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BIG EXIT

by

Jordan Turner

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2012

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Canada

Big Exit

by

Jordan Turner

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

Big Exit is a novella which chronicles the dialogic interactions of a series of narrator-protagonists from Vancouver, each using first-person points of view. This multi-voiced narrative showcases the often dysfunctional lifestyles of a small group of youths from the lower socio-economic group. The narrative structure rotates irregularly through the characters' perspectives and features spatiotemporal jumps to reflect the psychic dissarray of the community and the deeper psychological fragmentation of Luke, a character diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. The juxtapositions of these differing narrative perspectives generate ironies that are not evident to the narrator-protagonists, but are apparent to readers as they move through the text. This novella is followed by a critical essay which provides details on the structural form and style of *Big Exit*.

DEDICATION

This novella is dedicated to my parents, Brent and Kelly Turner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted for the guidance and encouragement I received from the following people, or groups:

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The Strokes, PJ Harvey, Joy Division, The Clash, Stone Temple Pilots, Lou Reed, Grateful Dead, and T.S. Eliot.

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There is a road, no simple highway
Between the dawn and the dark of night
And if you go, no one may follow
That path is for your steps alone

Ripple in still water
When there is no pebble tossed
Nor wind to blow

You who choose to lead must follow
But if you fall, you fall alone
If you should stand, then who's to guide you?
If I knew the way, I would take you home

— GRATEFUL DEAD, "Ripple"

BIG EXIT

Chapter 1: JARED

From our leaky high-rise condo off the tip of False Creek, I can see why they called this place Terminal City. The sun sets behind the clouds in the long-distance, and Vancouver turns the colour of burning cigarettes. All the while, Brendan paces behind me. I can feel his look.

"What are you writing?" he asks.

"Nothing, really. Don't worry about it."

"Why would you have your birthday party on a Monday?"

The question is fair enough, but I pause, unable to answer. Maybe it's the intrinsic banality of the day. I want to sing a line of "I Don't Like Mondays," but don't. We're roommates, and I want to tell him that I'm hoping no one will show up. That I'm twenty-five years old, and in all those years I haven't found anyone I want to spend a birthday with. Of course I've planned the whole event, right down to the silver streamers and piss-coloured napkins. But I'm just torturing myself; I never go through with these things.

This October it's been unseasonably cold, especially for Vancouver, and I know because odd moments from past birthdays torment my mind like a series of bad jokes. This is all I think about. Not that I had forty invitations made up for the party (the minimum at an overpriced antique press on Granville Island). Not that I only mailed one (and, it being sweeps week, mother demurred). I am not thinking of the rows of liquor bottles and stacks of red party cups, or the white icing cake still snap-enclosed in its hard

supermarket plastic on the kitchen counter. Not thinking of the rinds forming on the cheese platter behind me, or the baseball highlights on the television which have gone through their cycle five times. Trying hard to ignore boredom dragging across Brendan's face. None of it matters. I don't care that I live in a shitty two-bedroom apartment with a vapid roommate who spends his time crying and making annoying hyperventilation noises**.** I am not thinking of the fact that when looking out our fourteenth floor window the view of False Creek is completely obscured by a two hundred foot metallic relic of a sphere from Expo '86. Not thinking of this morning when I turned on Brendan's laptop to check email and found a blank word-processing page saved as "My Big Exit." Not any of this. All of it should be at the forefront of thought. I won't let it.

Instead, today's date keeps flashing by, as if written *ad infinitum* on a motorized Rolodex: October twenty-seventh October twenty-seventh October twenty-seventh October twenty-seventh. I can't pin down the year of my first kiss with Ashley Wagner at summer camp, or, what month it was when I lost my virginity to Julie Daley in the woods of Stanley Park, or the day of the week when my father left to "cool off" in Mexico and never returned. But I can remember the hour I got beat up by the football team in high school, the day I sat drinking scotch on a sticky bench at the Cambie, and the year I woke up in the drunk tank on East Hastings without a belt or shoelaces, but with eight stitches in my forehead. I remember October twenty-seventh, and I'll remember every October twenty-seventh for the rest of my life.

"Yeah," I say, "looks like Monday was not the best choice."

"You think?" Brendan motions for me to look at his watch, which I avoid, already aware it's about ten. "You feel like doing something?"

"Like what?"

"How about the Purple Onion? It's Brit Pop night and we can walk."

"Sure."

Brendan wears his blue dress shirt, skinny jeans, and chucks while I slip on a pair of brown dress shoes. We lock up the apartment and take Quebec Street north, chain-smoking in pace with each other. Brendan lights a new one as I put mine out, and vice versa, to keep a certain level of distance between us. As we walk, we concentrate on dodging the dirty needles lining the sidewalks along Andy Livingstone Park.

Quebec becomes Columbia, and passes the east Pender vagrants huddled in their alley havens. The Cordova hookers smile infectiously and do their little two-step kick-dance, some already winter clad in cut-off black trench coats and thick nylons under thin fishnets. "Looking for a good time?"

"Not tonight," is all I offer as we turn up Water.

At the bottom of the entrance steps we're met by the residual stench of burnt rubber from recent fire damage. We relinquish our driver's licenses to the bouncer. I've been legal age for years, but displaced shaggy brown hair and boyish features always wave the red flag.

Squinting one eye and swaying slightly as he turns the dumb look on his face sideways, the bouncer says, "What's yer name in whole?"

I would be taken aback by the lack of capable articulation if he weren't already occupationally pigeonholed. I try to look him straight in the eye and answer, but he holds my license directly in front of my face. I look down and respond, "Jared Ethan James Victon."

I grab my ID and move around him; they never give an inch. I leave Brendan to deal with the bouncer and walk to a lonely table near the bar. The Onion seats about a hundred people in two rooms in a mix of red vinyl booths and cracked oak bar stools. They usually play a discouraging mix of trashy local "Nu Metal" and reunion albums from eighties hair bands, dismal, but anything beats going to one of the clubs on Granville, especially on a Monday. I'd probably stumble on a fifteen-dollar cover charge for "Salsa Nite." Luckily, "Lost in the Supermarket" by the Clash reverberates through the space.

The room features half-turned transvestites with hairy chests, poking through plunging gown necklines, above running shoes – glam girls riding the old wave in their early thirties – and a few college kids, lost apparently. I order us a round of shots and a couple of bottles of beer.

Brendan comes up with nose tight-scrunched, eyes seducing the floor. We sit, chat about nothing. We're working on our second shot of bourbon when this girl enters, diamond lip stud and layered hair streaked to match her black and red cocktail dress. She stalks through the room with two lackey girlfriends, one tattooed blonde ponytail and the other a brunette pixie cut, both obediently floating just behind her pulled-back shoulders. I leave Brendan at the table with a dismissive wave of hand, and stand up, moving after her. She glides by a few times, but I'm hesitant – duck around a corner as she passes. She moves from the bar to the dance floor and back to the bar again, constantly nodding as if in some conversation. Before long she's well lit in the dim lights, veins filled with Jack and cola.

I approach robotic, tap her shoulder – twice. She spins and surprise envelops her jaw. Narrow eyebrows fold. She looks as if she is alluding to something. I hold nothing save a warming Boston lager and growing regret. She has this "who-the-fuck-are-you" look. I want to disappear. Sensing a breaking point she smiles**,** "What's your name?"

I choke. Anxiety hits. Knees buckle then become weightless. I tumble to the floor.

She towers above me unmoved and half-smiling dropping one hand to her hip, while the other reaches lower into my blurry vision. She laughs, and her dark blue eyes focus. Her head tilts. It levels her staggered bangs. She seems put off in waiting, so I take her hand using all the strength I can muster to push myself up.

Face to face again, I'm finally able to mumble, "I'm Jared. Jared Victon."

She looks me up and down a few times – reaching out to flatten jacket lapels, crimp my collar. She pushes a rogue chunk of hair slowly behind my ear with her licked thumb. "Well, hello there, Jared. Had a bit of a rush, eh? I'm Melonie. Melonie Collins. You might have to take me in smaller doses."

* * *

"I thought you were fucking dead when you passed out there," Brendan tells me. He's leaning heavily on our apartment's balcony railing. It's three in the morning, and the night air is refreshing.

"Yeah, go figure. After I got off the floor, she told me about how people need to get to know her slowly. So, I improvised a story about disregarded anaemia. Out of politeness, she pretended she believed me."

"Good thing we went out tonight, you know. You met a girl. Random chance can change the projection of a life. It's strange how lives can be knit together, how fucking intersectional the universe is. But karma, Jared, karma will get you."

"Sure, I guess."

"So, what did you two talk about?"

"I don't know, whatever people talk about. And I'm meeting her tomorrow at some place called Bean Time."

He laughs, "Cheap date," and swigs merlot straight from the bottle.

Brendan had watched us from the far side of the bar. For all he knew we were talking about the tranny with the hula-hoop. But, in fact, it was much more than that.

"Melonie and I discussed how Doug Coupland portrays Vancouver in his novels. We talked about the failures of recent Woody Allen movies. She could have asked me anything."

Brendan's sleeves are rolled up past his elbows. There is a fresh tattoo on his left inner forearm. It's a broken heart above three words, which I read out loud in a vague effort to change the topic, "Life ain't chess."

"It sure ain't," Brendan retorts, rolling his sleeve down and dropping the half full bottle of wine off the balcony. "If you really like this girl you have to show her you care. You have to be strong all the time. It never stops." At the end of the sentence, there is the distant echo of the bottle smashing on the sidewalk, a broken exclamation point.

He points his finger at me. "And there's only one escape. And it has to be taken alone, away from everyone. There can be no heroics. You have to plan it all out. You have to become a person that relies on the solemn life. The indignity of dank hotel rooms

with thick walls and cheap plaster over bullet holes. Head beams worn down by swinging ropes and the sharp scent of bleach on old carpets. Maybe even fighting over a vacant ledge," he elbows me with a nervous smile. "I didn't think I could handle being an inconvenience, a graveyard shift for some overworked coroner. But I have to stay firm on principles. My big exit is my one act of truancy."

"So you're talking about killing yourself on *principle*? Don't jump to any conclusions, bud." I turn away to the table to pour another glass of bourbon.

"I've heard the mermaids singing among the electric waves, man. There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to. One is always alone."

"You've been reading Eliot again? You look at a loss without your wine."

"You never met my ex-girlfriend. Her name is Dawn..."

"...Like the detergent?"

"Like daybreak. She left me awhile back. I maybe told you about her, maybe not. The dental assistant with all the metal in her face. You know, eyebrow bars and nose studs."

"So what happened?"

"I wish I knew, man," he starts out, getting up and pacing the five square feet of open balcony space. "I got wasted, real drunk. I think I called her. I know I called her. Actually, it said I did in that 'call history' deal on my cell phone."

"Yeah?"

"Twenty fucking minutes this call lasted. I know what you're thinking. There's no way some broad is going to listen to my, by all accounts, insulting and mean-spirited bullshit for twenty whole minutes. She had time on her hands."

"It can't be that bad."

"It could be worse. You should see the texts I sent. Like when she told me she thought she was late..."

"Late?"

"Like, 'with fucking child' late. I told her, 'Big deal, this wouldn't be my first abortion.'"

"Wow."

"I know, right? I can't figure out how to fix it."

"You should start by raising your life standards."

"I don't even remember what standards are. This morning I masturbated while eating breakfast."

"Sounds like you had *that one* coming."

"That's an awful pun, you know." He gazes over the railing.

"Sorry."

"That's just it, man. Sorry only does so much. You have to go *meet* this Melonie girl. You have to be strong. You should see the texts I sent. I can't figure out how to..."

"Ok, I'll do what I can."

"Yeah, you *do* that. Because if you fall in love and it ends, you have nothing."

"Ok. You're right. But seriously, Brendan, this is the first good birthday I've had in…"

Turning around, he isn't there.

Chapter 2: LUKE

"What should I do with the bracelet?"

"Your ID? Consider it a keepsake, Luke. Think of it as something to remember the therapy you've done with us."

"Ha. Funny."

"Luke, what are your immediate plans?"

"Plans?"

"After you leave Riverview. How are you going to make a living?"

"I've picked up a driver's license, Class 4. Maybe I'll look into driving a cab. Maybe transport."

"Transport? Transport what, Luke?"

"You know, whatever."

"How about sleeping, Luke? Have you worked out somewhere to stay?"

"Yeah, in Coquitlam."

"Near here?"

"Near the Skytrain."

"I'll need that address."

"Sure."

"How about voices, Luke, has there been any recursion?"

"Nah. Like I told ya, they've been gone for months."

"You're certain they're gone, Luke? You no longer feel something is controlling your thoughts? Or what you hear, see?"

"No worries, Doc."

"What about radios and special frequencies, Luke? Those only you can hear. We agreed that your obsession with those frequencies is because you don't trust people. As you recall, you've been angry, and at one point you claimed I just won't believe you."

"You've been good to me, Doc. I trust you now. I trust in what you've told me."

"And you realize and acknowledge that those frequencies simply aren't real."

"I do."

"All right. You realize we're going over old ground now and I have to ask you these questions as part of my diagnosis. So, yes. As expected. This all confirms my diagnosis. I believe you're ready to try things on your own. I've arranged for the paperwork. But, remember, you have to be certain to maintain regular appointments, twice a month at my office, here at Riverview. I encourage you to be in contact with me if you have any issues or concerns that you want to convey between appointments. You have my card, which includes my email address. And be certain to take your medication, regularly. I don't need to remind you the consequences that might arise if you neglect your pills. We've worked very hard and it's been a challenging three years, but I'm sure you are ready to try things on your own."

"Thanks, Doc. Yeah. I think it'll be okay."

Chapter 3: KATE

"Hey, Kate, got any of that gum left?"

"Sheila, how come you're always eating my gum? How come you never get your own, or offer me some, eh?"

"Lookit, I need a gum, ok? I'll buy you a beer later. Big deal. C'mon, gimme."

"Awright, here." I toss her the pack and she shoves three sticks into her mouth.

"Geez, Sheila, do you have to eat the whole pack? Leave some for me."

"Relax, I need it. Keeps the smell away. You know. You think I like working in funeral joint?"

"Yeah, yeah. Give it back. I need some too."

Sheila rolls her shoulders forward while watching me work – loosely gripping her mop handle. Her jaw is working a lot harder than her hands. "So, I gotta work here as a janitor 'cause I need the bucks, but you got a choice. How come you're workin' in a joint like this?"

Sheila's pretty perceptive for a mop-jockey. So, I tell her straight up. "All right, it's like this. I kind of backed into this job. I ended up in cosmetology school because everyone told me I should go there. I was the girl with too much eye shadow and not enough opinions. I've never really made any choices for myself. I just relied on doing what others expected me to do. First, I thought I'd be a nurse or veterinarian so people could rely on me. I wanted to make a difference. Now, I just want to be anything but invisible. Maybe even respected, once in a while."

"Oh yeah?" Sheila catches some drool with a rubber finger.

"Painting the dead was something I kind of fell into after a couple of bad internships. You know, I worked for Jett Models for the longest. All two months of it, but couldn't handle hoity-toity models, always whining about something, showing up late and hung-over, always bitchin'. What a drag. They all reminded me of Melonie."

"Melonie?" Her jaw stills.

"Yeah, my whacked out kid sister. So, here, nobody gives me a hard time. It took me a while to get used to the freezers, the smell of dead bodies, embalming fluid, bleach – stuff like that. You know. But, it's weird. I actually like the sound of the fluorescent lights. I like the steady hum, it's kind of soothing."

She chews more slowly now.

"The young deaths are the worst. I have nightmares about unzipping a body bag and finding my kid sister inside. But I work through it, you know, keep a diary about it. There's a lot of suicides and drownings, car crash victims, overdoses. They come in the parlour with burnt skin or sometimes they're bloated and blue. I try to make all the bodies that come across my table beautiful, as best I can, even with the closed caskets where no one'll see them. Some aren't too bad. Usually it's nothing too major, just a touch up here and there, a bit of foundation, maybe a little rouge on a sunken cheek."

Sheila starts up. "My little brother got killed by a truck, blew him right out of his sneakers."

"Gross. I mean... gee, that's too bad. Sorry. I woulda fixed him up nice, though. But, you know, what I do isn't just for the families or friends. I do it for the dead person's dignity; it's important to me. It's almost like they're still alive, when I work on them.

After a while a person can get used to just about anything. There are good and bad ways to bury someone. Well, at least I haven't lost anybody I love, yet."

"You're a lucky one, Katie."

"I prefer 'Kate.'"

"Oh. Ok. Kate." She starts pushing the mop around. "I'm just saying it's a hard thing to see happen."

"Yeah, I can see that. But dead bodies never bothered me. In high school I worked at the SPCA, bagging frozen kittens and dogs to be taken to the landfill out in Surrey. The other staffers gave me the strangest looks as I'd pull the animals' eyelids shut and put their bodies into garbage bags. I'd always whisper something nice to them, y'know? I'm doing something that helps these people, it doesn't matter to me that it's after they've gone. It's still a good thing."

Sheila keeps mopping. "Yeah, I guess, I'm doing something good too, in my own way. Except this place kind of gives me the creeps. What's this about a diary? Maybe I should keep one of those too, eh?"

"Sure, it might be good for you. You wanna read a hunk of mine?"

"Yeah, ok, but don't tell the boss. I'm on company time and I'm only supposed to read and goof off on my coffee break."

"I won't tell. Here, this is a recent entry... I'll read it out for you..."

Thursday afternoons at the funeral parlour are busy. Mr. Baumgartner, the director, usually has more experienced staff working on weekdays. I've been trained to fill-in, but getting called in today to work alone must have meant he's desperate.

Sandra, my manager, supervises most weekdays. She's middle-aged, walks in with this ponytail frazzle of black hair tied together with dirty, rubber elastics. Her "work clothes," worn yoga pants and pastel sweaters are always stained with yesterday's coffee or the morning's toothpaste. She's always braless, her breasts drooping. Her style is just haphazard. I do my best to flatten lapels or pluck an old woman's whiskers, but she keeps intervening, claiming the dead should be buried as they lived. She's not a bad person, just a bit dis-organized. If she ever came across my table, I would show her compassion. I'd cut her hair elastics loose, spray her down with conditioner, give her a proper make up job, get her out of the toothpaste covered sweater, dress her up nicely.

Sheila starts laughing, "You better not let Sandra get a hold of that book! You'll be up shit's creek."

I keep reading:

Baumgartner, on the other hand, is born and bred for this job. He looks comforting, non-judgemental and expressionless, almost as if he embalmed himself.

Sheila snorts. "Hey, that's for sure. That guy walks around like he's got a pickle up his ass. Keep reading!"

A short plump man, he stands about five and a half feet, and weighs in at least one-eighty. His jet-black hair collects above his ears in thick curls, and it floats thin as a spider web at the top. He wears these black-rimmed Coke-bottle glasses, which are too small for his head, always pushed hard into his wide eyes and fat nose, and he's always wearing the same dark suit and starchy dress shirt. At least he wears different ties from day to day. They're usually black or navy blue, but on a good day he puts on one with stripes or maybe even dots.

I hear the rear entrance door slam. Only the boss takes that door. Sheila makes herself look busy and mops another swath of floor in long steady strokes. I shove the diary away.

"Kate, where's your lab coat?" Baumgartner, bursts in. He walks up to me, loosening his tie. I make a mental note. Black tie today.

"And I think I've mentioned this, you don't have to dress up for work. No one notices."

"I know, sir." I pick up the bright white lab coat off the chair beside the table, wrap it around my grey blouse without raising my eyes from the corpse.

"You look nice, though, very pretty," he says, pausing on the other side of the body. "Such a pretty young girl should be helping me upstairs, taking coats and serving coffee. What do you say?"

I wait out the stare while his eyes critique. He does a quick loop around the embalming table, spending more time inspecting my figure than the naked, eighty year-old coronary on task.

"Still single?"

"I haven't dated in two years, despite the misguided enthusiasm of several men who are as old as my father."

"Aha."

He turns on his heel, charts his way back across the tiles, stopping just before the exit steps. Over his shoulder, he says, "There's a kid coming in. A jumper. Closed casket

for sure, but the family wants him dressed and cleaned up nice. Just listen for the buzzer. Oh, and that shave looks good, but please try to fix Mr. Murphy's expression, ok?"

I kept working on that coronary all through lunch. I thought he'd be an easy makeup. He didn't have a lot of scars. Some people are covered in them. His face looked a bit swollen, which might be why Baumgartner complained. Coronaries always come in with these pained, stupid looks on their faces. Mr. Murphy was shipped in from Vancouver General this morning, but they also come in pretty steady from St. Paul's, Royal Columbian, and sometimes as far away as Eagle Ridge. I'm still learning ways to mould the face muscles into a normal, sleep-like state. Sheila's finished cleaning up the back room. She drops by to chat.

"Jesus, that's gross."

"Yeah, I massaged his cheeks to loosen the jaw a little, trying to fit his teeth together. See, look here, most of the time it takes quite a while to make a corpse look human again, hiding the burns and bruises, or layering foundation or even wax over blisters. With Mr. Murphy it was an easy black contour of highlights and lowlights, and some yellow under the eyes to neutralize the blue. For a red nose or broken blood vessels, it takes a touch of green, and some contour, see? Jaw line, cheekbones, nostrils, and darken the eyebrows. Finally there's the powder and foundation, which has to be subtle. No one wants to see their husband or father looking like a transvestite. So I blend down the neck ever so finely, all the way past the collar line."

"Can you do something about these crow's feet?"

"Sorry, honey. I don't do live people."

"Dang. I understand. Hey, listen! The buzzer's gone off – you got another customer, eh?"

"Yeah, Baumgartner said we had a jumper coming in."

"Yuck! If you don't mind, I'll get back to my cleaning."

"Yeah, go ahead, I'm used to this stuff."

The top bolt unlatches easily for once and I heave the large metal door open. At the other side a young man stands with his back to me, leaning on a body bag stretcher and staring past the black limos, the lone hearse, and the tree line. He wears thick-heeled black boots and the same green jacket all the delivery guys wear. But he is new on the job. I've never seen him before.

"Yes? Ahem?"

"Excuse me?" the man responds, stamping out the cigarette he's smoking and turning around. The nametag on his work coat reads "Luke." Mid-twenties, I'd guess.

"Delivery. Sign here, please." He hands me a release form and pushes the gurney up the ramp just slow enough that I can step out of the way. He wheels it to the centre of the room, directly under the lights.

"What's the name?"

"It's on the form." He takes the paper from my hands and presses it unevenly across the body bag to scribble his signature. He looks up to me, his finger in a pistol-point at the line on the form. "Sign here."

"Thanks. I've done this before and I know where to sign, ok?"

"Yah, all right."

"Brendan Daley."

"Yep, that's your deceased."

I sign the sheet on my thigh and pass it back to him.

He takes back the paper, reads my name out to me, "Katherine Collins,"

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

He clips the pen to his breast pocket. I stare at my wavy reflection on one of the freezer drawers, push my hair back.

"Your hair looks nice," he says, half-smiling. He raises his hand to the back of his head. A pink band slides down his forearm.

"Thanks, uh... Luke."

"I had appendition," Luke says, pulling down his sleeve.

"Append – what?"

"Uhm. You know, there was a note in his pocket. It goes to next of kin."

"A note?"

"Yeah, here. I already read it. It's not that long."

"You know, you're not supposed to do that it's..."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry. Honest. I guess I did anyway, curious you know. I'm kind of new on the job, and, say, um, if you don't mind me asking, you been working here long?"

"Kind of, and pretty steady. I've got to work through the weekend sometimes."

"You work weekends too?"

"Sorry to say, yes, I'm in again on Saturday."

"Yeah? Maybe I'll drop by, only next time without a delivery, that is, if you don't mind?"

"Um, sure. Ok."

"Ok then. You know, I met some people at a bar I go to. Out in Gastown. Said they're planning a 'dead rock star' party."

"Excuse me?"

"Everyone dresses up like Jim Morrison or Kurt Cobain or whatever. It's in a coupla weeks. You should come. I mean, if you're not too busy."

"I don't know, Luke. I think I might spend too much time with dead people already."

"Think about it. I'm going as Ian Curtis from Joy Division. Guy suffered from epilepsy, depression. Hung himself from a kitchen roof beam. You know that song, goes, 'and of a voice that told her when and where to act. She said I've lost control again'? Anyway, I relate."

"Sounds like a real happy song, Luke."

"You know, you can't avoid all the sad. I'll see ya."

I slide the door shut as he heads toward his van.

I make my way past the body, and sit on the rolling stool next to Mr. Murphy's table. A magnifying glass is attached to a metal arm just above Murphy's head. I take out my powder mirror and hold it just beyond the tool.

"I'll be fine," I say out loud, applying foundation, searching for stray hairs. "Just fine."

Chapter 4: JARED

Melonie trails off, reading aloud from one of the scattered papers she found on my desk or maybe the floor. “Jared,” she says, “what is this?”

“Just something I’m working on. A book.”

“About?”

“You know.”

“I don’t.”

“About you and me and, well, everything really.”

“Why? When did you start this? You’re getting weirder all the time.”

“I wasn’t always crazy.”

“Well, Jared, you weren’t always *this* crazy.”

“See, Melonie, I know my point is lost, my bated breath wasted. It’s tough to pinpoint the month, the week, the hour, the moment I gave in. The exact instant I reached sanity’s far borders and then fell beyond. I am sure it is that simple though. It has to be. I remember feeling normal and I know what life is like now. Case closed.”

“Really, Jared?”

“You’ll learn more eventually. Everyone leaks the truth as it stews in your head, streams out your eyes, seeps out your mouth, and gathers under your fingernails. I know I rage on. It kind of keeps me balanced. I haven’t left this apartment in over a week. I remember the day I moved in when the landlord took me for a walkabout over the 400 square feet. The place was empty, spotless; the walls were so white they gave me chills.

They were white-white. I felt like my very presence was tarnishing, and of course inevitably it was."

"You have to stop feeling so sorry for yourself. Don't I keep telling you that?"

"Yeah, I suppose you do."

"You know, you should just get over yourself, just look at this mess, all these stacks of legal pad papers. You're really too much. You should do something about it."

"Too much? How?"

"Don't start."

"Sorry."

"Maybe you should see someone, like a therapist or something?"

"I use my window for therapy, a glimpse beyond the lease's shackles. In spite of my absence from society, not a soul has noticed. My data job hasn't called – it's like I never existed."

"You should call your mother."

"I think she's in the Greek Cyclades. Some port city."

"You need to go outside and see people, get some air."

"I once saw a girl waiting for a bus through my window. She was crying inconsolably, just wailing at the night. Young and blonde and beautiful and hopeless. In the rain, her bench without cover, her hair matted in a wave across her face and neck. She held her pea coat tight between shivering sobs. I thought about going down to the bench to sit next to her. She looked fragile. People passed, and most just picked up their pace as they went by. Some slowed tempo. I could see them talk to her. I imagine they were asking her if she needed help or something. But, I think they were all lying to themselves;

they only pretended to care, and I hoped she'd turn and scream. Instead, she'd shake her head. They didn't deserve the courtesy. As each bus approached I held my breath, worried she'd seek a new destination."

"And?"

"She'd just walk away from the bus station, and as one bus after another drove into the distance she always re-appeared. She was waiting for something that wasn't coming. I found her attractive. It was healing watching her. I wished I owned a camera to capture her pose. Eventually she stood and took four paces in one direction before abruptly running in the other. I could tell she had made a decision that changed her in that moment, in the short second between sanity and whatever. I wanted to follow her; run down the streets yelling she wasn't alone and we could find a way out together – cue the music, cue the credits. As she fled, my knuckles turned white gripping the window's ledge. I almost jumped. I almost spoke. I almost did something. But it was raining fairly steady, and I've never owned a proper coat."

"I see. You're real committed."

"Too much depends on the weather."

"So you're hiding inside?" Melonie stares up through the streaks of rain on the window.

"For now. Though I imagine myself living outdoors, in an empty field, surrounded by like-minded failures like me. Like Brendan was. Everyone's mundane lives will waste away in sync, carelessly flaunting our prescribed nihilism in a utopia of sorts – a mass transcendental fuck-up. Instead of the classic 'Om,' followers will groan and fidget and shred at their clothing until their fingers are left white-chalked and bloody.

I'll surround myself with people like my lost bus-stop companion – those who don't have, don't want, don't need; a world created of empty, hollow people. I'll ask them to follow me out of society and down my rabbit hole. Instead of mad hatters and smoking caterpillars, there'll be benzos and razor blades..."

"…And mushrooms and acid."

"And we'll all be forgotten for a spell. In due course, I picture a balding detective entering our sanctuary at dawn – his only guide the pinhole beams of light through the boarded warehouse windows. Vampire white, nearly translucent from too many night shifts, his eyes a fierce pastel-yellow from jaundice setting in. He senses the sickness of our safe haven and it culminates in his stomach and he pours booze on it and tells it false promises, unable to get through anything on his own anymore…"

"Oh, Jared. Chill out. This self-indulgent bullshit is really getting tiring."

"Finally, the detective steps forth into the massacre while loosening his brown polyester tie. He looks the way TV detectives do when walking into a career low point. He views my remains. I'm stone-faced, purple-bloated, motionless…"

"I think we should stop seeing each other."

"You're not listening to me. You're not seeing what I see."

"What, exactly, am I not seeing, Jared?"

"The tell tale signs are often subtle, easily lost without an awareness. They arise in shallow breaths and sheltered stances – deep sighs after dropping one's keys, the laboured movements in retrieving them…"

"Will you *please*..."

"Wait! Listen... I have ventured out – seeking more. All they want is a leader, a sense of some normalcy. One man caught my attention. He was pacing below my perch, but for how long I do not know. He had a cell phone and he kept dialling, followed by pacing, hanging up, and dialling again. I admired his resolve, his impatience for whomever he sought."

"Was he as crazy are you are?"

"He was well-to-do as far as the phrase prescribes a suit and tie, leather briefcase in tow. After some time, twenty to thirty more call attempts by my count, he swore and threw his phone at the street, and fell to his knees, then arose, retrieved the phone and made off. I was in awe. The day being mild I grabbed my sweater and threw on some old shoes. In closing the door I patted my hair down in a vain attempt to fit in, and scorned myself for having bothered. Rounding the corner at the neighbourhood's end, I almost fell over him. His fingers were dug deep into his scalp as he sat curb side in a wide defeated pile between a few trucks."

"This really is too much..."

"Wait there's more... It was all so pathetic, it seemed rehearsed. But he kept himself together. He hadn't totally lost the plot. His phone rang loud and he floated to his feet in a sudden shift as if God had pinched the scruff of his neck. He held the phone in front of him, and slowly pressed the answer button, said, 'Yeah... I know... Shut up! What happened...? Oh my God, she's... What the fuck do you mean 'do not resuscitate'...? I know what it is. Whose call was it...? Your Father's...? What the fu... I'm sorry, I'll be right there.'"

"You memorized that? I'm leaving."

"Wait, no, I tape-recorded it. I record everything."

"Everything?"

"But this is important."

"What about *this,* Jared. Are you recording *this,* have you ever recorded *me*?"

"So the man ran, and I didn't follow, there was writing on the wall. He left for the dim sterility of some morgue somewhere. It didn't matter and I didn't care. I was wrong about him, and now sit wondering how many times I've been wrong before. How many lies have I been told through my open window? It's sad that anyone would stand in the way of someone's end – their chosen time of reckoning. Who is he to question fate's will, or disrupt the wake of a fading life? I'm madder still in contemplation of the grim inequalities of existence. It makes little sense that a 'Do not resuscitate' order is only reserved for the feeble, the terminal, the weak."

"So, what? Should there be a sticker on your licence, neatly fit between organ donor and birth date?"

"Sure, that way a guy could clip his wrists and bleed out in the middle of Victory Square, while the masses trip over his drained body. Sex trade tourists would snap pictures while mothers scold their giggling children, claiming, 'It's his choice,' all the time eyeing a little note pinned to his chest, 'NO HEROICS.' Paramedics would be forced to stand by, impatiently tapping their watches and memorizing their shoes like executives waiting on an elevator, every once in awhile bending down and standing up again, lethargically muttering, 'Still a pulse, not quite time yet.'"

"You know I like you a lot, but, I'm hurt. I'm hurting, and you're full of shit. You have to start living your life. You have to stop feeling so sorry for yourself, Jared."

"You mentioned that. I mean, I know I'm an asshole and an alcoholic and I never really say the right things…"

"Yeah?"

"But I like you too, and I'm trying."

"Well, do something about it."

"I used to be a happy person, or at least faked one well enough. We even used to be in love, I'd say, months ago. Since the whole world went pear-shaped I've cherished this loss, held it close, found it comforting. But now I'm losing my mind, the plot, faith and my hair. I wasn't always this crazy."

Chapter 5: MELONIE

"You know, Melonie, this coffee shop is a real dive."

"Relax, Kate. It's my home away from home. C'mon, enjoy the Bohemian life a bit, ok?"

"All right, but I'm not eating anything in this joint. Hey, don't you know they've got 'no smoking' laws now?"

"I know. I just want to see if I can get away with it. What do you care?"

"I don't, why would I?"

"You want one, Kate. They're *Player's*?"

"Nah, I quit."

"Hey, here comes my favourite waitress, her name's Madge. She always takes good care of me."

"What can I get you girls? And, Melonie, you can't smoke here no more."

"Aww, ok, I'll butt out. Meantime, yeah, coffee, Columbian if you've got it, how about you, Kate?"

"Um, yeah, same. Thanks. So, Melonie, you seeing anyone?"

"It's funny you ask; I was thinking about that same thing earlier today. But, to tell the truth, not really, you know, a few guys here and there. There's this one guy, Jared. He's real creepy, all affectionate and whatnot. But he leaves weird little notes using the royal 'we.' Stuff like, 'we are at a junction in time,' and, 'we need to be alone, if just for

tonight.' Like he's got some kind of cult following in his head. You know, artsy-style fucked up."

"And you're still seeing him?"

"Oh, god no. But, he follows me around nearly every day. He thinks I don't notice him, but I do. He's not so clever. Amusing, nonetheless."

"Here's your coffee, girls. We still had some Columbian, so you're in luck."

"Do you think it's wise to let him do that? Pass the sugar and cream willya? What if he's more than 'artsy-style' crazy?"

"Don't get all motherly on me now, Kate. You don't know him. He's trying."

"Have you spoken to dad?"

"Yeah. We meet for coffee chats every week... right here."

"When did you start seeing dad again? I thought you pretty much disowned him?"

"I don't know, a while ago."

"When was a while ago?"

"Let's talk about you, Kate. Dating anyone?"

"Yeah, there's this guy I met at work, one of the body transporters. His name's Luke."

"Luke, huh? Does he do anything other than drive corpses around?"

"Well, I guess he's into radios. He took me to his place once, and showed me his collection. You know, old ones, taking them apart and putting them back together. Or he just listens for hours, turning the knobs from station to station."

"Sounds like a weirdo. But I guess he's right up your alley. I'll call Jared and we'll all hang out."

"After two minutes Luke would fall in love with you. You don't need another crutch. Here's five bucks for the coffees. On me. I know you're always short. This was fun. We should get together again soon, but I really should be..."

"No, wait. Stay, please. I didn't just run into you..."

"What?"

"Well... it's drugs."

"Drugs?"

"Heroin, mostly."

"Aww, geez. So... stop."

"I've tried, Kate. No one can kick it on their own. You don't know what I've been going through."

"What, with your crazy boyfriend?"

"Back off. You don't know him, Kate."

"And you want me to help? Listen, I don't know much about that stuff. I'm sorry you're messed up. Maybe you can ask dad for some help."

"I got some rehab money from dad, but the addiction squandered it. I just need a few deposits."

"Typical, Melonie. Typical. Yeah. Whatever."

Chapter 6: KATE

"So, Kate, do you like this? Would it go with my skirt?"

"I guess, Trish. But just *that* skirt, not your other stuff."

"Maybe you want to do some more shopping? They've got a sale on at Castle Milano.**"**

"Sinclair Centre? So we can wait in line behind the Asian women on break from the Passport line-up, while their husbands and children sweat over citizenship?"

"C'mon, Kate. I don't have anything European."

"Yeah, maybe. I could use a new pair of jeans. Somewhere cheaper though."

"Let's go down to Commercial Drive, ok?"

"Um, maybe somewhere else. I don't want to run into my sister again. You know. Melonie. She hangs out there."

"All right, you pick the place. So, what's up with you and Melonie?"

"Ok, so, I'm walking on Hastings and I hear this voice, y'know, over my shoulder. It goes, 'Kate? Hey, wait up. Kate!' My stomach dropped before it registered. It's subconscious. I should have never walked close to East Van. But, Melonie's still my sister."

"She is, by blood. How'd she look?"

"Ok, I guess. Ball cap. Sneakers. Dirty orange tank top, no bra. I haven't seen her in like a year and a half, since her twenty-second birthday party…"

"…When she threw a drink in your face for being a, quote, 'cunt babysitter.'"

"You got it. I went to the bar to get her a bottle of water and she fucked my date in the limo."

"Typical Melonie."

"So she was standing ten feet away, right in the middle of traffic on Hastings. She looked beautiful, even in that crappy outfit, those torn jeans. I asked her how she was. She goes, 'Fuck off, Kate. Let's get some coffee.' Just like that."

"Yeah?"

"So she led and I followed, staring down at the back of her head. She's two years younger and four inches shorter than me, but since adolescence she's always been in control."

"You've been good to her. Ever since you were kids."

"Growing up, I had this silly fantasy of taking care of my little sister and making sacrifices for our family. But, nothing ever came of it. I wasted my time away locked in my room listening to music and crying over nothing. When I turned twenty I packed up the few things I owned and moved out for good, two weeks after Melonie did. Trish, my first memory is trying to kill her."

"No shit?"

"You know how our mother died in a car accident a few weeks after Melonie was born? Well, dad wasn't much of a supervisor. When I was five and Melonie three, I pulled open our back deck gate, put her at the edge, and kicked her down the dozen or so stairs. The fall was slow motion. She never even cried out or anything. Reaching bottom, she crumpled in silence. The blood pooled around her head. I put my chin in my palm and started thinking of ways to explain it. An overlooked wagon. A wayward shoelace. I

didn't get help or even check on her. I just sat balancing my head in my palms, daring her to get up. Daring her to tell on me."

"But was she okay?"

"After a while she got up and started crying. At first I thought I'd killed her. I was so sure. I hated her for still being alive – for tricking me. Our father heard her voice, ran out to her, scooped her up and drove us to hospital. She got eight stitches, a cast for her arm, and a lifetime of payback. And now I'm walking in her shadow, hoping she leans too far into traffic."

"What on earth did she want?"

"Get this, Trish. Cash for heroin."

"Jesus. Did you give her any money?"

"Yeah. Melonie took out a pen, and started scribbling dollar figures and names of rehab centres all over a napkin. I felt no sympathy, but listened anyway. I almost envied her – the way she mapped out her plan. I gave her my phone number, a hundred dollars, and told her I'll see what else I can do. She just nodded and we left in different directions. Neither of us said goodbye."

"And she looked okay?"

"She's the poster girl for heroin chic. The reason models die."

"Typical."

"She did start to snivel. I tried to place the last time I saw her cry. The whole time as kids, I cried over everything from boyfriends to split ends and she consoled. She breathes ice. I mean, how can you help the self-assured?"

"Are you going to do anything about it, Kate?"

"I just need to let it out, y'know? Her problems always bother me."

"You shouldn't let her get to you."

"But when I left, on my way back to the West End, I passed some half-dressed strippers smoking outside the "Number Five." They were all so close-knit below the awning. I couldn't help but imagine Melonie huddled with them, sharing needles and hustling tips. I ended up soaked and sobbing, on a bus bench on Thurlow. I spent a long time on that bench. Then, I walked all the way back…"

"…To the coffee shop?"

"Yeah. But the waitress that knew her, this woman Madge, was gone. I was hoping she'd know where Melonie has been living. I should have offered to take her home with me, Trish. I should have at least asked Melonie for her number."

"No, Kate. You should have kicked her harder."

Chapter 7: LUKE

Message

From:	"Luke Tate" <lucas_tate@gmail.com>
Subject:	Just an update.
Date:	Sat, 14 Apr 20-- 00:46:39 -0400
To:	freeman@bcmh.bc.ca

Dear Dr. Freeman,

As promised, I am sending you this email updating you on my progress. You asked me to keep you informed about my deeper feelings, recollections of childhood, recent activities, and whatnot.

As you know I have always described my childhood as one like any other, the kind of white suburban upbringing that breeds junkies, and scholars. The other day, I met a woman at a masquerade party. I think we got along reasonably well.

She told me she was a dental assistant. Or she was just dressed up as one. I can't remember. What I do remember is that she had all kinds of piercings in her face. Steel knobs and silver spikes. And she kept talking about some guy she knew who took a dive off an apartment building. I was done up as Ian Curtis. You may not have heard of him, Doctor. He is a musician who committed suicide. I wore a fake noose. I think it was a pretty good costume. Anyway, it fit the theme of the party. She kept calling me "Ian" all night, and I kept telling her my name

was Luke. Maybe she was just making fun of my costume, but it kind of made me angry. She was nothing like Kate. Did I tell you about Kate, Doctor? I met her the first day on my new job. It was on that day that I found a note in the pocket of a body I delivered. I was struck by the words and even though I shouldn't have, I made a photocopy at my headquarters before I made the delivery. When I did make the delivery, I left the note with the body for them to deal with. Maybe I shouldn't have done that, Doctor, but the words meant something to me.

The dental hygiene lady said she had to work early and she was nice enough to share a cab with me. She left me outside Granville Station at one in the morning. As she dropped me off, she said, "Goodnight Ian." I got angry at her, Doctor. I yelled back that my name was Luke, and I swore at her. I called her a "bitch." I guess I shouldn't have done that after she was nice enough to give me a ride to the station. She even gave me her water bottle.

Anyway, I turned, and walked to the underground, past some homeless, and went down the steps to the train platform. The noose rope round my neck became a burden so I tossed it in a nearby, newspaper-recycling bin.

I slouched on a trackside bench. A train pulled in and I stumbled through the doors to collapse across a row of seats. I guess I was acting a little strange because I forgot to take my medications that day. Sorry, Doctor. I know you warned me about that. But, I did remember to take my medication the next day.

I felt pretty tired, and the shuddering of the train started to lull me to sleep.

At one point, not sure when, I'd lost track of time, I felt a cold grasp on my arm but tried to block it out, dismissing it like you taught me, until rough

fingernails scratched at my skin. I breathed in and jumped up, with fists cocked. Doctor, I thought someone was attacking me.

It was just a girl trying to grab my arm. I think I knocked her over when I jumped up. She fell to the floor. She looked pretty drunk or something. I realized she had been trying to grab my arm. And now, her body was limp on the floor.

I touched her hand, and she grabbed my arm again for a moment, then, she tensed, went spastic. The contractions arced her body in one direction, then the next. She dry-heaved, and grunted. Spurts of vomit shot from her. I could smell it in my eyes.

The stench took me back to Riverview, lockdown. It reminded me of those long days and nights, wading through the grunge of mood disorders and geriatrics. The lithium that grounded me.

I watched her lying there next to her own vomit. It seemed to be a long time. The train vibrated while the world revolved. Soon, only her dry-heaves filled the air.

I looked into her eyes, heard her say, ‘Help me.’ I tried to inch forward, tried to rise, but I felt paralyzed.

Her pupils looked dilated, eyes glazed in tears. Something about her eyes seemed familiar. She was wearing a green combat jacket, and faded pink dress. I wiped sweat from my forehead. I suddenly remembered the bottle of water, grabbed it out of my jacket and passed it to her. She took it from my hand, and half-smiled at me.

I thought I could have helped her off the train, maybe use a nearby payphone, or simply press the yellow emergency strip.

But I couldn't. I felt helpless. Paralyzed. She seemed transparent and empty. Suddenly, the brakes squealed and the train pitched to a stop. It all seemed to happen so fast. I knew I had to get off. It was my station. Stadium. I feel bad about it, Doctor, but I panicked, I left her on the train and ran towards the steps. But then I stopped, and looked back.

I saw a young man run, from the car behind the one I rode in, into the doors of my car where this girl had collapsed. I watched as the train pulled away. The young man was dressed in black. He stared at me for a few seconds through the window. Our eyes met. Then, he turned and moved toward the collapsed girl. The train started to pull away. I ran up the stairs. I was still frightened about it all. I hope he was a good man. I hope I didn't do something wrong. I feel bad about it, but like you said in therapy, it wasn't about me. I never hurt that girl or did anything to her. But I felt embarrassed for just leaving her, about not being able to help her. I hope he didn't do anything bad to her. I tell you, Doctor, it was quite the night.

After, I got up the stairs, ran across Pacific Central's lawn, and headed north up Main Street, and turned west down Georgia, then back north to my place at the Rainier Hotel. My friend, Kate, was waiting. I made it home safely, and without making any trouble, Doctor. I know you warned me about remembering my medications. I won't be doing that anymore. I felt badly about just leaving that girl. I just couldn't handle it. I hope she will be ok.

Sincerely,

Luke Tate

Chapter 8: JARED

"You look like a bum."

"Fuck off, Russ. You're not exactly a fat cat yerself."

"So, what've you been up to, Jarhead?"

"Drinking beer, what's it look like, dumbfuck. You might as well pull up a chair. Don't see you here at the Denham House all that often."

"Yah. I was in the neighbourhood and saw your mug in the window, thought I'd come in and see if you needed a wingman. So, watcha been doin'?"

"I'll tell you, I've been pretty bummed out since Brendan's big exit. I know you've heard about all that. But something he said just before he checked out haunts me. We were talking about Melonie, and he said, 'if you fall in love and it ends, you have nothing.' So, I figured, I gotta make sure it doesn't *end*, right?"

"Yeah, so what you doin' about it?

"Ok, listen, but don't spread it around, all right?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Yesterday, I followed Melonie."

"Very nice! So, you're a friggin' stalker now? This calls for a jug! Do go on."

"Ok, but it's for a good cause, it's not what it sounds like. She needs me. See, I waited outside her apartment building on Cardero Street, a half-block from Davie. It was a clear day so I had a little siesta on the patch of grass along the sidewalk."

"Hey, Jared, you know, nappin's great. Cheers to beers!"

"Cheers, Russ, it's good to be able to talk like this. So, anyway, I'm resting on my back up Cardero Street and staring through the oak tree branches. My eyes kept roaming back across the grey sky and through the branches, then at the clouds. Then, I noticed the trees nearby had plaques on them, like they had been dedicated to somebody or something. Guys who died from AIDS and that. It was like they were trying to tell me something."

"That you're fucking nuts?"

"Maybe, a little. But there were these words on those plaques. Words like Equality, Peace, Friendship, Acceptance, and so on, but they fell short of anything really visceral, and I thought words couldn't really change a person. It's not like certain moves on a game board can get you somewhere. Life ain't chess. Those words might as well have read 'Orange' or 'Doughnut' or 'Lampshade.'"

"Can you get to the girl? This ain't a sewing circle."

"Anyway, it was somewhere around three-thirty, which meant Melonie was just rousing from a day's slumber. For a girl without employment or responsibility, her schedule is clockwork. She leaves the safety of her bachelor apartment by four every afternoon, and returns by four each morning. My struggle is trying to find anything to do during her downtime, the early daybreak hours to the low light afternoon, the droning time between."

"You could get a job, bro."

"I'm looking. Anyway I'm lying there feeling almost weightless on the prickling, jagged grass. Through the glass entrance, and over the fountain, I could see Melonie emerge from the building's elevator. She walked slowly toward my gaze, bridging our

gap, but she stopped for a minute at that cheap looking Venus de Milo water fountain stuck in the middle of the front entrance, and tossed a penny in it. Good karma, maybe. Then, I watched her head the half-block up Davie, away from city centre. And, I followed."

"I gather that, bud. You want another jug, or should we switch to bottles?"

"Either's fine. Next round's on me. So, I followed kind of discreetly, dodging behind cars and posts and keeping out of sight. Eventually, at the shores of English Bay, Melonie entered the Denman St. Free House…"

"…Are you kidding me? The face that launched a thousand ships? She came here? Where abouts?"

"The table straight behind you. But, dude, this was all yesterday."

"Dang, missed her. Ok, I'm picturing it. Did you guys talk?"

"Naw. I just hung around here, layed low until she left. When she did split, I followed but kept my distance. It was twilight but I could see her directly across the street through the front windshield of a late '90s yellow Jeep. She was leaning right into the cab talking, but with a certain air of dignity, you know, like Julia Roberts when you see *Pretty Woman* for a second time. I've seen her meet this car before. She never gets in, just chats with the driver, he's of Caribbean descent, probably Puerto Rican. And he's always wearing sunglasses, no matter what the hour or weather."

"So, you're stalking a hooker? What's with you, man?"

"She's not a hooker, exactly. It's complicated. I saw a sort of exchange of something between the pair before the Jeep veered away, and Melonie walked toward

midtown. By then it was getting dark, so my pursuit got much more intimate, alcohol affording a bit'o audacity. I managed to stay about fifteen short feet from her."

"Fifteen feet? You gotta close that gap, maybe even talk to her sometime, hook-up or something."

"That's the dream, Russ."

"Ha. So, why were you following her?"

"Thought maybe I'd save her from anyone or anything – a drunk driver, a mugger in the night, whatever. But opportunity for such things rarely knocks, especially when aggressively sought. So I waited on her cues, ducking out of side during her shoulder checks and regressive glances. It almost seemed as if she knew I was behind her, watching, waiting. She probably found comfort in it."

"Jesus. I need some bourbon."

"So, Melonie passed St. Paul's and Burrard Street, all the way to Robson. At the Art Gallery, she danced with some decrepit vagrant holding a plastic bottle of Silent Sam in his grimy left hand, while spinning her away in departure with his right. As I passed him he stared in Melonie's direction, pinching the front brim of his ball cap. I don't know what came over me but I grabbed the bottle and drank. It'd been laced with some sort of cleanser."

"You're fucking sick."

"Yeah, I threw it up in a trash can. Then the old tramp clutched the back of my jacket, so I threw him face-first into the pavement. Meanwhile, Melonie stepped up the curb kitty-corner, through the door of the Lennox Pub at Granville's bend, disappeared into the horde."

"And you did what?"

"Followed, of course, found standing space between the backs of two tan trench coats. When I couldn't find her I stepped back, bumped right into her, knocked her over."

"Bumped Melonie?"

"Yeah."

"Wow, Jared. Guess you closed the gap."

"Well, I reached down and pulled her upright. Her eyes were like glazed slits, her body like rubber. I asked if she was ok, and she came to. She ignored me and stumbled right out the door zigzagging, fallin' on occasion down Granville toward Coal Harbour, sliding her hands along storefronts all the way down the stairs of Granville's Skytrain station. It was weird. When I got halfway down the Granville escalator some guy yells, "My name is Luke, bitch!"

"To you or Melonie? And, pass the pitcher."

"I don't know, maybe neither of us. But, in moments, this Luke dude passes by me in some kind of Halloween costume. He had a hangman's noose in one hand, and the back of his shirt read, "She's Lost Control" in a red paint – looked like dried blood, or something. He walked right in Melonie's direction."

"So, did you jump him? You're not exactly Batman, pal."

"Nah, Russ. Maybe it was his waxy white skin, the dead expression he wore, or the weird writing on his shirt, but I just followed, stoic."

"Fair enough."

"So, this Luke guy enters one of the train`s cars, and crashes out across a row of seats with his back to us. Melonie shuffles in through the same doors and sits down in the

seat behind him. I step into the car behind theirs, just as the doors close, and move to the front where the train bends like an accordion when roundin' corners. I was able to watch through the window at the front end of my car."

"Ain't you the little voyeur."

"Yeah, well, she sat for a while then staggered up, grabbed onto his arm. I could only see bits of their encounter. The Luke guy looked like he was maybe asleep, but when she grabbed him, he jumped up with his fists. I think maybe he socked her one. I saw her collapse on the floor. I couldn't see too well. It was night and the train kept moving around bends and stuff. So, she's on the floor and he's just sitting there looking at her. I saw her reach up with a sort of desperation toward this guy. But he just stared at her, like maybe he didn't give a shit. By this time, I figured I'd jump out of my car into the next one and see how she was doing. I didn't know if the guy was some kind of psycho, or something, but I figured I had to do *something*."

"And?"

"By the time all this happened, the train pulled into the next station. GM Place, you know, Stadium, I think it was. As soon as we pulled into the station, the guy bolts out of the car and runs for the stairs. I thought of going after him, but I had to help Melonie, so, I ran out of my car into the next one where she was collapsed on the floor. As the train pulled away, I took a couple of seconds to get a good look at the guy. He was just staring at me at the foot of the stairs. Then, I ran up to Melonie, and lifted her onto a seat. The train was pulling out of the station, so I hit the yellow emergency strip. The train stopped. There was nothing I could do for her. So I just called an ambulance, on my cell. I hung around until they hauled her off. I still remember that guy's face. The ambulance came

very quickly, and so did the cops. They hauled me downtown and made me file a report. I was there for hours."

"Holy shit, bud. Your life's a mess."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

Chapter 9: KATE

"So, Kate, do you think the bridge is high enough to kill yourself? Because either me or these hipsters have to go."

"The Granville Bridge? Sorry, girl, not by a sight. And with your luck you'd hit the island. But you should see Melonie. She's a full-blown whack-job."

"You've run into her again?"

"Yeah Trish – get this, Melonie has me listed as her 'next of kin.' I suppose I can play the part. It astonishes me that she has prepared anything of the sort."

"Did she call?"

"Oh no, she couldn't call. Last night, I got a nurse's message on my answering machine from St. Paul's Hospital."

"Aha, how many times you been summoned to St. Paul's for Melonie's cause now?"

"Well, before we stopped speaking to each other, she was a patient in the psych ward for suicidal tendencies. They shoved her in this long narrow room with a bunch of other teenage failures. But, I don't get too teary-eyed over the whole affair; she took the classic 'call for help' to new levels**.** She waited until about five minutes before our father was to return from a business trip to our home in South Van, and climbed into the bathtub and slashed her wrists. It was our mother's birthday. I was in Mexico at the time, spring break. She's never even met our mother."

"So, what happened this time?"

"She had a drug overdose. A big one."

"Geez, how come she's like that?"

"What can I say? Life sucks. Trouble is she takes it personally. And dad's never been the same since she tried to kill herself. She's got him wrapped around her baby finger."

"So what was on the answering machine last night?"

"I got this message from this nurse saying that my sister's at St. Paul's. I called back to see if she was ok. I get some night nurse; she tells me Melonie has been admitted, but the doctor hasn't finished the assessment yet. So, I high tail it over to the hospital to see what's up. They say I can't see her yet, and shove me into the waiting room with these twitchy-looking older men and this woman with a couple of kids."

"I hate hospitals. You have to wait long, Kate?"

"You have no idea, Trish. But turns out Melonie has this big problem. Heroin. The doctors were able to stabilize her, but she's still weak. They let me in to see her, and they told me the doctor in the ICU would fill me in on the details."

"So, what did the doc say?"

"Before I could even talk to him, this nurse came up and told me Melonie has been in a comatose state since arrival. She was non-responsive, and they can't diagnose all the damage until she wakes up. If she wakes up."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, the whole hospital scene creeps me out. It's funny. I can work with dead people all day, but I can't stand being near the sick or dying. So, when I finally got into Melonie's room I could see she's in pretty rough shape. Her mouth had a hose in it. And

there were tubes running in and out and an IV in her wrist. I grabbed her hand but it felt so cold. I swept hair back and wiped the slobber over the hole in the corner of her lip where they'd taken her stud out. The blue heart tattoo on her shoulder, her idea of a memorial for our mother, peaked out of her gown. I tell ya, Trish, I seriously thought about pulling the plug. You know? Wiping the slate clean."

"Are you nuts? I know she's crazy, but your own sister!"

"Yeah. It was just an idea. You'd be surprised what kinds of thoughts come into your head in situations like that. But, I felt kind of ashamed for the thought. I sat down in a chair, stared at her, and before I knew it, I was bawling my eyes out. That's when she coded."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean her heart must've stopped pumping or something. The whole place went crazy – doctors and nurses swarming in. A defibrillator got rolled over from the corner. Some nurse tried to push me out of the room, but I kept screaming, 'that's my sister!' I watched her body contort when they applied each shock."

"Is she going to be ok?"

"I dunno. Yeah. Maybe. They started her up again. But she's a mess, almost didn't make it this time. One of these days, she's gonna cross that line. And, I think the fucking nurse broke my nose when she tried to shove me out of the room. I ended up crashing into the door. Crap. And now I have to call my dad, who's oblivious to what just happened to Melonie. He's going to be a piece of work when he gets wind of this."

Chapter 10: JARED

"So, Jared, d'you got anything else to tell me? Maybe why you sat back, apparently watched some alleged psycho try to kill your girlfriend? How 'bout we go back in on that?"

The cop leans in his chair with his arms crossed. He sits beside me at a table in a small dim room inside the Vancouver Police Department on Cordova Street, and hasn't stopped smoking, hands-free, out of the side of his mouth since he entered the room.

"Could you put your cigarette out?"

"Once you start talking. Now, why were you stalking this girl if she's your girlfriend? This, uh, Melonie. Melonie Collins."

"I was trying to help her, sir. And when she got on the train, I couldn't get to her. I was stuck in the train car behind hers. I couldn't get through that barrier, like I told the other officer already."

"You ever see this guy? This is from the security camera."

"Yeah! That's the guy from the train."

"That so? How about this Luke guy, the one with the make-up."

"What? You know his name? What does he want with Melonie?"

"I was told you knew the guy's name."

"Yeah, I heard him shout out that his name was 'Luke.' I don't know who he was talking to at the time. Who is he, anyway?"

"I ask the questions here. Have you ever met this 'Luke' individual?"

"No, I don't think so."

"We're not convinced he was out to harm this individual. Security video doesn't back up your story."

"There's a tape?"

"How long have you known this Melonie individual?"

"A few months, I guess. We haven't seen each other in a while. I've been trying to get her back. You know – making sure she's ok, until we're back together."

"No, I don't know. To the best of your knowledge, has she ever been involved with substance abuse?"

"What?"

"Heroin, coke, crack, meth…"

"No, I mean, no I don't think so. Melonie is not like that."

"You absolutely sure of that?"

"Well, I know she likes to drink a bit sometimes. Maybe she does other stuff, I guess. I could go ask her though."

"I think you should go home for now – we'll call you."

"But what about Melonie…"

"She's fine. You just stay away from that hospital. You're officially a 'person of interest,' do I make myself clear?"

Chapter 11: KATE

I breathe in a puff of concealing powder, forcing a misty sneeze onto the latest cadaver's elbow crook. This one's name is Miss McKay. Dots of spit melt tiny craters in the caked cosmetics, revealing track marks.

"Bless you," Sheila says, handing me a Kleenex. "Are you ill, Katie?"

"Pretty likely. I've been at hospital of late."

"Oh? Don't they deliver?"

"Not bodies, Sheila. Melonie's ill."

"Your sis? Hospitals give me the creeps."

"They're germ factories, Sheila, too much living tissue."

"Yeah?"

"Trust me, the third floor holding area at St. Paul's is organic at eight in the morning. Sick people stumble onto rows of red-plastic chairs set out in line-ups, or roll by in stretchers towing med-sacs on IV-poles, to get neatly tucked in the corners."

"Ha, all's quiet here. Your young lady over there won't make a fuss."

"One man at the hospital this morning, in a paper gown and throwaway slippers, waiting two rows ahead, was the most dismal person I've ever seen. Eyes rolled right back in his head, thick silver hair dangling in front of his empty look, he watched the elevator all morning lifting his head each time the bell rang for a new floor."

"That's sad." Sheila picks her teeth with a curved, narrow-bladed bistoury.

"But I got this urge, y'know, to walk over and trim that old man's ear hair or shave the stray whiskers on his neck. My make-up case was sitting on my lap. From a distance, I thought of subtle hues for his upper lip and his bent nose. I wanted to wax over age spots, arrange his arthritic fingers into neat rows with satisfying snaps. He'd make a perfect cadaver."

"That's messed up, Kate."

"Sorry, Sheila. I've been dealing with a lot."

"Sister stuff?"

"Oh yeah. So, Melonie didn't die. The doctor said she was 'stable.' What a ridiculous word to describe her; I laughed out loud when he said it. The nurse led me to the hospital's psych ward and drug rehabilitation wing – Mel's old stomping grounds. This regression, typical, has relapse phases you can set your watch to. My dad was back home again, in shambles, once again passing the buck on her fate. At least the nurse gave me Melonie's cell phone so I left a message with her boyfriend Jared to meet me at the hospital, if and when he decides to get around to it."

"He sounds like an ass."

"Melonie's attached. I can only hope he'll pick her up when it's checkout time. Maybe, she'll stay missing. The ward, though, was much busier than I remember, upgraded yet overrun, probably due to the latest downsizing in the wards at Riverview."

"The papers says most of 'em loonies just run wild now, drink hand sanitizer and degreaser down the East Side."

"At least in the ward they serve a purpose, if only to give the teenage pill-poppers and wrist clippers a little perspective"

"I'll say."

"So, I walked up to room 312 to find Melonie moved from the ICU to a two-bed sardine can of a room, split in half by a hanging cloth curtain. Her roommate was a bit of a mess. She spent most of the time pulling hair out her scalp."

"Jesus."

"Yeah, she wasn't unlike Miss McKay here. But Mel's hair on the other hand, now dyed burgundy, was neatly brushed, and she no longer needed the tubes in her mouth. I've been practically living in the hospital for two days – three maybe? Who knows but it's terrible, just fucking terrible."

"At least you got a break from the dungeon."

"It's a nice break from working here with Baumgartner and the stiffs – painting these blue-and-grey-faces all day. My sister's overdose was a great excuse to get off work. I managed three days off with pay. Maybe Mel has a few *more* attempts left in her. Maybe next time she could do it during better weather. I could use some time at the beach."

"How is she feeling? She gonna be ok?"

"I haven't caught her lucid, yet. But I'm heading by after work. Thanks for asking."

Chapter 12: MELONIE

"Kate?"

"I'm here, Melonie. Everything is going to be all right. I'll get the nurse."

"Don't bother. Look at this dump. This still St. Paul's?"

"Yeah, two doors down from your old room."

"What happened to your face?"

"Is it obvious?"

"Glaringly."

"My nose isn't broken, thankfully, and I would rightfully disown you if it were. But you were having a heart attack after all, and I got shoved into a door during the process."

"Oh crap."

"Great. So, what really happened to you on the train? The police said Jared was the one who found you."

"Jared did? I don't remember that at all."

"Yes, apparently some other guy fed you something out of a plastic bottle. Some kind of liquid."

Yeah, I vaguely remember some guy who sort of tried to help me before I passed out. He gave me a bottle of water. Some kind of good Samaritan or something. I think I just got a bad batch."

"Of water?"

"No dummy, smack! You know. *Heroin*. It maybe had some crap in in it. I didn't get here from drinking bottled water."

"So, is there someone I could call? Maybe Jared? I think you might need a friend."

"Listen, Kate. Tell buddy boy not to bother."

"I'm here for you Melonie, but you need all the support you can get right now. How about you bring your attitude up a notch."

"I'll meet you in the middle."

"Really?"

"Yeah, here's the deal, you fuck off and leave me alone, ok? Besides, that asshole Jared already came by this morning."

"What?"

"Yeah, kept ranting on about how he was heading out to *avenge* me, and to find out more about what happened. He said he had a run-in with the cops at the train station after the ambulance picked me up, and later they questioned him at the station. He's nuts."

"Oh, I see. With everything else you have going on, maybe it *would* be better to distance yourself. Did you get a look at the good Samaritan guy with the water bottle?"

"Yeah, but only for a bit. I was pretty messed up. He had this weird face makeup and some kind of writing all over his shirt."

"Writing?"

"I caught the back of his shirt as he took off at the train station – I wouldn't have remembered it, but it made me laugh even though I felt like shit. The back of his shirt

said, '*she's lost control.*' Cracked me up. I think I passed out around then. That's good for a laugh, eh? – Hey, you must really be worried about me, you look kinda pale."

"I, I guess I'm just a bit tired. I better take care of a few things. Listen, I'll come back tomorrow."

"Whatever."

Chapter 13: JARED

When the neighbours, two guys named Pete and Gary, moved in a few months ago, I could tell they were party types. Fraternity Alums from UBC, they carry themselves with this feigned sexual entitlement – real alpha male shit. Last night in the hallway outside my apartment door, just when I was about to slip key into lock, they dragged me, supermarket groceries still in hand, into one of their all night get-togethers.

The sweaty room was crammed with late-twenties men and high school girls, gyrating to uninspired electronic beats from broken computer speakers. I dug into one of my Safeway bags and pulled out a milk carton, taking in the mating rituals between long pulls while I hung in the kitchen. The counter was littered with *Sports Illustrated* magazines, pens, and pads of paper doodled in stick-drawings and weightless ideas. The two housemates wore these over-washed Greek-letter t-shirts, assuredly from their long lost boys club. The shirts were all bleach-streaks, with painted-on colour-bleeds slung tight over growing bellies.

I watched Pete, a dirty blonde gym bum with mismatched armband tattoos – one an invented tribal design in fading black and the other green Celtic braids, hover over several naive girls like a fleshy awning. His vaulted perspective forced the girls to look up at him awkwardly, and yet he still held their doleful eyes – just tyrannizing them.

These people shouldn't matter.

I stayed for a time, took it all in as long as I could, trying to understand. I watched the partiers hold each other up with lazy smiles gaping – mouths as wide as African cats'.

But the free-love ambiance made me nauseous and flighty. Their fake tans and lamp shade helmets, and the pot smoke and bloody white-chalk noses – so vile – or, maybe, they just seem that way since Melonie.

Pete asked about her, but I couldn't bring up the day on the train. I was seated, isolated, behind the kitchen's island when he spoke. "Where's that girl you've been seeing?"

"I didn't know you were having a party."

"Tell me about her again; she's hot, right?"

"Yeah, Pete. But she's in the hospital."

"Seriously? How come?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out, Pete."

"What is that? Milk?"

"Today I'm cutting the scotch, reasonably. And by tomorrow, I'll have barely any at all."

"Nothing like a good cleanse, pal."

"The thing is, I think that *they* think that I did it."

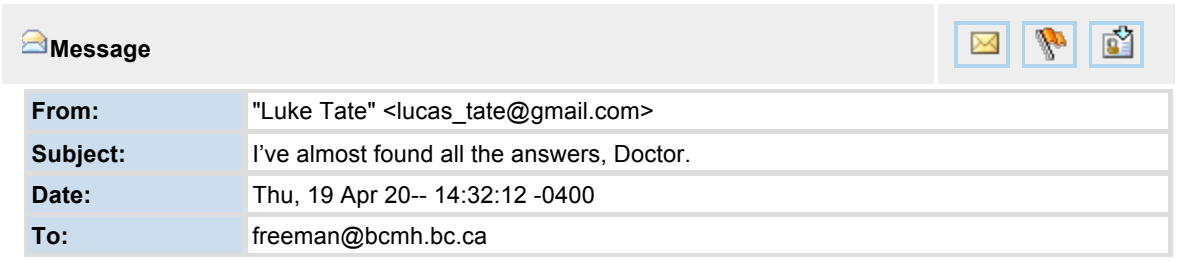
"Who thinks what?"

"The cops. I'm supposed to stay away from the hospital. But what if he comes back to finish the job?"

"You have to protect your girl, bro. Whatever it takes."

"You know what, bud, you're right. I have to save her from whatever. Because if you fall in love and it ends, you have nothing."

Chapter 14: LUKE



Message

From:	"Luke Tate" <lucas_tate@gmail.com>
Subject:	I've almost found all the answers, Doctor.
Date:	Thu, 19 Apr 20-- 14:32:12 -0400
To:	freeman@bcmh.bc.ca

Dear Dr. Freeman,

You're a good doctor, and you told me to write to you about my anxieties and needs. And you're right, doctor, I need to focus. I'm getting headaches, trying to focus. And, I keep thinking that I need a radio. I need a radio. This is all I can think about and all I have thought about for the last thirty-five sleepless hours. This radio needs to be old. It needs a knob and needle for tuning, just tuning. It can't have alarms, lights, or discs, compact or otherwise. Do you understand what I mean, doctor? It must never seek.

A steady hand can find the stations between the stations. I used to wonder how radios knew exactly what to play when you turned them on. But then I'd listen when they're off, and the frequency still buzzes, never ceasing. It's everywhere. Tough to comprehend how something can be everywhere. There's no such thing as empty space, nowhere to run in auroral propagation. The wavelengths flow through glass and drywall, bone and brain matter. The waves

sterilize and control, in a mix of polar mesospheric summer echoes. These are why my mind now wanders.

I keep remembering the train, the train ride that night. Heading west out of Granville on the Expo line. The policeman and his questions I couldn't answer. I sit thinking and remembering the ward they kept me in during my youth trying to figure out why they would want me back, and what more they can take from me or force me to take. Burn this letter after reading it, ok, doctor? I don't want anybody else to find out. I don't want anybody but you to read it. You're the only one who understands me. I'm trying, doctor. I'm trying to listen to other people, more than the constant hum in a flat power spectral density, the white noise – and the rainbow spectrum of signals – pink, blue, violet, grey, red orange, green black, brownian. I try to remember to interact, use words and details to convey messages. Silence is a symptom.

I hear people hustling about, but I don't need them. I listen to my hands and eye-search each cracked riverbed line on my palms.

Today I went searching further. At the corner of Terminal, Main Street station, I arrived and got out ahead of the strollers and laptops. The damp air made my tired eyes sag. The brick floors, bright adverts, lighting of the station's canopy seemed ultra-real. At the bottom of the steps, noontime was overcast, another unchanging afternoon of monotonous grey. You know the kind of day, doctor. Satellite weather. A block or so past the radio station, a downpour fell and I felt cleansed in the jamming interference – I knew the Co-op station hadn't gone spread spectrum. But I still felt a buzz – imperceptible at first – extremely low frequency. Then, I walked east down Terminal Avenue past the Greyhound

buses and abandoned buildings. I remember walking past a chocolate factory. I saw some stoplight squeegee kids, arrived at the flea market, the Big Red Barn.

At the front entrance, I saw a strange lady – maybe I've seen her in a dream before – I had this sense of deja-vu. She wore a white fake fur-coat and she spoke in a Hungarian accent, stunk of goulash. She was like some kind of gypsy-lady and she wanted seventy-five cents to grant me entrance to the booths of the bazaar. I paid admission and went inside.

I was there to find my radio.

The vendor tables were set in grids, doctor. I saw perfume atomizers, 7-up pop bottles, collectable spoons, rust-tin cigarette boxes from the bygone brands "Repeater" and "British Consoles," old iron keys without locks, used stamps, yellowed postcards, antiquated wood planers, crude archaic hammers, stacks of old *Vogue* magazines, comic books with Batman still in light blue fighting the Soviet Union, glass displays with broken watches, pocketknives on plush felt pads, neglected silver-plated platters, Boy Scout badges from the 60s, American Flyer train sets, out-of-state license plates, promotional posters from Expo '86.

I tried, doctor. I tried to concentrate and think only of my radio, the knob and dial and synthetic resin casing. I was searching for my Bakelite radio. When I was a kid I would listen to it for hours. My Father gave it to me, taught me about plastics and resonance.

A Daffy-Duck penny saver disrupted my search. I thumbed through washed-thin handkerchiefs with varied initials, rang loud brass bells, pushed my hands in waves in a large tin of Lira, Deutsche Marks, Francs.

I walked up to different kiosks and started rifling through everything. You know, doctor, I started getting real confused. Some of the carnies wearing feathered hats and ugly Christmas sweaters pulled their objects from my hands, forming physical barriers between their worthless treasures and me.

But I need my radio, I told them.

The radio man told me, “A radio, huh? That all?” Just like that, like it was nothing. He bent down, picked up this old Dairyland milk crate with plugs and wires dangling through the holes in the plastic.

There was a National Panasonic shortwave with a dual conversion circuit featuring tone control, an earphone jack and DC input on left side, a rear panel with the classic DX Sensitivity switch and a 3 x AA battery compartment, an old wooden Stromberg Carlson recreation with alternating current supply, 117 volt, super-heterodyne principle and a standard VHF tuner for fringe areas, a torn-up brown oilcloth Zenith transoceanic 8G005 with eight all-glass mini rectifier tubes and a hot chassis, a little Masteradio D120 midget in an ivory urea-formaldehyde cabinet with a 400 ohm 10 watt dropper, and a thin mains lead fitted to replace the original line cord. I tried them all, doctor, one by one, needling through the stations. The old tubes in these radios hold strong. Whenever I thought I’d found the space between the stations, a guitar’s note or a simple syllable would ring through, nearly clear as day. I think the man at the kiosk sensed my impatience; he kept reaching over and trying to guide the needle to a perfect signal.

I told him his radios worked too well, and that I needed an older model. Something that would connect me to the static. The white noise in-between. And

then he lifted it – a 40s FADA model “bullet” cased in dull orange Bakelite – he lifted it from the box. I couldn’t believe the beauty of it, doctor.

He plugged it in and the bullet hissed a pure white sound – thermal noise – the interference of atmospheric electric discharge and the impulses of light switches, motors, ignition circuits, computers, and the cosmic noise of the Milky Way Galaxy – leftovers from the Big Bang – photons of energy still cooling. And then I heard it, doctor. I know you’ve explained this as “electronic voice phenomenon,” the fuel of pareidoliacs and Ouija board enthusiasts, but I heard a single voice through the static of my radio and knew what to do, doctor. I now know.

The walk back to my apartment was long and quiet but I hummed the whole way as loud as I could. After all, doctor, silence is a symptom. Kate has left me a note, asking me to meet her at some rehab centre. She says she’s going to clarify something. And I’ll go. Medications and crystal oscillators can no longer control me. I’ll clarify all of this to her using my new radio. I can now track what is planned for me – decipher the frequencies and find out what awaits. I need to find the stations between the stations.

I have to go now, doctor. I need to listen to my radio. Thanks for your help. You’ve been so patient with me.

Sincerely,

Luke Tate

Chapter 15: JARED

Clouds of smoke. Front entrance of the rehab centre. Pale deviants chew nails, pull on cigarettes. Sanctioned/authorized addiction. Inside, staff and ailing mull about. The homeless and the affluent. Designer luggage and the squeak of wheelchairs. Walls emblazoned with bold-printed procedures, donation plaques, antiseptics.

I chart my path around to room 210, Melonie's new digs. A woman walks out of Melonie's room wearing green nurse's scrubs, jotting on a clipboard.

A blonde woman follows her, approaches me. "Jared?"

"Yeah, who're you?"

"Hi. I'm Kate. Melonie's sister."

"Really? I didn't know she had one."

"You wouldn't."

"If you'll just…"

"Jared, one sec, her counsellor is with her now. And I need to ask you a coupla things."

"About?"

"The guy on the train. You know, when Melonie had her incident."

"Yeah, that Luke guy. The cops are all over town looking for him. He's a person of interest."

"Really? This is all a misunderstanding, Jared. I'm sure of it. Ask Melonie. She even says Luke's innocent. That he tried to help her. He's a good person, Jared, just a

little strange. He's on his way to visit so he can clear this all up. Lookit, he just sent me a text."

Have somethin u must hear. Will explain erything. Rehab lobby 6pm.

"Listen, Kate. I saw him give her *something* in a bottle."

"You listen, Jared. I have a key to his apartment and looked through everything. He doesn't even drink. All I found were some pills, some kind of a prescription for him from a doctor. Something called *Seroquel*."

The nurse turns, "They're a Quetiapine."

"Huh?"

"Antipsychotics. They're supposed to be used for schizophrenics and bi-polar patients. But on the street they're called Suzie-Qs. Q-balls when they're mixed with cocaine."

"They're a street drug?"

"Been known to be used as one. Also as a date rape drug."

"I don't think it was that way here. Jared, let's go ask Melonie exactly what happened. Where are you going?"

"To meet your friend."

"Ok, bring him up here and we'll figure out what happened. Be nice."

"Yeah. Right."

Chapter 16: LUKE

Message

From:	"Dr. Freeman" < freeman@bcmh.bc.ca >
Subject:	Please respond right away, Luke.
Date:	Thu, 19 Apr 20-- 17:52:07 -0400
To:	lucas_tate@gmail.com

Luke,

The email you sent raises some important concerns. We need to schedule an appointment ahead of our regular meeting, and, as soon as possible. Are you available to come to my office tomorrow morning?

Please respond as soon as you read this, Luke. I will check my email regularly.

Dr. Freeman

Chapter 17: JARED

The elevator dings as I arrive on the first floor. The addicts shuffle and wheel themselves to gather beside the reception desk at the far side of the lobby. I see a man on his knees, his forehead pressed against a plate glass window. He's tuning the dial of a small orange radio, and he seems to be searching between two stations. His free arm, stretching high above his head, jerks back and forth as if he's searching for a signal. He looks just like the police photo.

"Stop. Stay right-exactly-there. No, no, no! Are you wearing a digital watch?"

"You're Luke, right? My name is Jared and…"

"Can you take the battery out of your watch?"

"I'm, uh, not wearing a watch. Listen! What exactly happened with you and Melonie on the train? Did you give her drugs? Something called Seroquel?"

"My pills? No. Wait, no, take one-step to the right. Stop."

"I need to know everything about you and Melonie."

"Who's Melonie? You seen Kate?"

"Who cares about Kate! Melonie was the girl who was on the train with *you*…"

"The train. I don't like what happened on the train. Listen to this. The radio explains it all. Listen now!"

"Are you looking for a news station? Is it something to do with Melonie?"

"No! No! No! It's everything. Listen."

"You're not on the station!"

"Wait! Is it solar minima, today?"

"Solar what?"

"Solar minima. Sunspots, solar flares. Gave water to the train girl. I felt bad after."

"Why did you feel bad? What happened?"

"Not at the station. It was before, the train still running. Clear polar skies. Couldn't help her, she looked so pale, I gave her the bottle."

"What was in the bottle? Did you drug her?"

"Radiation storms and power outages – can't get the right tuning. My brain. Doctor said, take Seroquel. It's all between stations. The radio. You can *hear* it!"

"What happened between stations? Seroquel? Did you give her Seroquel? Why would you do that?"

"No. No. No Seroquel. Just me. Can't get the station, don't know. Maybe satellite failure, but the radio knows, the radio will tell you what, wait, listen communication..."

"I want to know about the train station, not the radio station!"

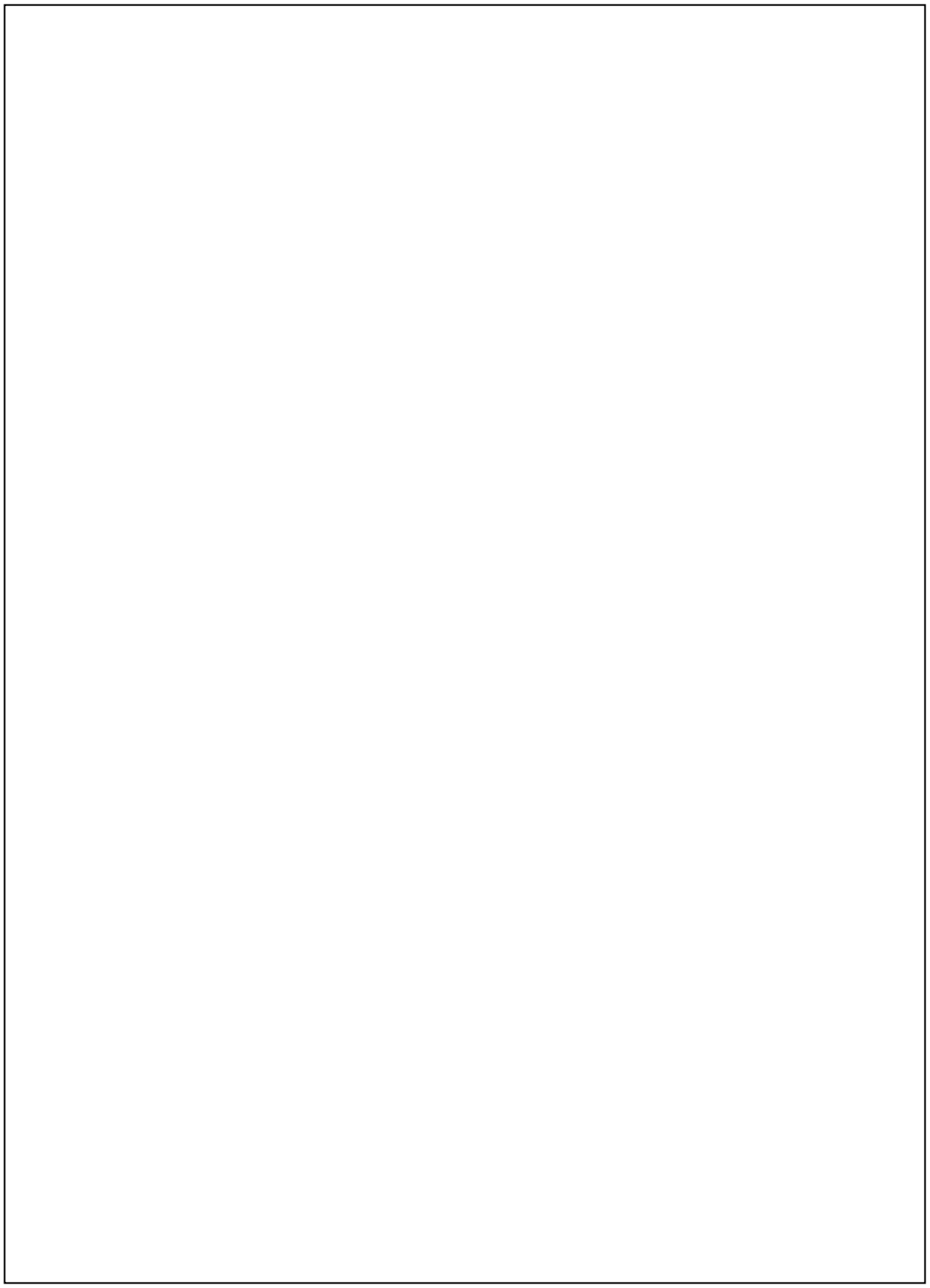
"No, disruption, I thought of the emergency strip, but couldn't move. Felt static. Frozen. Don't know why. That's *it!* Static. Listen! It's on the radio, but it's not working right now. Maybe a GPS receiver malfunction. Maybe an optical astronomical interferometer!"

"Stop messing with that radio. I need some answers! I *saw* you at the station. I know it was you. You just stood there looking back at me, at Melonie, lying helpless."

"Static, that's it. Had to move the radio. I see! Tried to help. Listen. I hear it!"

I reach for the radio. Luke's head leans into the glass. Have to get him away from that radio. Need answers. Screams. *I hear it I hear it*. His grip, manic. I grab the hair on the back of his head. Between knuckles. Pull back. Luke resists. Nearby table, chairs go flying. I feel someone, an orderly, grab me from behind. I elbow his head. *Listen to the sound of the radio. It's talking to you.* Nurse screams. *The police are coming*. Lose balance, wheel forward, driving Luke's head into the pane. Glass shattering. Security alarm. In the midst of it, rising above the noise, Kate's voice. *What are you doing?* White noise. Loud. On the radio. Sheet of glass slips. Luke's head. Sudden, blood. Radio. Static. Hum.

Chapter 18: LUKE



Chapter 19: KATE

"You're awful quiet today, Kate. Now I see what you're always sayin' bout the hum of these lights."

"Huh? What's that, Sheila?"

"The hum, Kate. The lights."

"Yeah, I hear it too."

"You doin' awright, Kate?"

"Yeah, just thinking. I don't know how much longer I can handle doing this. It's dismal, Sheila."

"The smell? You got a gum?"

"Thanks, girl. I'm good. I mean the job, really. All of it. You know, the smell, the costumes and make-ups, the bodies. These people. I need to move on. I think I can do better."

"You gonna put that in your diary? Did I tellya I started one? Not nice as yours, course, and the spellin's no good."

"Naw, Sheila. Gave it up."

"Too bad. Maybe try givin'er another shot or something. Hey, there's the buzzer. You gotta customer."

"I hear it too, Sheila."

The top bolt sticks, and I have to heave on it three times. The latch finally snaps back, pulling the skin off of my knuckle. A new deliveryman stands breathing hard,

drumming his fingers on the black body bag atop the stretcher. He wears the same green jacket all the delivery guys wear. I've never seen him before.

"Uh, ma'am. Delivery. Sign here, please."

"Where's your nametag?"

"Haven't got one yet, ma'am, just started. Name's Kevin."

"Your name is Kevin?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please don't call me 'ma'am.' My name is Kate."

"Sure thing, Kate."

"And the deceased?"

"Excuse me?"

"The name of the deceased."

"Uh, it's on the form."

"Could you please just tell me?"

"Uh, here. Lucas. Lucas Tate."

"Yes. I'll sign."

"I can push it down to the…"

"Thank you, Kevin. That'll be all."

I pull the stretcher down the ramp and under the lights. Sheila pours bleach in her bucket, pulls the mop out and pushes it back and forth twice, before replacing it and walking over to help me slide Luke onto the table.

"So whatcha got?"

"Here, hold the top firm. I'll unzip, and we'll slide him out."

"Jesus, Kate. He's all torn up."

"See, glass cut him here, caught the carotid artery. That's what got him. The rest is superficial."

"Closed casket?"

"Yes. But I'm going to have one hell of a time loosening his jaw, sewing these torn lips together. See, look, first I'll cleanse him with a germicidal solution, disinfect. Then flex and massage the muscles and joints – arms, legs, head to toes – relieve the rigor. Sew up some of these cuts, shave him, set the features. I'll leave the eye caps for now, 'cause they'll take the longest. They keep the lids shut, give the proper expression."

"You'll be here all night."

"It's ok, Sheila. He's a… He was a friend."

"Oh my god. That's terrible. I'm really sorry."

"I was there, y'know. I saw what happened. Nothing I could've done."

"What happened?"

"Altercation. They got the guy. He's in jail and all, but who knows. I just think I should've… I mean, I can't really say… Oh god. But, I just…"

"It's ok, Kate. You don't have to talk about it. Anything else I can do for ya?"

"Uh, yeah, Sheila. Check the pockets, I guess. Maybe hang around for a bit?"

"Yeah, no worries."

"Thanks."

"Uh, Kate?"

"Yeah?"

“There’s somethin’ in his shirt pocket, piece of paper. Looks like a photocopy.”

“Yeah? Give it here.”

Epilogue: BRENDAN

Will there be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that we will meet? Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far to go. Time yet for a hundred indecisions, a hundred visions and revisions. What I know of you is only the memory of moments, and we have changed, waves of memory, down passages we didn't take, to doors we never opened. I wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing. I wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing. In a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Knowledge brings us closer to ignorance, ignorance brings us closer to death, but death brings us no closer to knowledge. To be awake, living on several planes at once, speaking with several voices. Redeem the time. Moor yourself to trust. Avoid your station. Find something in-between. Another frequency. We arrive where we started and recognize the place as if for the first time.

There is one who remembers the way to your door, a signal out of the dead land, memory and desire. Dull roots grope, about the dry stone. No sound of water. I've found fear in a handful of ash. Time present and time past, can they be found in time future? And is time future contained in time past, if all time is eternally present? I connect nothing with nothing.

Will you see more than I can, more than I can tell you, more than there are words for? Decisions are made by powers beyond you which now and then emerge from the static. I have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, the dried voices, the broken glass, wind over dry grass. I can't tell you what clarity is, until you've lost it.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Les gens sans bruit sont dangereux

(People who make no noise are dangerous)

— JEAN DE LA FONTAINE, "Book VIII, fable 23"

I walk on concrete

I walk on sand

But I can't find

A safe place to stand

I'm scared baby

I wanna' run

This world's crazy

Gimme' the gun

— PJ HARVEY, "Big Exit"

Preamble on the Body of Work: Why and How I Came To Writing *Big Exit*

Big Exit, in its initial incarnation, was a one-act play named for the opening song on PJ Harvey's album, *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea* (2000). I started the project, with nothing but a blank word-processing page and a predetermined title. The play in its entirety has since been lost to a prior, castoff laptop, though the first scene survives in dusty bookshelves and storage closets by way of a mid-2000s edition of *Pearls Anthology,* an annual compendium assembled by Dale Zieroth, at Douglas College's Creative Writing Department, in British Columbia. In any case, the play features a young man, Jared, who discusses killing himself with his roommate on his twenty-fifth birthday, and as a result of the conversation both agree to end their lives. In contemplating this novella, I wanted to discover what would happen if Jared didn't end up killing himself. The accompanying body of work is a culmination of where Jared's character led me. In *Big Exit*, I created several other characters to carry forward the narration. I ended up with the following:

1) Jared, a young man, initially hopeless and experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder from the suicide of his friend Brendan, tries to find new purpose in love. He attempts a misguided quest to "rescue" Melonie, the only person he has ever cared about.

2) Kate, a level-headed young woman who acquired a degree in cosmetology, ends up working at a funeral home as a cosmetician for the dead. Kate is distantly involved in a failing relationship with Luke, and she bears some resentment towards her younger sister, Melonie.

3) Luke, a young man who is a schizophrenic undergoing ongoing medical treatment, is attempting to build a life for himself after release from a mental institution. He experiences a relapse of strong schizophrenic symptoms during the story.
4) The above three narrator-protagonists all have a stake in a fourth character: Melonie. Melonie, a heroin addict, has discontinued a relationship with Jared, but Jared does not quite accept that the relationship has ended, and he begins to stalk her out of a sense of loyalty with the aim of "protecting" her. These characters were partly based on individuals I had encountered during my various jobs in downtown Vancouver.

Concurrent to bartending in and around downtown Vancouver in a series of sports bars, Irish pubs, and a seedy strip club, I somehow managed to gain admission into a third-year, Abnormal Psychology course. Alongside census data and case studies, a portion of the curriculum was devoted to volunteer hours at Riverview Hospital, a beautiful and sprawling mental health facility in Coquitlam, British Columbia, which is the most filmed-at site in all of Canada, excluding movie studios. The inspiration for my paranoid schizophrenic, Luke Tate, can be sourced in Sunday afternoons spent chatting with patients in a locked ward at this institution.

According to leading clinical psychologists, "It is widely known that people with schizophrenia have difficulty telling a coherent story of their lives and that this is linked to impoverished function" (Lysaker et al 153). Although schizophrenics have the ability to understand how other people are connected to each other, their narratives often omit an agent-protagonist. However, in my experience, many patients were able to relate much of their lives in conversation and, of course, symptoms of mental illness are greatly divergent on a case-by-case basis. This creative project, therefore, includes an experiment

in how I envision a paranoid schizophrenic patient, recently off his medication, interacting with the world. I've depicted a schizophrenic character able to retell some of his experiences through email correspondences with his doctor. Although Luke has regularly scheduled meetings with his medical practitioner, when his email messages become garbled and fragmented, the doctor calls him in for an unscheduled meeting. However, this attempt to avert disaster fails, and Luke becomes a scapegoat in this ironic plot. In undertaking this project, I was aware that Luke's cognitive affliction would "other" him from the more neurotypical characters. I have ingrained these disjointed personality traits in the disjunctive narrative structure of the work as a whole.

Setting:

Big Exit is, in short, a work of urban fiction, which redefines what it means to come of age in a time of globalization in one of the youngest cities in the world. Still adapting to find its own identity, Vancouver complements the narrative through the unique lifestyle, and socio-economic groups that make up the city. Vancouver is consistently described as among the "most livable cities" in the world by business magazine assessments, while at the same time it is among the most unaffordable. In an ironic sense, much like the narrative, it is a city of contradictions. In Vancouver proper, over half of the population are foreign born and speak English as a second language. There are many gangs, both street level and organized, including one of the biggest Hell's Angels Chapters in Canada, which controls drug trade and prostitution rings. Vancouver's Eastside has the highest number of heroin related deaths and HIV infections per capita in North America.

In *Big Exit*, the metropolis of Vancouver acts as a character in of itself. The protagonists must fight through the monotonous grey of overcast skies and endless rain through mental instability, drug addiction, and dysfunctional relationships. Stuck between the traditions of diverse cultures, and the pressures that accompany a young and distinctly Canadian urban identity, the characters must learn to adapt or die.

Structure:

Unlike a linear narrative approach, disjunctive narration helps to forward a sense of psychic or individual fragmentation, as well as social disintegration. The juxtapositions of the three main differing narrative perspectives generate ironies that are not evident to the individual narrator-protagonists, but are apparent to readers as they move through the text. All of this rupturing is aimed at depicting what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called a "schizoculture," in their study *Anti-Oedipus*. The individual, spousal/familial, and larger social functions in the metropolis are fragmented as a result of 21st century social corruption. Deleuze and Guattari write on the relationship of desire to reality and, specifically, how capitalist society serves to alter the psychological framework identified by Freud who contended that schizophrenics can be categorized through Oedipal interpretations. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the only thing Freud, and many thinkers within the psychoanalytic community, can offer the schizophrenic is to make the schizophrenic's disjointed and incoherent behaviour adopt the shape of a "normal" identity formation. Luke's character appears to adopt this "normalcy," but eventually his illness resurfaces. *Big Exit*'s disjunctive narrative structure represents both

Luke's schizophrenia, and the social rupture within the city. The Mayo Clinic defines Schizophrenia as follows:

> Schizophrenia is a group of severe brain disorders in which people interpret reality abnormally. Schizophrenia may result in some combination of hallucinations, delusions, and disordered thinking and behavior.
>
> Contrary to some popular belief, schizophrenia isn't split personality or multiple personality. The word "schizophrenia" does mean "split mind," but it refers to a disruption of the usual balance of emotions and thinking.
>
> Schizophrenia is a chronic condition, requiring lifelong treatment. (n.p.)

In *Big Exit* the ambiguity between actual and "delusional" experience is represented in both characterization and structure, in narrative pattern and language. Luke's schizophrenic condition becomes symptomatic of a larger social malady that has affected the other characters in the novella. His psychic rupture is symptomatic of the fragmented or "split" social pattern of Vancouver itself, as it, in turn, is representative of our 21st century contemporary global culture.

Hence, the structure of this novella is schizophrenic in nature, featuring unpredictable shifts in narration and chronology. These spatiotemporal jumps depict important events through the conflicting perspectives of the characters who inhabit this Vancouver.

Society is xenophobic, and outsiders do not fit. I did not want Luke to take blame from the other characters simply because of his exceptionality, or for Luke to essentially blame his disorder for his actions. Nor did I want Luke's condition to be the sole dysfunction that drives forward the narrative. The disorders of other characters also contribute to the plot. In my mind, Luke develops into more of a sacrificial lamb – an

ironic outsider or scapegoat, mistakenly held responsible for Melonie's overdose. The three main narrative voices (Jared, Luke, Kate) intertwine to generate an overall dialogical perspective.

In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin notes that varied perspectives often disagree, and contradict each other. In *Big Exit*, the perspectives are often in conflict and the reader must decide which point of view is convincing. Bakhtin further notes in his study *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, that "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110). As such, the reader must interpret the story and decide where meaning lies. Further, dialogism resulting from conflicts in the three narrative points of view renders the novella open-ended. The "unresolved debates" generate an epistemological position, raising questions about "truth" and "knowledge," rather than offering answers.

This idea of epistemology is closely aligned with Foucault's sense of "truth," as provisional and subject to questioning. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault argues that madness is silenced by reason, and one loses the ability to signify the limits of the conventional social order in order to point to the so-called "truth." Foucault explains:

> In other words, beginning with passion, madness is still only an intense movement in the rational unity of soul and body; this is the level of *unreason*; but this intense movement quickly escapes the reason of the mechanism and becomes, in its violences, its stupors, its senseless propagations, an *irrational* movement; and it is then that, escaping truth and its constraints, the Unreal appears (87-88)

All of the principal characters in the novella, with the possible exception of Kate, are to varying degrees, delusional. Of these, Luke is the one who most demonstrates the features that Foucault describes, as he enters an irrational movement which "escapes truth and its constraints."

In addition, Foucault examines the rise of aversion therapy, arguing that new scientific or "humanitarian" methods of conceptualizing mental illness were aimed at *controlling* rather than healing. Such aggressive measures are hinted at in Luke's confessional narratives – whether the methods he mentions are imagined, or otherwise (60). Further, Kate makes reference to the lack of mental health services in the area: "The ward, though, was much busier than I remember, upgraded yet overrun, probably due to the latest downsizing in the wards at Riverview" (52). According to Susanne Francoeur and several co-authors in their "Update on Riverview Closure," published in the *B.C. Government and Service Employees Union News* (Aug. 25, 2011), the Riverview mental health facility is facing closure: "As you know the B.C. Government is continuing towards the final closure of Riverview Hospital by June, 2012 (n.p.). Within the Vancouver municipal infrastructure, there is an inherent contradiction between social need and the delivery of social services. Such contradictions are also represented in *Big Exit*, and extend into narrative points of view.

The three main narrative voices in this novella often offer contradictory perspectives. Each of the three main characters is on an ironic mis-guided quest to seek a personal "truth." Each character's sense of this so-called "truth" is provisional. As such, the reader is confronted by an epistemological dilemma, in determining which, if any of these viewpoints is believable. The novella is open-ended and not all situations are

resolved. Consequently, the reader is faced with a series of unanswered questions about what remains of possible individual and larger social directions.

Albert Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" further inspires this multiple narrative form. Essentially, the three main perspectives are "relative to the position of the observer." In other words, the relative subject-positions of the three narrators offer dialogical perspectives. Readers may find objectivity impossible, and may find themselves moving towards a subjective reading of these individuals. Relative "truths" emerge when one views these characters by considering *all* the different perspectives simultaneously.

While the larger structure of the novella pursues a fragmented narrative through a dialogical perspective, the linguistic level further enhances this ruptured aesthetic. Theorist Julia Kristeva's essay, "Towards a Semiology of Paragrams," published in the *Tel Quel Reader* (1998), explores the significance of paragrammatic linguistic systems (i.e.; pattern recognition of repeating ideas within a framework of multiple meanings in language). A paragram situates a text within a text. This could include a compilation of two words such as "a-friggin-mazing." Or, on a larger clausal or paragraph level, it involves inserting digressions or alternate points of view within the primary narrative. Kristeva explains:

> III.3 The double being the minimal sequence of paragrams, their logic is different from that of 'scientific logic', from the *monologic* that evolves in the binary space of 0-1 and proceeds by means of identification, description, narration, the exclusion of contradictions, the establishment of truth. It can be seen why, in the *dialogism* of paragrams, the laws of grammar, syntax and semantics (which are

> laws of 0-1 logic, i.e. Aristotelian, scientific or theological logic) are transgressed while remaining implicit (31).

In other words, multiple perspectives of a dialogical nature can be combined within any paragrammatic text. Such stylistics are evident in the linguistic level of the novella. In language, Luke is often erratic as in his email to Doctor Freeman when discussing his interest in radios. The same is true of Jared in Chapter 4 where he speaks to Melonie, as well as in Jared's last chapter (Chapter 17). These paragrammatic linguistic patterns feature a range of unfixed and often conflicting meanings. Luke and Jared's several dialogical linguistic "episodes" make overall sense when considered in relation to the entire plot. Their first meeting towards the end of the novella (Chapter 17) culminates in the disjointed dialogue at the rehab centre's entrance, as neither of the characters truly understands or answers the other's questions. This breakdown in communication leads to the violence that results in Luke's death. The two characters' "answers" to each other's questions serve as unintentional taunts in a split-rhetoric dialogue, where fixed meaning begins to collapse.

Given the various breakdowns, the form of the novella is ironic in nature. With no single main character, the group can be thought of as a "composite" protagonist. As such, much is lost, and a little is potentially gained. It appears that Melonie will not change her lifestyle regardless of Luke's death. With a crumbling support infrastructure, it is unlikely that she will have the strength to transform her life. Jared is incarcerated at the narrative's conclusion. He finally reaches the end of his mis-guided quest and now must face the troublesome realities of his own misunderstanding, and his culpability in the death of Luke, whom he will eventually realize was an innocent. Jared will have to live with this

unfortunate reality. There is much lost, including Jared's misperception of Melonie's apparent virtue. So, while some delusions disappear, some hard-won understanding is gained. These changes come with the high price of the deaths of Brendan and Luke. Though she loses much, Kate's trajectory does mark a potential gain. Kate begins as a woman who accepts the indifference of those around her, and suffers from low self-esteem while she is involved in a dysfunctional relationship with a mentally unavailable man, only to lose him through a senseless act of violence. The story ends with her on the cusp of deciding whether she can continue doing what she does, or move on to a better life. "Setting the features" on Luke's corpse is symbolic of closure, and places her in a limited state of control. It also signifies the end of a phase in her life, with the possibility of a moment of self-realization which may inspire a new and better phase.

Literary Precedents with Multiple Points of View:

Historically, multiple narratives have been an integral part of the literary landscape. Canonical frame tales narrated in seriated forms include *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, and *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. Much like these frame stories, *Big Exit* is written with Jared's quest narrative juxtaposed with Kate and Luke's stories. Because each narrative shifts perspectives, the meaning of chapters which proceed or follow also shifts as one moves through the novella.

Big Exit's narrative mode is complex, giving the reader agency to link the plotline together. Some modern examples of multiple-narrative points of view include: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Julian Barnes' *Talking it Over*, Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, Andrea

Levy's *Small Island*, Nick Hornby's *A long Way Down* and *About a Boy*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, and Wilkie Collins' The *Moonstone*. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is an excellent example of a multiple plot-line novel that has influenced modern writing, and *Big Exit* in particular. Like Faulkner's work, each of Big Exit's chapters is devoted to the voice of a character after whom it is titled. I've chosen to let a handful of first-person narrators relate the story from different points of view, leaving the reader to decide which narrator seems the most reliable for each of the various events.

Use of Various Epistolary Forms:

Historically many narratives have made use of epistolary forms, notably the early novels *Love-Letters Between a Noblemen and His Sister* by Aphra Behn (1640-1689), and *Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson (1689-1761). In this tradition, *Big Exit's* construction makes use of several epistolary forms.

I utilize epistolary form in order to develop the narrative without an obvious third person narrator. The clearest uses of this technique take the forms of Brendan's note and Luke's email-letters to Dr. Freeman (n.b.; Dr. Freeman is named for Dr. Walter Freeman, a pioneer of the prefrontal lobotomy). Luke's use of email correspondence with Dr. Freeman, sent inbetween his biweekly appointments at Riverview, is an ideal vehicle to communicate his narrative concerning his delusions about radio frequencies. Luke's mode of email communication is an aesthetic complement to his interest in electronic media, and the mysteries of radio-wave frequencies. Luke's final chapter further

emphasizes his use of epistolary fiction. The blank page in Luke's chapter symbolizes his inability to communicate further. It forwards a meaningful silence.

In the case of Kate, her chapters are in part explained by way of diary entries – as the diary conveys perspectives that she might not otherwise share with others. She does permit her coworker Sheila access to the confidential views she's recorded. Conversely in the final chapter, Sheila admits to starting a diary of her own, spurring the possibility of a shift in recording of the events to a new, at-hand character. Meanwhile, within the larger context of the novella, Kate's diary reveals an "inner" self suggesting a "split" in her world view. However, at the end of the novella, Kate admits to giving up on her diary, despite Sheila's attempts at persuading her otherwise (70). Kate's abandonment of her diary suggests an integration between the "inner" and "outer" aspects of her self.

Appropriation of T.S. Eliot's Works in Brendan's Note:

The creation of Brendan's note which appears at the close of the novella was created using the "cut-up" aleatory literary technique first introduced by Tristan Tzara, and later made famous by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs. Brendan's note as printed in this manuscript is the direct result of methodically following Tzara's aleatory technique.

In an editing meeting involving the "Brendan Note" epilogue, Dr. Jirgens suggested employing Eliot's writings as re-shaped through Tzara's "cut-up" method, where short selections of text are written onto a piece of paper. The paper is then cut into strips, each strip with a different section of text. Then, the strips are placed into a hat, preferably a bowler, (which is symbolic of the Dada movement). Failing a bowler, a

cardboard box will serve. Following a brief "mystical incantation" the strips are ritually withdrawn from the "hat" without looking, and then glued onto a piece of paper in the order they appear. T.S. Eliot famously claims, in the essay "Philip Massinger" from the collection *The Sacred Wood*, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different." In Brendan's note I take this claim to heart, appropriating and subsequently altering several lines from Eliot's works. To ensure some connectivity I first establish Brendan's interest in Eliot's writing through his dialogue in the first chapter: "I've heard the mermaids singing among the electric waves, man. There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to. One is always alone" (8). Brendan reveals his love of Eliot's writing early, by speaking variations of lines that should be obvious to most readers. Within the context of the novella, Brendan's affection for Eliot builds into a sort of philosophic manifesto covering his theories on life, later to be recorded in his farewell note.

Eliot's appropriated writings are the ideal vehicle for Brendan's note, as the buildup to its discovery contributes to the way Brendan's spirit haunts the novella. The note leaves a philosophical trace by way of Luke who makes a copy of the note for himself, and still later by Kate who finds the note in the final chapter.

Concluding Remarks:

In *Big Exit,* the ambiguity, between "real" and "unreal" experience is represented in both characterization and structure, in narrative pattern and language. Luke's extreme schizophrenic condition becomes symptomatic of a social malady that has affected the other two principle characters in the novella, as well as the larger social pattern of Vancouver as it, in turn, represents our global contemporary culture.

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