went through the typical fatherless-child phase of assigning paternal heritage to a wide assortment of professional and iconic figures. I'm Joe DiMaggio's secret kid. This is the big one. He tells this to his classmates regularly.

The story goes as such: Right before DiMaggio takes his father/son picture for the cover of SPORT Magazine, he reads an angry letter from none other than Lilly Carpenter, Nick Jr's aggravated, struggling mother, stating that she will not stand idly by and raise a kid alone while that kid's father revels in the monetary glory of athletic stardom, putting DiMaggio between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Because of the irreconcilable consequences of announcing the unintended product of an affair, DiMaggio strikes a deal with Ms. Carpenter to fund young Nick Jr's expenses; an all-inclusive deal ranging from trips to the ice cream parlor to college tuition, and they became DiMaggio's secret family, the American legend, blackmailing him regularly to keep the pressure mounted and the checks coming. How else did they (they being Nick Jr's classmates) think Nick's family could sustain their lifestyle with an unemployed single mother? The only shame in it, really, was that Nick would never get to meet his all-star dad because of the public blowout it might cause. Similar stories evolved with the times; similar athletes and musicians. He at one point was the born-to-be-rock-prodigy son of the one and only King himself, Mr. Elvis Presley, though he was yet to have inherited his father's uncanny ability to get the ladies.

A fluid identity persists until now, on the eve of the end. He is, ultimately, unbelievably afraid of the truth, of claiming for certain that *this* is who he is, and that doing so would seemingly solidify him in a permanent state of contentment in which all forward movement comes to an end. This is it. He's this. Is it okay that he is this? Should he ever be okay with being the person he is, okay with the many mistakes and flaws that could potentially expand into catastrophes for his social and professional life? He considers himself split into two entities: a future, ideal self and the person he is now, a dichotomy that cannot be reconciled until the dichotomy no longer exists. Until he is ideal.

"I'm part of a secret society, you know." John Lennon's ominously stoic face is offset by his gregariousness and possible mental instability.

Nick sits back, the pain in his chest refusing to subside. He is staring across a wet street painted in shadows. On the weathering wall of an old building, a figure is appearing like a hesitant reflection, an anthropomorphized face found in patterns coming to life. The figure is white and is constructed of smoke that rolls off the wall in long tendrils, and is wearing an old helmet and an old uniform. He is a young man with a smile of faded decades that hides very intense sadness under old teeth. He is looking at Nick Jr. He says, "Welcome home."

"That's actually making it sound way cooler than it really is though, because it's actually a shady and very powerful group, and I have to admit I'm actually scared by them most of the time. We're called The Organization, or The O, because apparently over the hundred-fifty year history, there's been too many issues with translation and disagreement on what our purpose really is. All I'm going to say is that we started in what-was-then Prussia for the sole purpose of

rallying German Nationalism, but then in the WWI era, we noticed just how deranged German nationalism was really getting so we changed our whole direction.”

The phantom materializes from the stone and glides towards Nick Jr across the street. John Lennon does not seem to register any sort of ethereal disturbance, leading Nick to believe that the entire event must stem entirely from his own head. The phantom comes closer and Nick can decipher through the slithering tendrils of smoke that the phantom is smiling. “You look just how I imagined. You look like me.”

“There’s something about escorting Jews out of areas of high prosecution in the Second World War. I’m going to be honest with you here; I did a lot of digging around and found some weird stuff and my conclusion is that I don’t really know what exactly our cause is anymore. It seems the bulk of our most obvious up-front work is in African countries, subverting guerilla warfare, taking out genocidal political figure-heads in non-obvious ways, and reestablishing new governments every decade or two, all while maintaining a certain underground quality so total that no one even knows were there. We’re this big shadow covering everything, and I’m right in the middle of it. Covered. And I can’t see any way out because the shadow stretches as far as I can see. I don’t know what they do in first-world countries like the US, but I can’t imagine it’s anything good. I’m just a courier for the whole system. I’m on the wrong-life path. There’s only so much mail you can secretly sift through until you’re found out. I’ve been on the wrong path for a while now and I think I’m in some serious trouble. Jesus, and to think I used to be *the* John fucking Lennon.”

The phantom bears a striking resemblance to Nick Jr. He is adorned in military accoutrements, smiling sympathetically. “I want you to understand what’s happening. I want you to know that I am here now. This is how to be strong.”

“And I do know that we house our operatives almost exclusively in mental health clinics across the country. I think it’s supposed to be a kill-two-birds deal that was the idea of some retired operative from the 70s who dealt with 3rd world communist regimes, where they can disguise our operatives in an investigatory-immune system that the police can’t get at very easily, while also actually dealing with the PTSD tendencies a plethora of the operatives end up suffering from. The drawback was having a slew of actual psychologically-in-need patients finding out about the whole system, which resulted in a few under-wraps executions. They’ll walk in on some shady meeting and then it’s just over for them. Then they better get out and fast. I’m just terrified I’m next. Hey, whoa, why are you crying?”

The phantom kneels next to Nick Jr, paternal care emanating, wanting to hold him through what is about to transpire.

“But wait.”

“I know.”

“But hold on.”

“I know.”

“But no. This isn’t over yet, okay? This isn’t because now I’m what I know I need to be.”

“Yes.”

“Now I have become myself. And it’s because of you, and I really just wish you could have been there and maybe you could have lived and you could have just been there. I know you couldn’t have, though. I know that you tried so hard. I am so sorry it wasn’t enough. I’ve missed you all this time, but I’m so happy that you are here now, at the end. I always knew you would be.”

“Of course you knew. Of course.”

“But listen, this just isn’t the end. It isn’t. Because what would be the point? What would God’s point be in revealing you to me be if I can’t go back to the family I fucked up so bad to make things right? Why would He do that?”

“You don’t understand.”

“I mean I think I’m really different now. I’ve really done some growing up and I know who I am and what needs to be done and I’m ready now. I’m ready to be a family-man who is alive and present and there.”

“Understanding is a lot to ask. I understand.”

“This isn’t it because this doesn’t make sense. There wouldn’t be any point.”

“I understand that you don’t understand.”

“I understand what I’m losing here and how I cannot lose it. I can’t lose it. I am so incredibly scared of losing it.”

“And that understanding will take a very long time. I love you. So much. Now just hold on, and dry those eyes. Just look at me. Look at me. I am so happy just looking at you. I thought it’d never happen. It’s very hard for me to know what is about to transpire; the predestination of it. But it will be over soon. Look at me. Think of me. Think of the happiness here, right now. Think of the gift we are both being given right here, right now. Think of nothing else. Look at me. This will all be over soon.”

Relax. The name of this game is empathy’s cross-breed with resignation. Breathe.

Death is there now, adorned in purple, black wings spread wide. She steps forward to a sobbing Nicholas Dumane Jr looking up into air, into the eyes of his phantom father.

“I know this is scary stuff,” John Lennon says. “I know how you can be terrified by this. It’s intimidating, just knowing there’s a group of people out there ever-vigilant, fucking with things. Believe me, I work for them, and *I’m* scared at least half the time. I’ve gotten paranoid. I think it’s my time every time I round a corner or open a door. I think, ‘this is it.’ I’ll tell you one thing: I’m so tired. I mean if it’s going to happen, then I just want it to happen.”

And the phantom of Nick Jr’s father comes in close, tries to comfort him, his son, make him feel that all of this is going to be okay, and his family will in fact miss him, and not just uncaringly lay flowers at a tombstone, and even though he’s made his fair share of mistakes, everything is still okay because at least he tried. That’s all, in the end, anyone can ask – did you try? – and Nick Jr would be stunned, his father states, at just how many people in this modern age leave this world answering ‘no.’ “Know that I am proud of you.”

“And I stay up nights just wondering how ubiquitous The O really is; like how deep does it all go? Is every government official of a developed country also signed into The Organization? Is it only me here asking questions? Do you think, from what I’ve told you, that if, say, some guy was to kill an operative he thought might be trying to kill him, and then proceed to dispense of that body in a Southern California tar pit, would The O be inclined to destroy this person? I think the answer is probably pretty apparent.”

“Learn that you don’t have control of this. Let go. Learn that there is much more at play here, and that you’ve done all you’ve been able to do.” Death lowers Herself before Nick Jr, looks into his watery, petrified eyes, and smiles, tries to make him feel better. Tries to get him to know that this will all be over soon, and that his family will be fine. They will endure. “You have

your limits.” The phantom’s ethereal form is peeled away in wisp-like tendrils, disintegrating in the air anatomically, becoming nothing. The phantom says, “It is absurd to expect that you would become anyone other than yourself.”

“But what if maybe that wasn’t actually an operative, but my paranoia tricked me into thinking it was, and I committed a real murder on a real guy? Then what? Am I a bad person now?”

Death wraps Her wings around Nick Jr, eclipsing the world and everything in it, maintains Her perfected smile, orchestrating a cerebral shut down, neurotransmitters carrying memories jumping across synaptic gaps for the last time, dying in the heart of the heart of the neuron, until, finally, everything goes still.

“You’re a very quiet guy aren’t you? Is it because I’m frightening you? Is it because you know I’m secretly in fact a very bad guy and you just don’t want to say anything? You’re it, aren’t you? You’re who’ve they sent for me. Can you at least look at me before you do it? Can you just acknowledge that you can hear me at all?”

Part Three: Underground

Doctor Matthews, M.D., Session #21: Nicholas Dumane III.¹

Portland, OR. The Anchor Psychiatric Rehabilitation Clinic, 3:00 PM.

Note: Treatment of depression appears to be failing. Increase in desperation and a return of intense rumination. Mentions of suicide in regards to self. Consider consulting Dr. Adams for a switch in medication. Consider a suicide watch if things progress as they've been.

Dr. Matthews: Good afternoon, Nick. How are you feeling?

Nicholas Dumane: Fine.

DM: What's been on your mind?² I know last time we ran out of time, so I just want to establish a pacing. See what we have to cover.

ND: I've been thinking mostly about David.

DM: Okay. Let's talk about David.

ND: I've been thinking a lot about the fact that it takes probably between two and three hours to die in the snow. There's that initial feeling of stinging cold, but then you get numb and the whole experience, if you really think about it, probably wouldn't be all that bad. You wouldn't feel anything except a fleeting consciousness and a teetering over the mouth of oblivion, which is still definitely tragic especially considering his age, but all and all, it could

¹ On July 22nd, 2016, Nicholas Dumane III vanishes. Being his psychologist, and having contributed all I could to the police investigation of the incident, I still feel a lingering curiosity towards the entire thing, and I am wondering if I may have missed something in past sessions with him. The inconclusive report has too many holes and burns at me, seems to be asking for someone to go looking deeper. This is for my sake. I've taken a leave from The Anchor in order to recollect myself and so that I may hope to come to some resolution in regards to this issue. This is the transcript of our last session.

² January 20th, Nick tells me he thought he'd been followed on his way to our weekly meeting, but upon further questioning, dismissed it as a wandering schizophrenic patient convinced of some delusion, something that I readily dropped. Police reports of Nick's room, where he was last seen, report no apparent signs of a struggle.

have been worse. And his neck was broken, bone snapped, but still with enough neural connection in the spinal cord to keep him breathing, so he didn't even feel the cold and the systematic organ shut-down that killed him. Which is good. It could have been worse. And when you factor in the relatively easy death freezing offers and plus the fact that when he died he was essentially a paraplegic, I'd say it was the death we all could have wished for him. He was probably dead an hour after the branch snapped.

DM: I'm hearing a little positivity. That's good. But I'm wondering why you're calling his suicide something you wished for³.

ND: I'm just happy it was maybe not a horrible way to go. I'm happy he didn't die in some catastrophically painful incident like a car crash or being mauled by a wild animal.

DM: Do you think this sort of thought process – considering that his death was in fact relatively painless – helps you in any way?

ND: I don't know. I mean, probably not considering I can't stop thinking about it. Him in the snow. Everything I just told you is how this thought starts out but then it always sort of digresses, and I end up thinking that painless death is still a consolation for the fact that death has happened in the first place. I mean he hung himself from a tree in front of our house and then that branch, which turned out to be way weaker than he'd thought, broke and he ended up lying in the snow for three hours until my mom came home. And he was probably completely conscious and unable to move the whole time, unable to move even his jaw and eye lids because a neck break that high up is all-inhibiting, which forces me to consider the slim-to-none odds that he didn't die from that alone, the neck break. Instead he sort of just watched the snow fall and maybe he felt some sort of resignation, like an internal shut-down. Lying there slowly losing

³ It was statements such as these that led investigators to their conclusion.

track of time and space, leaving only an amalgamation of memories for him to go over before death finally came and took him. A lot of hypothetical bullshit. Exactly the kind of rumination I should be avoiding. It gets me into trouble, I know, but it's like my mind's its own person. It's like this person is always against me. I keep recreating the image.

DM: Let's revisit the image. Explain it to me.

ND: David lying there in the snow, possibly wishing to be saved, which is a typical response in his failed suicide attempts – this aspect of intense, immediate regret where his biological resistance to death catches up to what's happening and sends him into this full-fledged panic that demands attention and consolation for what he's stupidly done, and possibly making him think about how grossly unfair it all is, dying unnoticed by a family who had started dealing with his depression issues like it was a standard routine.⁴

DM: What do you mean by standard routine?

⁴ Note: Nick's constant reference to his disdain of routine found again in one of Dr. Atlas' group sessions, of which, Dr. Atlas was kind enough to give me a written transcript:
Dr. Atlas, MD, Session #12, 2:00 PM Group Nickname: The O.
Portland, OR. The Anchor Psychiatric Rehabilitation Clinic.

ND: I figured this would be more meditative than anything else and all of this heavy internally-directed focus would yield an unlocking-of-sorts and I would 'come alive' the way I'd imagined intense therapy paired with anti-depressants would make one 'come alive.'

Dr. Atlas: What do you mean by 'come alive?'

ND: Alright, well take for example Walter Sigby, who isn't in this particular group, sure, but we all hear the stories of this emotionally flat guy who comes in here and doesn't say a word at a single meeting for four months until finally he bursts into tears all over the floor, confessing to this tormenting pain inside over his guilt for having repeatedly stolen money from his financially decrepit mother. And obviously there's something else going on there, but that powerful catharsis – or in my case, the lack thereof – is the point. Five months and I'm still not feeling shit. I feel like everything is just routine here, going through the same motions. And I'm really worried about the fact that I'm just not seeing any improvement.

DA: How is the group responding to Nick's frustration? Lyndie, I know you've talked before about feeling very 'stagnant.' How are you reacting to Nick?

Lyndie Kyder: Uh, I mean, yeah, like it's something I'm identifying with for sure. I don't know. Reaction is a weird question. I'm not like reacting, or anything. I'm just sitting here listening and nodding my head in agreement and I don't know, I mean I guess it's hard to see him so upset because I know just where he's coming from.

DA: Is there something you want to say directly to Nick?

LK: I mean... I just did say something.

ND: Like any other routine. Come home from after-school race training, unload my ski bag with my sweaty speed suit so it can air, spray the inside with Ocean Breeze, grab a Nature Valley bar from the pantry, check to make sure David hasn't tried again and watch something mindless on the television. Routine.

DM: Sounds like it must have been very stressful.

ND: ...

DA: Would you say you were shocked when you found that he had in fact attempted to take his life?

ND: Considering that the first time he did it, he was thirteen, I'd say no matter how many blood-soaked towels or empty pill bottles you shoved into my face, I wouldn't have felt shock. Let me tell you how the whole deal would go down. I'd come home from training, unload my skis and air out my speed suit, find David passed out in a bathtub of blood – which is where he is probably ninety percent of the times he does this – call mom who will come up, hoist him onto her shoulder and put him in the car, and drive to St. John's where Dr. Vane will be waiting pretty much like clock-work for this annual occurrence. Mandatory seventy two hour suicide watch, which is when coaches say I'm really in the zone the most⁵, and then counseling three times a week. Zoloft, Cymbalta, Paxil, Prozac, Xanax and even Lithium when it got really bad, which were all beneficial for a time, but then something would happen and everything would start all over again.

⁵ Coach Paul Brown, 1998 NCAA Champion, University of Colorado alum, stated over the phone, 'Nick's best skiing was when his mind was occupied with anything but skiing,' a statement that is widely agreed upon by all of those close to Nick, illuminating his tendency to live almost exclusively inside his own head. Statements such as these validate the investigator's conclusions. The evidence mounting and I still resist accepting it. Perhaps out of a sense of responsibility for Nick's well-being, I hope to find some other explanation. An absurd proposition: I enjoy the idea of Nick as an escape artist, eating cereal at home even as I write this.

The car rides to the hospital felt as if we'd all been stuck on a post-war train headed home. No one speaking, everyone captivated by their respective windows and somebody like Earth Wind and Fire playing softly to mask the tension. Which is the most absurd song choice imaginable for a situation such as this, I know. A suicide dilemma and the premier funk group of the 80s is playing in the car. My dad would do insensitive shit like this.

God, my fucking dad.⁶

DM: I notice you bring up your father. Was there something about the way he handled David's attempts that bothered you?

ND: Well that's the other issue I wanted to touch on, not to switch topics because I definitely still have a lot to say about my brother, but I've been doing some reading on genetics and it's just got me thinking. Really, it's made me scared that I'm making the same fucking mistakes my dad made, like maybe I'm becoming just as emotionally broken as he was, and it's all just some Nietzschean eternal recurrence where I'm doomed to repeat the same flawed, miserable life my dad had. "A demon steals to you in your loneliest loneliness and says to you

⁶ Doctor Mathews, M.D., Session #10: Nicholas Dumane III.
Portland, OR. The Anchor Psychiatric Rehabilitation Clinic, 2011

ND: I don't know how I feel knowing he's dead. I certainly don't feel sad. He was a prick, and I was put into the uncomfortable position of having to assume the 'father role' for David throughout his entire life because dad would provide and technically be there, but be so distant and unattached all the time, that I often wondered just how cognizant he was of anything about my life, who I was, what I liked, other than the general fact that I was alive and I was his genetic offspring. I say offspring intentionally, because 'son' just doesn't taste right.

DM: Did you ever get the chance to voice these concerns to him?

ND: I told him he was worthless. I asked if he could even hear me when I'd ask him for advice, when I'd just fill him in on the way things were going. You get to a point with someone like that before turning off completely.

DM: Does it anger you that you never got to really express these feelings towards your father?

ND: There isn't much of a catharsis in saying this to a tomb stone. The guy who was actually there when my dad died – some mentally ill guy from Vermont who thought he was a secret mailman or something – said my dad cried a lot at the end, so I guess that's something.

DM: What if we did a little role playing exercise where you imagine that I am your father. What do you say to me?

ND: I say fuck you. That's what I say.

*Session terminated.

that you will have to relive this life exactly as you've lived it down to every detail... would you curse it or rejoice in it" and all that shit.

DM: Do you think his death changed anything about the way you see your father?

ND: I know this is horrible, but really, it kind of makes me even angrier at him.⁷

DM: How so?

ND: Because it's his fault. He left. Which is actually my fault, too. I was the one who found the fucking letters in that dresser. Well, first I found all my grandmother's sex toys when I was with a friend – which is just fucking revolting – and my friend thought it was hilarious and had plans of slipping the toys into random girls' backpacks, and that's when we found the letters, in this bag underneath all of that. Makes you wonder what kind of fucked up woman my grandma was for going to those lengths to hide those letters from him, my dad I mean. And the letters were good, like really powerful, and I know I felt moved by them, and I remember thinking 'god damn, why couldn't *this* have been my father?' I mean this guy cared; really *cared*. And it just made me realize how shitty of a dad I had, like how he'd just sit there and give you this vacant, petrified look whenever you'd try to talk to him about something real and important. My friends actually thought my dad was scared of me.

⁷ I discovered a number of letters written by Nick's mother, Victoria, sent to Nick throughout his time here. They were never mentioned in our session.

Dear Nick,

It's me again! I'm not paying for that phone for nothing, mister! I was just cleaning up today and I found those old *Land Before Time* VHS' that you and David used to love so much. I'm going to put them in you nostalgia bin under your bed for when you have kids. That'll be so fun! What else can I tell you? Winter is coming soon so of course I'm scrambling to find a reliable plow-guy for the driveway. I tweaked my back last winter trying to shovel it myself. But don't worry, I'm fine!

It's just so quiet here without everybody! I've been playing some of dad's music just to keep the place a little less empty-feeling. You should see how bored Casper looks all the time. Anyway, I really hope you'll come home soon! At least visit for Christmas, okay? I hope you're feeling better. I hope they're helping you to get outside of that head of yours. I know how strong you really are!

Love you,
Mom.

DM: We talked about –

ND: And but here's the best part; how it's all my fault. I wanted to give it to him to make him feel bad, like a guilt trip. I wanted him to read it and feel like fucking shit, and I had this comment in my head that I'd say to him once he was crying at the end of the letters that was something like, 'Yeah, *that's* what a real dad is like, you asshole,' which I didn't end up saying because when he actually did cry at the end of the letters, I just felt really bad and guilty. I mean how was I supposed to know they'd rip his world apart that bad? He couldn't even look at David or me after that. It was bad before, but he couldn't even take being in the same room after he read the letters, and when he left he didn't even tell us; he told mom. I remember I wanted to drive after him and beat the shit out of him.

DM: What were you hoping to accomplish when you gave him the letters?

ND: Shit, what time is it?

DM: About 3:20.

ND: Shit, okay well let's go back to David, because there's still a lot more about David.

DM: Okay.

ND: Wait, where was I on all that?

DM: He'd attempt and you're dad would play Earth, Wind and Fire on the way to the hospital.

ND: Right, he tried in the tub. And I'm sure you can imagine how complicated and fucked that whole picture got after so many attempts. One day, maybe a week after he'd returned from the hospital, my mom leaned against the bathroom door and asked if he was okay, having noticed he'd been in there for 10+ minutes. When he didn't respond, even after my mom slams on the door in this desperate panic probably thinking 'fuck, not again,' we forced down the door

only to find him laid out in the tub jacking off with his phone propped up against a bundle of towels on the floor streaming some pretty raunchy porn. I remember he was absolutely infuriated and his whole face turned Santa's-hat-red while clutching his boner between his thighs screaming at us to get out. And this doesn't happen just once, which is the truly absurd part.

After so many times barging in and seeing this, which I imagine is the last thing any mother wants to witness, we decide that he's doing well enough with the new round of antidepressants to not have to barge in unexpectedly, and after a while, things are better and we aren't feeling the need to pay high school friends and high schoolers who don't really know him to give us weekly progress reports and one-to-ten scale ratings on his sociability and an approximation on how many times they see him smile. We aren't calling the teachers any more. Everything's going well, and then, once we've gotten comfortable again, he tries.

I don't know what to make of it, because it was like he'd do shit like this as a means of making sure the space was safe. Like that was his go-to, where if he really started feeling horrible again, he could go to that tub and think about or actually try ending it all. I brought this up to my mom, and she said that obviously we'd do everything we could to make sure it didn't come to that, but how much could we really do for someone who really just doesn't want to be here anymore.

DA: I remember you once mentioned how you often felt very alone in your parents' house⁸. You said it was hard to not gravitate towards isolation. I'm wondering if maybe that was your emotional reaction to David's depression.

⁸ Session #3: ND: I grew up in this six-and-a-half thousand square feet house where everyone could find their own space. I remember when I was in middle school I'd spend days at a time in my basement playing this game called *Islanders* where you constructed a fully self-sustainable island and had to plunder this place called The Underground, where The Devil would send forth his armies in increasing difficulty levels, and each wave gave you the option to 'be tempted,' which meant you let your self-sustaining kingdom and all of your villagers fall into ruin while you got a shit ton of power for joining The Underground.

ND: You mean like I sought out isolation as a way of distancing myself?

DM: Do you think you did that? Distance yourself?

ND: I'm not sure if distancing myself is all that accurate, but at times, yeah, I sought out space away from him. I wouldn't say distancing though because I can't even tell you how many times it was me who finds him in the tub⁹. It affected my social life; ruined my sex life. Imagine the impossibility of my family's predicament involving the starts and inevitable conclusions of romantic relationships. I was downstairs with this gorgeous girl. I mean like unbelievably gorgeous, with a body no high-school girl should rightfully have and these big endearing eyes. That's a pretty juvenile description of a woman isn't it? Boobs and eyes. But anyway so I have this gorgeous girl in my basement, which is single-handedly reconfiguring my entire spiritual belief set in respect to the whole God thing¹⁰, and she actually wants to... well. I think you can

⁹ Upon interviewing Nicholas' mother, Victoria, on the matter, it was deduced that Nick had only actually found David a handful of times, at least by her knowledge, though there were times, at the dinner table, where she said it seemed the tension that usually accompanied the after-math of an attempt was palpable, and David would be wearing an athletic armband or a long sleeve shirt.

¹⁰ Issues with spirituality brought up again in a later session, where another peculiarity w/r/t the disappearance caught my eye.

Dr. Mathews, MD, Session #19, Nicholas Dumane III.
Portland, OR. The Anchor Psychiatric Rehabilitation Clinic.

ND: Okay, I'm risking coming off as paranoid here, but I'm serious I think someone is following me. Not only here, but like everywhere I go around this place. A week ago I went to the bathroom late at night and saw Ragnus Lord, who's in my 2 PM group, 'The O,' and some guy in a suit who was handing Ragnus this manila envelope with an address on it, I think with the address of something like Berlin Avenue, but I couldn't really make out the rest. Not in itself terribly suspicious but considering the time of night and also the way the whole deal was handled, it makes me think some shady shit's going on here. I mean I know Ragnus. Wouldn't really call us friends but we're far into the acquaintance stage of things and will chat whenever we run into each other, but tonight, he gives me this terrifying look, like this was some big-time drug deal going down that I'd caught him red handed in.

Note: I attempted to use this as an argument against the claim that Nick had killed himself, and even though a recent murder case in Kentucky, one Alfred Pickenlooper, US Agriculture Dept., did take place on a Berlin Ave., Kansas City, Kansas, because Nick didn't get down the exact zip-code, this bit of information, while intriguing, wasn't enough to draw conclusions.

DM: Have you discussed this with Ragnus? (*Ragnus Lord is not one of my patients.*)

ND: I was going to, but then right after that I noticed I was getting followed. I don't know. Maybe I'm overthinking it. You and I both know I have a tendency towards that. Besides, there's a few other things I want to go over.

imagine the excitement. We're about to really get into things, when we're stopped by a thud from the floor above, which I know to be him.

Dr.: David attempted.

He opened his wrists. I think you can imagine just how fast she burst into tears, scantily clothed, still wet down there wanting to love me. She hurried away from me down the stairs to the door, leaving her belongings behind for me to collect to give to her a few days later at school without saying a word. And I don't blame her because I can't say she didn't try. There is a routine to be upheld when these attempts happen and I get really busy going back and forth from the hospital and then therapy sessions and then the whole check-up routine and calling various teachers and students for reports, and I have trouble finding time for her, and what time I do find I fill with silence and an ardent reluctance to open up to her in a mature and adult way, which upsets her, which upsets me because I always fail to understand how she does not see that I cannot open up and spill the emotional beans without forfeiting the defenses I have spent years of my life constructing. Admitting what is there only means that I can't keep not acknowledging it, which is bad, believe me I know, because how shitty is it to ignore your own brother's suffering, but it was the only thing that I could think of to keep me from following my brother down the same path.¹¹

¹¹ The investigator's deal-sealer. And one that at times is hard to counter. The only significant hole is that Nick's body is yet to be found, and with The Anchor's *Bright New World* suicide prevention program maintaining such a diligent eye over The Anchor's closed 'campus,' it seems improbable Nick could commit suicide on the premises without being found immediately. A tightly-knit security team, to address the alternative, makes movement between the campus and Portland's surrounding residential areas very limited.

DM: Have you ever felt like hurting yourself or taking your own life?¹²

ND: No.

DM: Okay. I want you to know that I am not judging you, Nick. You are in a judgment-free space and I want you to feel safe if ever you feel like you're becoming a threat to yourself.

ND: I want to ask something, but I am afraid of where it might lead.

DM: We don't judge here. This is a judgment-free room.

ND: ...

DM: It's okay if you don't want to tell me, but I don't want you to feel like you can't tell me.

ND: ... I just think it'll make me look very bad, like a horrible person that you will despise and think not worthy of even helping in the way you're helping.

DM: You are not a horrible person, Nick. I don't think you're horrible at all. I think it would be beneficial for us to let it out and really approach the situation and –

ND: I just again kind of think this is all my fault. When things were really bad and the Zoloft – I think it was Zoloft that time – and the weed weren't helping as much as he'd thought they would, and when he had a big race the next day that would either end the season or send him to Nationals, and when feeling numb and lethargic and lethally content with the numbness

¹² Dear Nick,

I haven't heard from you in a while! Call me! I just want to make sure everything is okay and that you're making progress. I really hope you are so you can come home soon. I miss you! Everything at home's pretty much the same as always. Casper is so needy these days! He follows me from room to room and is always begging for food, even though I've tried so hard to stop that kind of thing. I appreciate his company though. This house is too big for just one person! I've been going on walks with Susan, Alex's mom. She tells me Alex is doing really well and there's no cancer at all anymore, which I'm so thankful to hear. I was so worried. Anyway, I know you need your space and you've been working hard to feel better, so I'll stop writing and calling so often. I just want to hear from you! I baked your favorite kind of cookies, so be on the lookout for those in the mail!

Love, your mom.

was redefining The Beast¹³, it was me who suggested cocaine. Just as like a one-time thing, to lift him up, make him feel alive. I suggested it because that is exactly how it made me feel: alive.

I forgot to tell you he smoked weed. He would smoke it after training on weekends, but never before a race, at least at first, and he'd carry a can of Fabreez Cool Pine Air with him in his Loveland Racing Club pack to spray his clothes that he had tucked into his bag – his Junior Olympic coat, his heat-insulating long-johns, his Spider speed suit – spray them with three good spritzes to mask the odor, which seemed quintessentially important to him because he thought it would be cataclysmic if the coaches or Dad found out about him going off into the woods past the gulch on lift 8 to get inconceivably stoned. But then the weed would create a whole new issue of lethargy that became the shadowy accomplice to the depression he brought the drug in to treat in the first place. He told me that it would force him into this hyper-mode way of ruminating on his life and his issues in a way that was more entrapping than it was without it, the weed. And yet he would still feel he needed it. Sometimes he would break into Loveland Racing Club's clubhouse long after everyone went home, when the mountain was dark and still, and he would bar the doors shut with skis and go downstairs to where they'd keep all the gates and drills for setting up courses and he'd smoke up and be down there like all night getting unconsciously high, and one night, the head hanzo at the race department comes by at four-or-so in the morning to prepare for early-bird training sessions and guess who he catches passed out on the hard floors using the spare jackets for the elementary schoolers as a makeshift blanket. On the car ride home, mom kept looking back at him with this resigned, disappointed look that people get when they are forced to acknowledge the major follies of the ones they love.

¹³ Nick's nickname for depression. As in, 'I'm feeling like a slave to The Beast right now.'

I suggested the cocaine when he was sixteen and I was eighteen, and an outrageous snow storm locked us under six feet in our house in Evergreen, CO. We dawned our ski equipment, some paper and a pencil, and we blueprinted ski runs and partitioned my father's property into different runs. I remember we were jabbing sticks into the snow to make gates when he told me of how he was losing it again and how the weed and the antidepressants weren't helping anymore, and that's when I suggested it to him, the coke, and I pulled it out and we snorted lines off this tree-stump behind the house. And before our father handed us shovels, we would carve turns and blow lines and just feel *good*, and we would lose ourselves in Willy's White Room, which is what a coach of mine would call the transcendental occurrence of skiing in powder so outrageously and uncommonly deep that your head would be submerged beneath the surface of the snow and you would vanish from the world into white.¹⁴

DM: What are you asking me, Nicholas?

ND: For a while, he's feeling substantially better. I'm just happy that he's happy, which he was for a while, but then, like everything else, things start to go the way they always do: by the wayside. So I tell him to alternate, to stay on one for only so long until it veers into *need-to*

¹⁴ Dr. Atlas has been gracious enough to let me dig further the group files as long as they relate only to Nick. I must admit that I took one snippet of a transcript, not pertaining to Nick, without him noticing. It's the only session in which Ragnus Lord speaks.

Dr. Atlas, MD. Session #15, 2:00 PM Group Nickname: 'The O'
Portland, OR. The Anchor Psychiatric Rehabilitation Clinic.

Ragnus Lord: I'm disappearing. That's my problem. I'm becoming increasingly transparent and it infuriates me that no one seems to take notice. I feel isolated, like I'm a cog in some much larger machine.

DA: When do you feel like your disappearing? Do certain events make you feel that way?

RL: See, this is why I never talk: you're probing has the opposite effect you want. It makes me shut down. It's always happening. There's nothing that brings it on, or exacerbates it; it's a constant thing. And The Organization isn't helping with the whole thing

DA: Organization? What organization are you talking about, Ragnus?

RL: Never mind. I'm done talking.

Note: I've inquired Dr. Shriner, Ragnus Lord's primary therapist about this, but, of course, she refuses to tell me anything. Though when I asked her about this comment regarding, The Organization, the skin on her face stretched thin and she gave me a venomous look, which seemed extreme for a violation of Patient/Doctor Confidentiality.

territory and then switch, but then that too led him to this feeling, at least as far as I could see, of being caught by two different sub-beasts pulling him in different directions, but both under the dictation of The Beast, who was always there, underneath, breathing down his neck. The depression, I mean. And what I'm asking, what is just really fucking breaking me inside is the thought that my introducing him to the substances that probably just ended up giving The Beast two extra limbs to strangle my brother with was what made the last attempt the one that wasn't just an attempt. Like what if I was the one who went out, bought the proverbial gun and bullet, cocked it, placed it in his hand and rose the frail, weakened thing to his head for him so he could pull the trigger?¹⁵

DM: Are you asking me if I agree with this?

ND: ... I'm afraid that it's so obviously true that asking about it is just really me trying to hide. And bringing in what I said earlier about genetics, it sort of absolves me and at the same time entraps me, and I think that's the worst part. That of course I'm like this. That I've really never even had much of an option in whether or not I was going to be like this. The geneticists are unanimous on the proposition that yeah, sure, you have some wiggle-room with environment, but ultimately you are tethered to the biological chain with a limited circumference to your orbital movements and it's safe to say you're going absolutely nowhere, and really you are who you are long before you've actually become yourself. And that's what's killing me. On one hand,

¹⁵ An overall feeling that the death of anyone close to him is somehow his fault goes back as far as Nick can remember, specifically evident in a dream he mentioned in a previous session.

Session #4: ND: When I was maybe six, I had a dream I was standing in the mouth of a volcano on a bridge made of transparent stone. In front of me, there was a platform and my parents were both bound to a tree's lifeless trunk and standing in front of them was a shapeless figure in black with immense wings with shadows that covered me, and I knew, intuitively, that this was Death, and She tells me that I must choose. I must choose which parent gets to live. I woke up and ran downstairs crying to my parents, saying 'I'm sorry' to each of them equally because I didn't want them to know which one I chose.

I am who I am and that's a relief and an explanation and a sort of umbrella from the myriad problems I feel crushed by, and it tells me that I do not have to be so daunted and crushed and miserable because it's okay and of course this stuff is crushing me; it's been there, hovering since I was microscopic, which can be liberating, in a way. But I don't feel like that. I feel as if I'm the prisoner who doesn't even know he's locked up, every little action I make solidifying this miserable and totally fucked personality even more, making it that much less likely with each second that I will actually figure out a way to change myself. I just don't think it's going to happen. I think this is who I am. And I hate it.

DM:¹⁶

ND: My grandfather saw a shrink. I read it in his letter. He saw a shrink because he felt he 'was never really there.' Then, once, my mom told me my dad had said that he always thought he wasn't good enough. She said he was terrified by the idea that there was nothing left in him that was going to change. It's seeming to me like we are all fruit from the same tree, and how can an apple be anything but an apple? When I found David bloody in the tub, he told me he was sorry, but he just really did not want to be here anymore. He didn't know why, he just knew that. That he really didn't want to keep living. So he hung himself.¹⁷

¹⁶ There is a local beef company that delivers twice a week and I have, after searching through nightly attendance sheets, discovered that a number of patients are conveniently stricken from the sheet on the nights of delivery, and I have myself walked through the ward and discovered a number of cells empty, including Ragnus Lord's, a perplexing scenario considering the unwavering regulations, and it all elevated to a higher, more sinister level when I was approached by a man I'd never seen before, who wore a tailored black suit, who asked me what I was doing there, to which I asked the same thing. He looked at me, said nothing and walked away with small, deliberate steps. I've gone back since and have found nothing.

¹⁷ Nick's mother, Victoria, explained she'd found him while driving up their driveway, had almost hit a squirrel who darted across the pavement, capturing Victoria's attention, drawing her eyes away from the road and towards the face of the house and to the tree in front of it from which her youngest son hung, oscillating in the breeze, the rope tied to a branch. Victoria, in a state of emotional paralysis, subsequently loses control of her vehicle and collides with yet another tree that is uprooted by the collision and brings with it the electrical cords Nick Jr had snaked down the hill from their forested home to an electrical box at the bottom of their long driveway. Through tears, she told me she is seeing a therapist of her own, and they are making great progress.

DM: There's some tissue right here, on the table in front of you.¹⁸

ND: He fucking *hung* himself. It's like things are culminating now. My grandpa wrote that every generation was a step towards this ultimate quintessential self, but instead we've been stuck in the exact opposite projection that's ended in *this*. In collapsing internally. Grandpa wrote, 'Learn to turn off the great machine between your ears.' And I want to talk to him. I want to say, 'Understand that I can't. Understand that turning it off has never been an option. I must think that I'm responsible for my dad's abandonment and David's suicide. Understand that if I didn't discover you're letters, if I didn't read them and find it necessary to use them as a spiritual weapon, then he wouldn't have left. He'd have died emotionless, and I really wonder if maybe that would have been better.'

DM: Nicholas.

ND: 'Understand it was my fault for not being there enough for David, and it was my fault he had been cursed to this life in my shadow where he felt like such shit virtually all the time because he felt not matter what he did, he could not garner the attention he thought he needed, because – something else I forgot to mention – I can't tell you how many times I caught David bloody in the tub and *didn't* call mom. I would take him out and clean his naked body on

¹⁸ Dear Nick,

I know I've been writing a lot. It's just been hard lately at home and I've been going through some of your pictures. David's too. It makes me sad. My therapist says it's probably not a good idea, but I just can't help myself. Do you remember when we all went to the zoo and you almost fell into the elephant enclosure? We got you that stuffed elephant you loved so much. I remember you couldn't sleep without it. And then of course we had to get David another snake toy. Remember making that miniature safari with David's toys outside? I sure do. That was so much fun!

I don't want you to feel like you have to get better for your mom's sake. I hope you're getting better but for you. I hope you realize that nothing that's happened is your fault. I don't blame you for bringing your dad those letters or for David. David was David. We all knew, somewhere inside, it was coming. Listen to what your therapists are telling you! They're supposed to be the best. I hope you're starting to realize just how special and kind you are. And how you're becoming an intelligent, caring man. And just how proud I am to call you my son. I hope you come visit soon! Casper and I miss you!

I love you,
Mom.

the tile and bandage his wounds and pretend like he was an infant and I was his mother, and it was my job to protect him and to allow, at least in these moments, for him to feel safe, so I would smile at him in hopes that I could consume the dread that would build up in him, deep down, but all I got in return was this disappointed look that people get when they are forced to acknowledge the major follies of the ones they love. Know that there is so much more at work here besides what *I* want and who *I* can be. Understand that you had to make it home. Understand that your death had consequences you couldn't have possibly imagined.'¹⁹

DM: ...²⁰

ND: I've silenced the therapist. Even he knows there is just no hope. That I'm fucked.

DM: ... Nick I don't think you're a bad person. At all. I think you're very thoughtful, but I think that gets in your way and you're refusing to see that none of this is your fault.

ND: When David was nine, he tried climbing a tree in our backyard to retrieve a Frisbee. He carelessly leapt from branch to branch and did not pause for any testing of the stability of the platform he trusted his life with. He nearly reached the top, but before he could stretch out for the green, plastic disk, there was a snap, and David looked up and saw the Frisbee yanked away from him into the sky that was filled with dark clouds in October, gathering and brooding as the temperature dropped; waiting until David hit the earth to release the first flake of winter.

DM: That's a very poetic image.

ND: ...

DM: I'm afraid times up, Nick. Meet next week, okay?

¹⁹ It is not uncommon where the patients making the most substantial psychological leaps do not notice their progress until long after the fact.

²⁰ All secret movement in and out of The Anchor has come to an apparent stop. Nightly attendance sheets come in full, and I have walked through the ward and seen no business man, just a silence, an almost in-itself omniscient presence. As if even the air will not move. As if the entire world has gone still.

ND: My life's in the shadow of the grin of The Beast looking to me now, breathing.

DM: This will get better, Nick. Your life will improve. You will be happy.²¹

ND: Keep saying that. It's helping. Say it again.

²¹ I'm reading this over again in my office, and I notice, out the window, Ragnus Lord standing in the cold, his unflinching, all-business-type eyes staring through the snow at me.

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