

The Criterion

December 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

Vol. III. Issue IV

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

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Bathroom Alchemy

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Elvert stood in the shower, lukewarm water splaying over his shoulders and splatting flat against the fiberglass floor, transfixed by the lone hair that curved gently against the bar of soap in his right hand. Elvert found every hair on a bar of soap to be utterly repulsive, regardless of whether it was curly or straight, dark or light, even if he could match it up with the very follicle from which it fell, because it was always a pube. He often tried to reason with himself; he would say out loud that it couldn't possibly be a pube because he lived alone and shaved his area down to a waxy sheen, or that the offending strand bore the character and posture of an eyebrow. But when he would dig his nubby fingernails deep into the soap and gouge out a pea-sized chunk of Ivory with the hair protruding proudly like Excalibur, he would gag and wretch because he knew that his bar of soap had magical properties that could change any hair it touched into a pube. Bathroom alchemy.

He'd tried switching to body wash, but they were all infused with lotions and moisturizers that left his skin feeling soft and supple and greasy, and thus unclean. That experiment lasted one day. Elvert preferred his desiccant Ivory; every powdery, white slash left on his body by his fingernails a tally and testament to his hygienic integrity and overall wellness.

Having mined for every visible strand of protein, Elvert began the second phase of his daily showering ritual: loathing his body. He was not fat but not thin; certainly not athletic, the way he used to be through college and for a few years after that, when he was still with *her*.

He minded his diet enough so that he could usually hide his belly if he dressed himself in loose or well-tailored clothing, but each morning the one word that seemed to echo relentlessly through his head was "doughy". He didn't have rolls, but everything seemed plump and soft and bulged in all the wrong places, and in his car he could feel his man boobs jiggle when he drove over a pot hole. This did not inspire him to exercise, but it did inspire him to work.

Elvert, you see, worked for the city, or more specifically, for the Department of Public Works. His job was to oversee the maintenance of all city roads, including (but not limited to) managing the budget, prioritizing repair and maintenance projects, and supervising the field workers who actually did the dirty work. It was not a job that he particularly enjoyed, but he'd taken it for *her* when she'd grown bored with his more charming and unique talents and had become more interested in ambitions and provisions. For the most part, he was as good at his job as anyone who had ever held the position; he'd always had a fantastic eye for detail and a tremendous drive for perfection, however frivolously he'd applied those characteristics in his college days, now nearly ten years past. His boss, Bob, was a robust man with a permanently flushed face that flowed seamlessly down to his chest. He had once called Elvert "the most successful road doctor we've ever had." Bob was less a successful civil servant and more a failed politician, who'd managed to keep his job by evoking the pity of powerful friends when his last run at mayor yielded fractions of a percentage of the vote.

While he was not of much use to Elvert, he at least stayed out of his way.

Elvert sighed and began to vigorously lather himself up in the usual way, starting with his shoulders, then his arms, his belly, his back, his legs and then his feet. Once he'd rinsed off, he washed his hair before shutting his eyes as tight as he could and lathering up his hands in order to wash his face. Normally, he would blindly reach out and set the soap down in the duly appointed shelf before scrubbing over his eyes, nose, mouth and chin with both hands.

This time, however, a most peculiar thing happened--it squirted out of his hands before he

could set it down, which, in and of itself, is not very peculiar, soap being notoriously averse to pressure and impervious to friction. What was strange was that there was no dull thud from the soap hitting the floor of the tub.

“That’s strange,” he said, pausing for a moment and waiting to see if it was still coming, as if the soap was moving in slow motion or otherwise suspended. But after roughly ten seconds, he shrugged his shoulders and set about rinsing his hands and face so he could open his eyes and see what had happened. Once he’d rinsed his face sufficiently enough to draw squeaks from his cheeks, he opened his eyes and looked down, readying himself to carefully squat and retrieve the soap while remaining mindful of the spigot, his anus, and the relative position of each to the other.

It was gone. Elvert had a hard time accepting this at first; he spent several minutes staring at the floor in his tub, then carefully got down on his hands and knees to feel around, sure it was just blending in with the similarly colored background, but his hands found nothing. He pushed the shower curtain out of the tub, then pulled it back in, then shook it vigorously, then carefully removed each ring from the rod and turned the curtain over in his hands several times. Nothing. He stepped out of the shower and began to look around the floor, then the sink, then in the deeper corners that he never cleaned because he couldn’t fit his hand in them. He found nothing but dust bunnies and grime. He went through every towel, three times, poured out every small, plastic bin that held his nail clippers, chapstick, spare razors, travel toothpaste, loose but unused floss, and even some stray tablets of ibuprofen, removing each item from the bathroom as he went, but no soap. He retrieved a flashlight from his hall closet, still stark naked, and pointed it down the heating vent in the bathroom despite the fact that the bar of soap he’d been using was far too big to fit through the grate, but to no avail. He opened his medicine cabinet, tossing every band-aid, every foiled blister package of cold medicine, every vitamin he’d never taken and even the small tube of Q-tips he drew from once a week to swab out his ears, but it was obvious that there was no, nor had there ever been, any kind of soap contained behind its sliding mirrors. This being the very last place he’d looked, he slid the cabinet shut and stared at himself, his blue eyes wide and worried, his shaggy hair damp but drying into a rigid frizz around the pale and scaly skin that made up his face, his round but moderately-sized nose sporting tiny blackheads across its bridge. He shook his head and sighed.

“Shit. That was my last bar.” He grabbed the cheap plastic comb from the cup he kept beside the sink and dragged it through his hair, which was quite uncooperative. “I’ll have to grab some more on the way home. I’m gonna be late.” He threw himself haphazardly through the rest of his morning routine, pausing a moment before he left to look at his bathroom--now empty save for the fixtures--and he was suddenly reminded of the day *she* left, taking everything from the room with her except his bar of Ivory. It had looked so lonely without *her* posse of hair and skin care products crowding it into the back corner of the rack, transforming it from an afterthought into a dire necessity, the bridge between then and now. Glancing into his living room, he could see the replacements: towels strewn over the loveseat, toothbrush dangling precariously from the coffee table like a mountain climber’s moment of truth, toilet paper stacked in a shaky pyramid in front of the TV like the first day of cheerleader tryouts. “It’s gotta be around here somewhere,” he said before launching himself outside, pulling the door shut not with his hand but with the air that rushed in violently to fill the vacuum his body had left behind.

Elvert had a car, although he almost never drove it to work. There were too many potholes--for him, anyway. Your average citizen would probably disagree and say their roads were better than most towns half their size, but Elvert saw them everywhere, on every road, no matter how small or how fresh. He was not so poorly adjusted as to openly admit it, but on

his worst days, Elvert might tell you he was an abject failure if you were an unassuming fly on his wall. Driving to and from work made it harder for him to do his job; seeing every crack and imperfection was all too personal, too overwhelming. He found it all much more manageable when they were just ink on a page, an idea, an address, a gradation, a classification and a matching solution. He didn't do the dirty work, but he was the keystone of the operation--he made the plans, he selected who would execute which part, he inspected the final results (by photograph), he decided what was good enough, and he took the bus to work. Patching potholes three steps removed was one thing, but staring them down and dodging them behind the wheel was another.

"I saw you walking the other day."

"What? Where?"

"In your neighborhood. You were wearing shiny blue gym shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt. Your arms are really flat, like, they slope evenly."

Elvert blushed, though he wasn't sure why. "I was running."

"No, you were walking."

"I don't go for walks."

"What were you doing then?"

"I told you, I was running."

"No you weren't, you were--"

"I was out for a run, so I was running. Even if I was walking."

"Why?" Her nose wrinkled up in that cute way that it does.

"Because my purpose was to run, I ran most of the time, so we call it running, not walking." Sometimes he thought that Julie was an alien.

"Ooookay, E," she said. Sometimes E made her feel like an alien.

Elvert went back to his desk and settled in. "Anything new come in?" She was an all right secretary; she was weird and nosy and he thought she came to work high sometimes, but she was also reliable and cute and he liked having her around.

She entered his office somewhat hesitantly, which was unusual; she typically carried herself with the perfect blend of self-consciousness and self-confidence. She was holding a pile of work orders. It was an archaic system, Elvert thought, but easier than trying to teach some of the older field workers how to use a computer. "There's a bunch here, mostly fresh cuts, small stuff--but there is one you should probably look at first." Elvert's heart sank. He didn't even have to look.

"It's Angelina," Julie said, her shoulders slumping with sympathy. Angelina was a pothole that, no matter how many times they filled it, no matter what substances they filled it with, no matter how many different techniques and tools they used to do the filling, always popped back up, her insides darker and emptier than before. So Elvert named it after Angelina Jolie.

"Sorry," Julie offered with a crooked half-smile, before twisting on her heels and heading back to her own desk out front. She dressed how his mom looked in pictures from the seventies--that day it was a white blouse with straight, aqua-blue slacks that made her legs look longer than they were; her straight, black hair was pulled back into two tiny pony tails like a pair of rouge brushes and she wore a gaudy, fake pearl necklace around her neck that clacked plastically in time with the swing of her hips as she walked away. Sometimes he thought he loved her, but mostly he thought she wouldn't touch him with a ten foot pole, so just to be safe he doubled that distance.

"Jesus," Mick said, the surprise in his voice in no way matched by the casual cock in his hip as he leaned on an elbow against the truck, which was emblazoned with the

Department of Public Works logo. He wore a reflective orange vest, a large (but still undersized) white t-shirt spotted with sooty fingerprints, and blue jeans splashed with various shades of an unnamed sticky residue. A casual observer might think he was fat, but that was just his disguise--a beer gut and a relaxed posture. Underneath all that was muscle and bulk and profane, adrenal strength, the kind that can lift an engine block to save a crushed finger.

"Hey, Mick," Elvert said, trying to smile but only not frowning. Mick was the on-site supervisor and had seen nearly a dozen guys come and go in Elvert's position. Mick hadn't liked any of those guys, all stuttering mouths and shaking hands and flitting eyes, and had gotten his way in most cases with cursing, yelling, and general intimidation. Elvert, however, had surprised him early on, and Mick smiled as he recalled Elvert calling him a cocksucker on his third day. They'd gotten along ever since, and even though Elvert had quickly resumed his stance as a meager administrator, Mick regarded him in the highest esteem, often failing to drag him out for tallboys of PBR at the local VFW.

"What the hell are you doing here? That tight broad spot your wood? Wanna go to the post later? Last round's on me!" Elvert smirked at his shoes.

"Not this time, Mick. You're not wearing your goggles," he said. Mick was taken aback but amused, and quickly straightened himself up like a soldier, dropping his half-full Styrofoam cup of coffee to the tarmac and patting himself down as if his eyewear was within arm's reach. Some of the boys laughed and shook their heads, but with a sharp nod, Mick impelled them back into mixing asphalt and directing traffic.

"To what do we owe ze pleaz-yure?" Mick said with a terrible French accent, before reverting his lips to their common torque, "You never come down here."

"I know," Elvert said, furrowing his brow and focusing his gaze on Angelina. He circled her slowly, with a sort of reverence, his hands in his pants pockets, his cheap, blue tie flipping over his shoulder in a gust of wind. "She's been calling for a long time," he sighed, crouching down and reaching out his hand slowly, then stopping and pulling it back just before his fingers touched the ground. She was at least two inches deep, but the longer he looked the blacker the bottom appeared until it almost seemed as if it wasn't there at all, like he could jump in and disappear.

"Hey, you okay boss?" Mick said. He and the boys exchanged raised eyebrows and concerned looks while they watched Elvert watch the hole. Elvert didn't respond right away, but eventually he stood up and put his hands back in his pockets, keeping his eyes on Angelina.

"I lost my soap today," he finally said. Mick stared at him with his mouth slightly agape, suddenly wishing he hadn't invited Elvert to the VFW today. "Take care of her. For good, this time."

Mick shrugged his shoulders and said, "We'll do our best, like we always do," then spun his finger around in the air to cue the boys to get back to work. Elvert just nodded and frowned before walking back towards the bus stop, hands in his pockets and chin to his chest.

Julie was mildly surprised to find Elvert doing his end-of-the-day routine at two o'clock. She couldn't remember the last time he'd left early. "Hot date?" she asked, leaning back in her chair to poke her head into his office.

"I need to get more soap." He didn't flinch or blush. Usually he blushed when she made any reference to his love life, even if only in jest. He popped a few stapled packets of paper into his briefcase and closed it with absent-minded familiarity. When he looked up, he saw her head tilted sideways so that some of her bangs hung down in front of her right eye, and this crushed his heart. He opened his mouth to explain before saying, "I gotta go." He

often feared that speaking in more than truncated, tin can expressions would result in an accidental confession of love, and he couldn't let that happen. He loved her too much.

Elvert sat on the eight thirty-five bus on the ninety-six line, heading back to his apartment, staring into the open plastic bag from CVS that held one item (two if you counted the receipt). He wasn't sure why he was staring at it; perhaps he was frozen in disbelief, perhaps he thought if he stared at it long enough that it would turn into a creamy-white bar of Ivory when he blinked. Much to his chagrin, however, it remained a tall bottle of generic liquid body wash, fresh morning scent. There was no unscented.

Elvert had been to every drug store, department store, convenience store, grocery store, and even one of the bigger liquor stores. No Ivory. All the stores' employees had offered little more than an apathetic shrug and a "check back next week". One even asked herself rhetorically if she'd seen that on an episode of *Mad Men*. At first, he'd been skeptical of Jose, the customer service clerk at the liquor store who had been suspiciously nonchalant when asked about the soap, and suspiciously well-informed about it. "My uncle works for a distributor," he'd said with a shrug that wasn't apathetic in the least. "They stopped making it." Whatever Elvert's suspicions were, Jose was proven right at every turn. Of the twelve stores Elvert had visited, none of them--zero-point-zero--carried any brand of bar soap, much less Ivory. Even Irish Spring came exclusively in a bottle now. Tired and hoping to save an hour or two at home to resume his fervent search, Elvert had finally acquiesced to the great unifying equation of retail, supply and demand. Perhaps if there was profit to be had, scientists would have unlocked the rest of the universe by now.

It was roughly one in the morning and Elvert sat hunched over in his boxers, the cool, white glow of the Internet illuminating his face, the small droop of his belly dangling itself over the elastic like a young girl hangs her feet while sitting on the end of a dock. He kept telling himself that it's just a vast collection of information, and that he shouldn't take it personally, but it seemed like every link on Google wagged its tongue at him and cried, "Jose is right!" Tired and frustrated, he sighed and glanced down the hall and into his living room. The cushions from his couch were stacked in the corner like a picked-over club sandwich, the frame itself tipped forward against the far wall, its feet poking diagonally upwards towards the opposite corner where the wall met the ceiling. Next to the couch was his television, the power cord unplugged and coiled neatly on top of the set, and next to that was the small stand that once held the TV, now empty. There was a worn throw rug rolled up tightly and tilted into the third corner, held tight against the wall by the aggressive, amorous embrace of the coffee table's legs. On the floor next to that were thirty-six DVDs, stacked in neat, even piles and tucked against the baseboard. The middle of the room was bare, as if everything had been cleared out for some kind of seance, a seance to reveal the truth. The truth, however, remained hidden in the worn out boards of hardwood that made up Elvert's barren floor.

"Tomorrow," he muttered to himself, crawling into bed. "I'll get up early, I'm sure that--" he hesitated here, unable to bring himself to call it soap or utter the words "body wash"--"stuff will be fine. I'll be fine." He was out before the sheet billowed down over his naked shoulders.

It was not fine. His skin felt greasy and loose, like pizza cheese, and had even seemed to get worse with each additional rinse-and-repeat. He finally gave in after four go-arounds, when the water started to flow tepid and he passed a self inspection in the mirror, glaring hard over his shoulder at his back, his left arm thrown under his chin and pulling spots on his skin taut to better catch the light. His fingers slid slightly, no matter how hard he pressed them into his back. He dried himself off as hard as he could, pressing and rubbing vigorously

against his skin in hopes of just being able to wipe off the scummy feeling, like he'd been dipped in vegetable oil. He was not successful but dressed himself nonetheless, and as he pictured his clothes slowly absorbing his oils and turning yellow throughout the day, he also took pleasant notice of the absence of chafing against his nipples. Stepping to the door, he stopped to look down the hallway and into the bedroom; only it and the tiny closet of a kitchen remained intact, and he was sure one of them would go down tonight. For now, however, he pulled open the door, and just before charging out in a huff he typically reserved for tiny video game failures, he snatched his car keys and jerked the door shut behind him.

Elvert was proud of his car because he had gone through all of high school without any car at all, refusing to buy the kinds of rustbuckets his friends paid for with one summer's shitty wages, and instead saved up for four years and bought himself a Mazdaspeed 3 as a graduation present to himself. It was used, but had low miles and was in very good condition, was painted a deep charcoal color (the rims included), the windows were tinted, and his friends took to calling it The Batmobile, which Elvert thought was badass, if a little uncreative. Still, it had been the perfect, sporty little city gunner for a young man who liked to scoop by the local dives on Wednesday nights.

"That was a long time ago," he muttered to himself as he pulled the door shut on the ten year old hatchback. It only had about sixty-thousand miles on it, as he only drove it sporadically for the last four years, and while this made it seem a tad superfluous, it also made each time he sat behind the wheel a tad more memorable. He smiled, just gripping the wheel for a bit, remembering how open the whole world suddenly felt the day he drove home in it. For a moment he panicked and considered turning off the engine and hoofing it to the bus stop, but something stayed his hand. He jacked the transmission into reverse, cranked his head around like he had during his post-shower inspection, and shot a few pieces of gravel from the driveway out from under his tires. "Fuck it."

By the time he hit traffic on route twenty-eight he remembered how stifling the city streets felt, how terrible everyone was, how every road was riddled with pockmarks and potholes as deep as the roots of city hall, how heavy the road felt coming up through the steering column and into his hands. He sighed through clenched jaws, feeling pressed against the walls by his swollen aggression, inflamed by his inability to find the right soap.

"Hey, boss!" Mick said, "Want to grab a--" he began before cutting short his usual invite to the VFW. After Elvert's last visit, he'd decided to see what kind of mood the boss was in before inviting him anywhere.

"Grab a what?" Elvert said, eyes heavy with dark circles and his hair a frothy mess.

"A shovel, start digging," Mick replied. "Because our work is just getting started here." He jabbed his meaty index finger at Angelina, who had been stuffed with a fresh patch of pavement just yesterday. It was already in pieces, chunks of still glistening pavement scattered up the gutters for thirty feet. "I don't know what it is, but we had her sealed *tight* last night. I've never seen a patch deteriorate so quickly."

"Yes, well," Elvert said, squatting down to reach out to her the way he did the day before, "sometimes things just disappear when you close your eyes." Mick wasn't sure why his boss had begun waxing poetic, but he was quite sure it made him uncomfortable.

"Yeah." Mick forced out a guffaw. Elvert stood, never taking his eyes off Angelina.

"Strip it. The whole road. Rebuild the damn thing so that she was never a part of it."

Mick's eyes grew a bit wider. "Jeez, boss, is that really necessary? I mean, we can just patch it again, and shutting this road down will make life a lot more difficult for the residents around here. Some of them will have to drive all the way around the lake to get in or out." Elvert just closed his eyes and shook his head gently. "No. It doesn't matter. Go from corner to corner," he said, extending his arms in opposite directions, pointing from one

intersection to the next, a section of road spanning nearly a half mile. “Repave the whole thing.” Mick looked at him for a minute, waiting for a sign that he was about to change his mind, when finally Elvert said, “If that doesn’t work we’ll repave the whole goddamn city.”

He then proceeded to stare at Mick, so Mick gave a quick hand gesture to his crew and they began unloading some heavier equipment, and as Elvert walked back to his car he could hear Mick call in for “the big truck” on the radio.

Back at the office, he could feel her watching, if not looking then listening for a creak in his chair or some conspicuous phone call to indicate why he was acting so strange. She didn’t recognize this at the time, but later that night, chatting up one of her friends over a boxed Merlot, Julie would say that she’d never found him so interesting. She didn’t recognize it at the time, but Elvert sure did. To him it was clear. All he’d ever wanted was to be interesting to her, and now that he was, he did his best to ignore it, and without understanding why, he focused on the soap. When she unnecessarily wheeled by the door in her chair, peering out of the corner of her eye and chewing on her pen, he focused on the soap. When he had the urge to stride up confidently, sit on her desk and suggest they share a cozy night together, he focused on the soap. When he thought about the possibility that she was having the urge to stride up confidently, sit on his desk and suggest they share a cozy night together, he went home to look for the soap.

There are pictures scattered around him in an arms-length semicircle, a protractor for his memories, he, the fulcrum, sitting cross-legged in the center like a pushpin holding down invisible string, pulled tight from the outside as it runs the gamut from zero to one-eighty, measuring the relative position of each photograph as compared to the forward facing angle of his heart. His head hangs low and unmoving, so as to hold his view steady and capture the results from a singular position. The scientific conclusion is nothing more than what he already knew but had buried deep in his closet, beneath piles of old clothes and forgotten gifts for his niece. The only light comes from a single sixty-watt bulb behind a dingy lampshade on the lamp on his dresser, and it casts its own curvature over the photos forming a truncated Venn diagram and there is a great, white shine where the lines intersect, as if the orange glow of the lamp is trying to bleach out the pictures. They are all *her*, and he knows it, no matter how bright the reflection in the gloss. He has avoided *her* for years, told himself it was for a “clean break”, but it turned out to be less like a bone and more like a stringy ligament, torn but not completely severed, unmended because it goes untreated but stable enough function in day-to-day activity. The last few days, however, have been a bit more rigorous. He thinks for a moment that he should do something dramatic, like scatter the pictures in a fit of rage and sob uncontrollably, but without the impulse, the thought is just a hokey pun from a fortune cookie, inadvertently swept to the ground and picked up by the bottom of someone’s boot to be carried out the door to where the sidewalk ends.

So he just sits, waiting for some great wave of emotion to crash over him, staring through the photographs at ninety degrees, his queen-sized mattress and box spring stripped bare and tipped up on end against the wall. The nightstand has been turned upside-down and now resides in the hallway, along with the drawers from his dresser, leaking sleeves and beltloops all over the floor. His TV remains in its corner atop the stand, as the whole ensemble was a bit too heavy for him to move by himself. The DVD player, cable box and assorted movies have been removed from their shelves and are stacked atop the empty dresser frame. The only piece of the room that remains somewhat intact is the closet, as he had failed to get past the first plastic drawer he’d opened, which, in his soap-deprived state, he’d momentarily forgotten was the photo drawer. The one. The one he doesn’t open, except that he did, and thus did he revisit the math of memories, the geometry of time, the lonely and mysterious variables of calculus, how two complex equations can grow apart as x approaches infinity.

From the floor in the corner, his tiny speaker dock, with his iPod nestled snugly in its cradle, releases the lazy yet punctual piano of Earlimart, and Ariana Murray's gentle coo quickly overwhelms the space:

*Call in the air strike, tell them to make the drop
Initiate a cycle only you can stop
Would it be fair to say that you're in love with love?*

*And is that enough?
I bet you feel really potent stuff
The shadows of doubt on how things turn out are typically gray
But even the stopped clock on the wall is right two times a day*

*And it's still enough
Just how much distance means we're on our own?
And can we be happy, happy
alone*

Then an impulse barged in, uninvited by any thought, and he found himself carrying the nightstand out the front door and into the driveway, lit only by the jaundiced glow of a nearby streetlamp. He set it down and looked at it for a moment, like he was judging its placement in the context of feng shui, before bounding up the stairs to grab the next thing he found in his way. That happened to be an end table from the living room, which he placed next to the nightstand. Next came a small bookshelf, then the books to go with it, then his laptop, the wingback chair, couch cushions, the dresser frame and each of its leaky drawers, assorted lamps and knick-knacks, his toiletries thrown into his old backpack, towels, his mattress and box spring. He emptied his kitchen cabinets and dumped jars and spices and dishes and cans and all manner of food items and their matching utensils onto the small patch of grass in front of his building. He deconstructed his bed frame, even found the strength in his madness to take both of his TVs out and drag his couch down the five steps from his porch to the ground. He did this through the wee hours of the morning until he'd emptied every room, save for his bedroom closet, and stacked, placed, or recklessly tossed into his driveway and front yard every item that wasn't too large or connected to some kind of piping or tubing. He stood in nothing but his boxers and a white t-shirt, arms akimbo, his crap scattered about like a robbery in reverse, and smiled. For a moment he was relaxed, at peace, and for the first time in days, he did not think of the soap at all. Then it started raining.

Elvert did not like rain. He did not find it cleansing, nor did he appreciate the baptismal metaphor found in movies like *The Shawshank Redemption*; the camera looking down from the sky, slowly pulling away as the protagonist closes his eyes and raises his arms as the music swells and the storm washes away all his sins. It made for a grand piece of cinema, sure, but Elvert's experience was a bit less dramatic--he found it greasy and dirty, recycled ground water that was more apt to add to the filth than take it away, and in this particular moment, it came down in a sudden torrent that soaked through his shirt almost instantly, transforming it from a baggy disguise for his plump torso into a slimy skin that clung to his curves and accentuated the fact that his round belly protruded out farther than the tip of his nose. No, Elvert was no friend of the rain, but ambushed as he was he realized escape was futile, so he just closed his eyes and dropped his head, and even though there was no one around to witness such a thing at four in the morning, he was thankful that it masked his tears.

When he woke up, he was pleased to find that his shirt was dry and doing a fine job

camouflaging his softer parts. His relief quickly made way for sheepishness, however, upon realizing he was sitting on top of all his pants, which were flattened into the cushion of his wingback, which sat to the side of his driveway, facing the street where a ten year old girl in her Catholic school uniform and Hello Kitty backpack had stopped to stare at him. He was then again relieved to find that his shirt was covering the open fly of his boxer shorts, and that the girl shuffled along when she noticed him stirring. As soon as she was out of view he thought of his neighbors passing by on their way to work, walking their dogs or squeezing in a morning jog, a random cop rolling by and making a mental note of his address should any suspicious or drug-related behavior be reported in the area. He thought of how such odd stories could rip through a town this size and how *she* still lived here, and he felt his face begin to burn in a shameful smolder, sparking a fuse that sizzled through his arms and legs until he was in a panic, bouncing frantically through his piles of stuff, grabbing at anything and everything, filling his arms and dumping it all onto his cushionless couch. He tried to drag the couch back up the front stairs, but it hooked its stubby legs on the corner of the first step and refused to let go, so he dropped it and grabbed an end table and a floor lamp and tried to get that inside, but he couldn't maneuver the table over the hand railing with one hand and in the ensuing struggle managed to pop the light bulb in the lamp against the porch ceiling. He dropped the table, one of its legs cracking as it hit the ground, and hurled the lamp over the couch like a javelin, scraping his shin on the top step in the process. Feeling the fuses in his arms and legs coming to an end, he crawled over the couch on all fours and made a beeline for his bedroom closet, where he could properly explode and set flight to small plastic drawers full of photos, sport coats and dress slacks, and all those plush, forgotten gifts for his niece. The one item that remained grounded, however, was a forgotten gift of his own. His rage suddenly quelled, he ran out front, grabbed a quick change of clothes, and returned for it before hopping in his car to head for the office.

"I need to borrow your laptop." He was smiling sideways, dressed in a gray long-sleeved Under Armor compression top and white swim trunks with blue flames licking his thighs. Julie didn't notice the rubber flip-flops, which were mundane by comparison. So many questions.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

"They were the only things that had dried out."

"From what?"

"The rain."

"All your clothes were outside?"

"Yeah." Her first instinct was to ask why, but she had the distinct impression it would be a waste of time, so she just shuffled some papers instead.

"Why do you need my laptop?"

He picked at his molars with his finger, then said, "It's hard to explain."

"I'm on your dime."

He stopped and looked at her for a moment before saying, "I don't want to explain it."

"Well I'm failing to see why I should help you out." She leaned back and knitted her fingers together. "You've been M.I.A. all day, no explanation, then you show up here like you're ready to go jogging on the beach in November, tell me you need my laptop, but you can't explain."

He pulled his lower lip tight over his teeth and scratched it with his finger while he stared out the window. "You know that trick where you say 'girl' into your fist and it sounds like a dwarf saying 'goya' over and over?"

"Yeah..."

"I still remember the first time my friend Brian showed me that. I was ten."

"What does this have to do with my laptop?"

"It's complicated," he said with that sideways grin, like he had the upper hand. She did her best to hide it, but she was intrigued.

"Don't you have one? Why do you need mine?"

"It's broken."

"Oh yeah? How'd that happen?"

"The rain." That sideways fucking smile was starting to piss her off. Probably because she was becoming increasingly aware that she was going to do what he asked, *and* that *he* was *also* aware of this.

"*What the fuck* were you doing outside last night, for the five minutes it was raining, with your entire wardrobe and your laptop?" As soon as she said it she closed her eyes, and while she couldn't see his smile, she involuntarily pictured it inside her eyelids.

"It's complicated."

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Are you going to tell me about this someday?"

He hopped in an almost imperceptible way and said, "No, but come to the Oak tonight and I won't have to."

"Just take it." She slapped it shut and offered it up. He snatched it before she could reconsider.

"Thanks! I hope you won't regret it." She shook her head and looked away. She'd long suspected he'd had a thing for her, and that he would blurt it out in some awkward or terrible way that would compel her to find a new job. She didn't love him, but she liked him and her job. "Oh, by the way," he said, stopping but not turning by the door, "I'll probably have to delete all your *Big Bang Theory* episodes," and before she could utter a word, he cried "Bazinga!" and disappeared down the corridor and down the stairs to his car.

"I just won't go," she said to herself, then sighed, knowing that she would. She thought about all the pressured silence from him, his stunted sentences, the hearts hidden in between his lines. "It'll just be worse from now on if I don't," was what she said, but the simple fact was that she was curious, and no matter how hard she tried to suppress it, her mind kept wandering to her closet and what she was going to wear.

"This place hasn't gotten any nicer," Elvert said, looking around with his hands on his hips like he just arrived at his ten-year high school reunion.

"Neither have you," Ron said, "and it's been about a dime." Ron was the owner/bartender at the Oak, and ever since doing three months in jail for a bar fight, he only spoke of the passage of time in terms of prison slang.

"I guess it has, old friend."

"You been practicing?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of? When was the last time you...uh, played?"

Elvert smiled and breathed deep. "About a dime."

Ron felt a surge of panic in his chest. "Are you serious? Jesus, man, I mean, you're always welcome, but I've been telling people about this, about *you*."

"Don't worry, man. I feel good. I feel *real* good." He wandered up to the stage, which was really just a platform at the back of the bar about a step high, and turned to face his old friend.

"I got this."

Ron laughed. "Still cocky." Elvert chuckled silently. He did feel cocky, but he hadn't felt like this in--well, about a dime. "So, uh..." Ron began before hesitating to scratch the back of his head awkwardly, "is *she* coming?"

"God," Elvert replied, crouching to touch the stage floor, "I hope not."

"New laptop, eh?" Ron said, now huddled over it at the bar.

“Nope, belongs to a co-worker.”

“What happened to yours?”

“Left it out in the rain.”

“Ah,” Ron said knowingly. “This co-worker, they got a real thing for shitty network sitcoms, huh?”

“Yeah, you can wipe that. I’ll need to install Ableton.” Ron wasn’t sure how this co-worker would take that, but he didn’t hesitate. There was something cathartic about eliminating a hundred episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* and *How I Met Your Mother*.

“You still got that rig? The one you made with scrap plywood from Lowe’s and some old push-button switches from the physics lab at State?”

Elvert just grinned his sideways grin and jogged out to his car.

There was a healthy buzz floating above the crowd now. It was a little past nine, and while one could make it to the bathrooms without having to throw any elbows, it could not be done without some electric contact between one’s crotch and a some strangers’ butts. Elvert had finished setting up hours ago, as the equipment needed for his show amounted to little more than his laptop, his homemade footswitch panel, and himself. He had been doing his damndest to stay focused on mental preparation and to avoid looking for her, but even in his newly acquired state of fuck-it-all he found himself occasionally tossing glances at the sea of bobbing heads, hoping to catch a glimpse of blush brushes. He hadn’t noticed any as of yet, which, he kept telling himself, was all the more reason to focus on the show. The performance. The rest would take care of itself.

“Hey, E,” Ron called from behind the bar and beyond the bobbing sea, “you just about ready?”

Elvert nodded silently, a look of determination on his face. He could already feel beads of sweat cropping up beneath his hairline, and he turned his back on the people to do some tongue exercises, starting with some rolling r’s and working his way into some basic drum beats. He heard the music from the jukebox begin to fade down, the remnants of new millennium Chili Peppers or some such crap, and knew Ron was trying to pull out the crowd’s Binky without waking them up. They wouldn’t sleep forever, Elvert knew, but it would give him a small window of opportunity to start before they woke up, angry and hungry. Once successful, Ron gathered everyone’s attention with a spoon and a pint glass before dousing them with his gravelly voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you may or may not be old enough to remember E. He used to play here frequently several years ago, when he was the best around at a talent that, for reasons unclear to me, has gone unappreciated since. I’d say more, but I don’t think that it will be necessary once you see what he can do.” Ron gave him a quick nod and a smile before every other set of eyes turned to him onstage. E took one last glance at his footswitch below, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and raised the mic until it was touching his lips.

It was just him, standing up on stage with a microphone in his hand, wearing jeans and a white t-shirt (apparently more had dried since she last saw him) with some weird box with silver buttons on the floor in front of him. There were wires running from it to her laptop, which rested on a recommissioned barstool to his right, and he fiddled with it for a few moments while the bartender made the announcement. She’d made a point to arrive as inconspicuously as possible, slinking in and sliding her eyes side to side in case he was waiting to pounce. But he wasn’t. He was on stage getting ready, so she hid behind the corner to the bathrooms where she could lean out and see but likely not be seen. She felt pangs of anxiety and embarrassment flash through her as her imagination anticipated a

proposal or a terrible, lovesick poem or half-witted stand-up, and then her mind went blank as she watched him raise the mic to his lips.

It started with a “psht”. Four of them, slow and sharp, bookended by a tap of his foot to one of the buttons, and while he stopped the sound continued, like the rhythmic release of bursts of steam. He let it ride for a few measures, his head bobbing in time and his eyes open but staring through the floor. Then he brought the mic back up and began making a guttural noise, something low and from the back of his throat, and she was instantly reminded of his story from earlier about saying “girl” into his fist. It didn’t sound exactly like that, but it was similar, and he did this quickly, four times between each psht while pulsing his palm towards the crowd, again punctuating with his foot on a button.

“What the fuck is this guy doing?” she heard some bro whisper behind her. Then suddenly he let forth a flurry of pshts and bmps and tchs and thks with a speed that belied the metered precision of his delivery, again punching a button with his foot, and suddenly she heard drums and cymbals and bass.

“Holy shit,” came another bro voice, “I think he’s...beatboxing.”

His voice was like used motor oil, black and thick and smooth with the occasional granule of dirt, and he swayed back and forth like a man who’d had just enough to drink as he began to sing.

*Please won't you stay awhile to share my grief
It's such a lovely day to have to always feel this way*

“Word, I’ve seen that shit on Youtube,” came the original bro. “It’s pretty cool. But what fuckin’ song is this?”

“It’s Portishead, you twat,” she said, turning her head back just enough to be sure they knew she was talking to them. She turned back in time to see him break into the chorus.

*Wandering stars, for whom it is reserved
The blackness of darkness forever*

With a flick of his foot he was repeating the chorus and harmonizing with himself, his forehead beginning to glisten and his brow furrowed, and just as he got to the last word he leaned back, put his other hand flat over the mic and flapped it back and forth as he made a harmonica out of thin air for just a few notes. Then his arm broke free, a charmed snake attached to his shoulder while he scratched a record with his larynx and the spit inside his cheeks.

“Wow, he’s pretty good,” said a bro. She didn’t say anything this time, but smiled as she realized she, herself, was oscillating in time, his clock’s lazy pendulum. His body only became more involved, flowing through the second verse and into the bridge where his scratching snake and flapping harmonica battled, then the third verse, which he started before somehow spinning his voice backwards and then forwards, right into the verse. Then, after kicking his voice up an octave for the final harmonic chorus, his arm became an elephant’s trunk as he layered the smooth but whiny sound of three obstructed trumpets on top of each other. While he did this, he finally took the liberty of gazing out over the crowd, and the sight of a hundred and fifty people bopping back and forth in syncopation with his beats, littered with smiles and expressions of awe, almost brought him to tears.

And just like that, the jukebox kicked on with some shitty Nickelback song and the wonder that strung the crowd together dissolved. Elvert was simultaneously heartbroken and relieved, and he smiled, because of or in spite of this.

There were drinks, none of which E payed for, none of which he refused. She found him, quickly but casually, and while he stayed with her the rest of the night she had but a fraction of his attention. He was a nanocelebrity, at least for a night, and while he did not revel in it, per se, he did not shy away from it. She’d never seen him so loose, so himself. It suddenly occurred to her that she must not have really known him at all, not for all these years. It was

exhilarating.

“You were...really great,” she said, when things had finally settled down.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling into his beer. He was sweaty, and it clumped his hair together. She thought it was sexy.

“Look at me.” He did immediately, his smile wavering for a moment that was almost imperceptible. Something about holding a pint glass, half-full but as sweaty as he was, comforted him. “Why haven’t you been doing this?”

He dropped his head but not his smile. He thought about his parents and the look on their face when he told them he was still doing this in college. He thought about *her* and how she loved him for it before they met and hated him for it after, he thought about the day he buried his footswitch in his closet.

“You know what?” he said, laughing over his half-beer, “it really doesn’t matter.”

“You need a shower,” she said, smiling as she looked him up and down and wrinkling her nose in that cute way that she does.

“Eh,” he grunted dismissively, “it looks grosser than it feels. Actually feels kind of nice and cool.” He threw back the rest of his brew and spun his stool around to face her, and while she didn’t realize it, she leaned forward just the slightest bit, ready for a kiss.

“I’m glad you came,” she said, filling the gap.

“Me too,” he said, offering nothing more than a cockeyed smile before hopping up and sauntering out the door. Her face beginning to flush, she spun around to watch him leave.

After a few minutes, when she’d accepted he wasn’t coming back, she dropped a couple of twenties on the bar to cover the tab and walked out wondering if one of them had just quit.

As Elvert started the long walk home, his skin nibbled by his sweaty t-shirt and the chilly night air, he saw that he had a lone voicemail. It was from Mick, who usually didn’t call for any reason. It was just under thirty seconds.

“Hey, Elvert, Mick here. Just wanted to let you know that we finished the whole Angelina project. It’s weird, and I’m not totally sure, but I think we found what might have been causing the problem. We found...well, it’s weird, but, we found a, uh...bar of soap. Just a plain white bar of soap. Not sure how it got there, or what, but I’ve never seen that before. Anyway, I just threw it out. See you tomorrow.”

Before his computerized mistress could finish her offer, E hit three to delete.