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# Thresholds

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Thresholds

By

Gabriel Jon Pline

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of  
English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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the Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English

DEC 2013

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## "Renal Health in the 21st Century"

Gabriel J. Pline

McDonnell-Douglas's Space Station Five is the crown jewel of the new corporatized world government. For almost three decades it has survived the cold of outer space, proving itself far more advanced than its four predecessors. More stable than Space Station One, whose HVAC chief fell asleep on his keyboard, taking out the heating system and freezing all its occupants. More organized than Space Stations Two and Three, each crumbling under mutiny. Only slightly more sound than SpaSta-4, a state of the art machine with one flaw: a bolt left loose by a hung-over maintenance man. The tiny piece of metal fell out, rolled into an air duct, and dropped into the engineering room, blowing the gyroscope and sending the station tumbling into deep space. Space Station Five is a glimmering wheel that spins gently in orbit, a testament to engineering and, having eliminated all human involvement, immune to malfunction.

Today, though, Space Station Five is hurtling toward a cloud of cosmic detritus. I can see the glints of light hovering above the Earth's hazy atmosphere. Some of these bits of ice and rock are as large as my fist. Very soon they will slam into the hull. The air around us will be sucked out, the structure will collapse, and we will all die. I couldn't be happier.

"Are you okay?" the slim brunette asks, laughing. She leans over me. There's a loose button on the sleeve of her jumpsuit.

"No," I breathe, "but no matter. Go back with the others."

"I dunno," she says, "you look kinda funny. Your mouth's all puckered up."

I'm hyperventilating, but there's no reason to worry her. As far as she's concerned, I'm

just some elderly survivor of the Great Blackout in my final throes of death. And that much is true: I am fifty-six years old, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, and I am dying. What she doesn't know is that I'm the one responsible for sending this station into a meteor shower.

My back seizes up and I let out a high-pitched croak, the kind a rabbit makes just before it dies. Of course, no one here has ever seen a rabbit. And they've never seen anyone dying.

I wave her off.

"Okay," she says, "but you're missing out."

She stands and runs over to her nubile comrades, some still in their colored jumpsuits, some in states of undress. My eyes stay on that loose button.

"Have your fun, kids," I mutter.

A short while ago, I outsmarted the space station's advanced computer system by simply passing a note around. Guerilla subversion. My final act of autonomy. I first handed it to the kid at the cafe pod. He read it, gasped, and looked at me in zit-pocked confusion. I whispered an explanation in his ear. He gasped again and passed the note to another worker, a cute blonde girl. She read it, gasped, and passed it on, but not before requiring a whispered explanation herself. It took no time for all 132 youngsters on board to follow their more base instincts and override space station protocol.

I'm curled up on the floor in pain, waiting for Dr. Armenius, my back against the SpaceView WindowWall. Behind me, Cassiopeia and Orion coast by, taunting me. They pass by this window at every rotation. I want them to draw closer, closer, so close that a star in Orion's belt buckle blasts through the WindowWall, shattering glass and metal and bone. My

vacuum-packed corpse will float toward the Earth and return home in a flash of fire.

Then the beep.

*Beep.*

\* \* \* \* \*

McDonnell-Douglas's marketing team went into overdrive after construction was completed. They boasted that this new space station was impervious to breakdown, citing its advanced computer system and updated logistics (and tighter bolts). Their commercials, backed with upbeat jingles, were sent over the shortwave frequency so the radios on Earth could pick them up.

*Hey! Get away!*

*Stay on Spa-Sta!*

*Not a worry! Not a care!*

*Join us in the frosty air!*

*Hey, hey, hey! Get away!*

*Stay... on Spa-Sta!*

Earth, its population decimated by international conflict and nuclear winter, was a floating ball of ash. SpaSta-5 was to be the panacea for our ills. Get off the planet, we'd been told, or starve to death. Worse yet was being kidnapped and enslaved by roaming tribes of post-apocalyptic cannibals; slow starvation would have been a blessing by comparison. A short trip to SpaSta-5's outpost could make us all forget the torturous lives we'd led since the Great Blackout.

But, as with most anything else, living on a space station involved sacrifice. Previous space stations had attempted to replicate life on Earth in such a way as to provide the most natural surroundings for its inhabitants. As many had come from the charred planet below, inhabitants were allowed to move about as they pleased, to socialize, to engage in recreation. The space stations used a time system similar to that of Earth's -- seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. By the collapse of the fourth SpaSta, it became apparent that simply allowing people to do as they wished was not going to work on a space station. An ordinary earthling would find that life on a modern outpost was, by comparison highly regulated... assuming he could get on.

Living hand to mouth on Earth had taken its toll on me. I was sick of rations and raid alarms, armed conflict, the whole survivalist bit. I desired the kind of order that Space Station 5 offered. A system. Anything that would take my mind off the task of self-preservation. For thirty-seven years I'd seen the tiny lights of SpaSta-5 creep across the smoky sky two or three times a night. There were other space stations, yes -- Virgin Universe Excelsior Utopia, Sony-Tandy Unlimited, Ford Explorer III -- but they were old and cramped. SpaSta-5 was the best, the biggest, the safest.

Most of my family had already died off. I had no children. I had no friends. There was nothing for me on Earth, so I walked the twenty-five miles to Pensacola for an application and found that my name had already been drawn.

"Mr. Lehi, is that right?" the man asked. He wore a shiny red jumpsuit with zippers and buttons all over, the uniform of SpaSta's recruitment team. His face showed not one whisker.

His hair was trimmed close, free of dirt and grime. He was probably the cleanest person on the continent, and he knew my name.

“Yes, young man, that’s me. Lehi.” I looked at him with a mix of envy and suspicion.

“Alrighty, Mr. Lehi, it looks like you’ve already been sponsored.”

Sponsored?

The man clicked through the mini-computer strapped to his arm, his large blue eyes darting around to gather information. “Mr. Armenius has provided us with your name and vitals, and I can have you on the next jump in foxtrot four-point-seven-two -- ah, I mean...” His fingers flew over the mini-computer. “I can have you on the next jump in...” He looked back at his wrist. “Ninety-three minutes. Have you said your goodbyes?”

“Say goodbye?” I spread my arms out to indicate the crumbled buildings and gravel lots, the stacks of clay bricks, the emaciated faces of survivors, all of them dressed in rags, all of them miserable and hungry.

I looked back at him and chuckled. “Say goodbye to what?”

\* \* \* \* \*

At gamma 17.322, I arrived at SpaSta-5.

I’d been assigned a liaison, a translucent-skinned man whose job was to ease me into life on the space station. He pushed rather than guided, telling me where to step.

I stood on the moving sidewalk with him as we approached Space Station-Five’s third spoke. I needed coffee but was told by my liaison that liquids were prohibited in all off-Earth outposts. Injections, he told me, were available at CafePod A-3. I made a quick glance at the

glowing matrix of green pixels on the wall announcing “Next stop: Starbucks” and as the sidewalk slowed, I got off, launching into a series of clumsy footsteps.

My feet stuck to the floor but when I took a step, my leg made a slight move to the right. Maybe it was the trauma of the launch, or maybe it was the new oxygen. Whatever the cause, my stumble caught the attention of a teenaged boy who, by the appearance of his black and green smock, was waiting to enter the CafePod for work.

“It's the rotation. You get used to it,” he chuckled.

“Really?” I asked. “After how long?”

“Oh, it takes a few rotations, but you’ll get used to it.”

My liaison explained that SpaSta-5 rotated at a precise speed, creating artificial gravity using centrifugal force. Then he explained how centrifugal force really doesn't exist. I just stared at him.

The boy in the black and green smock studied my face, now cleanly shaven, but still gaunt from my Earth diet of wild potatoes and roasted varmint.

“So,” he nodded, “you’re new.”

“How could you tell?”

“Just a hunch. You look hungry.”

“Hungry isn’t the word for it. This is paradise, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He pushed further. “Hey, where you from? Mac Orbit Alpha? Taiwan Express?”

“A rock.”

His caterpillar-like eyebrows scrunched up in the middle.

“A dead rock. Earth.”

His face lit up with curiosity, showing two rows of spotless white teeth.

“Trust me, kid, it’s no place you want to visit. They’d eat you for lunch. Literally.”

His face went ashen. "Really?"

"No, not really. Just messin' with ya."

“Oh!" he laughed. "Well, it's good to see that the savages haven't lost their sense of --”

*Beep.*

He looked at the silver band on his forearm. It had rocketship stickers on it. He walked away without a word.

I felt bad about lying to him. Back on Earth, I would've eaten his liver while it was still warm.

After my injection of coffee, my liaison took me to a desk where a receptionist was to supply me with several materials intended for acclimation on the space station. The receptionist rattled off a list of information; one of the items was the notification that Dr. Armenius would be my on-board physician.

I was pleased that Armenius would be my doctor on SpaSta-5. We had fought together in the Seven Hills Savages, a militia in south Georgia. Armenius, a medic, had saved countless lives in the Battle for Savannah. He'd even saved my own. Against my liaison's advice, I asked to go see him.

“Ah... what?” the on-board receptionist asked. It was if I’d asked to paint the space

station pink.

“Dr. Armenius. Physician. A friend of mine.”

The receptionist, a slim young man wearing a turquoise jump suit, ignored my request and continued his spiel in a high-pitched, robotic voice. “The rest of your supplies are in your quarters, and I have a jump suit right here that should fit --”

“Armenius,” I interrupted. “I want to see him. Now.”

The receptionist, agitated, set my uniform, an orange one, on the counter and looked me straight in the face. His eyes, suddenly absent of light, slid to meet mine.

“Sir, I know you're new here, but you just can't go doing anything that you --”

Something beeped. It was the same beep I'd first heard at the CafePod. An alarm? A radio? He looked at his wrist.

“Your jump suit comes complete with one WristSched, two pens, five sticks of chewing gum, and --” His wrist beeped again, this time more urgently. His tempo picked up. “Enjoy your stay on SpaSta! Not a worry, not a care, welcome to the frosty air, welcome to SpaSta-5.” Then his body jerked to the right and he sprinted through the door behind him, his hands fiddling with the zipper at his groin. I was left with an orange jumpsuit, a wrist-mounted computer, and five sticks of chewing gum, one of which I shoved angrily into my mouth.

My guide explained that a new system of time had been established for SpaSta-5, one based on the rotations of the station itself. Thanks to advancements in microphysics, the designers were able to divide and sub-divide each moving molecule into tiny components -- the observance of time was based on the movement of molecules, not on the natural movement of

the planets, and certainly not on the natural rhythms of human living. Arriving early or late became an anomaly.

In an effort to distribute the population evenly, each person would wear a wrist band linked to the central computer, notifying its wearer when to move, when to go to workstation, when to pee, when to eat, when to sleep. The central computer kept track of all inhabitants and issued schedules and so was able to ensure equal displacement of mass. Left on its own, human behavior -- mingling, fraternization -- would interrupt the gyroscopic rotation of the station and throw it off course.

At the end of my first eighteen hours on board, I felt rejuvenated. In fact, from the moment I stepped on board and into this new way of living, I felt free, liberated from the smothering clutches of Mother Earth, where it was the gnawing of an empty stomach, not a WristSched, that urged me to move. Life on the planet was choked with disease, starvation, roving bands of scavengers whose gaunt hollow faces told of unbelievable struggle. Here on SpaSta-5, I never had to worry about going hungry or being without shelter, the two most basic human needs.

But food and shelter aren't enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the second day I got the tour.

The outside of the space station was a marvel -- enormous, gleaming metallic silver, a wagon wheel spinning 400 kilometers above the surface of the Earth. I cried when I saw it through the window of my transport.

My wonder at this image was only surpassed by the view inside. Brightly lit hallways with white marble floors. Slate blue walls lined with informational screens. A ceiling a little lower than what I was accustomed to, but I didn't feel cramped. Rather, I felt caressed and safe. This was the life I'd dreamed of.

Suddenly the hallway opened up to an open spaced area lined on one side by a seven foot high wall made of glass. The only light in the high-ceilinged room came from long blue neon shafts that rose on both sides of the window.

"You gotta be kidding me," I told my companion, a guide who'd replaced my liaison when his WristSched beeped. She was a petite African woman with cropped wiry hair.

"Oh, no sir," she said. "This is the SpaceView WindowWall."

She went on in metered fashion, clearly well practiced in the presentation of SpaSta-5's most impressive feature.

"Made of aluminum silicate and fused silica glass," she continued, "the WindowWall is comprised of an internal pressure pane, a 1.3 inch thick optical pane, and an external thermal pane."

I stepped off the moving sidewalk and padded carefully over to the WindowWall, unable to speak. Thousands, millions of stars burned just on the other side of the window, tracking from right to left. Their trajectory was slow, but not so slow that I couldn't detect their movement.

"Orion," I whispered.

"Excuse me?" the woman asked.

“Orion. The hunter.”

I pointed out to the cluster of three stars marking Orion’s belt.

“Oh,” she mumbled. “That’s nice.”

I got the impression that she was uninterested, perhaps distracted by a small beep coming from her WristSched.

“And there’s Cassiopeia, the queen.”

“Who?”

“Cassio --”

*Beep.*

“Sir, we mustn’t dally too long here. Much more to see, much more to see.”

She began to walk away. I called after her.

“Haven’t you heard of Cassiopeia? Of Orion?”

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, stepping onto the moving sidewalk. “Now come with me and I’ll show you our NoGrav chambers. There you can enjoy frivolity and recreation.”

She turned back to me.

“If it’s on your DaySched, of course.”

\* \* \* \* \*

On the third day I was allowed to roam freely for much of the day while I grew accustomed to my WristSched. On the fourth day I received basic training for my job. On the fifth day I worked my first ten-day shift without a supervisor.

It was the sixth day and I had stepped off the moving sidewalk for my daily IV injection

at Starbucks. A line of pale-faced, lean adolescents in black and green aprons stood against the wall near the entrance, waiting for their shift to begin. Just as the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that.

A postal bot, exempt from DayScheds, rolled by at a swift clip about three feet in front of the youngsters. Just a little thing, maybe nine inches tall, seafoam green with six wheels. Three of the boys squirmed. One of them, a nervous boy with slanted eyes and a jet black bowl cut, chewed on his bottom lip. Now usually this would just be a sign of what SpaSta physicians call “the pubescent shivers,” a naturally occurring spasm that I’ve been told is a result of a teenager’s hormonal imbalance, coupled with the body’s response to space living. But that day, in a sudden and unplanned divergence of thought, I realized what these boys were doing. They weren’t going through a hormonal imbalance. They wanted to play.

That same day, just after coffee, I experienced two supernovae prompting my visit to Dr. Armenius. One was in outer space and one was in my gut.

I was still clumsy when it came to adhering to the strict schedule set forth by SpaSta management, but I felt myself slipping into it quite easily. No longer did I wake up and feel the need to check my rucksack, to make sure scavengers hadn’t dropped by. No longer did I feel the need to look over my back, constantly aware that someone was watching. Instead I dutifully arose after the first alarm beep, got dressed and made my way to my second day as laborer in the oxygen renewal pod.

Scooting along the moving sidewalk, I finally felt a part of the collective hustle and bustle taking place on SpaSta-5, an audiovisual and tactile hum that breathed and pulsed.

On that sixth day I approached the SpaceView atrium when a tingle started in my stomach and quickly passed. As I got closer, the tingle came back and grew. It was a sparkling glow at first, then the glow turned gray, then brown. The tingle changed into a dull pressure in my lower abdomen. I felt the need to release my bowels, but I could wait until I got to the OxyRenew pod.

Passing into the atrium, I looked to the left and saw Orion and Cassiopeia again, softly gliding across the WindowWall. Should I stop for a moment and watch? No, I thought, I must keep on DaySched. This indecision tumbled and bounced until I finally could not stand it and in a split second I stepped onto the dark marble floor.

The stars enveloped me as I drew closer to the window, and as they did so the pressure in my stomach grew uncomfortable. I had to get to work, to keep on DaySched, but the call of the constellations was too great.

My nose touched the glass. The window fogged and quickly dissipated. I took a deep breath and locked my eyes on a spot just to the upper right of Orion's belt buckle as my lower body began to explode.

Suddenly the hunter and the queen stopped. The hiss of the air vent above me bated. My arms and legs fell away as the floor dropped, leaving me hanging in mid air. The starlight grew brighter and brighter, but one star flashed more magnificently than the others. First a dark purple, then light, then pink, and finally hot white. My eyelids collapsed and I suddenly realized my bowels were about to release.

*Beep.*

But this was no ordinary bowel movement. I fell to the floor in excruciating pain, an explosion of heat emanating from my lower left back. There was a dark corner off to the left, and I crawled with some difficulty to the spot in the corner where the walls and floor met, three intersecting lines. I unzipped my jumpsuit and yanked them down my legs, then pulled down my undergarment.

*Beep.*

While the searing pain slowly magnified itself, I dropped a mass of brown liquid onto the floor and then fell in a heap to the side. My pain was not eased, though. It grew in intensity and I began to rock back and forth, my jumpsuit and underwear bunched around my knees. Sweat beaded on my cold forehead and my lungs ceased to work. The pain was still there, not in waves but a constant stab of heat.

*Beep.*

I could do nothing to stop the pain. Measured breaths didn't work. Squeezing my legs to my chest didn't work. Looking for mercy, I craned my neck back and searched the black sea of stars, hoping Orion and Cassiopeia had not slipped along. To my amazement, they had not.

*Beep.*

\* \* \* \* \*

I finally got to see my friend Dr. Armenius after my collapse at the WindowWall, but only after using my WristSched to request an emergency appointment. Despite a lingering pain in my groin, I made it to MediPod A-11 right on schedule.

“Armenius!” I called as I walked in. “Can you believe it? We’re both here!”

“Mr. Lehi, welcome,” he said, keeping his eyes locked on the ArmCom he wore, his white jumpsuit crisp and clean. “Says here you’re having some pain in the ureter.”

I’d expected a hug, a handshake, anything that resembled recognition on his part, but there was none. I hadn’t seen him in years, and though he had arranged my transportation to the station, he had made no attempt to contact me. Here in the MediPod, he was Dr. Armenius, not just Armenius, and I was Mr. Lehi, just another patient.

“Um, yeah, I got a problem,” I told him.

“Affirmative,” he said, touching his gray beard. “Step forward, please.”

Dr. Armenius opened a compartment on the wall. It was the height and width of a person, curved at the corners, and backlit with a green glow.

“Stand right in front of those scanners,” he said. “Please, make no sudden movements.”

“Armenius,” I continued as I positioned myself, “this place is a hoot. When I got here, I asked the receptionist if I could come see --”

“Stand still,” he ordered.

“Sorry. Armenius, I asked the receptionist if I could come see -- ”

“What?” Armenius asked. He set the chart he was reading on the table and ran his fingers through his thin hair. Had I said something wrong? Armenius, his face tired and flat, looked back at the chart and then to me. He was about to say something else, but seemed rushed.

“Mr. Lehi, you have a kidney stone. You probably got it from drinking that Earth water. So many contaminants. So many.” Armenius pushed a button on the wall and a screen slid

out, lighting up to show a colorful display of all the space station's amenities.

"As you know," he continued, "here on SpaSta-5, we have the cleanest water ever produced." The screen undulated with color as the tutorial extolled the many benefits of living on a space station.

"Looks like I have a little stowaway in my kidney, yeah?" I chuckled.

Dr. Armenius pursed his lips, like he was trying to figure out the reason for this renal anomaly.

I said, "I guess it's a stone-away..."

I laughed, trying to add some levity to this situation, but Dr. Armenius kept his face tight. The only sound was the air hissing out of a duct above me. I felt nervous around him. He wasn't the same Armenius I knew back home, back when we hunted beetles and made steaming pots of dandelion salad. Back then he seemed more full of life, more vibrant, more upbeat.

I looked around me, trying to adapt as much as possible. This place, the way it was run -- it was still foreign to me. Six days on board, and I'd grown accustomed to my WristSched, the constant reminder to move, to work, to eat, to sleep, to empty my bladder. But I needed a connection. I needed someone to give me a clue as to what had been happening to me since the supernova. Since that moment when Orion and Cassiopeia stood still in the WindowWall.

"Armenius, you're probably my only friend up here --"

"Associate."

"What?"

"Associate."

“Associate?”

“Associate. And, please, *Doctor Armenius*.”

“Okay, well, you’re probably the closest associate I have on this space station, and I thought you should know.”

“Know what?”

“About my... I don't know. Time slip, I guess you'd call it.”

Dr. Armenius’s eyes grew wide and he seemed to stop breathing.

“You know, a time slip,” I said. “It’s like... ah, how do I explain it? It’s like time slowed down when the stone dropped. I wasn’t thinking about my next appointment, I wasn’t waiting for the WristSched to go off. I was...” My mind drifted to the glow of an exploding star, to the searing pain in my back, to that suspension of time at the window wall.

“Armenius, do you know how long it’s been since I’ve felt like I could do whatever I wanted? Have you ever -- ”

“Lehi! Man, keep it down!” He shut his laptop closed and leaned forward, lowered his voice. “Lehi, you did what?”

I was surprised that Armenius had called me by my name. He was looking at me with anger and fear, two emotions I hadn’t seen since my arrival, but that I still recognized fully. It was the kind of look a parent gives an impulsive child, a little shock, a little condescension.

“Armenius, what’s the big deal? I know staying on DaySched is a requirement here, but come on...”

“You can’t talk like that, Lehi,” he said.

“What are you, Security Councilor Amos all of a sudden?”

“Shut up, Lehi. If anyone finds out about this...”

“Someone already has,” I said. I leaned in and gave him a hard, knowing look. “You.”

Armenius sat back in his chair and took a deep breath, wiping his forehead.

“I can handle myself,” I told him. “What, are you going to tell on me? Is it really such a crime to --”

“It’s just that,” he said, “we have a system here. A system that keeps life moving forward. No kinks. Things have a way of snowballing... dominoes --”

*Beep.*

“Alright, Mr. Lehi, lots of fluids, double up on Vit-C tabs, and here’s a scrip for hydrocodone.”

A slip of paper emerged from a printing console by his desk. He handed it to me and looked at me as if he hadn’t heard a word I’d said about the stone, the constellations, the slowing of time. He was right back on schedule.

\* \* \* \* \*

I’m an ant in a tuna can. For the past week I’ve wandered around a matrix of passageways, breathing stale recycled air, eating the same space food day after day, isolated from the relative excitement of space by an aluminum silicate window wall. What began as a new life of stability and security is now one mundane task followed by another. Where’s the excitement? Where’s the passion? Where’s the risk? There is none. Life here isn’t real life. It’s just walking in circles.

Today, of course, is the exception, for all of SpaSta-5's inhabitants, the other ants, are gathered here in the atrium, together for one final moment of release before the whole thing goes to hell.

"Sweet liberty!" I hear one call.

"Such pleasure!" I hear another one shout.

"Give it to me now, baby!" squeals a woman, the one who checked on me earlier, her body shoved in a corner, her space suit hanging draped off her hips.

The burning fire in my lower back is eased only by curling up and leaning against the cold seven-foot-tall window. The cries and whoops of the crowd do nothing to ease the pain, but my mind is calmed by the sounds of people making split-second decisions. Liberty, yes. Pleasure, yes. And some are even getting laid, probably for the first time.

*Beep.*

I force myself to throw up the pill I just swallowed. I think of what the priest in Pensacola said. He wore a canvas robe and leaned against a burned stump outside the SpaSta Recruitment Office, his one leg poking out.

"Setback, challenge, tribulation..." he announced with raised arms, "These are the things that give our lives purpose. Living is pain. To remove the pain of life is to remove a person's very reason for living. The task of alleviating the pain of living is the purpose, and to live in utopia is death."

His voice reached a climax: "Nay, suicide!"

Around him, the last members of the human race trudged on, clutching their belongings

to their chests, coughing, hacking. They eyed the old priest with disgust.

I vomit into my hands then pour it onto the floor beside me. It's really the only thing that relieves the stabbing pain traveling from my lumbar to my toes. Mixed in with the organic VegiToss and meatless chicken nuggets I had for lunch is a white slimy substance. The hydrocodone pill. I watch it undulate inside the spreading puddle of goo and realize I have lost any chance of painless death.

But in this unending discomfort I finally feel free.

Dr. Armenius appears in the entrance nervously scanning the room, looking. Security personnel in their black jumpsuits trail behind. Armenius stops in the middle of the arena and levels his head on me. He points in my direction and says something. The men in black jumpsuits gather around Armenius as he jumps off the moving sidewalk and makes quick steps over to me.

"Lehi," he gasps, "What have you done?"

His face is tight and pale. The pain is growing again, this time more fierce than ever before. All I can do is point at the stars on the other side of the window.

He motions to the guards. Two of them come over and stand over me.

"Lehi, get up and come with us."

*Beep.*

One of the guards grabs my arm and starts to pull me over. Armenius holds a hand up and stops him.

"Lehi," he says, "do you know why I sponsored you to come here?"

A perfect question. Why *had* he brought me here?

"You were the perfect addition to our project. You were selected because of your unflagging loyalty to order. You proved that dedication during our time in the Seven Hills Savages. Don't you remember?"

"I'm not that person anymore," I tell him. "I spent a lifetime wanting order, even demanding it. Seven days on this space station changed my mind."

Armenius is clearly upset. He's become a part of this system.

He says, "We've provided perfect order here. Everything is provided for. Every desire, every need. It's all at your fingertips. What better life to live than one unfettered?"

"That's crap," I say. "Each moment is perfect as it is. A moment of pleasure, a moment of pain... what's the difference? They come and they go. But take away one and you have nothing."

Armenius looks nervous. "We've taken away pain and created the perfect way of living!"

"No, you've created robots. And you've taken away the reason for living. Struggle. That's the reason for living. All these people are miserable without it."

*Beep.*

He's frustrated. He runs his fingers through his hair.

"How did you do it, Lehi?" he asks. "Our engineering pod is double-sealed. Our computer system is encrypted. There's no way you were able to -- "

I cut him off. "A note."

"A note?"

"A note. All it said was *Come to the window wall and get laid*. These kids want a piece, they want a party, and they're going to have it."

This seems to enrage Armenius even more. He rushes over to me with his teeth gritted, an arm raised prepared for attack. Security Councilor Amos holds him back.

*Beep.*

"See, Armenius," I say, "these people's lives have been written out like a play script, but the instinct for risk cannot be mitigated. You, the space station, the council of eggheads who built this damn thing, you've all made a mockery of human existence."

*Beep.*

"Not all progress is growth, Armenius. Just because you've crossed the threshold into something new doesn't make it *better*."

"Lehi," Armenius argues, "the intention is justified. Humans simply aren't cut out for autonomy."

He waves his arms toward the window, Earth spinning past.

"I mean, look at what happened down there..."

He turns from me and confers with Security Councilor Amos, then speaks into his WristSched. I suppose he's in contact with the engineers, trying to figure out a way to move all these people back to their appropriate locations. I chuckle to myself because I know as hard as he tries, he'll never overpower natural desire.

*Beep.*

I watch a young boy with skin the color of loam, no older than twelve, sits cross-legged by himself on the other side of the atrium, pushing a disabled ServiceBot back and forth, back and forth. His dark hair is mussed and the zipper on the front of his yellow jumpsuit is half opened. Completely uninterested in the cacophony of voices nearby, he seems absorbed in this one act, his eyes and nose and mouth pointed down, his body still except for the arm that pushes the bot. He is solitary, quiet, warm, satisfied.

*Beep.*

I look over at the Earth gliding beneath us then I draw Armenius's attention to the faint glow of meteors on the horizon. They grow closer and closer with each passing moment.

"See that?" I ask him. The security officers shift from side to side. Creaks and knocks begin to fill the arena, not quite drowning out the sound of the people crowded together, but perceptible all the same.

"That," I tell him, "is freedom."

"That," Armenius says softly, "is the Perseid meteor shower, and this whole space station is going to spin into those rocks if we don't get all these people out of here."

His voice grows more insistent, more crackled.

"This whole damn thing is going to crash!" he yells.

Without a word, he and the security personnel run off in the direction of the evacuation pods. He figures my punishment is having to watch through the WindowWall as we burn up in the atmosphere. But I know that he will reach Earth safely, knowing that this great project was a complete failure. He will learn again to live with struggle. I will die with satisfaction.

The creaks and pops are now quite noticeable but the crowd, growing every minute, keeps roaring in ecstasy. The floor has begun to move in waves underneath me. The space station is collapsing. And my WristSched has gone blank, mute.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day before I was to fly up to fulfill my calling on SpaSta-5, I sat in a rusty chair behind a run down coffee shop. A few survivors had jerry-rigged a bean roaster and made what resembled coffee, sometimes from homegrown coffee beans, sometimes from various plant seeds that made an acceptable substitute. Theirs was an act of compassion and community, perhaps rebellion, the last remnants of human civilization. I sipped my lima bean coffee and watched silver dollars of sunlight fall upon the pebbled courtyard, bright gold coins flickering as an early Autumn wind bounced along pale leaves.

Two young girls danced around a graying maple tree, their peppered hair tied up in hemp string. Emaciated but lively, they wore simple dresses made of discarded window curtains and their feet were bare, something you'd never see on SpaSta-5, but a common sight on the charred, blackened leftovers of Earth.

The two girls lurched around the tree, one behind the other, using the roots as steps.

“You, um...” said the older one, “you hafta walk around this tree... and, um... you hafta walk around this tree three times.”

The younger one was totally focused, but I couldn't tell if she was concentrating harder on her sister's instructions or on her own unsteady feet.

“Um... just walk around the tree three times,” the older one said, then jumped from the

root to the array of bricks a few inches away. “But if you step here, you’re dead.”

The dry wind picks up and rustles the older girl’s tattered dress, then she jumps back on a root and starts walking around the tree again, her little pupil close behind.

“Oh, and after you walk around three times you go out the secret door, and you’re free.”

The younger one stops on her root and stares at the girl. She looks worried, afraid.

Suddenly she gathers courage and jumps off her root and stands firm, her brow brought down in comprehension.



With a sudden movement of his cracked hand, Hector places his flint on the ground and sheathes a dagger. His jaw moves to the side. He's tonguing a broken front tooth. He rises with some effort, clutching his abdomen. Two comrades, dour and shivering, move toward the fire and help him up. Hector walks slowly away, a slight limp in his left leg. The flat faced boy walks alongside him, slowing his pace to match Hector's.

"Picked him up last night," he says.

"Still alive?" says Hector.

"We roughed him up pretty good," the boy says.

"Still alive?" repeats Hector.

"Still alive."

The frosted grass crunches under their boots as they move to a group of four boys dressed in rags, their arms held close at their sides. One kid, tall and scrawny, has a rifle slung over his shoulder. His name is Lehi. Like the other boys in the militia, he's abandoned his birth name, the name given to him by the Old Folks. Hector is the only one who has kept his birth name, the only thing he's kept from the old world. Everything else he tossed away with the ash of continental catastrophe.

Hector has led the Millstone Madness -- a youth militia of twenty-six boys -- for almost a year and in that time has grown colder and colder. Today he feels the coldest and his heart is liable to shatter. Last night's raid on another militia's cache of potable water didn't go as planned. Thirsty and overconfident, the Madness rushed into the Brookline Brawlers' territory on a raid. The fight was two against one -- in the Brawlers' favor -- and left Hector and his boys running for the hills with their tails between their legs. Hector took the worst of it: a cracked kneecap, a chipped front tooth, and a bullet lodged in his hip. There was no one there to save

Hector, and that scared him, probably the first real fear he'd felt in a year.

He looks around out of habit and paranoia. A dark brown splotch of dried blood covers the front of his hooded sweatshirt. He squints as he looks to the western horizon, then up and back around the perimeter. No sun. Hector stops in the middle of the small clearing and speaks to his companion.

“Got him in the basement?”

The flat faced boy nods. Hector looks up at the thick white clouds.

"Snow tonight, Rat," says Hector. "Dig."

The flat faced boy breaks off into a run, back toward the fire and, then, beyond it. He's headed for the Madness settlement down the hill. Hector turns around, toward the four youths. He resumes his walk across the field in slow steps.

Hector nears the motley contingency and slings a green rucksack onto his shoulders with a grunt.

"The basement," Hector tells them. "Interrogation."

He passes the boys and the four urchins surround him then match his stride in an easy, intentional walk. Lehi walks in front with the rifle.

As they enter the woods on the edge of the field, there's a crunch under boots, a scrape of gear against fabric, an occasional cough, but no words.

The boys walk through the strip of forest with deliberate steps along a trail worn deep in the pine needles. Their muted colors blend in with the corpse-like landscape around them. The wind picks up as they approach the edge of the woods and the pine tops clack together overhead.

Lehi stops and holds his hand in the air. The rest of the group creeps into the scrub brush. Unshouldering the rifle, Lehi creeps up to the end of the trail. He crouches and peers

over the rise, his breath trailing away in a fog. He looks over a criss-cross of blackened frames, the charred remnants of the Greenleaf Haven subdivision. It is a graveyard.

*hector alvarez*

*jan 13 2009*

*daily journal*

*quote of the day: "who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god. " -- plato*

*plato playto playdoh platipus playdoh*

*i hate this class i hate this class i hate this class.*

*this teacher blows. and he talks funny to. screw him.*

*i'd rather be a beast than a god.*

As a teenaged boy growing up in the manicured landscape of the suburbs, Hector had found himself unable to live in society. He was most certainly a delinquent but he wasn't a bad kid at his core. He hated too much was all. He hated the grand drama he perceived around him. He felt everyone wore a mask and put on an act. His parents jumped through hoops at their jobs, performing tricks for their masters. His sister, two years older, played the role of dutiful daughter, making good marks in school and cheering for the local football team on Friday nights. Hector hated the life he lived and everything about it.

Despite his hatred of the ordered world, he got along quite comfortably in it for the first seventeen years of his life. He and his family lived in a four-bedroom, two-bathroom home on a cul-de-sac just outside Atlanta. Nestled there among the other well-to-dos, Hector enjoyed the amenities of middle-class life in the Millstone subdivision. There was a swimming pool at the neighborhood's entrance. Just one block away was the basketball court where he used to

practice free-throws, back before he grew his hair long to cover up the acne sprouting up on his mannish face.

But Hector, a typical middle-class American teenager, suffered openly like some first-world martyr. He was the child of Baby Boomer parents. Too much processed food, too much TV, too much coddling, too much comfort. Between grades nine and twelve he grew to hate the monotony of the suburbs. The identical minivans in everyone's drive, the HOA's beautification contests, the housewives' hairdos all puffed up on their q-tip heads, every bit of it. He felt no sense of communion with these people. He felt resentment toward them, calling them "sheep," then punctuating the remark with a stiff middle finger in the air.

His teenage angst manifested in the fashion one might expect. In ninth grade his marks fell to Cs during second semester. His tenth grade year was tainted with no fewer than four fistfights, landing him in out-of-school suspension each time. Eleventh grade was no better: cursing at the librarian, throwing chicken nuggets at a lunch lady because they were too cold, crumbling chalk dust in his math teacher's coffee. Every time he sat in front of an administrator, he'd stare down at his fingernails while a clearly flustered suit rattled off the list of his infractions. And every time he was asked to explain himself, he'd reply, without looking up, "Screw your rules to the wall, man."

His parents could do nothing, not that they didn't try.

It was a world of rules he'd been brought into -- unfairly, he thought -- and it was the destruction of this world of rules he fantasized about when he found himself alone in his bed at night listening to the old Germs and Aus Rotten cassettes his uncle had given to him. But it wasn't rules *per se* that he hated. He just hated *their* rules. The rules that said he had to go to college, that he had to stand for the pledge, that he had to consume, consume, consume. He

hated the security promised him by adults. But he did want security, and he believed he'd find security in chaos, since he knew with certainty that he could take care of himself.

Absent the Great Blackout, Hector might have risen above his adolescent fury, perhaps gone on to succeed in the real world. Without the rules and laws of civilization, though, in the wake of the Great Blackout, Hector became an animal and a killer.

There on the ridge above Greenleaf Haven, Hector fingers a gnarled spiral bound notebook in the pocket of his oversized coat, feeling the ridges of anger written a year earlier. The paper is tattered, dry. He's been reading year-old journal entries lately, thinking about how he got this way. And how he can get back home.

Lehi scans the valley below while Hector and the others crouch in the brush. Hector's right arm, the one touching the notebook, shakes but the rest of his body is still. His breath comes in short spurts and hangs in the purple evening cold before him. He rubs his left knee.

Hector looks over at Lehi. The ground is frozen underneath him but he doesn't shiver. Can't shiver. Has to look strong and firm. Confident. In control. He takes out the notebook and looks down at an empty space beneath the final unfinished journal entry, takes an old Bic pen from his pocket. He begins to write.

*Whistle.*

Hector looks up and pockets the notebook and pen. Lehi slings the rifle on his shoulder and waves the others to join him.

Beyond the trees and across a slight knoll sit rows of dilapidated houses that slither down a steep slope and back up a hill on the other side. This is one of the few subdivisions left standing. Most of the other ones have either been quarantined, commandeered by what's left of the government, or simply razed to the ground in bombing raids and arson fires. Many

subdivisions, like Millstone and Brookline, remain under the violent jurisdiction of youth militias and so have managed to avoid government interference. They're simply not worth the trouble.

Out in the open, on top of the knoll, the winds pick up and whip fiercely at the young faces, chafing them to red. The ragged gang clomps down the hill, Hector hobbling, slowly inching toward a leaf-strewn cul de sac. They are surrounded by several blackened structures. Some of the houses are still in one piece, barely, boarded up and rotting. A few seconds pass as the group cautiously steps into the street. They take stock of their surroundings: shattered windows, curled porch boards, naked trees, a flattened basketball.

"Lehi," Hector says, "you're on point." He motions to the others. "Tank, Kool-Aid... walk on the side. Tall Boy, watch our six."

Daylight is fading now, giving way to a bluish gray that hangs like smoke over everything around them. No sound save for the scrape of their nervous feet on the faded pavement cracked with neglect.

They pass houses long abandoned, houses unoccupied since the Blackout, houses devoid of life. Since this is a Secured Territory, there might be a squatter or two now and then. But they've made this walk before. It's dangerous. Constant threats -- DHS patrols, rival militias, HERF blasts -- have kept them in an unceasing state of watchfulness and sharpened their senses. They've had to adapt and develop procedures necessary to escape detection.

This is a Secured Territory in name only, and they don't want to stay for long, so they keep moving.

Lehi slows up, walks next to Hector.

"I hear they're building a space station," he says.

Hector doesn't even look at him. "Bullshit."

"No, really. A freaking space station."

"I don't believe you."

"Don't matter." Lehi spits on the road. "I seen the rockets going up. Don't know how they did it, but I seen it."

Hector is annoyed. "Well. So?"

The boys slide past houses, and at the first corner, a four way stop, they turn right.

"So," Lehi says, "it's supposed to be for survivors."

"Shut up, man."

"No, really. Atlanta is toast, man. Word is that Birmingham is gone, too."

"I said shut up. Pay attention."

"Chattanooga, Macon, Savannah -- ashes."

"Do you have a point?"

"Yeah, well, I was thinkin. Maybe they get all the Old Folks up there and leave this to us."

Hector stops and faces him. "You're a special kind of stupid, do you know that? Do you really want to stay here? And do you really think the Old Folks give a -- "

Glass shatters about one hundred yards up the road. The five boys scatter onto either side of the street.

"Shit!" Lehi whispers. He's hunkered down with Hector in a drainage ditch, the other three on the opposite side behind a burned out SUV. Lehi pulls on the side of the rifle, a .30-30 lever-action, but the round won't chamber.

"Dammit," Lehi mutters, frustrated. "Stop shakin."

Hector thrusts his hand to Lehi's throat, his Bic pen poking into the jugular. His voice is

low, almost mute.

"Shut. Up."

*hector alvarez*

*jan 14 2009*

*daily journal*

*qotd: "At his best, man is the noblest of all animals; separated from law and justice he is the worst." -- aristotle*

*antigone's sister is so stupid. she just does whatever her uncle says. he's just like mr douche, always making us follow rules. they both sound like my dad. real pricks. antigone is like "screw your rules to the wall, man." that's the way to live. aristotles got it all wrong. law and justice are shy.*

This could be it. This could be the day their luck catches up with them, right here in this burned out neighborhood. This could be the last day they live, the last day of stale oatmeal, putrid water, constant paranoia, troubled sleep. This could be it.

Twelve months removed from society, Hector has become a beast, knowing that death is just around the next corner, but being one hasn't removed the pain of being a man. Somewhere deep inside him is a man growing tired of this new world, a man who believes maybe it wasn't so bad back then.

Hector wasn't always this way, reconsidering his animal ways. When ordered society broke down, he was one of the first to join a local brigade of teenagers, one of many in the area. At first they arranged for supply runs to help the local community, but after some time they agreed that adults -- the Old Folks as they called them -- were squarely to blame, and among the first operations was the extermination of all citizens over the age of twenty one. The first man

Hector killed was his own father. As his mother bent over the bloodied body of her husband, Hector bludgeoned her with his sister's gymnastics trophy. He hit her again and again, each time grunting with satisfaction that a new world was coming, and he was going to be at the forefront. When he heard his sister had joined a group of survivors staying in a refugee camp at the state capitol building, he considered her a traitor and said he'd slit her throat if he ever saw her again.

After those first two months of darkness, Hector took a leadership position in the Millstone Madness. He led raids. He oversaw interrogations. He executed grown men and women with impunity and, sometimes, with glee. But today his knee hurts. The seeping wound on his hip bothers him. The faces of the neighbors he executed bother him, too.

He shakes his head to chase the images away. He reads his old journal from senior year English class so he can feel the rage again. So he won't feel regret. He can't let himself feel regret because regret is weakness, and weakness will get him killed.

And he keeps a Bic pen with him. He doesn't know why. Maybe to finish the last journal entry? He looks at it, knows he can write more. But he looks at it harder, remembers why he's here. It's not a pen. It's a tool for killing.

There in the ditch, he takes out his journal and pen in the silence. He's hesitant at first but then places the nib on the paper.

"Hector. Hector. HECTOR." Lehi's whisper matches the wind rustling through the trees. Hector puts the pen and journal away and squints at him. "Hector," Lehi says, "look."

A woman in rags crawls on her hands and knees toward them. She is probably in her forties but looks much older. Blood, dried and caked, covers her face and neck. Tall Boy, the fat one, lumbers out of the ditch and into the road. He laughs at the sight.

"Dummy, get back!" Lehi says. It could be a trap.

Tall Boy laughs again. "Naw, it ain't. Just some dried up old bitch. They're like cockroaches, these Old Folks. Can't seem to catch all of em."

Tall Boy walks down the street toward the woman. He takes out a rusty old machete. Hector punches Lehi in the arm, motions to help him up.

"Tall Boy," Hector says, "wait up. I get first dibs."

Tall Boy returns the machete to its scabbard, smiles a toothless smile, and opens his arms wide. "You're the boss, boss."

Hector stomps over to the woman, Lehi behind him scanning the area.

"Where'd you come from?" Hector asks.

The woman is barely responsive. She only mutters, "Water."

"Where'd you come from?" he asks again. He grabs her hair and pushes her onto her back. "Are there others?" Her dress is torn. There's blood between her legs.

"Come on," Tall Boy calls from behind. "Do her or do her."

"Shut up," Hector says.

"Water," the woman says, "please. Help."

Kool-Aid walks up. "Seriously, man. Let's do this and get on."

"She ain't from here," Hector says. "This place is secured. No man's land, dumbass. Someone brought her here and I want to know who."

Hector is standing over the woman. "Who brought you here? Talk or it'll take longer."

Tall Boy is now standing with them. "Screw it, man. I'll do it." He pulls out his machete.

"Stop," Hector says. He pushes Tall Boy back.

"She's one of them Old Folks," Tall Boy says. "It's her fault, remember? Or are you goin soft?"

Is he going soft? Hector looks at the woman. She's bleeding, dehydrated, totally out of it. Helpless. Her face has the same pale fear he saw in the faces of all the people he's killed. The ghost of humanity starts to burn inside him.

Hector draws his dagger and points it at Tall Boy.

"We're gonna be Old Folks one day, too, you idiot," he says. "Whatcha gonna do then, huh?"

He looks down at the woman, torn and bleeding, and feels something like regret.

"Shit," he says, sheathing his dagger. "We're already old."

Tall Boy, dumb and quiet, sighs and looks down. The other boys watch him, waiting.

But he can't look soft. Has to look strong. In control.

Hector shakes the regret away and walks off.

"She's yours."

As he walks off with Lehi, the sounds of machete and bone, and laughter, echo off the houses and into Hector's ears. He holds his hands up to his head and limps a little faster.

*jan 15 2009*

*beast alvarez*

*daily journal*

*qotd:*

*screw mr douches quote of the day. screw it right to the wall. i got a better one. "in normal life talking out loud means your crazy. here on the island its proof of your identity." -- william golden. from the book pincher martin. if i was out all by my self i probly wouldnt talk to much*

*but i get what hes saying. you gotta make a name for your self. speak only to make your self heard. papa gave me that pincher martin book last week and told me to read it. then the crazy old bastard gave me a survival pack and said the end was coming. hes like me, don't talk much, but he lets me be quiet. not like mom and dad. mr douche he doesnt let us talk. douche. he says 'think while you ink'. well i THINK you STINK mr douche. that book is all right i guess.*

Hector stopped talking during his senior year, that is unless he was cursing at librarians or telling administrators to screw off. As he reads his old journal entries, that old ghost of humanity rears up and maybe the one place he hated the most, Mr. Deuce's English class, was where he began to find the voice he denied himself.

Mr. Deuce's expectation of each student's personal best was often negated by his lack in interpersonal skills. Deep inside him was a passion for the potential of youth, but he came off as impatient and angry. Not everyone rose to meet his exacting standards -- certainly not Hector. Occasionally some of those who survived his torturous year-long course entered the real world prepared for the demands of adult living. Hector left his class with nothing more than a 14 average and a seething hatred for the Reed-Kellogg sentence diagram.

Hector has been talking more lately, but nothing constructive. Mostly arguing with his comrades. He feels like he's losing it, like he's the only one who wants to go home.

More specifically, Hector and Tall Boy have been having it out. Tall Boy's been saying he wants to expand their territory into Seven Hills and Bentwater. Maybe one day take Greenleaf from what's left of the government. Hector, in an uncommon moment of restraint, argues that the best course of action is to play it safe and strengthen their current territory. "This is real life, y'all," he tells them, "not a dress rehearsal." The truth, of course, is that he is tired of

killing and, perhaps, has grown more conservative in his old age.

Tall Boy and the others catch up with Hector and Lehi down the street. Hector hears Tall Boy talking and picks out the words "soft" and "can't hang." Hector stops mid-step, starts to turn around, thinks better of it. He continues to walk with Lehi. There's business to attend to in the basement of an old house at the far end of the subdivision. He can handle Tall Boy later.

Tall Boy reminds Hector of a classmate back in high school, an oaf who went by the name Meat. Two hundred sixty five pounds of ignorance, Meat terrorized most of the kids in his vicinity, but mostly he liked to pick on Hector. During that last year of high school, Hector's year of silence, Meat got a rise out of him during lunch. For the first time in his life, Hector let the fire of anger and rage flare out of control. He let fly a wile haymaker on his foe but it was like throwing a pebble at a grizzly. Meat grinned and responded with a full tackle onto the dirty linoleum floor.

Mr. Deuce was there as a lunch monitor that day. Professorial in his pink bowtie and tortoise-shell eyeglasses, Mr. Deuce surprised Hector by pulling Meat off of him. Hector should have been appreciative -- Meat put a boy in the hospital the year before -- but that day he resented Mr. Deuce's intervention. If Hector didn't hate Mr. Deuce in class, he surely hated him that day. He had robbed Hector of any chance to defend himself and release the full bore of anger built up inside him. All Hector could think of for the rest of that day was the choice between being a beast or a god. He'd wanted to be a beast. Instead a god had dropped from the sky and revealed his inability to take care of himself.

Like Meat, Tall Boy challenges Hector at every turn, doubting his ability to run Millstone Madness. But there is no one to intervene this time. Hector knows that one of these days he will be backed up against the wall, like that day in the lunchroom, only this time he will shove a

rusty dagger into his oppressor's trachea. It will be a killing that he does not regret.

*jan 16 2009*

*beast*

*daily journal*

*qotd: "there is a savage beast in every man and when you hand that man a sword or spear and send him forth to war the beast stirs." - george martin*

*where the hell does mr douche get these quotes? i like this one tho. give me a sword and i'll tear you up. yesterday papa said the end was near again. what the hell. he says things are ramping up and a blackout is inevitable. whatever that means. he says there gonna blow out all our solid state electronics. he said stop laughing and all i could think about was the word solid state. i dont even know what that is but it sounds badass. i want to be solid state. i want to be strong. its just me and no one else. and if meat messes with me again ima shank him in the throat. if i have to use a sword i'll show everyone how much of a beast i am. the only rules will be my rules. BEAST RULES.*

Tall Boy is wiping blood off of his machete when he says, "So, Hector. Couldn't do her back there, huh?"

Hector glances over at Lehi for some sort of support but Lehi just screws up his face and looks away, keeps walking. Hector clinches his fists and keeps his mind on the basement just up the road.

Fifty yards more and they break from the pavement and jump to a gully on the left side, down past a brown two-story with busted windows and a boarded up front door.

Lehi stays on watch at the street, hunkered behind a few scraggly elms, eyes narrowed in a constant survey of the silent row of buildings. The other three walk with Hector down to the

back of the house, around to a basement door.

Two members of Madness stand guard at the door. One of them, a slight boy with sparse, almost white hair on his chapped face, opens the door then looks back at Hector with a sleepy expression, flat and mute. Like Tall Boy, and most of Madness, he doesn't think Hector has it anymore.

*jan 17 2009*

*BEAST*

*daily journal*

*gotd: "perhaps down in his heart okonkwo was not a cruel man. but his whole life was dominated by fear the fear of failure and of weakness." - chinua*

*this book mr douche has us reading is so weird. okonkwo is a real prick. why does he have to beat on his woman. but maybe the b deserved it. seems dickish tho. i want ppl to take me serious to but i aint gotta be mean about it. its so weird that hes not really a bad guy, just afraid. maybe im so mad all the time because im so afr*

Hector never got to finish his last journal entry. At 10:53am on January 17, 2009, the lights went out.

Hector now stands at the open door and runs his tongue over the chipped tooth. His face hardens. *Just one more*, he tells himself. *Just one more*.

"Move."

The slight boy shoulders his .22 and steps aside. Inside, darkness. Hector hears labored breathing, creaking wood. He walks in.

"Light."

The other boy, a tall stick dressed in tan coveralls and a worn plaid shirt, takes a crooked

handmade candle out of his pack, jams it into a beer bottle, and lights it with an ancient Zippo. With a shaking blue hand he gives it to Hector, who turns around and walks into the basement. Light falls upon the concrete in front of Hector's feet. Hector walks in and a raspy voice rises from the other side of the darkness.

"I -- I..." the voice stammers, "I... I know... I know why you're here. I know you're upset..."

Hector's boots crackle across the litter-strewn concrete, a sound magnified by the stark silence, echoing against the wall and the wood beams above. The two boys have remained in the doorway, looking inside, but their presence isn't necessary. They just want to watch. One of them snuffles.

"Upset?" Hector answers. "You have no idea."

This has become a game for Hector. How far back can he push the inevitable? He's walked into this basement many times, walked across the field, the subdivision, this floor, candle in hand, many times. He's heard the same pleas for mercy, many times. He operates on something akin to emotion, maybe rage, but nothing that never quite reaches the level of what one would call *feeling*. It's response, instinct, self-training. The voice in the darkness starts, then stops, a halting breath of fear and hypothermia.

"Shon... Shon -- "

Hector tenses his arms. "*Don't* call me son."

This is the closest Hector's voice comes to emotion. He hates being called son. It reminds him of the old days, in high school, when he was called son too many times, when he was fighting against the Old Folks and their prison of social convention where people operated only to fulfill roles. He was tired of that, had grown tired of that years before, even before the

Blackout, the turning. Now he was the one holding the light, a Prometheus unpunished.

"Don't call me son." Firm.

Now on the other side of the cavernous basement, Hector can see what his comrades had brought him here to see. Tied with nylon string to a chair, a pale elderly man cowers, shaking. He is bruised on the jaw and has wet himself. Dried blood covers half his face, cakes around his left eye, stains a gray sweatshirt that unmistakable brown of terror. The old man tries his appeal once more, glancing up at his captor in two-second shots.

"Look, I... I know y'all are upshet with us, and I undershtand it, I do..."

The old man shivers and looks down, searching for words. His breath jumps. The chair squeaks.

"And I don't know what'sh happened anymore than you do, but..."

Hector, he's still walking, slow, he's almost annoyed at the man's groveling. He's done this before. He stops six feet away and sets down the candle. All the fighting with Tall Boy, all the rage against the Old Folks, all the regret he's been fighting -- it's there in that basement with him. Hector just wants to go home, but he says nothing.

"C'mon, now... you don't hafta..."

Five steps. Four steps.

Hector knows this voice. It's the same the same voice that told him that life was no dress rehearsal, the same voice that told Meat to back off, the same voice that told him to be present -- not just present, but *present*. Tonight, on the coldest night of the year, the voice is right in front of Hector. And Hector. Hector feels something like...

"We can make it better..."

Three steps. Two.

The old man's eyes grow bright in the dark basement.

"What'sh happened to you?"

One step.

With one swift, practiced move, Hector unsheathes his dagger and lurches toward the old  
man.

“The Black Snake”

By Meanface Bear Lightnin

I was in the yard makin clover necklaces, back before the lights went out, when Daddy tromped past with a machete. He told me follow. We got to the bottom of the yard and there was this big old black snake next to the fence, he was a ribbon shimmerin in the sunlight. Maybe three, four foot long, all black except a white ring on his neck. Daddy walked round the snake, he bent over.

*Can't take no chances*, he said. Daddy he took his hat off and rubbed his head. All his hair was wet. It was the hottest day I can remember.

*Girl, hold this*, he said. He handed me the machete, it was like a brick. He put his boot on the white ring. He pressed down. The snake started thrashin.

*Now don't be scared*, he said, but I was already so scared.

*No, Daddy*, I said. I ran around behind him and hid at his knee. Then he grabbed my wrist and put my hand on the snake, behind his boot. He moved his foot and stepped back. I held it down, kept it from movin.

*Go ahead*, Daddy said. And then he laughed.

I knew what he wanted me to do. I didn't say nothin, just stood there.

*Baby, you gotta do it.*

The machete felt like it was bein sucked into the ground. I knew things would be different if I used it.

Daddy he said, *Do it or do it*. I made a sound like a mouse.

Then he stopped laughin.

*Aw, you ain't worth nothin.*

Daddy snatched that blade from me and thwacked the head off that snake.

Mama hadn't run to the creek just yet, she was out front, so I wanted to run tell her, tell her that Daddy done killed a snake. I wanted Mama to rush me inside, away from Daddy and his machete and the black snake. I didn't really know how to feel, so I decided to feel empty. I just stood there and stared at the dead snake body, it was like a flat bike tire.

*Daddy*, I said, and started to cry.

He must've been real worried about me because he said, *Really? Are you serious, girl?*

*It's just a snake.*

I couldn't say nothin. Why'd he have to kill it? It was just a snake.

Daddy looked at the snake, then the machete. *Well*, he said, *good gravy.*

He put down the machete and knelt down next to me.

*No, no*, he said, *baby, don't cry.*

He put his big heavy hand on my shoulder. My hands on my eyes.

*I know you ain't a killer, baby*, he said. *But go ahead and cry.*

Then he got up and threw the snake and its head over the fence. Daddy come up and ruffled my hair then walked away, back out front with Mama. The woods around me started to breathe again.

That was last year. It seems like a long time ago. Now I'm starin out the window in the back room, where I stay, where I been stayin, missin Mama. This room is the only thing I like. I been in here since Mama went away. I stay in here because I think it'll make me feel safer. I don't.

Right after the lights went out for good, the hills around us lit up in flames and there was lines and lines of folks walkin down our dirt road. Daddy made us stay inside. Sometimes the

fires got real close and Daddy'd get nervous. We'd hear all kinds of noises, like they was a war goin on right outside our front door. Daddy'd get up and go outside. Me and Mama would hide in the back room, her and Daddy's room, and we'd make shadow puppets with the flashlight. When the loud booms came, Mama grabbed a hold of me and hugged me tight and sang me the song I hated. Then Daddy would come in with his .30-30, he'd be all sweaty, and he'd tell us to *Get down low!* and *Shut up!* Mama would just hug me tight and never let go.

My room has a window. It faces the creek. I used to could see Mama comin up the hill from the woods with these two big old buckets of water. Strainin with the weight, gruntin. But she ain't here no more. The window is hazy cause it's cold out and everything's blurry and my sadness fogs up the glass. Sometimes I believe that if I just stare through this window hard enough, long enough, that Mama will appear from behind a tree down there, a bucket of creek water in each hand.

I'm tired of bein scared. So I just sit here with my fingernails diggin under flakes of curled up paint. Daddy he's there on the back porch. He can't see me. But I can see him. He's wipin off a Daisy .177 cal air rifle.

Daddy he's been teachin me how to shoot the air rifle. I'm pretty good. Daddy says I just need a steady hand because I ain't worth nothin as it is. Daddy he says if I'm gonna use a big gun to hunt I gotta know the basics. He keeps his .45 with him everywhere he goes. He don't let me near it though. See, sometimes my hands get to shakin so bad and I just stare at em, like they gonna do a trick or somethin. Leaves on a tree. It's the quiet that gets to me, that makes me nervous. It's just me and Daddy now, it's just the quiet and sometime the pops in the woods. That's when my hands start to shakin.

Daddy says I gotta be more steady. *Squeeze, don't pull*, he says, then when I mess up,

*Aw, you ain't worth nothin.* He loves me a lot because he spends all that time teachin me the basics out back, shootin at old cans and stuff. I'm pretty good, but Daddy he says I need to hold my arms more steady. *Squeeze, don't pull.*

I'm at the window lookin at my hands when a cold man walks in our yard. He's lookin around and walkin real slow. Now he's standin below the porch, pointin his gun up at Daddy. I look down the hill and wait for Mama. She don't come.

My fingernail drags across the sill, pullin up some old paint. I get real still. Daddy looks down at the man.

*Get that thing outta my face,* Daddy says.

*Put yours down first,* the man says.

Daddy he chuckles. *It's a bb gun, dipshit.* He spits in the yard. *What's that, a twenty-two?*

The man don't say nothin. Daddy he ain't scared, just puts the air rifle down next to his chair. He gets up and walks toward the back steps. The man hollers somethin and takes a step back, almost trips. His legs are all wobbly. He can't hardly hold his gun up.

*Son,* Daddy says, *you about to pass right out.*

The man takes a step toward Daddy, flips off the safety. *Don't call me son,* he says.

He's a soldier I think, like the other ones we seen around. His clothes are all ash and mud. His face is like a cinder block, little holes in his skin and lots of whiskers. He's young, I can tell, but he looks a lot older. Maybe just tired.

*I'm a soldier with the occupying force,* he says. His words are big but his voice ain't. *I have the authority to confiscate all arms,* he says.

Daddy leans on the railin. *Is that so?* he says. *And just what force are you with?*

*That's none of your business.* The man moves his jaw around. *Just hand over your arms, old man. I know you got some more in there.*

Daddy takes off his hat and runs his hand across his head.

*Water, too, says the man. Gimme some water.*

*You ain't with no occupyin force, Daddy says. You're just a kid. You ain't even got a uniform.*

*No, I'm for real and I got a buncha other guys just out in the street waitin.*

*Call em over, Daddy says, we'll have us a potluck.*

The man's voice gets higher and I know he's scared because my voice does the same thing when I'm scared. I kinda feel sorry for him cause I know what it's like to have shaky hands.

*You think I'm jokin? he says. You think I'm kiddin around?*

Daddy's voice gets lower. *I think you're scared, you little prick. And if you don't get that rifle outta my face I'm gonna come over there and...*

Daddy looks over at the window where I'm sittin then cinches up his overalls and starts to walkin over to the man. I get a sick feelin in my belly. The man in the yard, he puts his rifle down next to his foot and opens up his jacket. When he reaches to his belt, I see there's a dark stain on the side of his shirt. Daddy sees it, too. He stands in the yard.

*You shot, son?*

The man's eyes roll back in his head and he drops to the ground. Sure enough, he's passed right out.

Daddy takes a deep breath and puts his hands on his hips.

*Well, good gravy.*

I tug on a piece of my hair and put it in my mouth. I chew on it. Daddy walks real slow over to the man and bends over, takes the big knife from him, puts it in his pocket. He pulls some twine out of his overalls and goes to work on the man, but I can't see. Daddy picks him up over his shoulder and carries him up the steps to the porch and I see he done tied the man's hands together. I think that's real nice of Daddy to make sure the man's arms don't flop around.

Daddy he's always been like this, helpin folks like this. This one time, maybe a couple year ago, Daddy was watchin TV after work and Mama come rushin in the house all excited. Mama she told Daddy that Miss Della's tree was on fire next door. So Daddy he run out and Miss Della's magnolia was dancin in flames, a Christmas tree, only red and orange instead of green. Blue jays and robins flyin out. Miss Della's house wasn't but ten foot away from the tree, the plastic sidin curlin into little white flowers from the heat. Daddy run out into her yard and drug Miss Della's green water hose over to the tree.

Daddy he hollered, *Girl, turn the water on!* so I run around her house to the spicket. It was hard to turn but I got real strong and turned it all the way, lefty loosey. Now the little white flowers were big old drops of candle wax, white drops of flame that splattered when they hit the ground. I was gettin scared. Daddy, he was real calm like always.

I remember Mama askin Daddy if he wanted her to call the fire department, this was before the fire department went away, but Daddy he told her to *shut up woman* and he got right under that fire and shot it with water. His hands were steady and his aim was tight. Little ashy leaves fell on his head, he brushed them away like deer flies, but part of his skin got splotchy red. He didn't cry.

I wanted Della's house to burn down. I wanted her to burn with it. All the time yelled at me to quit hollerin so loud in the back yard. Just sat on her front porch and dipped snuff all

day long. I had a kitten once, his name was Henry, I'm sure Miss Della poisoned him.

Daddy said no, I couldn't go over and put her in jail for that. He said he'd go and talk to her. He come back and put his .45 on the table and said he couldn't do nothin about it. But Miss Della never told me to quit hollerin in the yard ever again. I bet they had a real nice talk.

The last time she ever said a word to me was that night her house almost burned down. She bent over and said, *Thank you*. She gave me a Charleston chew. I hate Charleston chew.

I thought about telling her how I hated Charleston chew and how I wished she'd burned up with her house, but I didn't have the heart. She was just old and angry. Daddy had taught me to feel sorry for her. I said, *You're welcome*. I put the Charleston chew in my pocket.

The smell of winter comes in with Daddy when he hauls the man in through the back door. It smells of brown leaves and cold air. I'm standing in the utility room between the back room and the kitchen, next to the back door. The man doesn't smell like winter. He smells like he's desperate.

*Is he dead, Daddy?*

*No. He's sleepin.*

Daddy lets out a breath when he puts the man on the kitchen floor. Mud comes off his scratched up boots in sheets and onto the floor. I'll have to mop tonight. There's a bunch of paper pokin out of his big coat pocket.

It's gettin cold in the house so Daddy puts another piece of wood in the stove. While he's crouchin at the fire, I look at the man sleepin on the floor. Well, Daddy says he's sleepin. He sure looks dead to me. I seen dead animals before, just the ones Daddy brings up.

*Daddy, I say, what's it like to kill a animal?*

*Nothin, Daddy says.*

*What's it like?*

Daddy clears his throat. He stands up and turns around. His face sinks down to this neck.

*It's like nothin, he says. It's like snappin a branch off a tree.*

He goes back to stokin the fire. I chew on my hair. The man is down there, breathin real quiet, so I guess he really is sleepin.

*Daddy, I say, what was the first animal you killed?*

Daddy clears his throat again but don't turn around.

*Ain't it time for your nap, girl?*

*But what was the first?*

Daddy stops with the fire and says, *It was a dove.*

*Did you wanna kill it?*

*Naw, I didn't. Well, I wanted to shoot it. Not kill it.*

*But you killed it?*

*Yeah, Daddy says. Yeah, I killed it.*

*What'd it do? I say. When you shot it?*

*Hell, I don't know. Flapped its wings and then fell down.*

I look out the window. It's gonna rain tonight.

*Daddy, I say, what'd it look like?*

*Wet. His feathers was all messed up. Like spikes.*

*Did you poke it?*

Daddy laughs and stands up, sits down in his chair.

*Yeah, I poked it.*

*Did you pick it up?*

*Yeah, I picked it up.*

*What'd it feel like?*

Daddy leans back in his chair, takes a deep breath.

*Like a sack of corn.*

Daddy gets up and walks over to me. He's big. He puts his paw on my head and says,  
*Nap time.*

He's behind me, kinda pushin me into the back room, when I turn around and look up at  
him.

*Daddy, I say, what'd it make you feel like?*

Daddy stops and puts his hands in his overalls. His arms are startin to shake, like he's  
gettin anxious about somethin. His voice gets real rough.

*Bad, he says.*

*Bad? Like you done somethin wrong?*

*Yeah, yeah, like I done somethin wrong.*

*Then what?*

He really wants me to take my nap. I can tell cause he grabs my hair and jerks it toward  
the back room.

*Goddammit, he says.*

I just stay quiet and let him jerk me back there. Then he stops.

*Nothin, he says.*

I don't say nothin. I just rub my head and look up at him. He's starin off somewhere.

*Just decided not to feel nothin, he says.*

*But what did you feel? I say, real quiet.*

*I just said, girl, he says, I didn't feel nothin.*

*Seems like you'd feel somethin.*

*Maybe. Just didn't want to. Couldn't do nothin with it. It was just a sack of corn.*

*Threw it off in the woods.*

Daddy seems like he's about to say something but he don't. He looks down at me and puts his hand on my head and ruffles my hair.

*Now go on, run back in there, Daddy says, run take a nap, and he starts walkin back out.*

*But Daddy, I say, the man, is he --*

Daddy stops in the doorway to the kitchen.

*You little shit, what'd I just say?*

Daddy'll be mad if I don't run back and take a nap.

When I lay down on the bed, I think about the man's missin teeth and how Mama was missin the same teeth. She smelled better, though, like jasmine. Even after all the lights went out, she still sprayed her jasmine perfume on every mornin. I bury my face into the pillow, it still smells like jasmine.

It's dark, near suppertime, when I wake up. There's a deep sound like coughs comin from out there. I tiptoe to the door and open it real slow. I look out the slit of the open door through the utility room and see Daddy's face real close to the man's notebook. Daddy's sittin cross-legged on the floor, holdin his head in his hands. Cryin. He's holdin the notebook like it's a dead bird he's wishin back to life.

I don't know why he's so sad. Maybe he's thinkin about Mama. Is he mad at me? I didn't do nothin wrong.

*Daddy?*

He turns so his back is to me. Now there's two strangers in our house. Am I in trouble?

I close the door quiet and try to go back to sleep. I want to go back to my dream, the one I always have, the one where Mama's walking out of the woods from the creek. She's carrying those two buckets of water. In my dream I run down the back steps to the fence and she sees me and smiles. I curl my hands around the cattle fencin and jump up and down.

In my dream she's always singin that song.

*Oh my my, oh me me,*

*Looky looky who I see!*

*Oh my stars, oh my world,*

*It's my favorite little girl!*

I always hated that song. Mama and Daddy said all the songs my friends sang were too worldly, so what I got was what I got. I liked Mama singin that song, I just hated the song.

She sang that horrible song the last time I saw her. She was comin out the back door with her buckets. I was makin castles out of dirt and when she told me, *I'll miss you*, all I said was, *Okay*. I went inside and ate supper then boom and flash, closer than what I'd heard before. *That there is lightnin and thunder*, Daddy told me, *only a bad storm*, like he always said. Mama she didn't come back.

Now there's the same thunder sound outside my room but it's closer. I get that feelin in my belly, like I'm gonna throw up or pass out, but I get worried about Daddy and open the door.

The man is still on the kitchen floor. Daddy is kneelin over him. The man seems like he's chokin or somethin and Daddy he's got his hands around the man's throat to help him breathe right. The man coughs again and whines a little, his legs flop around and his boots

make a loud noise on the floor something terrible. He must be hurtin. Daddy, he's really thinkin hard about how to help him, so he puts his hands around the man's throat again to help him breathe. Daddy's always helpin people like this.

I'm in the utility room now, right next to the kitchen. I don't hear too good what they're sayin but it seems like maybe Daddy's tryin to get the man to talk.

It's dark in the doorway and I can't hear too good so I walk closer to see if maybe I can help. Daddy he sees me and says, *No, girl, stay in there.* I just kinda move off to the side of our big table and peek over it. Daddy has his hands on the man's chest now and I see he's real mad.

*Where is she?* Daddy says. He's shakin.

*No, no,* the man says, *it wasn't me. It was --*

*Where is she?* Daddy says again, real loud. I almost answer him that I'm right here, but I keep quiet.

*Dude, what the hell,* the man says, *I just came up here for some water.* He looks real worried, his face is all sad. *I'm just passin through, honest, I don't want no trouble.*

Daddy takes the knife out of his pocket and sticks it right in the man's belly. There's a sound of cloth rippin. The man clears his throat. My hand flies up to my mouth. I don't even know it's there until I try to breathe and can't.

*I read your notebook, you little shit,* Daddy says. This is my house, but now I'm trapped in it. I feel sick again. I want to run back in my room but I can't move. The screen door out back slams in the wind. It shocks me and I want to ask Daddy somethin.

If I talk real quiet he won't get mad at me. *Daddy?*

Daddy looks back and his eyes hit me hard. *Shut up.*

I crawl under the table because Daddy's hittin the man real hard. Daddy's back is to me so I can't see it, but I see his hands going up and down, up and down, and the sound is like throwin a potato up against a wall. The man keeps sayin *no, no, no* and beggin Daddy to let up.

*Only a couple weeks, man, he says. I didn't do it, I swear to God!*

Daddy's askin the man how long ago he saw the woman. I can see his face now. He's lookin up at Daddy with this look on his face, like *Why are you doin this?*

But his eyes are hard. He rocks one of his boots back and forth. I don't believe him. He's a bad man.

I look at the man, he's gaspin and breathin real hard. I know he's one of them boys what took my mama. He's got that bad look on him. And I ain't afraid no more.

Daddy has the man's knife up at his face and that knife, it's shakin. Daddy keeps pokin it at the man's cheek and then pullin it back, sayin *Oh God oh Jesus* like he's afraid it's gonna cut him. Daddy can't do it.

I look on the table and see the strawberry preserves Mama made last year. Me and Daddy put it on biscuits this mornin. It was sweet and tart and tasted just a little bit like jasmine. Next to the jar is Daddy's .45 pistol, cold and alone.

Daddy and the man are still yellin at each other so they don't see me take the pistol off the table, real quiet. I walk up behind Daddy and aim it at the man's head. He don't see me because he's got blood all in his eyes.

*Squeeze, don't pull, I hear in my head.*

The gun goes off and I jump back. Daddy he jumps back too. The man's throat explodes and he makes this gurgle sound. The blood makes like a red ring on his neck. Daddy all he can say is *Oh God oh Jesus* but I don't say nothin. I smell smoke. It's quiet. It don't feel

like nothin.

Daddy told me about Sack Man when I was real little. He told me Sack Man walked up and down the street with a sack in his hand and he, he took people. Daddy he'd say, *That's why we want you to be good, so Sack Man don't take you.* Mama'd tell me, *Darlin he ain't real,* and Daddy would shake his head and say, *Lord I hope he ain't real,* and then just get real quiet and look at me and wink. I never knew if he was for real or not. For a while there I didn't let it get me afraid, I didn't believe in him.

Now I believe in Sack Man. He come up in my yard today. I wasn't takin no chances. So I killed him. There is no way to come back from somethin like that.

Daddy runs his sleeve across his face. He looks up at me. He sniffles.

*Well, I say, let's throw it over the fence.*