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Honors Thesis

THE FACE OF GOD: IMAGINATIVE SPACE IN *PICKLE GREEN*

by
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ABSTRACT

THE FACE OF GOD: IMAGINARY SPACE IN *PICKLE GREEN*

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A foundational premise of adaptation theory is that novels, films, theater, and any other storytelling medium can tell the same story but must do so differently. That is, each medium has its own distinct “language” with varying strengths and weaknesses inherent to its form. However, adaptation theorists have recently started pushing back on the idea that a film “can’t” do the same things as a novel, for example, arguing instead that the language of film and literature is more a result of “habits that are grounded in the history of fashion, taste, and analysis rather than in any specific technical properties of novels and films” (Leitch 152). The idea is basically that an adaptation is different from a transcription, and consequently films and novels can do anything that novels and films can do. Be that as it may, even the differentiation of the words “adaptation” and “transcription” postulates that there is at least some basic formal difference between novels and film, however small. Because literature is read, as opposed to seen, action and characterization exist principally in the reader’s mind. Moreover, because everyone’s experience with language and certain words is different, each reader’s experience will be similarly unique. The first three chapters of my novel, *Pickle Green*, take advantage of

this by characterizing each of the three protagonists in distinct and indispensably literary ways, meaning that the methods exist primarily on the page and in the reader's mind, thus creating a unique relationship between character and reader.

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Critical Introduction

The crux of adaptation theory is that novels, films, theater, or really any medium can tell the same story but must do so differently. Each has its own distinct “language” that uniquely engages its audience, and in recent years scholars have become increasingly interested in collating the language of especially film and literature. The obvious question, especially for the lay English major, is, what can novels do that movies can’t? Indeed, Seymour Chatman wrote an article titled “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)” that delineates what he thought to be the precise advantages and disadvantages to writing a story as a novel. Chatman’s arguments were aptly challenged by Thomas Leitch, who pointed out that Chatman and other adaptation theorists conflated conventions of each medium with its limitations. That differences between literary and cinematic texts are rooted in essential properties of their respective media “has been one of the rare articles of faith that has actually come under such general debate that few theorists would probably admit to subscribing to it these days” (Leitch 149-150). His paper boils down to the argument that anything a novel can do, film can do just as well, and that it’s more appropriate to consider “all Chatman’s arguments together and conclude that they apply not to essential properties of novels and films, but to specific reading habits that are grounded in the history of fashion, taste, and analysis rather than in any specific technical properties of novels and films” (Leitch 152). That is not to say that movies and films are identical, or even that each can adapt a story in exactly the same way—only that a movie can *adapt*, a word which many adaptation theorists confuse with “translate,” anything a novel can do.

I bring up adaptation theory because its many formal comparisons are fertile ground for understanding the nuances of written storytelling. Admitting that nothing a book can do is truly unique, there are nevertheless certain things a novel does differently than a film. Leitch admits that novels aren't as dependent on prescribed, unalterable visual performances as films (154), and Chatman similarly points out that "evaluative descriptions like 'she was pretty' can invoke visual elaboration in the reader's mind. If he or she requires one, each reader will provide just the mental image to suit his or her own notions of prettiness" (Chatman 410). It is precisely this alterability that *Pickle Green* engages with—Richard, Pickle, and Marissa are each characterized using textual iconography and language in ways that not only deliberately engage the imagination of the reader but that also explore the physical representation of abstract imaginary space that is possible only because it is a written story. Richard's ® and ™ symbols and his past tense narration; Pickle's made up contractions like "pricklebuzz," the biblical style of the words LORD / FIGURE, and the physical descriptions of his drug induced hallucination; and Marissa's separated contractions like "uncelebratory/pockmarked thing" and the list of all the things she doesn't do while waiting for Richard are all characterization methods that are most effectively portrayed in written fiction.

It's worth giving a (woefully) brief history of character in fiction to better understand the ways *Pickle Green* engages with its literary genealogy, starting with Jane Austen. Austen pioneered the brilliant technique of free indirect discourse, a narrative technique that blends narration with character. So, for example, she writes in *Northanger Abbey* that "from fifteen to seventeen [Catherine Morland] was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with these

quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (Austen). Words like “heroine” and “eventful lives” aren’t *just* Austen’s narration or Catherine’s direct thoughts (hence the lack of, “she thought”)—rather, it’s something in between. The narration teaches us that Catherine thinks herself destined to be a great heroine of an eventful story. Which, of course, she is, it’s just not the story Catherine thinks it is. Austen’s prose becomes a tool for characterization. Austen also interrupts her story early on for a well-written defense of novels, which in Austen’s day were still in their infancy and generally looked down upon. Novels, she writes, are in short “only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed... are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (Austen). This digression, a now-outmoded genre convention, seems to be Austen herself directly addressing the audience, rather than Catherine Morland.

George Eliot in *Scenes of Clerical Life* similarly uses free indirect discourse and the occasional digression to address her reader. “Depend on it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones” (Eliot 44). This passage represents Eliot’s personal aesthetic philosophy blended with the narrator and minor character George Eliot who lives in Milby. This is more obvious later in the novel: “The act of confiding in human sympathy, the consciousness that a fellow-being was listening to her with patient pity, prepared her soul for that stronger leap by which faith grasps the idea of the divine sympathy” (Eliot 336). Mary Anne Evans wasn’t religious when she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life*, though her author persona clearly is. Eliot’s narrative style

echoes Austen's but is more obviously embedded in the head of a character, even in the digressions.

Two modernists, Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway, split from Eliot's pastoral realism with new and very different aesthetic philosophies. Woolf's experimental novel *To the Lighthouse* prioritizes psychological realism over all else—Woolf attempts to portray as accurately as possible how people think and interpret the world. It's a nonlinear novel that jumps from mind to mind as the cast of characters contemplates visiting an offshore lighthouse. Psychological realism in this context is like free indirect discourse taken to the extreme—the prose is erratic and contradictory, exactly like our thoughts are.

Hemingway, contrastingly, is almost the antithesis of psychological realism. His prose has been described as cinematic by Leitch and others because of the “camera eye” neutrality that typify his stories. He opens “Hills Like White Elephants,” which was published the same year as *To the Lighthouse*, by writing, “The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun” (Hemingway). Notice how uninflected these descriptions are—it's like looking at a picture. The dialogue is equally sparse, just lines of what people say with very little physical description. Hemingway sets the scene, which of course is relevant to the story, and lets the reader figure out the rest through juxtaposition and inference.

Contemporary authors like David Foster Wallace have chosen a kind of middle ground. *Infinite Jest* uses variously Hemingway's camera eye prose, free indirect discourse, and character digressions, while simultaneously creating moments that are

indelibly textual, meaning they exist best on the page. One great example is the noises Hal makes when he first tries to speak to the university deans. “‘I cannot make myself understood, now.’ I am speaking slowly and distinctly. ‘Call it something I ate’” (Wallace 10). Wallace uses a blend of free indirect discourse and psychological realism by letting us into Hal’s head while he talks. We can see how obviously intelligent, well read, and above all else, articulate he is, a moment that is disrupted by the deans’ horrified reactions. “‘I look out. Directed my way is horror. I rise from the chair. I see jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads, cheeks bright-white. The chair recedes below me. ‘Sweet mother of Christ,’ the Director says” (Wallace 12). Hal, we learn, is incapable of talking without making sub-mammalian noises and flailing his arms so violently that the Director tackles him to the ground and calls an ambulance. Yet, because *Infinite Jest* is a novel, Wallace crafts the moment so we are horrified at the deans’ reactions. It is not until Hal’s uncle comes back into the scene that we understand exactly what happened. By writing the scene in Hal’s head, Hal’s own emotions are amplified in the reader.

Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*, winner of the 2019 Booker Prize, follows more Virginia Woolf’s psychological realism, though it’s not nearly as extreme or experimental. Evaristo emphasizes character over plot, and her free indirect discourse is more overt than Austen’s: “when they leave uni it’s gonna be with a huge debt and crazy competition for jobs... and it’s so crazy that the disgusting perma-tanned billionaire has set a new intellectual and moral low by being president of America and basically it all means that the older generation has RUINED EVERYTHING and her generation is doooooooooomed // unless they wrest intellectual control from their elders // sooner rather

than later” (Evaristo 42). Evaristo emphasizes backstory and character moments over everything else, often grounding her characters in a present moment that she quickly leaves to explain how they got there, or else to think about what will happen to them, all in a language that helps the reader understand the character better.

Pickle Green is a kind of aesthetic pastiche of characterization. Like Austen, it utilizes free indirect discourse—the prose is distinct to each character despite all being written in third person. Like Eliot, there are moments of digression that are embedded in the character’s heads, like Pickle’s views on drugs or his bulleted list as he walks to meet Richard. There are long stretches of dialogue with few dialogue tags or descriptions of what the characters are doing. Marissa’s chapter is especially a type of psychological realism that emphasizes Marissa’s character moments and her backstory over everything else, and each character is grounded in a present moment that they leave for backstory.

However, *Pickle Green* builds on the work of previous literary works by deliberately choosing characterization methods that, like Hal’s speech, exist strictly on the page. Richard, the money hungry megalomaniac, notices the trademarked sayings and brands, whereas Marissa and Pickle don’t, which is simultaneously a commentary on their world’s commodification of things like memory and pleasure and on Richard’s superficiality. Pickle sees a FIGURE, a typographical allusion to the King James Version of the Bible which writes LORD and JEHOVA the same way. Marissa tends to think of things in stilted contractions which is a textual allusion to the way Pickle talks. Indeed, language between the characters is often similar—Marissa imagines answering the door by saying “Heya, Dad,” the same way Richard says, “Heya, Pickle.”

While I can speak of the general effect of these textual methods of characterization, the ultimate effect will be mostly up to the reader. As Wolfgang Iser writes in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, “Every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text. The act of selection, however, disassembles their given order, thereby turning them into objects for observation” (Iser 4). Which, of course, means that a fictional text brings to bear all the subjective experiences of the reader. To reuse Chatman’s example, when I write the phrase “beautiful person” I and you the reader both imagine very different people. Similarly, Richard’s ® and ™ symbols, the typography of Pickle’s FIGURE, Pickle and Marissa’s contractions, each brings a different mental image to the reader’s mind. Thus, each character and their experiences are personal and distinct from any other reader.

Moreover, Marissa, Richard, and Pickle are each characterized by the same kind of strictly literary space as Hal’s monologue in *Infinite Jest*. The spaces in *Pickle Green* are necessarily imaginary, meaning that they are empty spaces into which the reader will project themselves. “The basis of *all* character may well be incompleteness and omission,” writes Leitch (159). Iser finishes the thought by writing that “at the heart of empirical epistemology there is an empty space, and imagination is the ‘completing power,’ which even Hume recognized despite all his reservations as to its graspability” (Iser 174). These character spaces are a deliberate use of this space. The most obvious is Pickle’s hallucination, which is an external representation of internal memories and feelings from both Pickle and the reader. The figure’s feet is a defining negative memory with Marissa, whom Pickle will try to rebuild a relationship with later in the novel. Its

hands fill him with a “sharp, jealous fear.” Its face is a swirl of constantly changing emotion. Because the figure in the story is an outward, physical manifestation of something that is impossible to visualize, the reader projects themselves into this negative space along with Pickle. The result is a figure that is distinct to both Pickle and the reader.

Richard’s omission is an explanation of why his narration is in past tense. It’s a technique that requires Richard to be understood in context of his children, both of whom are narrated in present tense. Richard’s past tense is appropriate for a few reasons: he has been resurrected, and the legitimacy of his life, just like his perspective, will be explored throughout the novel; Richard clings to the past, expecting his children and their relationships to be precisely as he left them, which is why he decides to visit Pickle first; he is missing important memories from events that happened after his last MRI, like a conversation with Marissa about her wanting to go to law school, something hinted at in these first three chapters and that will be explored later in the novel. Marissa’s omission is everything she *doesn’t* do while waiting for Richard to show up, a detail that helps the reader better understand her anxiety while simultaneously establishing her as an unreliable narrator where Richard is involved as the free indirect discourse clearly shows that she is, in fact, thinking about the things she doesn’t want to be.

The result is a novel whose characters live best on the page. The reader fills in the intentionally omitted character details with pieces of themselves, creating characters and events that are more personally vivid and visceral than they would be otherwise. Similarly, the textual details included bring the reader’s personal interpretations of iconography and language to bear. Although Leitch argues that films can adapt anything

a novel can do, *Pickle Green*'s deliberate use of selection and imagination creates a unique literary experience that is quintessentially so.

Pickle Green

Chapter I

Richard Green's first thought on his Resurrection Day was of pickles. The ballooning headache he had for at least the last eternity finally popped into the briny sweetdill taste of consciousness. Crinkle cut or spear? His mouth was terribly dry, but when he tried to ask the waiter for a glass of water it was stuffed to bursting with tubes. He gagged and tried to rip them out, but his arms and legs were Velcroed to a freezing metal table. Richard's second thought was that he hated pickles.

Maria, the attending Johnson & Johnson® certified ReVital™ physician, didn't jump to help the now living lump of spluttering flesh as she might have were Melvin, the intern from the local E-paper, in the room. But the printing process was disgusting and terrifying in a mortal, fleshy kind of way. After introducing himself and politely declining Maria's offer of modeling in front of the Machine (it was halfway through printing Richard's face), a wobbly Melvin had run out for a coffee break that so far had been two hours long.

Richard was the third commercial resurrection. Had he been the first or even the second, Maria would have been famous like Rebecca, the physician in New York. Websites had blasted her smug pink face around so much Maria had to swear off social media for nearly two months. But the sensationalism of it all had waned enough that even the local paper barely bothered to send their squeamish intern, and so she was stuck with the disappointingly thankless job of unjamming the Machine when it clogged on Richard's stomach.

Inside the Machine, a loud drippy voice said, “Welcome back! Thank you for choosing ReVital Services™, a division of Johnson & Johnson, a Family Company®. A certified physician will be with you shortly. Please remain calm,” seemingly ad infinitum over a track of upbeat, jazzy music. The jazz couldn’t quite block out the pumping, dripping, whirring noises coming from all the tubes and nozzles and wires plugged into Richard, and in fact only panicked him more. How did he get here? He stopped gagging long enough to start hyperventilating. Last he remembered, he was on his back getting yet another MRI. Now thousands of mechanical arms poised and dripped and twitched over Richard like some mechanical arachnid. Richard struggled against the straps.

The music changed. “Thousands of people suffer from dementia and memory loss as they age. With each memory that fades, you lose a piece of who you are. Your daughter’s wedding. Your mother’s face. That sweet feeling of holding your child for the first time. Suffer no more, thanks to the restorative powers of MemoGrow™! MemoGrow™ is an easy-to-swallow pill that unlocks hidden memories that are already printed in your brain! Relive your final moments alive! Your first ever birthday! Your last words! Your first words! Memories you forgot you even made! Ask your Johnson and Johnson® certified ReVital™ technician about MemoGrow™ today! MemoGrow. A Whole You.™”

Richard hyperventilated through another ad for ForniC∞™ (Increase sexual pleasure AND endurance!) before Maria walked in, gave Richard a pitying smile, and started the tedious process of checking valves and monitor screens and reporting their values on her tablet. Richard spasmed randomly as she worked. After half an hour, she

finally pulled and pulled the tubes from Richard's mouth, which made him so lightheaded he retched a clear, viscous fluid.

"Wintermute," he mumbled to his knees.

"What?"

"Oh, um. Am I dead?"

"Not anymore, Richard."

"Are you God?"

"For now," she said. She handed him a small cup of pills, red and blue. "Take these, please."

"All of them?"

"Yes." Then, "Thank you." She held a picture in front of Richard's face. "Can you please tell me what you see?"

Now that he could breathe more easily, Richard's mind was starting to clear. "Not until you tell me what the hell is going on."

"Okay. You're in a ReVital Services™ facility in Utah. My name is Maria." She holds up the picture again. "I need you to tell me what you see on this picture so I can make sure you printed properly."

"Did you say, printed?"

"Yes. I am checking that all your bits are where they should be so we know you won't mush apart on the teacup ride at Disneyland. Otherwise, I can't legally declare you living." She smiles blandly. "I suppose I should mention that, until now, you've been dead. So welcome back, Mr. Green."

"No," said Richard. "No, I was getting an MRI. Dr. Woodmancy—"

“Mr. Green, I know you have questions. I promise they’ll all be answered. But I need to keep running tests.”

Richard looked at the picture. “It’s a boat.”

Maria tap tapped on her tablet. “In as much detail as you can, please.”

For the next two hours, Richard forced himself to remember that he was an extraordinary person. It helped blunt the utter humiliation of Maria’s tests. After the picture—A Rembrandt, Richard had pointedly told her, Christ sleeping through the storm on the Sea of Galilee—, Maria blindfolded him and made him play with a plastic toy shape sorter (Richard not only graduated from Stanford’s MBA program debt free, but with over two-hundred thousand dollars in his pocket); she had him write his name in crayon, sing the alphabet, crawl around *on the floor*, (At twenty-six, when his other friends were just starting to get into their careers, he was married to the girl of his dreams, owned his impressive Park City house outright, and had his first million dollars smug in a collection of tax havens where Big Government couldn’t get its sticky fingers on it); she gave him crayons and asked him to draw a sunset, asked him to repeat what she had just said in conversations, (Over the years, various awards studded the walls and decorated the shelves in his office, including several CEO of the Year awards, a Green Business Award, a 20 in Their 20s, a Forty Under 40, and two or three Best Companies to Work For. His oldest child was attending Harvard Law School and finished his first year at the top of his class). Maria took blood, urine, saliva, semen, even tear samples and made Richard wait naked in a room while she ran tests. Every inch of his body, every animalistic function, Maria scrutinized and tested and photographed.

Notwithstanding his pride, Richard couldn't help but enjoy his new body. The day of his last MRI, Richard had felt worn out, pockmarked by the aggressive leukemia the doctors were trying to treat. His hair had fallen out, his joints scraped, his paper skin was blotched and burned by chemo, which he had recently learned was basically mustard gas. Which had made Richard feel like the doctors were pickling him alive. Now he had hair. His joints did not ache. He wasn't winded when he walked across the room. Richard could almost, almost think of Maria's ridiculous tests as proofs of his new superpowers. He went into the MRI a mortal and came out a god.

Richard and Maria were sitting in her office. He was clothed in an itchy, too-small robe, probably as an apology for feeding him some kind of mush and refusing to tell him it was a powerful laxative until he had already ingested it and then watching the resulting chaos from behind a one-way mirror. He knew Maria was watching because when he went to flush, Maria stopped him and made him scoop some into a sample cup. Richard was now looking into a small mirror Maria had given him too.

"Say," he said. "How did you pick my age?" Richard was younger than he had been, but not nearly as young as he thought. He felt eighteen but looked fifty. His hair was a dusty gray, the skin around his eyes was crinkled like a crumpled post-it.

"Why not make me twenty?"

"That's up to the client."

"Someone paid for this?"

"Of course."

"Who?"

“They wished to remain anonymous,” said Maria, “but they said to have you call once we’re all finished. But something’s wrong, Richard.”

“What?”

“There’s quite a bit of blood in your stool.”

“Well, that’s not necessarily a problem, is it? I mean, if what you’ve told me is true, then two days ago I was paste in a tube. Surely a bit of blood is to be expected.”

Maria looked annoyed. “I need to make a call. Please wait here.”

Richard immediately knew who the anonymous client was. Dillan, the eldest of his twin children. Little Dill Pickle. Who else? Harvard Law, top of his class, Richard was paying for his J.D. so he’d have a leg up on the competition. At least, Richard had been paying for it. He realized he had no idea how long he’d been, well, dead. Years, certainly, as he’d never heard of so much as a resurrected mouse, let alone a person, before today.

Had he really died? Must have, though he had no recollection of doing it. Nor did he remember any kind of afterlife he had been sucked from by what he imagined to be a kind of ReVital™ shop vac. He hadn’t been stolen from pearly gates any more than he’d been rescued from fiery pits. It had been like magic. One moment, he was getting an MRI, the next he was naked and wet on a table.

Maria walked into the room. “Richard, blood in stool is a zero-level error. Corporate wants to reboot. Follow me please.”

“Reboot? What does that mean?”

Maria waved her hand. “Don’t worry. Your purchased plan covers up to two bodies. We’re going to make you a new one, as it is extremely likely that yours is

defective. For liability issues, policy is to discard any majorly defective products and start fresh.”

Richard’s skin was pins and needles. “In other words, you’re going to kill me.”

“What? No, no, no. That’s not what I said. We’re giving you a new body. You won’t know the difference. In fact, you won’t remember any of this. Besides, officially you’re still dead, so technically it’s impossible to kill you.”

Somewhere, Richard’s body was moldering in a coffin. He was pretty sure he knew which cemetery, too. Depending on which part of Utah ReVital™ was in, he could be there within an hour. He thought about visiting his own grave, about visiting and knowing it wasn’t a question of when, but when. His name bookended by two dates. The ironic finality of looking at his tombstone. What had been the significance of his death? All the suffering, the fear he’d surely felt. Was it quick, like the snap of a rubber band breaking? Or gradual, like an ember eating itself into oblivion? What was clear is that it hadn’t mattered. He had died, but he was alive again. He didn’t remember it.

“Richard? It’s time to go. The sooner you follow me the sooner we can get you out of here.”

Richard felt the weight of his body. The beat beat beating of his heart. He wouldn’t even remember it.

“Okay,” he said. He followed Maria out of her office and back towards the Machine.

He was slightly behind Maria as they walked. She was telling him about something that happened with her brother. Richard wasn’t listening. They passed the hallway with the green exit sign. Richard bolted.

He ran faster than he thought he would. Maria shouted, “Hey!”, but he was already rounding the next corner. Blood thrumming in his ears, he sprinted down the hallway and to a flight of stairs. He took them four at a time, but could only make it two floors before a pair of feet started pounding their way up towards him. He wrenched open the next door he saw and ran down what looks like a hospital ward to the first door. It was locked. So was the second. The third opened with a snick, and he shut it just as two men kicked open the stair doors. He was in a dark room with two beds. An old man was in one, staring at him with wide eyes. The other was empty. One man sprinted past and the other ran to the first door and jiggled the handle.

“I’ll give you one thousand dollars if you keep quiet,” Richard said, and jumped into the second bed. He pulled the covers up around his shoulders and faced the man just as the guard looked through his window.

The man opened his mouth.

“Five,” whispered Richard. “Five thousand. Please.”

The guard moved to the next door. Richard stood up.

“Thank you,” he said. “I don’t have my wallet, but tell me your name and I promise you’ll get the money.”

“Charlie Wollstonecraft.”

“Thank you, Charlie. Now, there’s one more thing I need you to do.”

Richard left the room boldly. Robe pulled tightly around his new body and holding his head up like, *of course I’m wearing just a robe, why aren’t you?* He made eye contact with a nurse a nurse and smiled on his way to the elevator. Because why wouldn’t

he take the elevator? She smiled back, and though she looked confused she didn't say anything. Nobody did, though a twentysomething woman got on the elevator with him.

The same jazzy music Richard heard in the Machine was playing in the elevator. The girl was staring at him.

“Rough day?” she said.

Richard kind of shrugged, kind of laughed. “Just one of those days, you know?”

“God, do I,” she said. “Do I ever.”

The elevator dinged open in the lobby. Two guards were posted by the exit. Richard followed the woman with that same confident kind of swagger. Any second now, Charlie, would be great. One of them made eye contact with Richard and kept it. Richard gave him an apologetic smile.

“Excuse me, sir?” said the guard. He stepped in front of the door.

His buddy grabbed his arm. “Rooftop,” he said. “Now!” He looked at Richard for three adrenaline-fast heartbeats before running after his partner.

Richard was sweating when he walked outside the hospital. Charlie pulled through. Thank God Charlie pulled through. Richard had asked him to wait exactly two minutes before yelling about someone hiding in his room and then running upstairs, to the roof, maybe. Thank God for Charlie.

A crowd thronged police barriers set around the hospital doors. They were holding signs that said things like “Will a man rob God?” and “Only Christ Jesus has power over death!” and “Remember Golgotha!” above a poorly drawn skull with crosses in its eyes.

“There he is!” one of them yelled, pointing at Richard.

The crowd screamed at him as Richard ran down the path away from the hospital. Bare feet slap slap slapping against the concrete. He slowed down when he rounded a corner some two blocks away from the hospital, barely winded.

Richard laughed because he knew exactly where he was. Salt Lake City, forty-five minutes from his house. Though, technically, probably now it belonged to Dill. Maybe they would be kind of roommates. Wouldn't that be fun? Richard was still jittery from adrenaline so he jogged to the nearest bus stop. He was a little anxious that his BioPass® wouldn't work, that he wouldn't be able to board, but his thumbprint scanned green just like everyone else. He sat down at the front of the bus and tried to ignore the people staring at him.

“What's wrong with you?” the man sitting next to Richard said.

Richard smiled at him. “I guess you could say it's my birthday,” he said. “And I'm about to surprise the shit out of my son.”

Though, it would be just like Pickle if he saw this coming. It would be just like Pickle to say, “Dad, I knew you had something planned. It's just like you to try to out-surprise me.” Maybe Pickle would have a big rebirthday brunch already waiting for him, and they'll laugh about the whole thing while eating refried beans and twice-baked potatoes. Pickle was smart like that. Marissa, though. His younger daughter would never see this coming. She had never visited him during chemo. Not even once. Left all that dirty work to Pickle. Richard would have to ask Pickle if she even bothered showing up to his funeral.

The bus passes the cemetery on the way to Richard's house. He wondered if there were flowers on his grave. Who laid them there? He wondered if they are lilies.

Chapter II

Dill Pickle is sitting on a leather sofa cushion on the wooden floor of his living room at the head of a circle of four other people. Everyone has their own joint, hand rolled by Pickle the night before in Bible paper from the book of Revelations. Pickle has told everyone as much—it adds authority and mysticism to what otherwise seems like hippie pseudophilosophy. Pickle always rolls his sacramental spliffs in religious texts, especially for missionary sermons like this, because he needs that legitimacy to break down his congregation's self-imposed mental barriers. Plus, the apparent sacrilege and absurdity of using sacred text to get zoinked does a lot of work to prepare his congregation to accept the transcendent truths that the Church of the Human Condition preaches.

Pickle lights up first. The hot profane smoke is as good a way as any to tell who is here for revelation and who is here for the free weed. Theodore, the bluesuit businessman sitting at the far end holding a bowl of blueberries, certainly doesn't care for anything Pickle has to say. Smoke dribbles too easily from his mouth and nose like gravy from the boat and fogs up his ears. He closes his eyes and throws his head back on the sofa as the lethargic pricklebuzz of Pickle's resin-soaked hybrid starts to take hold. Carla and Yessica, the couple visiting from Spain, cough skeptically on their smoke. Good. Pickle loves a good skeptic. But it's Delphi, the woman sitting immediately to his left, who shows the most promise. She coughs so hard she vomits into the little baggie Pickle gives to newcomers who have never smoked before.

Pickle's first experience smoking was horrible. Will, a 1L from Oregon, invited him over to his studio apartment the Friday after Dad's funeral. Pickle had been around

Will before, knew he liked his drugs. Will usually offered, Pickle always said no, but the week had been difficult and Pickle was putting his lips to a bong before he considered the implications. He took three huge hits because he wasn't feeling anything after his first or second, two hits too many for his first time. By the time he and Will walked from the balcony to the couch, Pickle could fully dread the inevitability of the high, profound and lapping at the edges of his mind. By the time he peaked, Pickle was huddled in the crook of the couch, rocking back and forth and crying hysterically because he knew knew knew that Dad was going to knock at the door and catch him. Pickle could feel Dad's bitter disappointment, taste his own soupy apology on his cottondry tongue. Pickle's shame was more physically real than Will splayed on the couch next to him. It broiled and cut inside him before finally bleeding out of him and pooling somewhere around the soles of his feet. It sat there for the rest of the high, pulling at Pickle's leg hairs and jittering his toenails.

The next two days were a euphoric blur. He had tried one drug, so why not try them all? He'd try them all, or at least all of the drugs Will had, which was a considerable amount and variety, and then he'd never touch the damn things again. Coke, Ketamine, MDMA, Pickle's memories are vivid but sparse, like firecrackers. He told Will the story of Dad's funeral and wept at the abject anonymity and impermanence of human life; he stared at Rembrandt's *Christus in de storm op het meer van Galilea*'s Wikipedia page and felt he was aboard the ship and begging Christ to wake as thieves robbed the painting from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; he cooked and ate five whole boxes of Kraft Mac n' Cheese entirely by himself. And through it all, the dark pool of shame.

It finally coalesced into something nearly intelligible when Pickle dropped acid. He swallowed the tab of paper and two hours later, after the walls breathed and the carpet churned, a FIGURE manifested. Pickle knew immediately what it was. He felt an elated humiliation while looking at It and struggled to meet its eyes. It was only vaguely humanoid, and it was featureless. Its feet were the time Marissa came to Pickle and asked for help. She wanted to quit, she said, but her addictions were too much a burden for her alone. Its palms, which were turned out for Pickle to see, filled him with a sharp, jealous fear. Its bosom was a dilapidated tombstone. The only word Pickle could make out was “Green.” And its face. It was pulled into a kind of snarl sob, and with each of Pickle’s heartbeats it seethed into a new emotion.

It helped Pickle recognize the beauty of the last three days. That his whole life had been lived for, and consequently *by*, his father, a fact that he realized he had known for years but had repressed. The drugs had stripped him of Dad’s imposed illusions and forced the split Pickle to confront both sides of himself—the Stanford-Grad-Harvard-Law-Student Dad wanted him to be, and the Dill Pickle Green who suddenly knew beyond a doubt that wasn’t the life he wanted. More importantly, the FIGURE revealed to Pickle what has become the main tenants of the Church Pickle has dedicated the last twenty years of his life to. The first of which is the indelible, absolute necessity of drugs. Pickle likes to say that THC is the road to Damascus and higher order drugs like LSD and Ketamine are Ananias.

To Pickle, the call and purpose of the Church are obvious. Not so much to others. Will looked concerned when Pickle told him he had been called to found a Church. Marissa, no stranger herself to the cosmic powers of drugs, laughed at him after he lured

her to his house with the promise of free weed (still the most effective way he has found to get people to listen to him). Twenty years of preaching preaching preaching and still his friends (and the government) think the Church is a loophole to sell tax-free edibles. Of twenty true converts, five have ditched the Church for a collection of chips from the myriad Anonymous programs. Pickle often wonders what else he should be doing.

Pickle's lungs are a bellows. He burns through his first joint and lights up a second before any of his congregation are halfway through their first. Delphi has put down her smoldering roach and doesn't look like she intends on picking it up again. The smoke dims the air between Pickle and his congregation, as if they are looking at each other through a glass, darkly.

"Let's start with the question you all expect me to ask," Pickle says once people start snacking on the fresh fruit. "Who believes in God?" Carla and Theodore raise their hands, Yessica wobbles hers so-so. Delphi shakes her head no.

"Why not, Delphi?"

She hunches her shoulders. "Um," she says. "I don't know," she says. "Well, no, that's not true. Sorry. My mouth is so dry."

"Here," says Carla, "try some watermelon."

"I guess," says Delphi through a mouthful of watermelon. "Oh my God. That's delicious. Wow. Sorry, um, I guess I've just never really had a reason to, you know? Believe, I mean. Not that I haven't looked. It's just, people think they're right and everyone else is wrong. I don't get that, because everyone else thinks *they're* wrong. So, it just makes more sense if everyone is wrong. I don't know, it seems fairer that way."

Pickle nods. “Everyone,” he says because nobody touched their joints while Delphi was talking, “take another hit. For this to really be worth your time, it’s essential you get out of your comfort zone.”

Pickle puffs along with everyone else. Revels in the dry mucky smoke in his lungs and sinuses. “Yessica, you said you weren’t sure. Why not?”

“Well, because, like Delphi says, right, I just don’t really think that there’s just one correct religion or anything. And I see a lot of confusion and suffering and hate and I just think God wouldn’t do that. But at the same time, if there is no God, what’s the point of all the *good* in the world, right, like, everyone gets so focused on all the bad sometimes I think they forget about the good. Why are flowers so beautiful? Why is sex so amazing? What about compassion? What’s the point of that? I watch a sunset and think, how could there *not* be a God?”

Pickle says, “I’d like to play something while we talk.” He dims the lights and plays the quiet sounds of summer evening crickets. He lets everyone sit in silence for precisely twenty seconds. Counts them out in his head.

“I’m sorry for opening with the obvious, but I like to get God out of the way because that’s what everyone expects when they hear the word ‘church.’ But we’re not concerned with God’s existence, at least not today. We need stronger drugs than this to tackle that question.” He takes another puff. The embercherry at the end of his joint warms his fingers and lungs as he sucks.

“What I will say is that the Church is not concerned with questions of faith. We seek fact. Truth, observable and definitive. The first of which worth mentioning is that some questions do not have answers. We do not know, for example, what is God’s will, if

such a being exists. Humanity is capable of only so much. And if that doesn't scare you, which it should, you need to take another hit."

"I'm sorry," says Delphi. "Why would you want us to be scared?"

"Because fear is symptomatic of disillusion, especially while tripping. Drugs strip away the lies you tell yourself to pad uncomfortable truths. Disillusion is central to the Church. Truth lacks gentleness."

The smoke in the room looks almost like clouds now. The chirping crickets undercut it all with nostalgia. Warm summer nights spent lying on a grassy hill, spent running down an empty street well past midnight, spent chasing friends through moonlit parks.

"Here is a small fact," says Pickle: "You are going to die. Life is but a series of ever-shorter memories. Soon, you'll be bedridden with absolutely nothing to look forward to but the dread of something after death. The suffocating immediacy of what is now just an abstract imagination. Now, you may be thinking that you already know that you will die. But deep deep down you think you're the exception. Or rather, that death is something that happens to others rather than something that you will actually have to do. Maybe you've separated the present 'you' from that future frail 'you.' But soon you'll be there, lying in a bed or wherever you will be, and you won't be able to be anywhere else. 'Why me?' you'll ask. Well, why anything? Because that moment simply is. You and I are bugs trapped in the amber of each moment."

Pickle leans forward. "I know what you're thinking. Everyone wants to know what happens after death. That's the wrong question entirely." He grabs a handful of pomegranate seeds from a bowl. "Wrong entirely. Because remember, human potential is

limited. It is an absolute fact that it is absolutely impossible to know what happens after you die. SO, because human potential is limited, ‘what happens when I die’ is not a question that you should try to answer. It will only distract you from the truth.”

He holds up a pomegranate seed. “Carla, what will happen to this if I just let it sit at the back of my fridge?”

Carla blinks. “It’ll mold.”

“Exactly. Mold spores are floating all around us, slowly collecting on all the fruit we’re eating right now. In a sense, everything, everything is dying around us. So, I have a choice. I can wipe my fridge down with antiseptic. I can put this pomegranate in an airtight container. I can soak it in a salt brine, pickle it, and keep it on my shelf for years and years. If I do enough, I can make this seed last much longer than it is supposed to. Or,” Pickle pops the seeds in his mouth, bursts them with his tongue, “I can accept that everything dies. Because as soon as I do that, my focus changes. I’m not worried about stopping the mold, trying to stop the natural process, because I know human potential is limited. So now I can focus on what I do have power over.”

Theodore laughs. “Man,” he says. “I’m not nearly high enough for this. You sound crazy.” Everyone else laughs too.

“That’s exactly the point of the drugs, Theodore,” says Pickle after a minute. “Some truths require a complete dissolution of the ego to accept. Fear and logic can be powerful tools, but they can also hinder truth. It’s possible to be completely logical and still be wrong.”

Pickle closes his eyes and lies flat on the floor. He can feel that they’re puffy and dry. “The Church of the Human Condition is about truth. Truth and disillusion.

Controlling what can be controlled and admitting what cannot. If that scares you, or if it just seems silly, I have a kickass movie theater and every season of Planet Earth you can use to ride out the rest of the high. Just down the stairs and all the way to your left. But, if you want to keep talking, I'm going to stay right here."

Pickle keeps his eyes closed while everyone stands up and leaves. Yessica says, "Thanks, Pickle." Pickle gives her a thumbs up. He stays on his back, riding the Indica colored waves of Sativa as they dance across his brain. Listening to the chirping of the crickets over his stereo. Thinking about what he could have done differently.

"Pickle."

Pickle's eyes gum open. Gabe, the Church's security guard, is standing over him. "Some guy's out front, wants me to let him in. Getting real angry and threatening to call the cops. Says he's your dad? Otherwise I wouldn't have bothered you."

"What? My dad's dead, Gabe."

"That's what I told him. But then he started talking about all that Lazarus shit they're doing now. I think it's really him."

"Shit," says Pickle. "You're kidding. Shit. What did he say?"

"Asked me what the sign out front is for and why I'm standing outside of his house. He knows you're in here. Mostly he seemed angry. Angry and confused."

"Was he with anyone?"

"No. I think he just came from the hospital."

Pickle's legs tremble as he stands up. As he stands he notices Delphi sitting next to him.

"Delphi? I thought you left."

“Oh. No, I was here the whole time.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I figured you knew I was there. Plus, I kind of lost myself and just kind of floated for a while.”

“Pickle, man, c’mon.”

“Hold on, Gabe, this is more important.” Pickle looks at Delphi. “Look, I’ve got to deal with this, but do you want to come back Sunday? We meet at sunset.”

“Yeah, sure, why not.”

“Awesome. Great, yeah. Alright.” Elation briefly cuts Pickle’s terror. “Now, I really need you to go downstairs with the others.” As she runs down the stairs, he yells, “Stay there until I come get you!”

Pickle’s twenty-four again as he trips his way to the front door. He has heard about ReVital, the new division of Johnson and Johnson, and while the science of what they do is fascinating to him, it’s unnatural and consequently abhorrent. He’s unsure if the skin job standing outside can rightfully be considered Richard Green. But if it can? What does Dad know? Has Marissa told him about the Church? Dad locked Pickle in his room for a week in high school just for finding an empty Vodka bottle under the bed. Wouldn’t listen when Pickle told him it wasn’t his. Paid one of his workers to install a bar on Pickle’s door and would march him to the bathroom three times a day. Made Pickle write a twenty-page analysis supporting the thesis that Marx and Engel’s ideas find the strongest purchase in the minds of the selfish, the jealous, and, above all else, the lazy, before letting him out. Pickle found out later that Marissa planted the bottle in his room as revenge for tattling on her missing curfew.

Marissa must have paid the extortionate price for the operation, filled Dad in on the drive here. Dropped him off like a lion in Pickle's den and is waiting to watch the carnage. Pickle can feel Dad's disappointment, his rage, radiating from the door. Pickle is supposed to be a lawyer-capitalist-billionaire, not an anti-system drug guru selling high dosage edibles out of the garage. Twenty years of enlightenment suddenly feel trite. The reality of his situation smothers him, so Pickle numerates the facts of the moment. It is absolutely true that:

1. It is Pickle that is walking to confront his father. That he's not dreaming, hallucinating, or prophesying.
2. Pickle is, unquestionably, still high, and that after twenty years of learning to listen to his drug-induced urges, he's not sure how to suppress them.
3. The space between *then* and *now*, if you're unfortunate enough to notice, is filled with gluey peanutbutter seconds. That there is infinite time between a hand and the front doorknob. That one second has been defined to be the duration of 9,192,631,770 cycles of radiation of a particular cesium-133 transition, and that sometimes it is possible to dread every single one.

Pickle is opening the door. Dad is standing there in nothing but a white robe, looking exactly the same as he did twenty years ago. Dad is saying, "Heya, Pickle." Pickle has forgotten he's holding his joint in his fingers.

Chapter III

Marissa is rummaging through the Party Palace shopping bag Alex her housekeeper just dropped on the kitchen counter and tearing open a party pack of multicolored birthday candles. The old ones in Dad's cake have all burned out. Marissa picks out the nubbins and the wax and lights a new batch and everything is perfect again for Dad's rebirthday party. The big banner that says, "Happy Rebirthday Dad!", the balloons, the bottle of Moët & Chandon chilling in the refilled ice bucket.

"This is all they had?" she says.

"Every box."

"Great. Thanks, Alex. You can go home now but keep your phone on in case of another emergency."

"Sure thing, honey," he says.

The hospital called over two hours ago and said that Dad escaped. For legal reasons, said the lady on the phone, she couldn't explain the context that justified the word, couldn't tell her why "escaped" better described Dad's departure from the hospital better than "left." Marissa countered that Dad wasn't a patient, he wasn't even legally a client. The facts being that she, Marissa, paid for the procedure, and that Dad wasn't technically legally a person until they, the hospital, signed all the necessary paperwork, which she inferred they *didn't* do because of the connotations of the word "escape," Dad was technically legally a product. Technically legally *her* product. Doctor/patient confidentiality was moot. And so she had a reasonable legal right to know why the fuck the rubber band snap of a woman had called to tell her that Dad had *escaped*. The woman said that this was now more of a police matter and hung up the phone.

Marissa didn't call the police, as she figured they'd be more interested in the hospital's agenda which was probably to catch Dad and dissolve him in acid or something, like maybe they'd chop him up and sell him for parts. Neither did she get in her car and drive around and look for him because she had paid extra to implant a memory in Dad's head of her address, just in case, and what if he showed up and Marissa wasn't there to answer the door? Marissa's house was an hour and ten minutes away from the hospital. She waited an hour and eight before lighting the candles on Dad's rebirthday cake in case he took a taxi.

Each candle, Marissa learned, burns for fifteen minutes. She sent Alex to Party Palace after thirty to buy as many boxes as they had while she sucked her teeth and bounced her leg as the last batch burned themselves to smoke and wax. Alex was to buy as many candles as possible in case Dad had to take the bus, which takes approximately two and a half hours because there isn't a direct line from the hospital to her house. Unless, of course, Dad took a taxi, in which case he was bound to knock on the door at any moment, and God only knows what he would say if the party wasn't perfect.

Every time she changes the candles she gets anxious. What if Dad shows up while she is changing them out? Because that's how it always is with Dad, he always shows up at precisely the worst moment possible. Like the time she tried baking that pie for Dad's 38th. She dropped the dish and it shattered and of course Dad was right there and he got so mad he smashed another one. It didn't matter what Marissa said, that the pie was for his birthday, that it was Bear Lake Raspberry pie, Dad's favorite. All that mattered was that Marissa dropped the dish and ruined his birthday. And also maybe the fact that she

was high while cooking, but, as she repeatedly pointed out to Dad, that didn't have anything to do with it.

Marissa is afraid of Dad showing up and having no birthday candles in his rebirthday cake, just a plain, inappropriately uncelebratory/pockmarked thing with wax dripped all over it.

These fresh candles burn for another fifteen minutes. Marissa does not work on her caseload like she probably should. She does not think about the case she is putting together against Pickle, the work that needs to be done to get Dad the house back. She does not think about the legal precedent set in *Wade v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (2—) when the court ruled in favor of the plaintiff rewarded them with the property previously inherited to the defendant. She doesn't think about the complications surrounding Dill's "Church," his drug den he somehow registered as a religious institution, about how Dill will try to use the first amendment to keep selling his drugs. She doesn't think about the injustice of that. She doesn't wonder what Dill's reaction will be to the news that Marissa is suing him for everything he owns.

When the candles burn out she replaces them and picks out the dripped wax and repairs the blemishes to the frosting with a batch that she mixes up.

She doesn't pace the room because she doesn't want to seem nervous. Which is why isn't running and peeking out the window, because she doesn't want Dad to see her staring out of the blinds like a desperate person. She doesn't eye the champagne because she doesn't want to open it before Dad gets here because what's worse than flat champagne. But also because she doesn't want to get thirsty because she doesn't want to

need to pee because she doesn't want to be peeing when Dad rings the doorbell and not hear it or not reach the door before he decides to leave and go to see Pickle first.

The next candles get replaced before they're halfway burned out because maybe that's the trick that will get Dad to knock, to replace these candles before they're halfway used up.

Only, what happens if Dad's being chased? Because another connotation of "escaped" is that someone was/is chasing Dad. Marissa waits to replace the candles again and as soon as the last one is lit she times the walk from the dining room to the front door.

Twenty-five seconds. Walking fast, she trims it down to twenty.

Twenty seconds is plenty of time to get shot or captured and shipped off to some lab where they'll chop you up and sell your parts like a Chinese black market, except you don't even get to wake up in a tub of ice this time. She could sit in the grand foyer so she can open the door right when dad knocks. Except she can't open the door unless the candles are burning, and forty to fifty seconds is a lot more time to get shot or abducted or, worse, to change your mind about visiting your favorite daughter and decide instead to visit your son in his church themed dispensary.

Amanda did a fantastic job researching Dad's case. Marissa will have no problem drafting an argument for the judge. Marissa has picked through the cases and Amanda has highlighted and annotated the relevant information. Complete with a bulleted argument that, Marissa has to admit, is almost as good as the one she's drafted up. Almost. Having graduated Chicago Law barely two years ago, Amanda is already an

impressive candidate for full partner, which is good, because the firm is growing faster now than it ever has.

Except Marissa isn't thinking about that. She's muscling through the issue most present, i.e. making sure the candles are still burning when Dad finally knocks while also not taking so long that his organs show up on some cannibal enthusiast darknet forum.

She decides to set a timer for fourteen minutes, giving her enough time to hurry to the kitchen and change the candles out and hurry back to the foyer to wait. She doesn't run even though that would help cut the time down, mostly not to scuff the floors but also because she doesn't want to be out of breath or sweaty when Dad hugs her. When Dad knocks she'll open the door immediately and he'll hug her and then she'll walk him back to the dining room where Dad will be impressed with how the candles are already burning and he won't get chopped into pieces and eaten.

One unintended side effect of this solution, all this walking fro and to, is that Marissa is getting thirsty. She does four whole revolutions before her throat gets scratchy. And another two before the word "parched" becomes involved. Fourteen minutes and ten seconds later, after all the candles are lit, she takes a pit stop into the kitchen and drinks two tall glasses of water and decides a glass of wine won't hurt anybody.

Chardonnay in hand, heels clop clopping back to the foyer, Marissa certainly isn't wondering whether Dad really did visit Pickle first instead of her. Because now it's extremely unlikely that he took either the bus or a taxi, even if both had broken down multiple times. The thought makes her stomach feel like a frayed bungee cord. But she *isn't* worried about it for three reasons:

1. She paid for the procedure. If there's anything Dad understands, it's the sentimental value of money, and Marissa just paid the monetary equivalent of holding your firstborn moments after it popped out of the oven.
2. Marissa cared for Dad until the very very end. Well after Dad was no longer able to care for himself, well after Dill said they should take him out back shoot him in the back of the head already, Marissa fed him and wiped his ass and cleaned his drool. He owes her at least a visit to his daughter's house. At least this.
3. Say dad did go visit Dill first. Say Dad ignored financial/sentimental/ beholden obligations. Even if he gave his favorite Pickle a visit, Dill is the leader of a drug cult. Dill has debauched the house into an opium den, and extrapolating from Marissa's own experiences with Dad/drugs, there's just no, no way Dad's favoritism outweighs Dill's drug addiction.

Most likely? Is that Dad had to leg it. She wants Dad to return to a life as normal as possible, so she called ahead and reregistered Dad's BioPass, but maybe his DNA is screwy from the procedure. Maybe he tried boarding a bus or getting in a taxi but couldn't. According to Google, walking from the hospital Dad would get here in fourteen hours. So now he'd be somewhere about halfway. The smart thing to do would be to get in her car and drive slow to the hospital with the windows down calling out "Richard!" like Dad was some lost puppy.

She relights the candles and pours herself another glass of wine. Of course she's not going to do that. It's just as likely that Dad took the bus from Salt Lake and couldn't find the connecting station and legged it from there. Which would mean Dad is just about to knock, so she hustles back to the foyer. A bit of wine spills on her dress.

Of course. Of course she spills a bit of wine on her dress right when Dad's about to knock. And, because he had to leg it, he's bound to be in a sour mood. So now she has to choose between disappointing Dad with a wine blotted dress and risking him changing his mind to visit Marissa before Dill while she's changing her dress.

She doesn't sit around worrying about what to do because she isn't an indecisive person. She doesn't wait to open the door with a sloppy wine stain on her dress because she doesn't want Dad's first re/impression of her to be that she's sloppy. She doesn't want to seem even the eensiest bit tipsy, even though having not eaten anything in a couple of hours she is just a little bit buzzed. She doesn't take her time changing, though. She doesn't change in her closet, doesn't dawdle choosing another dress, because her room is even further away from the front door and she doesn't want to miss the doorbell. She just picks out a charcoal dress and changes on the mezzanine above the front door and tucks away the dirty dress behind a decorative fern.

She doesn't think she missed the doorbell, although she's not certain. It's not impossible Dad knocked and Marissa didn't hear it, that Dad knocked and waited and decided to go to Pickle's instead. Marissa changes the candles and instead of just sitting down in the foyer she pokes her head out the front door and listens for the sound of footsteps. She doesn't hear anything.

It would be just like Dad to completely ignore the huge emotional/monetary/etc. debt he owes to Marissa. It would be just like him to want to check up on Dill first. Especially because, as far as Dad knows, Dill is a hugely successful lawyer too. Marissa didn't pay extra to have those memories implanted because she wanted to be there when Dad found out about Dill's implosion into drug induced psychosis. She wanted to be the one to tell him, to be on the right side of things for once.

Marissa changes the candles out two more times and now she has to pee. To hell with it, she thinks. To hell with all of this. She goes to the bathroom but doesn't leave the door open. The timer on her phone goes off but she doesn't run to change the candles. She flushes the toilet and walks to the kitchen where Dad's rebirthday candles are burning dangerously low. She blows them out and replaces them but doesn't light the new batch. She's only got enough for another thirty minutes burn and she doesn't want to bother Alex with another rebirthday candle run.

Dad's not going to knock any time soon. She needs to be pragmatic. Realistic. It'll be a while before he knocks. Either from walking or from visiting Dill first, he's probably not going to knock for a while yet. She doesn't call Dill because she doesn't want him to answer and say he's with Dad, and neither does she want him to answer and say that he isn't. Dill doesn't know about the procedure. He doesn't need to, not yet at least.

This is what Marissa will do. She'll wait in the living room, a comfortable midpoint between the kitchen and the front door. She'll kick off her heels that are starting to blister her ankles and relax on the couch. When Dad knocks she'll take her time answering. She'll smile, say, "Heya, Dad." He'll give her a big hug and she'll lead him to

the kitchen where everything is ready except for the candles, which she'll leave unlit just to show him how casual she is about this whole thing. Like she doesn't really care all that much really that Dad is nine hours late to his rebirthday party. They'll sit down and she'll light the candles then, or maybe they'll talk a while first. He'll say he missed her and she'll say, "I missed you too," and then she'll light the new batch of candles and everything will be perfect again for Dad's rebirthday party.

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