

THE SPIDER WEB

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Silence (part one of three)

Marjorie stepped only on the colored tiles that led to the kitchen which was darkly lit through glass like a wine bottle. She climbed the kitchen stairs in the places that she knew did not creak. Her hands touched the dilapidated balusters at the top where she knew they would not shift. Her head bobbed between the convex humps of rotting rafter that hung over the second-floor hallway, shiftless above her and only her. Walking whimsically through the house had been her habit, become her hunt, become her vicious mission. Her finger tips, extended to the long hallway walls, propelled her from the invisible indentations in the plaster there. They brushed and stabbed; they wrapped around the mouldings at an inner intersection and, without slowing, her path was instantly perpendicular. They missed nothing; they hit nothing.

She glided into Leonard's room and around his sticklike bed, which was in the middle, to watch the menagerie: near the door, an amazonian snake bulged in a steamy aquarium like a tangled ampersand; beside it a parrot muttered; an anemic monkey hung desperately from rubber loops at the head of the bed. In all, nine caged creatures observed and reflected her with their eyes, including a fat, mustachioed guinea pig. To this she crept, and with silent fingers she removed the top of its cage. It retreated to the corner, near a wooden running wheel with rusty hinges and a scattering of carrots, and shivered.

She reached inside the cage and then it began to bark in a series of surprised starts that agitated its orange body in rapid disproportions, its lips tearing apart and then sealing again into a single, unhardened membrane. It soiled its bedding with a muddy effluence, then it became silent. Guiltily, it watched her harvest from its nest some long things and sticks, rooting and stabbing. She wound hair and thread around her fingers until there was nothing

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more to excavate from the cage, which was foul from neglect—then she wiped her fingers on her gray apron and left the room as quickly as she had arrived.

The guinea pig began to mewl again in long, lonely gasps. It emerged from the corner of the cage with a carrot chunk, gazed upon its shattered habitat, and then set its mouth roughly around the carrot chunk, which was moldy. Little particles of the carrot chunk fell from the guinea pig's gyrating mouth and in sprinkles were shuffled among the scraps of shavings and feces in which it waded up to its murine thighs. Beyond the running wheel and a molding tub of water the room beyond the cage was blurry with plastic dampened by the guinea pig's own evaporated sweat. But above it, where the top had been left off its cage, the room was clear. Lacerating gusts of fresh air fell down from the gap and numbed the guinea pig to motionlessness. Only its head retched in the silent throes of consumption, viciously, until the carrot was gone, and then further with a compulsive anxiety as it gnawed out of its own teeth a thin paste that ran from its jaws into the bedding. The smell of it lifted in circles and scoured away the odors from above which had promised vaguely of Spring, and harvest without renewal.

The guinea pig knew Leonard was near by his smell. His owner did not come immediately to the cage; instead he doted in the room between the shifting shapes beyond the cage, human lingering with avian, reptilian, lapine in a mural of rippling arms and spokes, and then his hand. It reached down to the guinea pig, steady and flat, and heavy so when it pet the animal it compressed the creature's spine into its innards. The guinea pig waited complicitly, squashed under one hand as another tilted a handful of carrot chunks into the cage. They tumbled onto the bedding like boulders among the pig's orange excrement. Then the pressure ceased and Leonard's hand was gone and the guinea pig bounded for the carrot chunks in

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lopsided bursts, ejaculating saliva from its mouth. To Leonard, the palpable bulk of its body seemed to engorge the carrots without the need of its mouth, and it shuddered there above them in an unhealthy orange glow when he at last blotted the shape of it out with the top of the cage. Above Leonard, the stone vault of his chamber hung in kind, petrified with the long pregnancy of his body and with stale air. He whispered his animals awake as he removed their gags and fed them, but his whispers did not move the air.

Leonard avoided the business of his older sister's foraging as best he could. She stole things like cups and lint and newspaper after he had used them—shreds of carpet that had been torn up by the moths, and then the moths themselves—and collected them in her squalid room at the bottom of the stairs. Sometimes he thought he was grateful that the east wing of the house had collapsed so he had little reason to go down there anymore. Though... As he past it, time and time again, through the contrastless streak of his vision between his glasses and the sprouting hill of his temple he would glimpse four feet into her room, and hope to catch her. Any farther was impenetrable to an eye as weak as his, or to a body as weak as his. She disgusted him. Though... From the corner of his vision, where from beyond her always-open door unlidded specks of light glimmered in pairs like vampire bites, he knew she waited in invitation, stockingless and vile.

Leonard adjusted his glasses. He could see the animals were agitated: the snake in the cage closest to the door was all knotted up; the goat chained to a ring in the wall was grousing at the stone floor. Its hind legs had been crippled by an automobile when it was young and had grown no longer than human hands. It usually stood unsteadily on them, so that its head and back slanted up suddenly like the forward parts of a fountain, but now it tucked either one into its flaccid paunch, as if in shame, and rested on its bald pink udder. Leonard

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whispered to it and gently kneaded its lumpy skull. He removed its gag, tending it in this way until it volunteered a nuzzle and one quick, thwarted lick.

Leonard's glasses slipped a little. The animals were agitated, but Leonard had long since ceased being worried or even annoyed with Marjorie's foraging. He felt a little thrill from having just missed her, from being almost upon her and then in tense expectation discovering nothing but excited animals, not howling or jabbering, not speaking with their crude tongues or hooting and clamoring their hands against the bars of their cages and their chests and tearing at their lips with their teeth as if the ripping of their vocal chords could not display discord appropriate their hatred of her. Their hatred of her made it more exciting. Gnawing at his lip, Leonard adjusted his glasses and became calm again, for them. Their silence was as strengthening to him as his was for them. Their attentions imprisoned him as his did them. He climbed on top of his bed in the middle of the room and rested in the silence, under the pantheon of unlidded eyes, and slept.

The sound. The sound of grinding teeth woke him. The room was blurry without his glasses which had fallen from his face in his sleep, and his face shook. His face shook while his hand cast angrily on the bed for his glasses. He could not find them, so he pushed upward off his dirty blanket and used his hand, cast out, to steady himself on something full of fluttering things that knocked and went swinging. Thrush, Thrush. The birds inside were quiet. Hermit Thrushes. They were silent while their wings sprung out to steady themselves in the swinging cage and their bodies thudded flatly against the wires. They were more obedient than his own hand, which blundered into things. They knew his mind better than his own hand.

Dreamily, he stumbled after the grinding sound, then he was right next to it. Dangling

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against his face was a blurry shape like a little boy's face. A denim gag shifted over its approximate lips, like it was trying to sing or speak. The gag rose and fell like a swatch of ocean. When he was a boy he used to look at his hand and know if he was dreaming. He worried the gag loose, watching his hand, and then peered behind it. There was no mouth. There was just a blackness, a rotted formless shape like a collapsed pumpkin. He wanted to yell, but knew that the rules of dreams prevented yelling, prevented sound, and in return prevented you from your collection of memories, your disgusting collection of memories. It prevented you from finding out who... He looked at his hand. It had found his glasses on the bed.

When he put his glasses on and was looking out of the plastic again, the shape was not a little boy but actually the ape hung up at the back of his room by cuffs. There was still a gap in its face, though. Even though he was wearing his glasses the gap was exactly as he remembered it without them, with no difference in detail. The details of its complexion seemed to collapse on the spot just above its neck and reemerge below its eyes like its head had had to be resculpted one day but was left unfinished. It had no mouth at all, even though he had only fed it three days before. Three days ago it had a mouth. It had been full of overgrown mesolithic teeth that were ruddy at the base; it was as if six years without speech had accumulated in the battery of the monkey's memory as an acid and then burst through the gum walls and destroyed the useless organ. Leonard rapidly replaced the gag (now more of a bandage), and the grinding began again, in his own mouth.

The monkey was shivering slightly like it was sick. Through his glasses Leonard saw beads of sweat bulging out of its pores like tiny stillbirths. Along its thighs, the pallid, milky beads ran together in streams that pulled the ape's hair to its skin in dark chevrons before

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falling into puddles on the floor, tapping like extravenous fluid. Leonard stepped back sourly and watched its terrified eyes. It squirmed and watched, its terrified eyes. If it still had the capability to speak, it did not try, despite the obvious misery in its terrified eyes. Leonard looked at it, and supposed it was dying. It had been a well behaved monkey. If its mother was still alive, it would have been proud of it. He felt vindicated for feeding that ape with his own victuals, out of his own share, every week religious, like its life was like his life. Of course he would have to get a new one, from a traveling salesman, probably. There was a corner store five miles up the road where he could phone one.

In the hallway, Leonard's feet lifted bouquets of fungus dust, white from age like plaster, from cracks in the hallway floorboards. The dust spewed up with brief jubilation and then slunk manically back again, as if the moulding moldings and the disintegrating plywood and the patches of scuttle in the ceiling concealed crowds of ant-lions that sucked.

He reached a junction of four passages and stopped just shy of the middle, lingering below the chamfers as if a train might suddenly sweep from the darkness on either end and splatter him into bloody pieces. He took the perpendicular path to the right, and kept close to the walls where his sleeves brushed against the peeling wallpaper in the forever dusk of the house. Crosshatch wallpaper, grey in the dusk, perpendicular patterns, rafters, rotting at right angles. Every step he took down the stairs to the first floor screamed, and he pressed it; if he pressed it hard with his heel it cracked like a collarbone. He asked the baluster, do you squeal? It screamed.

Leonard thought Jameson might have been the one who poisoned the ape. Leonard's glasses slipped down his nose. Practical joker, good at poker. Jameson had poisoned him. Big brother, loved by mother. Oldest, boldest. Jameson, Jameson, Jameson, James's son. Jameson

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had poisoned *him*.

He adjusted his glasses.

It was him or Marjorie. She was a thief, but then she never stole above her station. She pilfered lint and strips of newspaper and bits of fuzz from the animals' cages, because there is no honor between like prisoners, but anything more ambitious was beyond her. She respected Leonard and Jameson their things because she knew they were beyond her, beyond Bingham street and the corner store because they bought her cream sodas there on Christmas and the town which had no name because it was just one street. Beyond that, Leonard doubted she had any real idea about the world—about traveling salesmen or the animal kingdom or automotive machinery or international finance—real, tangible things that were important to people and made their lives better.

When Leonard stopped at the bottom of the stairs he could see into the kitchen where cracked old plates in the dishrack collected light from the single window and cobwebs. A legend of rainbows cartographed the far wall via bubbles in the window glass. The rainbows were not: red, yellow, green, blue, but: yellow, gold, bronze, brown. Jameson would be snooping around here somewhere, looking for the fish poacher. Trying to find the metal poacher hidden among the metal rainbows. Leonard would ask Jameson why he had poisoned the ape. And then he would drive to the store and call the salesman.

Leonard walked east, out of the kitchen. His glasses slipped down his nose again. He wanted to fix them but he was trying to stop his feet from tapping like they were wearing tap shoes, but grown too dirty to sound right, and he kept fidgeting with them. They sounded like consumptive hiccups in the moss on the floor, deciduous boards that reeked an ancient odor of pine, and something else like paint thinner that burned his lungs. He harbored the whine of

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the boards in his chest like wine its flavor, too sour to be savored right before bed, sheets tucked up into his chest to protect his heart from beating, just swelling and sinking like a sea. Like as not, like not. Not like. Me.

Marjorie hung in the nook between her cell window and the floor by her fingers. The joints of her fingers and her knuckles all moved independently under the skin of her hand, each one competing for a better grip on the porous stone wall, wriggling into the crannies like segmented worms and hiding their wan, nailless tips there from the light. Outside, the silhouettes of thin trees in the yellow light cast bars of shadow over the window; the shadows became warped and drunk as they passed through the glass into the room. The angle of the light was so extreme that the shadows moved perceptibly across the room like fat leeches, too fast to deceive their poacher, who hatelessly watched them slither on the wall. She climbed up the wall and attached some string to a crooked nail there and let it droop. Its tendonous shadow swayed between her fingers for a second before she snatched at it and stole the shadow to the floor. When her body moved it moved all at once even though between the strips of light from the window the slimy parts of it flickered in and out of sight. In precise movements she wrapped the shadow, hanging there, in her own spit and then hung it from her web. It stretched out, a thin bridge dripping with silver saliva between the shadows of the tree trunks on the wall: her bars. Beside it another thread crossed at a tiny angle, and then when those two were in focus a hundred thousand little strands—sister shadows—materialized in meticulous order, ensnaring a ribbon, or a child's ball, or a cup leaking drop by drop from its bottom—objects suspended from the reach of gravity which in Marjorie's room was but a tolerated guest.

She heard a weathered phonograph playing from the kitchen. Underneath the hiss of the

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recording she could hear someone tap-dancing, shoes popping and blunt, like bones on bones, left and right, left and right. Then it stopped outside her door and the phonograph stopped and the sound was replaced by a gleam through the door, the glossy reflection of an eyeball in profile; then the phonograph began again and the reflection wasn't in the door anymore. It was off somewhere beyond, tapping and cracked. A shaky hand somewhere turned the volume of the tapping down in arthritic jerks until she could hear the phonograph needle in the distance scratching and drawing blood from the record. In the distance, an automobile hacked into anguished life and drifted away, trying but unable to draw breath for all the coughing. She saw the shadow of it slide miserably onto the far wall and into the spider web, where the memory of it became trapped in temptation and terror—in threads stronger than modern steel.

Then the doorbell rang. Its lowing set the house to retching. The retching accumulated and then overwhelmed the tiny sound of the bell. The bell sung again and steaming trickles of odorous rain began to sweep against the window. Again the bell sung, and the rain began to slather and then it filled with tiny hail that thudded onto the house like pieces of regurgitated food. Marjorie stirred, her limbs unfolding at once as if by the same muscle. The bell sung again. How it sung. It sung, "Jameson was home."

Jameson's rash came to him as he smalled himself under the brim of the awning. He scratched the rash with the fingernails of his free hand, over and over again; his other hand fanned his heavy head. He fanned his head with the stock ticket. The rain smelled terrible, it was polluted by little broccolic hailstones but still it hissed on the tin awning over his head. Jameson couldn't see six feet in front of him because the steam was too thick. He dug his

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thumb into the doorbell until some of the cream paint came off and burrowed into the quick. He flinched and dropped the stock ticket in the rain. The stock ticket was soaked and he thought he had better get it inside by the fire. Even though it was worse than a sauna outside. He guessed Leonard wasn't home because only Marjorie would take so long to answer the door. Jameson never carried a key because he could always count on Marjorie being inside. Not like there was anything inside worth stealing, since the fish poacher was stolen. Jameson scowled. How many bits of things she could find in the yard, and yet she stripped their home since forever. He pressed the doorbell again, and flinched.

Jameson didn't realize it at first when the door opened. There was just an inch between it and the socket, and beyond it he caught the glowing rim of an eye socket before the weight of the door pulled itself open. He stepped in to the foyer and let the door rebound further off his hip, his hands being too busy, scratching, fanning, to push it. He stepped in, careful around the sharp fragments of tile like broken glass on the floor. Like mother had taught them forty years ago, he removed his shoes and set them by the wicker hamper in the corner. The soles were shredding like psoriatic skin. On tiptoes he stepped in and east and in to the kitchen, scratching unconsciously at his face where the skin was beginning to scrape away in streaks.

Marjorie was in the kitchen, sucking on something spindly from her mouth. Maybe a vegetable. Jameson stopped her from leaving with his long, thick arm and sat her down hard so she breathed out strong and sour against his face. Then he let her go and peered in and out of the cupboards ostentatiously while she looked on. A drizzle of green fluid leaked from the corner of her mouth for a minute or two before she wiped it away with her shoulder without the help of her hands. Jameson had a lumpy sack hanging from his belt but didn't know how

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to get to it with his one hand scratching and his other fanning at his bristly face. He forced one of the hands down and opened it, then the hand renewed its vigorous activity on his face. A brand new fish poacher spilled out of the sack onto the ground. It was heavy but it made a tiny noise. It was long and made of brass and had two thin handles on either end that wouldn't fit a finger. He put it, laboriously, into one of the cupboards and then glared at her. He began to feel sick to his stomach, but he didn't look down; he stared at her with his teeth creeping out over his lips on both sides of his mouth, maybe angrily. Then he looked away. He heard Marjorie stand, and when he still looked away she left the room. He thought he would kill her if she stole something of his again.

There was a footprint from one of Leonard's shoes by the cupboard where he had put the fish poacher. Then Jameson saw more from the stairs like a trail of ants. They'd have company tonight so he cleaned up the footprints and followed them backwards up the stairs and down the long hallway at their head. His heavy feet drowned out the noises of the old house; the furniture silenced itself under him. The rotting rafters receded into his shadow and stayed hidden there after he left, leaving nothing but raw dilapidation. He came to an intersection and stopped in the middle. There wasn't really any choice about where to go—he was going to the sitting room where the fireplace was—but he made a special effort to ignore the leftward passage, from where he felt an abundance of awareness, which took some brief rest and concentration. Then he went to the sitting room where the fireplace was, and the fireplace had no fire so he made one and set the stock ticket down on the mantle to dry. They'd have company tonight and he didn't want his company disappointed. He excavated a closet full of old board games and found Leonard's fishing pole and raincoat in a bucket of rotten worms, then he left the sitting room where the fireplace was, the staircase with the

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frightened balusters, and the kitchen, thinking he would take the automobile down to the fishing pond. The company would expect it. The company would not be disappointed with the fish on Bingham road.

Leonard was a lucky man. No other place in the world so small as Bingham street and luck, or the Lord, put a salesman just three miles away. Three miles away, he said. Three was Leonard's lucky number. Now it was. The auto sucked up a gout of water from the road where it was still raining and thick, too, as he'd ever seen it. The engine erupted angrily but went on, miracle of technology and finance. Even if it was Jameson's finance. Jameson said he'd be paying it off short. He was right claiming that mother never did anything half so good as that auto. That's what the fellow at the corner store called it. Not automobile. Leonard was getting wise in the world; he was a quick learner. The traveling salesman had talked to him without hesitation, like he was a regular customer. Jameson would be proud enough of Leonard to give him the money for the new ape, he was sure. Jameson was in International Finance. Jameson bought an auto and would be paying it off short. Jameson was already wise in the world. Leonard was happy for him. The auto gave out a raspy ejaculation of black fluid that sat on top of the water and slid past in a miasma of colors. The two of them, the car and the man samelike, drove sunnily along the road in the rain. Crank the crank, hold the wheel, press the clutch, push the ignition. He sung the song.

The gore of fallen trees stretched by in the water with the strips of rainbow blood from the car. It was a regular flood, reaching up in strips towards the hail that came crashing down on it and beat madly on the hood of the car like it was a drum, beating up and down with the box of brussel sprouts he bought for this week's dinner, and steaming madly too. His skin was

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all wrinkled like a brussel sprout. He hoped it wouldn't be cooked by the weather by the time he got home, warm and as wet as it was. But three was his lucky number and it was only three miles left to the house. Maybe he wouldn't have to cook them if they cooked in the car. As if the auto was listening it slowed down as he went up the ridge by the pond, then it stopped, and rolled back down. It was getting dark, and the pond was opaque with rippling. The rabid hail made long nipples in the water.

Leonard couldn't get the auto to start again. He sung to it like he would have sung to a horse: crank the crank, hold the wheel, press the clutch, push the... he couldn't see the ignition it was getting so dark. Then he pushed it and the car gave an oxygenless wheeze. Leonard tried to think how it was lucky that the auto had stopped. He puzzled over it for maybe ten minutes, but couldn't think of anything but the rain and that the traveling salesman would be at the house in an hour and the brussel sprouts would over-cook and then the salesman would leave. His hand reached back and opened the lid to check them, but since his face was watching the road the hand had to reach further back and feel them. Between his gritty fingers they gave to the touch, slightly softened. Then he squeezed one that had something hard inside, and he realized he was squeezing his own finger.

By now it was dark and the auto was completely dead, its insides awash with poisonous water. A shallow film of rainbow fluids reflected the light around Leonard's boots where they rested by the pedals of the car, and a variety of insects floated dead in it like salad toppings. To his right and down a shallow bank where he knew the pond was, a bullfrog called out to him: crank the crank, crank the crank, crank the crank. Then there were the crickets, their mocking only audible now that the rain had slackened. At the extreme of his hearing he thought he heard a monkey jabbering insults. The whole animal kingdom observed him in gallery.

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All at once the street lightened as by a prolonged lightning strike and for an instant he saw it all in gallery, swollen in the water, bulbous, sprouting, scraped from its shadows; being seen, all of nature receded back into putrefying silence. Behind him a car horn honked in a peremptory way. Leonard turned to look and past the box of brussel sprouts there was a man in a gray suit leaning out of the window of a gray auto, waving his hand angrily and shouting while his hat got wet. Leonard put a brussel sprout from the box in his mouth and chewed into its pillowy flesh. It was his lucky day after all.

The house was quiet like a carcass but for the buzzing of a moth in the corner of the room. Its wings left a powder on the ceiling until it could no longer fly and it dropped to the floor, dead. Then the house was quiet. The silence rose around Jameson and draped itself over his arm, gallant, over his shoulders, heavy, over his head. He watched for Leonard out of its heavy folds, his garments, at the dark road which went from the foyer step, over a hill and down into a rich facade of foliage. Actually he watched for the automobile, the automobile Jameson had bought with his hard money, the work of risk, and investment, and profit. He worried about his company. They would be here any moment, hungry, thirsting, and he had nothing to give them, not even stock for a soup.

On the mantle the stock ticket was drying, almost dry now, suspended in that way of dried paper left to its own degeneration. If Leonard didn't return—if Leonard didn't return in time to—he never should have taught his brother to drive. He should have kept him trapped here in Bingham, like Marjorie was. There was a mantra he had made up for Leonard—to help him escape—but it eluded him now. It seemed like Leonard had stolen it from him also and run off in the automobile that Jameson worked for and shared like his mother would have

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wanted him to. His mother, resting by the mantle, curling up like the stock ticket, withered from coughing up her bowels and then lying, poached, in a coffin with her feet sticking over the edge like in the movies.

The thoughts drove him from the room a foot at a time, each one representing a year that he dwelled on—in—without being able to bear the thought of moving on because it was so lonely and silent, this responsibility. Then he was in the hallway, which was open and free and uncongested like the sinus of a dead woman. The edges of it were peeling away, the powder coming off, but what was it but dust anyway? The dust coming off, and the rot coming on like roots that grow one year at a time, up the sides until the whole house is a tree, and they are trapped inside, with their toys. He came to the intersection where his hallway met with three others. The nursery where the toys were had collapsed at the end of the left hallway so there were only really two others: the forward, which catapulted on to the staircase, and the right, from where he felt himself watched. If he stepped out of the way a little the watching seemed to streak right by him to the old nursery where the old toys were, entombed. It was the animals that were watching, harmless but a little disgusting. Leonard catalogued his animals with a kidlike science, and then slept among their multitude of gazes—harmless but disgusting like his pets. He had a baby bear for a while, a bunch of sterile chickens, a stupid lizard, he might even have fish in there. Jameson listened at the end of the hallway but it was perfectly quiet.

Heavy and woolen, the silence dragged him into the room where nothing stirred like the victims of the basilisk. Nothing watched him. Nothing turned its head. Nothing knew he was there, and *nothing* barked, screeched, growled, hissed out in alarm for its absent owner. Jameson covered his ears at the silence.

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From between his clasped hands he saw the following: a gigantic boa constrictor tied to itself, an ugly bird sewn to its perch, a cat with its claws glued to a scratching post, two mice knotted together by the tail, a dog, an ape, a cage of birds that were no longer colorful, a guinea pig, a goat, all gagged with ragged strips of the same cloth. No fish. In the corner there was a box of rotting vegetables the size of eggs. He dug around in the rotting vegetables. No fish.

Leonard had gone and stolen something from him when he most needed it and it wasn't below Jameson to think of his own justice. He thought all's fair when he could have anything taken away from him in just a day and not even know it until he goes to the store for work, or gets back from the store. He looked at each of the animals in the face until he came to the ape which did not look him in the face but looked sideways into its head in both directions like a child making a face, the one eye looking through the bridge of the nose at the other. It would have to do. He cut the ape down with his pocket knife and it was heavier on his shoulder than any of these others would have been, even the goat because it was only really most of a goat. The ape's skin felt damp through his shirt.

The walk down to the kitchen was difficult with that shape on his shoulders and no lights on in the house yet. All the way he felt the watching from that room, no longer streaking past him to the nursery, but following the monkey or, maybe, him. He dragged the monkey to the counter and hit it on the head with a mallet until its eyes closed, so he wouldn't have to see the eyes rolling around in there. The animal must have been a hell to deal with when it was a live, so hard a head. There was a large cutting board in the thin cabinet and of course the knife set. Jameson took off the gag and saw that its head would not be much good for eating.

He was good at carpentry so he started right away on the neck and got a little ways in before the whole head started rocking back and forth like a doorknob, so he went back upstairs

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and got a vice and came back and stuck the head in it. He cranked the crank, and as he cranked the crank he remembered the mantra he had taught Leonard, so by the time he looked down again he had burst the monkey head in the vice like a baked potato. He was going to throw it away anyway, but deep in the spilling ridges of bone and flesh and entrails he had created, he saw a shape like a boy, combed over and sullen with a toy in his hand—a dinosaur or something. Jameson covered it up with a paper towel and threw it hurriedly away in a wicker trash basket, from which it dripped.

Paring the rest of the corpse was uncomplicated, but he kept thinking back, not about the boy but about how there hadn't even been a sound, so he worked less efficiently than he could have and it was already eight thirty when he put the heaping platter of meat in the oven. Jameson's rash had gotten bad during the butchering so he had to wash the blood off his face where his hand started scratching again, and while he was over the sink he started feeling sick and gagged into the sink where the metal of the sink and the acid smelled together. Then he looked up and realized the doorbell had rung, and there was the healthy purr of an automobile in the lascivious garden, and the doorbell rung again, and he vomited again.

Jameson wiped his mouth and his face and grabbed the steak knife and went to the door, but then when he opened it it was not his company standing there or even Leonard who he would have gladly stabbed, but a shabby man in a brown felt hat with a feather in it who stuck out his hand, then pulled it back, and said,

"Well how do you do Mr. Mr. you got a name? Ah Bingham, right. Yes, well Mr. Bingham today is your lucky day do you know why today is your lucky day because today is your birthday ok not really your birthday but as good as your birthday because today you get free gifts and not only free gifts you get deals lucky deals from the best dealers in the country

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and I don't just mean me ha ha..."

Sound (part two of three)

"Well how do you do Mr. Mr. you got a name? Ah Bingham, right. Yes, well Mr. Bingham today is your lucky day do you know why today is your lucky day because today is your birthday ok not really your birthday but as good as your birthday because today you get free gifts and not only free gifts you get deals lucky deals from the best dealers in the country and I don't just mean me ha ha..."

"I say, I say you must not have a woman around here no I can tell you don't. Well it's fine all the same, it's fine because I'm not particular I sell to everyone you know and everyone you know sells to me ha ha. Yowzer that tile's sharp innit pretty, though. I once had tile this pretty in my bathroom before I moved away and my dear departed mother cleaned it so often it broke into pieces like this here, can you believe that—giving a thing so much attention that it just snaps because things ain't what they used to be no sir even back then they ain't what they used to be. I don't suppose you know much about that no, young as you are. Young and free like an American. Well let me tell you no one's gonna give you orders tonight. I'm not gonna tell you you should buy anything, but suppose you could use a fine new set of tile for this room or a some flowers or a pho-to you know to pretty it up you just come to me. Guests like me appreciate having a pretty thing to look at when they come in they like the image.

"Heck, I don't bet you really know what you want. You've got not a lot to say for yourself

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that's for sure, you can be assured that you can tell me though, I happen to think what my customers say is valuable, yes though I said it, valuable, specially if it's an order ha ha. Been hard shaking the feeling here that you don't like my job but I daresay who does, I mean not until you need me and you call me down here all the way down here. I'm here because you do need me, and I do right by any customers' desire—I look to see what I can do to make a man's life more valuable. Philanthropy, is what they call it. I could sell you a dictionary with that word in it for seven dollars. You can't put a price on good advice, is what I say, ha ha. Look at these tiles, I could fix em up for you in just a day and for less than half what you might earn while I do it. Look at the doorway here, it's all scuffed. Bet you didn't know palm oil is better than the oil off your hands for keeping a doorway smooth, which I can tell is all it's been treated with since it was sold to you by someone like me, and maybe a carpenter. Three dollars for the palm oil, but my advice is free as a free man. You aren't a carpenter are you? Say, we should talk some time if you are, team up. I've been meaning to get into housing for years now, years and a day here or there for investment, we put some houses up and I'd bet you I could sell em if you could build em even if they were as rotten and badly shaped as this one. No offence, but look in there at the kitchen—it's a wonder your maid hasn't cut her fingers off in there cooking with only one window, a dirty window mind, and no lights. I could sell you genuine electric lamps half as much as they go for in the city, and no more missing fingers, just like that, and I'll throw in some special cleaner that'll make it seem like the sun rises right here where I'm standing: right in front of this thing here which I bet you call a coatstand but I tell you you ain't seen a coatstand until you see one of the new wall hangers, four bucks, three for a good friend like you, and that advice is free. So don't look sour now. Where there's a salesman of as fine repute as myself in your neighborhood, well, unhumble as it is for me to say it, you

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can have anything you want, anything under God's golden sky, for the right price. And everyone has wants. Any habit you have, I say even habits unpopular, I can accommodate because I'm an abolitionist and I believe that any natural desire by man is natural in itself. Liberty. I'm it's middle name: li-bert-y ha ha. I'm a fool yessir, but you'll be surprised to know I also ascribe to science, and consider myself modern in my ways. They call a man like that a jack of all trades—trades, see. Trading's my game—oh! what is that! Heaven as all that blabbing doesn't matter in the presence of a good cook! What a fine smell! How tintillating my nostrils are. I say if a woman is a fine cook she be fine at heart, and I'm not an honest man if that roast is not the finest my nose has experienced since I was in Atlanta for a gentlemen's banquet, and then I do believe the difference was only due to their overpriced kitchen things. Let me tell you, I have with me, out in the very car, an oven that would put theirs twice to shame and still be half the price, should you be interested in intensifying your maid's already spectacular skill with meat.

"And is this the very woman responsible for my enchantment? Tending to the kitchen, there's a girl. How do you do? What's your name? My name's Bert, but my friends call me Clint. Call me Clint. Here, I've got something pretty for you. It'll suit your face. Have yourself this tassle, free of charge. Careful now it's a special tassle made with the finest cotton, normally seventy five cents but I'll give it to you for free cause I know a girl that makes em in the factory though I'd gladly trade knowing her for you. Trading's my game, see. You got anything to give me for free, in return for that tassle? I'll give you some advice, how about you be nice and say something, you know a how-to-do, Mr. Miss? Don't be shy now, say, I've just said my gratitude to you for the right good job you've done cooking that ham I smell, and I don't get a word for it in return? I bet you it's ham. Though, worked by those pretty fingers of

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yours it could be anything and I'd eat it. I bet it's right good, no matter what sort of abominable oven that is you're cooking it in, is it tin? A tin oven, haw it looks like tin. Honey I can change your life with a coal oven for fifty five dollars, or sixty with fellas to set it for you. That old thing you got, what's it burn, wood? A modern coal-burning stove is twice as big, twice as hot, and not even twice as expensive.

"Say, Leonard, Lenny, your maid's a bit of ham herself, isn't she? A spinster, I'd guess by the look of that dress. You should get her some new clothes, Lenny. A good six dollar dress would do. No shame in a six dollar dress. Though for eight, she could have a bonnet and a ribbon too—she seems like the ribbon sort—they'd make her seem like she was younger than she was. There's no shame in knowing a spinster if she's dressed like a lady. Say you don't have a match do you? No shame in that. People these days putting down the habit and right well for them I say. Only reason I still put up with it is 'cause I get them at such a good price. Hell, I've got a hundred cartons out in the car right now should you feel the desire upon you, tobacco in all kinds actually just twenty cents for most of it unless you want one of the chewing tins; them's thirty. Say, will she be joining us for dinner, I was invited to dinner but now I'm thinking dessert. Maybe we can exchange, you know negotate in the original, one animal for another. An ape for a woman is a fair trade, under God.

"Say, you joining us for dinner, miss?"

"And there the three of us were sitting, just like this, around a table quite like this, except a little longer, maybe made for twelve, with scrollwork on the sides and *of course* it was

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polished like a mirror, like a polished mirror. See, there's a point where being well-off corrupts a man, and I know that point has been reached when I can see myself eating in the polish of a man's table, and I know that the man, remember who won't even communicate because he's a foreigner and he's wealthy so why bother he thinks, he likes to watch himself while he's eating, like he couldn't wait to get away from his company to his "boudoir" so he had his table polished and put razors and freshenings and his toothbrush in the drawers. I was sitting there, watching this man watch himself, when the other guest, a bird about my age but twice as pretty ha ha pipes up, and she wants to know how about many people the table is supposed to fit, and he sees her pointing at the table and he says "two by four," thinking she's talking about the planks, and she says oh. Ha ha ha ha!

"I only mention it because it reminds me strongly of this situation. I expect you're expecting more company, because no one heats up an oven on a hot day like this in a little room like this to cook a roast for only three people. Not even clever country folks like you could keep that much meat tender for long. Perhaps you would let me sell you a tenderbox, like a tinderbox get it ha ha, a trusty tool for any frustrated cook, that gets wired in like an electric light and keeps your food fresher longer for sixty dollars. I'd use one if I wasn't on the road so much its such a handy thing.

"Anyway, sitting here reminded me strongly of that time around the table, here I am facing you and this here bird, seated at a plank table for twelve that's maybe not quite so shiny but then I don't hold the same criticism over you, Mr. Bingham, as I did that foreigner. Course the rest is pretty different. Leave to a foreigner to have a grand kitchen that they never use. At least yours looks like it's used as much as it is. That foreigner's kitchen was a grand thing with every pot and expensive utensil hung from something. Nothing rested on a surface great

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stretches of reflective surface my it was a traveler's bad dream there was nothing to sell him. I could have sold him everything there myself, but no more. It takes a man of ego to arrange a kitchen in such a rich display, like they were afraid to use it because they really weren't as rich as they looked and they couldn't afford a single extra pan, like they had spent everything they had on spectacle. I could sell all that spectacle to you, just with what I have out in the auto, for two thousand dollars, the shiny surfaces included, but even if it were in your means which looking around me I can guess it is not, I doubt very much you would take it because you and your maid I can tell are not people of ego. And that's a compliment, fellas, especially to you miss because there's nothing more unnatural in this world than a woman of ego.

"Let me tell you, I sure knew a few of them in my time, though. You've got to when you're a traveling salesman with girls in every town. And some of these girls aren't swooning on their porches just because I look the way I look or because I'm a man of modest establishment, but because they are women of ego, with plans for the future that exceed nature's proper boundaries. It takes a discerning man to tell them apart, but I tell you miss that a man doesn't become a traveling salesman by being undiscerning, and I can tell from the getgo that you're as pure of heart as any virgin half your age. Let me tell you, it isn't easy: one day I visited a chemist for some medicine to treat my ailing nephew, and my innate sensitivity to such things was confounded by the unnaturalness of what I discovered inside. There behind the long white countertop, just about as shiny as that table I mentioned fore, is this chemist, except its not its a woman. I can see myself in the reflection of the white counter, behind me racks of medicines like an audience in a stack of bleachers with red hats and green hats and jerseys cut out of old sheets, I watch myself being watched by the medicines in the reflection on the counter and muddle through buying the ointment I aimed for, which was three rows up

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in a shelf behind her head by a door with a port hole in it (I wouldn't be muddled enough by anything but the devil himself after my eventual unfortunate death, come when it may, to not complete an important transaction), and I watch myself make my pitch to the *woman* for the salves and bottles of things I keep in my car in case some local doctor is low on stock, and what's she do but compliment me right out. She interrupts me with words out of her bow-shaped mouth, the words propelled along like arrows out of her round, kind of fat face. I'm normally prepared for such eventuality, but it took me off my balance because it was a woman not a chemist and I don't know what to say to a chemist telling me my face is a pretty one, so I say to her like a woman that maybe she'd rather be interested in some of these pills I had for female solutions, with a humor as sanguine as hers, and she smiles wide open like the earth cleft open and yawning into hell—the devil smiles at me and asks me if she'd be needing em any time soon as if to imply, so as shocked as I am by the perversity of the thing I still have my wits and my wits tells her, they quip back, I say I supposed maybe she'd already run out of her original stock, large as it was, so often she needs it ha ha. I tell you that was a woman of ego, *boy!*

"Don't let me distract you though. I bet that dinner's about ready and surely you've got something else to split it with, something you need to get up and do, you know, chop. Though the weather's been a bit too slick this season for good crisp vegetables, soggy instead and drooping like the trees hanging in the rain like their bark wasn't enough this time to keep them from dissembling and coming all to pieces like cheap toilet paper, let me tell you. If you've got nothing better to do then let me entice you with an offer. Let me tell you, I don't know how you make out without a clock in a kitchen, it's not a luxury but a necessity yes a necessity, for five dollars you can have a timer that can do just as well. Here, look at that there's one in my

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pocket. Come on one of you has five dollars—I'm trying to help out is all. No? Alright three dollars and a half. No? You're looking at me like there's nothing there. It's just a timer, look. You country folks can't be that bad off even after that horrible stock business. I suppose even you out here heard about that. Even me with my plans in the housing market has to wait this one out, but I tell you that it won't do no good to hide from it. The President says we've got to spend, so, listen to the word of a man you all trust and I don't just mean me ha ha and let me sell you this timer—it'll last you years. See that's something to have a thing that will keep track of whole years one second at a time. No?

"Oh I see, I see. You folks have been out here so long you aren't familiar with these machines these little machines its like an automobile just smaller and it does a different thing if I take the back off you can see the gears, see. They're turning in there, their teeth locking and twisting, violent kissers, one lightly bearded and scratchy the other polished recently with watch oil, to the tune of the coroner's quickstep, a march in two two with a solo by a horn player with no teeth. Let me tell you I once knew a fellow at an orchestra house, a big cylindrical building with holes in the top like it was itself a musical instrument, just draped in velvet purple banners that concealed the length of it like a woman's leg, and this fellow had no teeth. He'd had them knocked out when a brawl broke out one evening right in the orchestra pit and a fellow knocked away his tall black music stand and pushed his horn right into his mouth past his teeth and tried to choke him on it. He said it was like his horn was muted, but it kept on playing as he gasped through it for breath and blood dribbled through its castellated tubes then out the bell and onto his pants. He showed me his pants as proof. You should have heard the way that man talked—not tough like he'd survived something hard to survive, but kind of timid as if the reputation the event had earned him had compensated for the

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trouble of it. He said it was no trouble at all, no sir, he never asked for it but God's punishment was also God's gift, and he found after that he was the best horn player in the county, like the progress of the horn down his throat had shaped it like a horn and now he was like it, body and soul. This fellow was humble, though. He attributed the reputation the event had earned him to a little timer just like this he called a metrognome and treated it as fondly. He called it his best friend, cause he was bad at counting from long ago as he was young, but he sure could count on it ha ha.

"You can count on me folks because I don't have a hidden agenda for you like most people in this world. I'm as honest as they come in this part of the world, which is the most honest part if you ask me, and I've been around I've been a lot a round the whole world, as much as they know it and to some places they don't. Let me tell you, some of the places I've been have been, or will be, the most beautiful you could ever imagine. Where do you think I get my stock? I'll tell you: slogging through the thick Amazonian mud that like lips lips you down into the long rivers with premenopausal haste, or the thick Amazonian trees that dip their fronds (they don't call em leaves down there) into the river with a fake gentility; they offer their hand, cuffed and smooth as a man's at a dance, and it tears away at the wrist, sinews spraying, leaving you hopeless for escape from the river, gazing four feet out onto the bank where a lizard, a great striped lizard like the ones I have in my auto right now for forty dollars a piece, a commodity, stares at you from the bank, its company in waiting, its currency its very breath, contemplating some mischief beyond your subcutaneous and permanent state of imprisonment. If anyone tells you that the Amazon is any less a place of business than the city of cities then you'll know they aren't folks from this part of the world, because they'll be lying, or just plain foolish, and folks from this part of the world know a truth even if it's beyond

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them, beyond this big old house with the rotting eaves that are rotting even in its glory as the sun sets behind it, beyond Bingham street and the overgrowth and the lake that's only visible from one discrete angle from the road, beyond the corner store at the end of the road that only exists because every shape that touches another shape has a corner, and where two shapes touch there is business.

"I'd like to take you there one day, Miss, though I can see in your face that it is beyond you. Perhaps you would be interested in an album of pho-to graphs. A set of twenty for ten dollars, each taken in the depths of the living, the chordate jungle. I have mementos, real artifacts and animals gathered at great risk and sometimes great cost to my person. The traumas I have seen, suffered at the hands of the riverside Indians, the objects I have liberated, bejeweled and pagan but at once sacred with a rapture beyond the savages' comprehension, all of it a hundred feet away at most, resting, nascent in the darkness of my automobile, silent but for the thrush, thrush, thrush of the gallinule that guards it. It is like a temple itself. Let me tell you, it was mistaken for one as I drove down the Basin one day, though the gaps in a torn paper-towel of trees, when a host of savages crowded into the snarl of road I had made there (years before), unwilling to move even as I nudged them with the car and, impatient, began to knock them over. Was it awe or hatred that riveted them there like fake birds? It was hatred, I know, but a kind of awed hatred. They let me run them over into the earth into the mud until I was able to push away, without ever getting my feet dirty by stepping out of the car, because they worshipped their hatred of me, and with every snapping bone their hatred grew in tintillation.

"They can hate me all they like as long as I get what I'm after and can make myself a humble reputation from it. For example, just outside I keep some of my famous bone jewelry

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that you might be interested in browsing. I could bring it in and roll it out for you. It's prettier than it sounds. Would be a lovely thing around that long neck of yours, Miss, and perhaps I could entice you, Lenny, to try a pair of bone reading glasses, or, since your eyes appear to be in fine condition, a bone flute, or if you are not yourself of the musical disposition, a fine bone knife perfect for utility, better than that bloody dagger you're holding, and easier to clean. Fifteen dollars for any item, decorative or practical, made from bone. Thirteen if you're replacing an item you might be willing to part with. These are generous offers folks, you won't see such a grand selection of goods until the next time you catch me. That means you, Miss, ha ha. I collect everything of value, from the tiniest grain of gold dust that once drifted from the eyelids of an Egyptian pharaoh to the elephant, gargantuan in body and nobility, unwilling but perfectly able to crush me and the petty auto outside that it's trapped it in out of the deepest respect for life. We are not so very different, the elephant and I, in this way. It is the nomadic soul, the wanderlust that grips all animals and me, but it is emended in my humanity by God to be an intelligent nature, like Columbus's, for whom discovery is more than just exploration but transaction and, I shall tell you this secret because I trust you, profit of soul.

"So when I say that I have an exotic display of feathers that would make your appreciable body look like a diva in disguise, Miss, I am offering up my future my future my livelihood my spirit to enrichen. Thirty cents for a feather of startling blue with a sheen like a shampooed queen on every thistle or a cataract removed from its rush to gleam on its own in the full of a blush of the maiden, or even the spinster, who wears it. Two and I cannot tell you the gazes, jealous and envious and amorous and androgous, that you will draw like Cupid the string of his bow to his cheek, to kiss lightly what they seek there: your image, your appearance—and

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with three feathers, the third one a red one for the surging blood of the heart, the arrow will loose and pierce that nearby heart, and its surging blood will love the woman beyond the image, beckoned by the image, trapped by the image in the shell beyond in supine bliss, unawares—a spinster? an old maid? a sister?—unawares of creed, creed unneeded, only love heeded. Let me entice you, let me distract you to an exotic feather. Ninety cents for a guaranteed life of pleasures, vindicated by God as each one has been personally blessed by an emeritus minister of my own acquaintance and confidence. Let me tell you, with these feathers more than just my practiced eye will be able to divine the serviceable woman inside those faded dungarees and that marbled skin. A service I imagine you greatly require.

"I provide services and functions, perform weddings and luncheons, entertain, ascertain, and I am an excellent shot at twenty yards. If you have a habit I have it. Today is your lucky day miss no not your birthday its the day you've been waiting for only you dont know it you knew it but you forgot because you want it so badly you lost it but now its here rub the lamp and ask my ear any wish any request any regard ask the best just ask and I'll arrange the rest and you can even have the lamp for another seventeen dollars—real gold plate look at the shape of it sinuous and broad and at the nape an inscription that could be yours yes your own name and the name of this lucky day your lucky day written large the same as the name of the best queens in france, visible at a glance, full of majesty.

"Madameoiselle, with me you are free of anything, even reality.

"Let me tell you, I once said that very line to the Queen of France as she lay in her bedchamber on the tops of her folded hands, the unintelligibly pink curtains draped between our visions, and she chortled madly, for she was madly in love with me, and said my dear Clint I am already free of reality all you have to do is ask my court and I said Lady, I would not

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prosecute half so generously and she laughed and laughed, shaking the bed. Let me tell you, the laugh of the Queen of France was like a tiny bell without a clapper, and her eyes and her ears were like the ears and eyes of a bell and her face like a bronze alloy and yes her crown was like the crown of a bell ha ha, not half as shapely as your long features, but still royal. She gave me this talisman that opens on a scene of Calais for her mirth, and since I have had the acquaintance and confidence of an accomplished jeweler since, I have reproduced the article twenty times and would be willing to part with one precious example of it for fifty dollars, no less, for the image is close to my heart. Fifty dollars, pure silver, fine craftsmanship, Calais, the best.

"How about a stool of glass with a single leg or a razor that will shave without a trace or a wooden cat so fierce it will scare your rats or polenta cooked in animal fat or a wig with tassel for theatrical events or an electric torch you can carry with you or a saddle starched for discerning visual or smoked cheese that will last a lifetime or wine that will put your guests to sleep or powder to make your face look sweet or boots of lizard hide or marshmallows cooked along one side or oil that's slicker than a pig or sticks that seem to sing or a toy that a boy can bring to parties or candy cooked like a cloud or puppets that make sound or a wheelbarrow round or a pack of cards that never dog or a dog with stripes or spots or a wallet with a lot of pockets or a tiny figure of the tallest building or an acoustic diaphragm you can blow on good for children or paint that dries just when you want it to or a staunch in case you're bleeding or a pear seedling or a baby hare or a special shampoo or a see-through dress or a miniature stair or a lightning machine or a thermometer or a noiseometer or an encyclopedia or a flower that's green or an example of any single object or animal or place that's ever been seen.

"God you've got to let me sell you something, that's why I'm here. Shall I get right down

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to business, then? Shall I bring them in? In parade on your own kitchen table? Your own grimy kitchen table spattered with food once suitable for human and then insect and then tiny organism in turn until it no longer has a function for any body or any mind—so small it is to see? I could bring them in then would you buy would you buy with an ape dancing on your table because I have a dancing ape and I have a singing ape and I have an ape that's with child and an ape that was still wild two weeks ago and an ape that will sell you things like a tiny impersonation of myself I have a menagerie you have never dreamed of living and dead packaged and pickled and porked that will work for you as hard as a son for his father or a mother her son or a baby its dreams echoing palsy screams while it struggles and gasps under the strangling clockwork toy it plays with in its sleep. Let me sell you, let me tell you about the things I have the things, the dreams I have, the things I have in dreams, let me sell you the things I have to tell, the dreams I have as well, the dreams, the stories, the enticements, the distractions, I tell you the hell. Let me tell you. a true story:

The Fish Poacher (part three of three)

"Stuck in an inexplicable dip in the middle of a country road, as far from any thought as any other place in this world, was a broken automobile. At first there was nothing but the automobile, for the thing that was inside it was still and—as its defective function as driver—part of the broken car itself. So there was nothing but the automobile, and the road, and the carthaginian forest that ran alongside the road, trapped by the line of the road even when it

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had the whole rest of the world and any other direction it pleased to grow, and the lake, which could only be seen from that point in the explicable dip, as if the dip was providing a misunderstood favor to passersby (a roan car or two at most, in a year) that until now had driven past, the drivers' heads bent rigidly forward, their hands clutched around the thick black leather of their steering wheels, to escape the jolt, jolt, jolt of large rocks, and as if by disbelief escape the dirt that sprung up, inexplicably, from the road before the automobile wheels even touched it and spread down the grooves and pockets in their faces and across the moist surfaces of their eyes like rust would. The lake was the only thing beautiful there. Perhaps the lake's anonymity was why this particular spot, at the very concavity of the inexplicable dip which was filled with water and by the broken automobile, was the place least contemplated as any in the world, until now.

"The broken automobile divided, and then there were two automobiles in the road, the lake invisible now, but the road, at least thirty feet of it before it turned into the jungle, was intensely visible in the streak of light from the headlights of the second—the child—automobile, a heavier creature with peeling blue paint that no one had ever complained about, and two impatient passengers, one squeezing the horn and the other bisected by a hole in the car door, waving his hat at the first automobile, apparently unaware that there was no passenger in it, just machine. Then the first automobile divided again, and there *was* a passenger in it, as if the impatient men had called it into being like a genie (except these men would have naught to do with old oil lamps) to convenience them. His name was Leonard, and he was as surprised and delighted to be called into being as any man is after they have overcome the trauma of their birth. He exited the first automobile, which was the cheapest of its class—a dull black mound that was hunched in the most awkward impression of human

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sclerosis—and in his cheap clothes and cheap accent he stood himself outside the other car window and negotiated a ride to his home, which was, he said, just ten miles yonder.

"I expect hauling his broken car out of that trench is enough service to let him ride to the house with us, even though he is sodden," said the man with the hat, now damp from leaning out of the car in the trenchant rain, to the man who had stopped squeezing the horn and was now cranking the cranking the cranking the crank.

"You should ask him what his name is, in case he's the fellow we're supposed to meet," the man said, cranking, even though Leonard was right there outside the passenger side window, his eyes muddy behind thin glasses as dirty as the automobile windshield, and behind him the forest waiting to devour him in its silhouette. But the damp man did not ask; instead he opened the door and slid without any perceptible use of his legs over the bumpy leather seat to make room, which was quickly and moistly filled.

"Hey, now," said the driver, shrugging off the damp man's dampness.

"Leonard got out of the car again and said he had some cargo to take with. Because they were already late, the two other men watched him and each other placidly, because late was late to them. While they waited, the dampness in the car deflated the posture of their thick suit jackets and their encephalic ties, one cream the other a light melon color, and they slumped invertebrate into the cushion, bouncing up out of it once as Leonard placed a heavy crate into the back and with snuffling noises secured it. Leonard came out with a car jack and put it underwater in the dip and jacked his car up and onto the road, then he pushed it to the side of the road, so when he finally came back to the car—the door of which still hung open—and placed himself back onto the seat, the gush of water from his clothes onto the seat seemed not to run around the two well-dressed men but to mingle with them, as if they were never really

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people to begin with but collusions of shape in a puddle, or two leaky bladders.

"Adieu,' said one of them to the spot with the lake and the broken automobile, it was impossible to tell who in the darkness. Whoever it was said it fearfully, like they were not yet prepared to die, and then they drove the rest of the way to the house without saying a word, only breathing."

"When Leonard and the two businessmen arrived within walking distance of the house, which could not be determined by sight but by the easy sound the tires of their automobile made on the ground there, the honeylocusts filed in behind them so the road and the moon even disappeared behind them. They made good time across the yard which had been stripped of everything irregular as if by an excellent groundskeeper, though none had been employed for years. Ghastly, the precarious bulk of the house reared against a single underqualified buttress and then penetrated the tree line and a half-healed sky that was still dripping from its wounds. In the house's fall-shadow there cowered a valueless lean-to made of ply, and in *its* purple shadow cowered an automobile, and then their automobile, so alike as to be identically divisible; in this they cowered.

"There wasn't much room on the doorstep out of the rain, but the three of them, Leonard in front and the two somber men behind, weren't large people. A single useless light bulb hung invisibly from the short awning that covered the front door and bounced between them on the wind. It made a sound like sand bouncing off a shingle, and then when the door opened the door made the same sound, so none of the guests noticed at first, even though there was a ruddy light beyond it and also the face of Leonard's brother Jameson, and it was ruddy because he was mad. 'Leonard?' were Jameson's predictable words, but they came out around

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the flat shape of his hand as he scratched his face so that even though they were predictable words they seemed unusual and deserving of serious consideration.

"It was Leonard who considered them. He simply said, 'Jameson.'

"'Jameson?' said one of the men.

"'Leonard?' asked a voice from behind Jameson's large, but not bulky figure. Then from under Jameson's armpit materialized a hat with a feather stuck on top of it and a head stuck underneath that was whiskered finely all over so it looked like a badger's. 'Leonard?' repeated the whiskered man.

"Jameson shook his head. 'Jameson.'

"Then the stranger's face divided in half on either side of his smile and he looked out of the doorway at the soaked men assembled there. 'Leonard!' he said. At that point Leonard recognized the traveling salesman's voice and they shook hands over Jameson who was shaking hands with the automobile driver under the other passenger, who was already trying to get inside out of the rain.

"The kitchen was regrettably dull, but it was clear that some effort had been made to make the place presentable for guests. What were once stains that ran from the counter and onto the floor in splats had been recently tidied up and some ancient, decorative blankets emblazoned with nursery scenes had been used to cover up the sink and what, by the shape of it, was probably a hardware vice in the corner. There was little homeliness in it, but there was a stark nobility that—even seeming deceased—gave the wetly accoutred kitchen a mood of

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import and ambiguous, fatal foreshadowing.

"The eerie atmosphere was not diminished by the unclever prattle of the stranger, who introduced himself—several times—as a traveling salesman of great reknown and then greater reknown and then in one last gusty brag of a reknown so great that to comprehend it was to die. This, the salesman concluded, was the logical conclusion to his (and everyone's) story, and thus he refused to speak at all for at least five minutes during which tentative introductions between the other guests were possible: Leonard and Jameson were brothers, apparently with a third sibling, absent, who was a spinster. The other two later guests were Jameson's company, and had arrived to discuss something grave and distressing and secret; they appeared put upon by the idea that their business would be delayed until after dinner—an idea which Jameson insisted on in a tone of dead promise—as if they were mostly mechanical and had replaced their appetites with nothing at all out of goalless disdain. The salesman's presence was considered Leonard's fault by the majority, so with a judicial severity the others exiled him and him outside to fetch some brussel sprouts Leonard claimed to have purchased in town, but when they returned the others could not believe the objects they carried with them were edible, so putrified they were and limpid like bloodless fingers.

"After some small discussion, the salesman was eventually readmitted to the table when Leonard unexpectedly excused himself, protesting melena. The salesman mistook this for good faith and volunteered something from his shirt pocket which he said had abetted his own personal struggle with diverticulosis and wanted to sell. Thereafter he was permanently banished, and it took about an hour for everyone to regain their appetite, which was lucky because this was when they were all, save the third sibling, reunited at the table, but it was also unlucky because by that time they were very, very tense in each others' company."

"Jameson watched the businessmen's mouths as they ate. As they ate they themselves watched the brass fish poacher in the center of the table. It still steamed half an hour after being removed from the oven as if the divided wedge of plasticised meat that bulged from its center was itself a mouth that exhaled continuously. The mouth spat giblets into its immediate above as it sizzled, popping and bubbling glibly. The mouth seemed to be uttering an unrecognizable stream of vulgar snickers that would have been out of place coming from the mouth of a man or any mammal half his size or half his brain. It was as if the very words had been roasted which once said, 'trapper,' poacher,' 'murderer,' and were now too caramelized to comprehend consciously. But unconsciously the breathlessness of the mouth crept into the brains of the businessmen while they watched it and nearly suffocated them. They grew visibly blue, and then seemed to forget completely the method of breathing, so they seemed to struggle inordinately at it, when finally the salesman uttered, 'what a delicious roast! You must give my compliments to the cook and inquire as to whether I might enquire on her for her trouble, in the civil sense, later tonight once civil business has been put behind us ha ha' and then the spell of it was broken, though their faces retained their hue.

"Jameson mopped/scratched a brown stain below his mouth with his hand while he said, 'I hope my company has not found this our final meal together distasteful' and then for the sake of expediency they said they did not and agreed to resign upstairs to the sitting room to discuss the evening's business. After this, the salesman deigned to cut another piece of the roast from its carcass but could not find the carving knife, so he reseated himself next to

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Leonard, with whom he had business of his own, and helped himself from the bucket of the brussel sprouts, out of which Leonard had been palely sampling the entire evening.

"The salesman was quick to task: 'I see you've traveled a long road, a longer road than I by the look of you, even I, who has been to the Amazon to the Old World even to the north pole where I befriended and then trapped a polar bear with my good nature, and being so adept at channeling it I persuaded it by bearlike gesture *alone* to travel with me at the head of my caravan, on which I inferred it would receive thirty five percent of the profits plus rights to the haggle from items that carried a market value less than ten dollars on or after November the sixth of the previous year. Then in a feat of courage that briefly eclipsed my pity for such a noble animal, I snared it in a jaw trap and was able to sell it at an overwhelming gain before it died—as it eventually would—of tetanus.'

"Leonard adjusted his glasses. 'Tetanus?'

"A wondrous frightening disease, if you ever saw it. If you saw it you would know it. A maiden in Turkey once fell afflicted of the disease by being forced to eat a box of nails by the Sultana, who suspected her of conducting an affair with her husband, a carpenter of international reknown and personality and my former partner. The maiden's illness was so horrible that the carpenter would not leave her side, but at her side it was impossible, with his tender heart, to resist kissing her one last time before she passed, and since tetanus is predominately a disease of the mouth in homo sapiens and the like, he contracted the plague that by no other means he could have gained, and the Sultana had proof that her husband was treacherous, and made him a slave of the court where he lived only briefly with his mouth cut off and also as a eunuch.

"I can assure you, however, that as a favorite of mine you'll receive no damaged goods. I

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have the perfect, most healthy specimen for you today, which is your lucky day, an animal of such good nature and sense of humor and playfulness and oh, perceptive as the seerest oracle of Greece, with excellent libido and a forthrightness with the ladies of its species, and manners bred into it by design and by nature that are the paragons of each, and a temper only raised in defence of justice, and of trusting and loving disposition even being trapped from birth, but high in worth for the family man, and rapt of obedience, and of mirth even under the worst of circumstances he's convenient. He does jabber as a monkey must, but it's a flaw of his species, and he's traveled wide enough to know about the other beasts he sees; he's uneasily frightened, a creature of dimension and confident vision to brighten your life and guard you from thieves and trappers and poachers and poisons and old age and other griefs and rock your children to sleep in the nursery and polish your shoes and help you move (a strength like his should always be used) and cook meals you approve of and read the news you approve of and ah the things he could do to improve your life and oh the life. A companion like him would be the greatest asset money could buy, a life! And here he is. Here is your ape, behold! ha ha.

"Who ah! ah! ah! he he! ah! oh ah! who who! he he ah! ah! ah!..."

"Marjorie stepped only on the unbroken tiles that led from the foyer which was dark like the inside of a wine bottle. She climbed the stairs to the second floor in the places that she knew would not creak. Her hands touched the rotting balusters at the top where she knew they would not betray her. Her head escaped under the tumorous hallway ceiling that led from the stairwell without injury or bump, though it was dark. Racing through the house was her

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vicious mission, become her obsession. Her raw finger tips, engaged like excoriating roots into cracks she had worn into the walls, propelled her along the walls. They scraped and stole; they missed nothing; they hit nothing, except, once, a spider web.

"She entered Leonard's room which was vaulted and windowless and barren of what she sought: near the door, a thick amazonian snake bulged in an empty aquarium; beside it was a featherless parrot; a hairless cat; tailless mice; the guinea pig cage was empty of bedding. In all, eight caged and gagged creatures observed and reflected her with their eyes, but the room was empty to her. It was empty except for the gags, which were stringy from months of gnawing. To these she crept, and one by one her rapid fingers retrieved them. It was above her to think of her own justice, to steal above her station, but she had almost completed the web in her room and that mission was the greater responsibility.

Soon the room was filled with noise: the animals hooted and clamored their hatred of her. They tried to bite her when she approached the next and then the next one, but her fingers were too fast and like a ripple the next one burst into cacaphony and discord until the discord seethed and rippled up along the walls and swelled the room. The hate of it was tremendous. The sound of it tumescent. An animal ear could have fathomed it better than Marjorie's, as tongue, feather, breast, lungs, claws, fangs trembled and beat against one another and the room and began to tear away at it. Their collective voices smote away their bonds and then they were free, yet their voices transcended still their freedom and they were mad, and their madness was the madness of the rapture."

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"Jameson paced—and scratched—to a little table at the end of the sitting room. On the table was a timepiece with a gross, protruding crank for winding. He cranked the crank and the gears inside it began to pluck against each other, each mechanical tendon off key from the other as he preserved life in the watch with a sound like pain.

"'Bankruptcy entitles you to an insurance stipend based on the declaration of the value of your assets.' Seated on a couch by the roaring fireplace, Jameson's company spoke as one. 'Our job is the unpleasant one of evaluating your net worth and your debt and confiscating the difference, starting with nonessential and unsentimental articles, such as your recently purchased automobile, which we believe you will soon find has become less than an asset. Our responsibility is to the shareholders, you understand, many of whom reside overseas, and if we do not report favorably to them, there will be accusations of theft which we would like to preclude. Presuming your receipts add up and we are satisfied that all the stock deeds have been accounted for, this should be a quick and painless investigation. International finance is a very clean business; it has to be in order to guarantee our country's reputation and future investments.' Here they made an ostentatious business of coughing into twinned handkerchiefs, rising from which they appeared even bluer and more sick looking than they had before.

"'It is above your station to take from me,' Jameson said, 'I employed you.'

"His company shifted on the coils in the couch. 'We are glad you have already accustomed yourself to using the past tense in this matter. As your former deputies, we have been commissioned by the government to—as compassionately as possible—close your affairs.'

"Jameson laughed. 'I used the past tense because I have poisoned you.' Then he stared at the watch which was ticking, barely audible, over the roar of the fire. 'Oh, I knew you would

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not be disappointed. Soon you will be corpses... My company is dead.' After one last glance at the watch he snapped his fingers and then the businessmen started, stood up and then sat down again in a rush, choking, with their hands at their necks gripping hard enough to strangle. 'I will not be trapped in my own house,' he said very seriously. With his other hand he removed a stock ticket from his coat pocket. 'These are your stolen funds. Just enough,' he said, 'to escape.'

"The fishlike gasps of the businessmen mimicked the growls and wheezes of the fire in the fireplace, and then others joined them, mysterious voices that crept into and around the room on bodies of strange shape and size: Leonard's animals. They were inconceivable in motion, as the subject and not the object of gaze. They stampeded into the room, shrieking and knocking things over. The couch was overturned, catapulting the suffocated bodies away; the timepiece was taken up and hurled against the wall where it splintered into fibrils; the closet was capsized and the equipment inside it—a fishing rod and some rancid bait—deposited across the floor and into the fire which barked and lunged out onto it; and then they were gone, to the next room, with a stopwatchlike method as a woodcutter chops at a tree."

"Jameson felt a weight against his shoulders in the wake of the animals. He could hear them at the bottom of the stairwell, moving off and eventually out of the house, free and weightless. Still the house shuddered, and wheezed, and barked and cackled and slithered to pieces. The sounds, and possibly an instinct to survive, drove him from the crumbling remains of the second floor a foot at a time. With each step he kicked away a year of

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responsibility to the physical thing of the house and its inhabitants and a dead woman he had dumped in the lake for the fishes years ago. He was not proud of being a murderer. Then he was not proud of being at all, and cared little when his foot went clean through a weak board on the stairs and only circumstance saved his body from being mangled in the gap there. Yet, he would not be trapped in that house (his responsibility). He pulled himself free of the gap and was more careful this time, and then did not need to be careful at all as the house became whole again—stable—near the ground floor and he could see the animal's trail where it went right up to the front door, which had now collapsed. They had not bothered to destroy the entire house. They had just left through the door.

"This angered Jameson. They had left the job unfinished and his responsibility intact, looming, precarious, bulky. Were they so wild? So oblivious? No, he knew what they had done: they had left the one of them that was still trapped there to finish the job.

"God damn you!" he shouted. "God damn you! Come back for *me!*" Then he reached out and with his considerable strength tore one of the balusters from the banister on the staircase and cast about with it, knocking holes in the plaster wall and beating at the front door where the exit was until the baluster went to splinters, and when that happened he tore up a floorboard with his strong hand and destroyed the furniture and went into the kitchen and shattered the cutlery in the kitchen and the window in the kitchen and with his weaker hand ripped his face.

"He did not see Leonard in the kitchen, standing over the corpse of the salesman whose mouth his brother had cut out with the carving knife. The concavity in the salesman's face was formless; without his mouth he seemed impotent and empty... Jameson did not see Marjorie either. She was poised in the corner of the far doorway, peering in. Neither did they see him.

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They had eyes only for the fish poacher on the kitchen table and the spider trapped inside it, stuck in the meat and in the poison, dead.

"Come back for *me!*" he shouted, tiny under a new sound like roaring, groaning, or barking from above in the house, it raged. At that point he knew that he had not been left behind after all. The animals were here, trapped in the web, and himself chief among them."