

**A PROMISE, OR, ESCAPE FROM THE EVIL OGRE'S TIME COCOON, OR WHAT IS RETRIBUTION OR REDEMPTION AND DO THESE GUYS NEED ONE OR THE OTHER OR BOTH OR NEITHER OR SOMETHING ELSE?**

*A play written for audio by*

*Mohammad Shebata*

**NOTE:** ONE is the same person throughout the play, and so is TWO. The play takes place in different universes: a universe where ONE and TWO are two brothers in a magic forest with an evil ogre. And a universe much like our own where the ONE and TWO brothers are reconciling in an outdoor pub after sixteen years of no contact. And possibly a universe in between or around those two. The author has made no obvious indication as to when and where the characters speak as people in one Universe versus another, in part because in a few areas, the author himself is not sure. In part because the characters are sometimes speaking in both universes at the same time; in part because sometimes a character will be present in one universe and speak as himself in the other universe. When there is a clear transition between one universe and the other, this is usually indicated by a (SOUND) note.

**THE PLAY BEGINS**

(OVERTURE)

**TWO:** If I start at the beginning, none of this will make any sense.

Let's start with now.

Where am I?

What is my body doing?

What's my story?

I must be present. I must not let my mind wander. I made a promise. That's it. I am in...the forest. There is no light; I cannot see. I can only hear the sounds of my own thoughts. It's almost comforting; my fear is nearly gone. But the danger is still very much present. If I make it out of here I will definitely have a great story to tell to my brother. Oh, why can't we just be back home together, telling stories? Why did we ever feel like we had to do anything else? Wait. My... *brother*. That's why I'm here, isn't it? To find and rescue my brother. From who? *An evil ogre*. I'm here to save my brother from the ogre! That's a start. My mind is coming back to me now. My hand is grasping something... a... cigarette? What on earth is that? *Cigarette*. Who put this word into my head? And this thin, enticing, smoking contraption between my fingers? No. No. it's a weapon. A knife. My great, great, great, great, great grandmother's knife. The only knife capable of slaying the ogre. But I have no intention of slaying the ogre, only to find my brother and get out of here. There is no point in trying to squelch evil with force, one can only hope to avoid the fate of a lost soul. My brother came to kill the ogre, but I know better, and I will save him. But how did this knife come into my possession? My brother took it with him when he left in search of the ogre. I must have found my brother! But where is he? And why don't I remember? That's alright I can remember later. But at least I know why I'm here. Ok, I can feel my footing now but I can't move my feet. I must be in a trap of some sort. I see... time. Time is like a ball of yarn and all the strings are tangling and

untangling in front of me. Is this all happening in my head? No. Things are actually happening. The dark forest is real. The evil ogre is real. My brother is real. The danger is real. But I must release my mind from the delusion. How? The wise old healer told me that the only way to make it through the forest is straight through. That seems right. She also told me that my life is a metaphor for lives unfolding in another string of time. That doesn't make any sense. Maybe the old healer was crazy... but... straight through. Seems like the only option. I have to go straight through this trap, if I am going to find my brother and escape the ogre and escape this damned and forsaken place. But *how?*

**ONE:** Smoke?

**TWO:** What?

**ONE:** Smoke?

**TWO:** Brother? It's you! I've found you! Why are you... and who is that other fellow... he's rather handsome if a bit drab and pale and sort of depressed looking and easy to manipulate looking.... is this man an amateur scholar? Perhaps a hobbyist who fashions contemporary fiction tales? Is that... *me?* With a... *cigarette?* And... libations? And a bright sun... what is this... this place? Heaven? Are my brother and I dead and in heaven... did that blasted ogre eat us both!? Or... am I... is this... *another string of time?* *You are a metaphor for lives unfolding in another string of time.* This is the other string of time. I see... and I must... I must go through it... I'm in a ...time cocoon!!... the ogre has trapped me in a time cocoon!! And, if I see my brother, he must be in here too! That means he's alive... I must live this string of time. I must go through it, in order to save us both. It will require all my mental fortitude. I must go straight through. I must live this strange other life. Always remember... who... am.... I??

*(SOUND)*

**ONE:** Smoke?

**TWO:** I quit.

**ONE:** Oh, me too. It's the best way to heighten the taste.

**TWO:** Cigarettes are like my father.

**ONE:** And what was he like?

**TWO:** Not at all present, or overwhelmingly so.

**ONE:** Just one.

**TWO:** No.

**ONE:** A man needs an occupation.

**TWO:** Oh please you can't do Lady Bracknell and not go full out.

**ONE:** I'll do it if you have a cigarette.

**TWO:** Fine.

**ONE:** *(LADY BRACKNELL, FULL OUT)* Young man, should you become an alcoholic layabout crippled by being trained to compete in a system designed to reward labor with more labor, I and your father will inform you of the fact.

**TWO:** You win; I'll have the whole pack.

**ONE:** Plenty more where that came from.

*(A MOMENT WHILE THEY SMOKE AND MAKE SOUNDS OF PLEASURE)*

**ONE:** I liked your story about being detained at the bus station. I'm still thinking about the unsolicited advice that woman on the bus gave you after that whole affair. Frankly I think her comment was entirely unnecessary.

**TWO:** Honestly, the whole thing about waiting for someone to ask for your advice or your opinion

is such an overrated concern... opinions aren't meant to be *solicited*; in cultures where capitalism hasn't totally infused itself into even the language people use, you might be surprised that people simply offer up their thoughts when they want to... you know *freedom of expression*.

**ONE:** Yeah, but that woman was way out of pocket.

**TWO:** Should I have hit her?

**ONE:** Hit a woman? God no. You should have blown up the bus.

**TWO:** I had plenty of C4 on me; fortunately those cops were far too good at their job. They eventually let me go take my seat on the bus and went off to beat up the unarmed homeless fellow down the street.

**ONE:** Jesus Saint Mary what an outrage!

**TWO:** What?

**ONE:** No one says, "fellow," any more. It's wildly archaic.

**TWO:** Is that right?

**ONE:** Further more, why does someone carry C4 and *not* blow up a bus?

**TWO:** Why does someone carry candy and not blow up a bus?

**ONE:** Well, you should have done *something*.

**TWO:** There was nothing to be done; frankly I thought she gave me good advice.

**ONE:** So she's on the bus with all the other passengers, all of whom are watching this interaction between you and the cops unfold, and when you are finally allowed on the bus she has the effrontery to tell you, "*don't take it personally*." What does she know about being harassed by the FBI? Can't a man carry his C4 in peace? So much for a free country. What was the cops' excuse for stopping you anyway?

**TWO:** It was the way I sat down.

**ONE:** On the bus?

**TWO:** In the station. I hadn't been allowed to board the bus yet.

**ONE:** Was this before or after they detained you?

**TWO:** *After* they detained me, of course. What would give them a reason to suspect me other than having already detained me?

**ONE:** The C4 you were packing.

**TWO:** But they didn't know I was packing C4.

**ONE:** So they had to detain you in order to find out.

**TWO:** But they didn't find out.

**ONE:** Because they went to beat up a homeless man.

**TWO:** An unarmed homeless man.

**ONE:** But before that they detained you, and then you... sat. down.

**TWO:** It was the *way* I sat down.

**ONE:** And how did you sit down?

**TWO:** "*Like you'd never met before but you'd known him your whole life.*"

**ONE:** What does that even mean?

**TWO:** That's what the cop said.

**ONE:** "*Like you'd never met him before but you'd known him your whole life.*" Mary Lord Jesus Moses! That's a... *paradox*. Also, it means... someone else was there with you. Someone else had been detained!

**TWO:** Your powers of deduction are ethereal.

**ONE:** Why thank you.

**TWO:** I did not know this other fellow.

**ONE:** *But it's as if you did*. And you refer to him as *fellow*, a word that represents the complete opposite of pleasant intimacy, and you would not have met him nor seen his face ever in your life let

alone *known* him for your whole life had you not been detained, and there was no cause to suspect you without the cops already having detained and searched you without cause. But those geniuses were on to you anyway! National heroes.

(PAUSE; LAUGHS)

Such a silly game.

(PAUSE)

Anyway, it's just a story. Or did that really happen to you?

**TWO:** I mean... it's embellished.

**ONE:** So it's a true story?

**TWO:** Well I just find it extremely difficult to fictionalize. So I take maybe a small happening in my life and try to make it sound exciting.

**ONE:** So the FBI actually pulled you aside because they thought the way you sat down was suspicious? And a woman on the bus told you to not take it personally... and your reaction was to smile and oblige all the way through?

**TWO:** More or less. When I finally got on the bus, I did throw my bag onto my seat out of frustration.

**ONE:** And this woman took it as an opportunity to enmire you into her perspective on the matter.

**TWO:** I enmired her in my frustration. With my dramatic display.

**ONE:** But your response... was "absolutely yes, they're just doing their job."

**TWO:** What should I have said?

**ONE:** "Fuck off." Or, "none of your business." You can't let people just assume you'll take everything that's thrown at you.

**TWO:** It never occurs to me to be angry at these things. That's the truth I want to convey.

**ONE:** You know the Nazis were just doing their job too.

**TWO:** Oh please can we not play that stupid game I am so bored of that paradigm let's find a new way to analyze justice, yes?

**ONE:** Sixty-eight percent.

**TWO:** Sorry?

**ONE:** Sixty-eight percent of the world's refugees come from a race of people who make up less than five percent of the world's population.

**TWO:** We're not refugees. Besides I'm writing a story. I'm trying to be dramatically interesting, not politically relevant.

**ONE:** You have to write what you know, don't you?

**TWO:** I don't know anything!

**ONE:** Great. Now that that's settled all I have to say is... *fuck the police.*

(ONE shouts "fuck the police," perhaps more than once. And we hear celebratory callbacks.)

**TWO:** Frankly I was flattered they'd noticed my ability to invest so much emotion and dramatic energy into the simple act of *sitting down*. I'd just taken a Meisner class.

**ONE:** Meisner?

**TWO:** Sanford Meisner. The acting teacher.

**ONE:** You study... acting?

**TWO:** I dabble.

**ONE:** Let's hear something then! A speech! A poem!

**TWO:** Really? I'm not a professional.

**ONE:** I prefer amateur actors.

**TWO:** Why?

**ONE:** Actors are like whores. The amateurs always retain that spark in their eye.

**TWO:** Is there such thing as an amateur whore?

**ONE:** That's anyone who has sex and not for money. Let's hear something!

**TWO:** Alright this is an original poem I wrote about a stranger I met at a café. (*ACTING*) Your skin is the sand. And your hair is the urchins washed up to shore from the ocean that is your eyes. Eyes I cannot see, because the light is so dim; I am not worthy of their depth. Not yet. At least.

(*PAUSE*)

**ONE:** I have one tip.

**TWO:** On the acting?

**ONE:** God no! The acting was... *sublime*.

**TWO:** Oh god, thank you...

**ONE:** Absolutely flawless.

**TWO:** Oh, well you know, there's always room to improve. You should have seen me recite this poem last Tuesday! Oh I was touched by the hand of god, then!

**ONE:** The writing is good but I have one little thing to say about it.

**TWO:** Please! I want your honest thoughts I'm dying to improve.

**ONE:** I shouldn't say... it's perfect as it is.

**TWO:** No please it would be my honor to get a note from you!

**ONE:** Well... a few things, but the main thing is... it's a bit too lofty. I mean actually saying this to a stranger you've fallen in love with might scare them off. Try writing the way people talk.

(*PAUSE*)

**TWO:** Fuck off.

**ONE:** It's still very touching.

**TWO:** Just stop.

**ONE:** Don't. Take it. Personally.

**TWO:** Oh that's clever of you. (*PAUSE*) I think we can agree violating my civil rights is nothing compared to the offense of providing initially welcome criticism of my writing.

**ONE:** Without question. In fact I prefer my writing lauded and my civil rights shat upon, like any great artist.

**TWO:** Even a gargoyle could get me off by denying me civil rights; Helen of Troy or Adonis can't offer me writing criticism without my smashing their face in.

**ONE:** You sir are a civilized man.

(*PAUSE*)

**ONE:** So... what is on the remainder of your agenda for today?

**TWO:** Oh, today I have what the kids these days might refer to as a *booty call*.

**ONE:** Is that right?

**TWO:** Quite right.

**ONE:** Don't you ever go to work?

**TWO:** Of course. One needs a break from pornography every so often.

**ONE:** Boy or girl?

**TWO:** Girl. Lesbian girl.

**ONE:** And how did you meet this lesbian girl booty call?

**TWO:** At the pub.

**ONE:** Details, man! Details!

**TWO:** I go to the pub thinking I want only one drink, then a fellow pulls up to me and buys me eight rounds of shots hoping to recruit me as his wingman. Moments later I'm on a dance floor the size of a peanut... impossible not to grab *something*. I must have had sixteen hands on my buttocks alone, and a girl grabs my crotch and goes, "*I'm a lesbian who needs some dick tonight.*"

**ONE:** It's rather reassuring she included the point about being a lesbian; complete and immediate transparency is always a good sign. What did you say?

**TWO:** The truth.

**ONE:** Bold move.

**TWO:** I told her, "*I'm a gay boy who likes girls.*"

**ONE:** Brilliant. That separates you from nearly zero percent of the earth's male population.

**TWO:** She drags me out by the head of my cock looking for a place to fuck.

**ONE:** Always appreciate the coy type.

**TWO:** We find a greenhouse down the block.

**ONE:** Clean air is a must for copulation. Plus the extra humidity adds to the sense of urgency.

**TWO:** The greenhouse is usually open to the public on weekdays.

**ONE:** A free place to fuck on a weekday afternoon!

**TWO:** But it's a weekend night; the greenhouse is locked.

**ONE:** A twist in the plot!

**TWO:** But I'm drunk so I'll do anything. I tear open the greenhouse sheet covering and we proceed to the fucking.

**ONE:** You animal. Free alcohol; free lesbian; free greenhouse. How wonderful to be in the land of liberty.

**TWO:** I feel ashamed that I tore open the greenhouse.

**ONE:** You don't feel ashamed about giving a lesbian whiskey dick?

**TWO:** It was vodka. My patron was a cheapskake.

**ONE:** You have such a wild life. No wonder you're not nearly as good an artist as I am.

**TWO:** I'm not wild at all. That kind of thing never happens to me; I'd never had sex in my life before that night I gave a lesbian vodka-dick in a greenhouse. That's why I'm telling it to you. It's a novelty. Well, not for me technically, since it's the only sex I've ever known.

**ONE:** What I mean to say is you have the *potential* to be much better, better than me, if you just stopped clitting around.

**TWO:** Clitting?

**ONE:** It's my substitute for "dicking." I'm a feminist.

**TWO:** A feminist? Sir! *There are children present.*

**ONE:** Children?! I like to ejaculate into their corpses.

*(PAUSE)*

**TWO:** You always take it too far.

**ONE:** Oh, come on, you've got to keep it going.

**TWO:** I'm leaving.

**ONE:** No, stay. I'm sorry. Let's just talk, alright? Let's pretend we're not brothers, we're just

strangers at the pub. We hardly know each other anyway. Let's act like we don't know each other and we never have to see each other again after this. We're just strangers at the pub, yeah? That's the best. We can divulge all the secrets we wouldn't dare tell our most intimate companions, and go our separate ways. It's the key to writing actually, you know, to package everything around a secret, a secret you tell millions of strangers, but never anyone who actually knows who you are. Best way to hide in plain site is to write something. Anyway, I won't lecture you. We're just strangers at the pub.

**TWO:** No, we're brothers

**ONE:** Yes, I know, but like I said let's just play pretend--

**TWO:** This is not pretend!

**ONE:** Such a lack of imagination.

**TWO:** *No! We are in a forest! A forest terrorized by a terrible ogre!*

**ONE:** Oh that's good, I take it back.

**TWO:** *And you're trapped! Trapped in a time cocoon! Don't give in! Just hold out a little longer; I'm coming for you!*

**ONE:** Trapped? Huh... brother? You. You followed me into the forest?

*(SOUND)*

**ONE:** Where.... Where? I don't see anything. What is that pounding? Last thing I saw were... eyes. Terrible, terrible eyes. And teeth. Am I being devoured by the ogre? Oh no. I've failed. I've failed everyone... my family will be eternally cursed... there is no hope. I failed. I will just sink back into this strange but pleasurable dream... at least I can see my brother again...

*(SOUND)*

**TWO:** You don't feel like a stranger.

**ONE:** huh? oh... well... The feeling doesn't matter. You're so invested in your feelings no wonder you are a failed actor.

**TWO:** You said my acting was sublime! Flawless even!

**ONE:** It was a lie. Haven't you ever heard of one?

**TWO:** A few actually.

**ONE:** Like what?

**TWO:** Right and wrong. Friendship. The whole damn world.

**ONE:** Who told you about those?

**TWO:** My mother. She told me all the lies.

*(PAUSE)*

**ONE:** I'm surprised you smoke. Filthy habit, you know.

**TWO:** I only had one cigarette. Growing up I had one very remarkable role model.

**ONE:** And who might that be?

*(PAUSE)*

**ONE:** I was addicted to *pleasing* people first. One filthy habit replaced by another. At least this habit pleases no one.

**TWO:** Except anyone who wants a cigarette.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** How do you like the city?

**TWO:** It's godless.

**ONE:** You're a man of god now?

**TWO:** Always have been.

**ONE:** How were you informed of his presence? He's not so well known you know.

**TWO:** I always keep voraciously abreast of the tabloids.

**ONE:** And why is this place godless?

**TWO:** Haven't you heard? The rats took over; they kicked god out. All I ever see is fucking rats. Huge fucking rats; on any given day I am more likely to see more of them than I would other humans. Most of these people walk the sidewalks with a confidence; what ever they're heading towards must be the most important thing in the world—they're busy. I tiptoe and sprint across these paths. I've never walked a sidewalk at night without seeing a rat scurry past me; they ride over my toes. I see them everywhere. As though they only appear to me like I'm some long awaited rat messiah. The King of Rats. I can't hold a conversation out on the street because they beckon me in public; leading militias within the gutters, reconnaissance around the wheels of parked trucks; these things are everywhere even when they're not. They're the last thought I have when I go to bed and the first when I wake up. I see their slippery tails slime through every crack and crevice of whatever dinge hole I happen to be living in at the time. Something about this place fills me with a kind of dread. Not the whole continent, but America in particular. Especially this city. But I think I have to leave the whole continent and get as far away as possible from whatever is coming. Something just gives me the feeling that we haven't seen what's close to the worst of it all. It just feels like we're building to the comeuppance of comeuppances. And I need to get as far away as possible. But I don't know if this is just brash and paranoid.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** You must have gotten engaged recently.

**TWO:** Not at all I am far too truthful to be subject to mere vows.

(PAUSE). THEY LAUGH.

PAUSE.

**ONE:** You haven't lost your touch.

**TWO:** And you're on fire!

**ONE:** It's been too long.

**TWO:** It's so surreal seeing you.

**ONE:** I'm sorry I should have told you I was coming.

**TWO:** No, it's ok.

**ONE:** I mean, I don't know, it seemed weird either way. To just call you up and say... hey little brother, haven't seen or heard from you in a decade and a half but I'm coming to visit...

**TWO:** It's really ok, honestly. I love that you're here. You've always inspired me.

**ONE:** Yeah?

**TWO:** The way you just made a *decision*. And followed through on your *conviction* to be somebody.

**ONE:** Didn't turn out to be what I expected.



**TWO:** It's not the worst case scenario.

**ONE:** What's the worst case scenario?

**TWO:** Have you read Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*?

**ONE:** Didn't I give you that book?

**TWO:** I don't remember. You must have. It's the only book I carry with me when I move around.

**ONE:** You move around a lot?

**TWO:** I'm a self-publishing writer.

**ONE:** Do you need money or anything? It's the least I can do.

**TWO:** Oh no, I loathe money.

**ONE:** And that's why you're a failed whore.

**TWO:** I've got a pretty good set up at the moment.

**ONE:** When I was your age an RV with no heat and no water was a pretty good set up. I lived in one for half a year, but I had to leave when I found out the shit people were on to me. Every Tuesday morning, when I walked out the door, I was greeted by a pile of the gnarliest shit.

**TWO:** Damn.

**ONE:** Yeah, it even swirled like an ice cream cone.

**TWO:** I'm pretty spoiled. I mean, life is hard in an existential way. But really... it's not hard at all. I don't act like a religious person but I thank god every day. I'll stand on a street corner blind drunk holding a cigarette and I'll be thanking god. He feels so real to me these days. Sure, I still stare at all the beautiful people with longing, but I stare at the homeless and forsaken even longer, with a sense of humility. I didn't earn any of this. I've only ever done what I was already good at and I've never put in so much as an ounce of work. I've never done anything harder than breathing. My story was written for me before the stars themselves were conceived.

**ONE:** Sorry to inform you but the stars were conceived out of god's cuckolding.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** God really feels real to you?

**TWO:** It's weird. I was such a wimp as a kid, it's embarrassing; I always did what I was told; never held my fist up to anyone. *Except god*. I always felt so angry and betrayed, and no one ever told us any fairy tales so how else was I supposed to project these unbearable urges? Those times I would cry out in silent agony up to god were the only times he felt real to me, then. I still went to bed thinking I had to protect him from the doubters.

**ONE:** Didn't we tell each other fairytales?

**TWO:** Did we?

**ONE:** God is what keeps you going?

**TWO:** Well. A rat has to gnaw continuously in order to prevent its teeth from growing into its head.

**ONE:** I should have told you. I never believed in god.

**TWO:** I'm glad you didn't tell me.

**ONE:** I get what you mean though. About the beautiful and the forsaken. When I lived in the Bay Area a friend owed me a favor and let me sleep in his closet for a few months. It was right at the beginning of the rideshare industry and there was more money to be had there than you would expect. I had a decent enough car so everyday I'd crash into a building hoping I could profit from this budding new source of democratic commerce, then I'd pretend to go looking for another job but most of the time I would order a burger and fries and ice cream and whatever and just eat it in my car. I never liked eating with people; it always struck me as a shameful activity. I used to park downtown and I would frequently watch a homeless woman with a literal hole for a face pass by. Her face looked like a mouth with no teeth and infected gums. I sometimes saw her more times in

one week than I did anyone who called me a friend. And I never spoke a word to her. When I think back in the time I spent there it's *her* face I think of the most. I don't know, maybe she would have made a decent enough wife. At least you'd never have to hear her talk. I've always wanted to be true to one woman. I think that's what every man has wanted since the beginning of history: an opportunity to prove that they are the bravest among men. And an opportunity to prove to one woman that they are among the most loving of lovers, and to be true to her. How brave would it have been to fall in love with a woman who has a hole for a face? I imagine having a first date with my future wife, just an hour, just a coffee with three sugars, no touching, and a feeling that she is safe and happy in my presence. And my heart swells to near implosion. It takes courage to go slow and deep. It is not an easy courage, but it is a necessary one.

(PAUSE)

Then I imagine being swallowed by her face.

**TWO:** To be fair that could happen with any woman.

**ONE:** Don't kill the fantasy!

**TWO:** Though... *there is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.*

**ONE:** Do you ever try quoting yourself instead of other people?

**TWO:** The bay area is whack though. White girls outside the club be trying to ingratiate me by calling me a *cute lightskinned nigga*. And I dated a girl who fancied herself a dominatrix and kept calling me "slave" in bed. And she said I was only getting cast in plays because I was "riding a pendulum swing" with ethnic casting, and so I work extra hard to prove her wrong. And the white dudes get jealous of the hot white girls I pull trying to warn me of "exotification" like they're concerned, as if the girls couldn't just be attracted to *me*, and so I work extra hard to pull even more white girls just to prove them wrong. It's a viscous cycle.

**ONE:** Yeah but I mean... it's kinda true.

**TWO:** Most of the "ethnic" actors in hollywood passed as latinX until 9/11. It was this country's *fear* of the term, that allowed it to actually acknowldge its existence.

**ONE:** Fear is the seasoning served in a dish called evil.

**TWO:** Yes.

**ONE:** Do you fear women?

**TWO:** Not in the least.

**ONE:** Women can be annoying.

**TWO:** Yes.

**ONE:** But I don't think white skin is enough of a power card anymore. If it ever really was? Which is saying something. We're all in the same boat. Everyone's time and energy is being stolen, bought, and sold again. Everyone's a nigger.

**TWO:** Yes. Everyone's a nigger.

**ONE:** David Milch said that in a writing class. He also said *let one more plane crash into one more building and this country will sign on to the extermination of everyone associated with the Muslim religion; trust me*. It's on YouTube. I think he's a genius. No one's on his ass about it so fuck it. Everyone's a nigger.

**TWO:** Everyone's a nigger!

**ONE:** Not so fucking loud. We're in public.

**TWO:** What difference does it make if people can hear me or not? *I'm still saying it.*

**ONE:** Self-awareness is important though. You don't want to mistake insolence for courage.

**TWO:** Most people just listen to what happens inside their head; the knee-jerks and the triggers; not what is actually being said to them.

**ONE:** The speaker doesn't know what is actually being said until someone else hears it and lets them know what it made it occur in them.

**TWO:** Well, yes. The only reason I choose to articulate is because I'm never ever certain of what my actual point of view is. I'm trying to find out.

**ONE:** That's good but you have to remember that there are *other people in the world who's feelings matter. Death and pain are essentially feelings to pass over, dismissing them is what makes you a monster.*

**TWO:** I'm not just going to construct my stories out of our world's acceptable narratives in order to guarantee my appeal—*that's what advertising is.* I'm not trying to write for people who believe in overpowering others because of their race or their gender, or to educate people I assume know less than I do, or I assume don't have as rich an interior life, or to reassure people of what they already think; I'm trying to challenge people like me. I'm trying to challenge people by acknowledging what they are afraid to acknowledge.

**ONE:** You don't want to overpower women because they are women?

**TWO:** I'm ambivalent. Sometimes when I know a woman is the kind of woman who would prefer it, I am afraid of acknowledging it. *Only because I am afraid of being caught.*

**ONE:** When a woman wants something it's unmistakable.

**TWO:** To Everyone but herself.

**ONE:** Maybe what you're describing is the quality of a kind of person, for which the kind of genitals they possess makes up one of an innumerable amount of variables.

**TWO:** Once you can fully articulate an idea or a point of view, its relevance has already expired.

**ONE:** Haven't you ever wanted to be married though? Or to have its essence? To commit to one woman and be satisfied with her? To treat a woman who has affections for you with actual decency?

**TWO:** Not really.

**ONE:** Better to have kids young.

**TWO:** Why?

**ONE:** To carry on the name?

**TWO:** What is in a name?

**ONE:** Clever.

**TWO:** No seriously. There will always be those who enthusiastically carry the species forward... it doesn't matter who makes kids. Man or woman. Or how. It just matters that kids are made. That's why we're here. We're all one soul; everyone's a part of it.

**ONE:** So you don't want kids for yourself? You don't want to really take care of a woman?

**TWO:** I think about it sometimes.

**ONE:** You think about taking care of a woman?

**TWO:** No never. What I mean is, I just like the idea of having a kid—actually having one is too much work. I'm not going to have a kid just to fulfill the idea of having a kid. Maybe if I was like in a polyamorous thing and we all took turns...

**ONE:** Polyamorous?

**TWO:** It's when you have multiple partners...

**ONE:** No I know, but with a kid?

**TWO:** Yeah, some of them raise kids together.

**ONE:** Seems confusing.

**TWO:** Yeah.

**ONE:** Decadent, really.

**TWO:** You know, I kind of agree.

**ONE:** The civilized thing to do is to have one partner and cheat on them all the time.

**TWO:** How does that help the child?

**ONE:** Discovering that your parents have an utter lack of integrity builds character. And best not

risk exposing them to someone who is true to themselves.

**TWO:** But they do say it takes a village.

**ONE:** Oh, gangbangs are wonderful!

**TWO:** You're being vulgar and reductive.

**ONE:** That's sort of the idea isn't it?

**TWO:** I think it would be wonderful and fascinating to be raised by several parents.

**ONE:** But you don't want children of your own?

**TWO:** I think if most people knew the difference between wanting the idea of having a kid and wanting the reality then people wouldn't be so fucked up. If you marry for the sake of a fantasy you might as well have one night stands without a condom.

**ONE:** Who taught you to use a condom?

**TWO:** I figured it out.

**ONE:** Always use your own condoms; you never know who's crazy. My friend's mom gave him very good sex education; in fact, she generously gave him and all his friends—I was a favorite of hers—very thorough, and on occasion hands on—sex education. and that's something she stressed a lot. According to her, some women like to poke holes and then cry rape when they have a kid and everyone believes her and you're fucked. That's what my friend's mom said anyway.

**TWO:** I'd never take advice from a woman about other women. But thanks for looking out.

**ONE:** I want you to *use* me.

**TWO:** What?

**ONE:** You know, for advice... or if you want to vent; anything.

**TWO:** You're making this feel forced.

**ONE:** I just... I can't... I so regret...

**TWO:** I get it. We're here now.

**ONE:** Yes. We're here now.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** Or... we're trapped in a dark forest being held hostage by an evil ogre fattening us for the feeding.

(PAUSE)

Last week my CoStar app asked me if I was sure my waking life is more real than my dreams. Do you think that when our bodies die, for our souls it will be like waking up from a dream?

**ONE:** That would depend on what defines a dream.

**TWO:** All a dream is, is desire without completion. And life is satisfying for *no one*. Anyone who claims contentment is lying.

**ONE:** I think you're projecting.

**TWO:** That's what thinking *is*. You create projections in your head about how the world works. Some are more honest to life than others.

**ONE:** Maybe this is a dream.

**TWO:** Everything sucks.

(HONK)

**ONE:** I love this city. Its sounds always seem to punctuate the conversation at the perfect moment.

(PAUSE)

You see that couple over there, fighting? You'd think they'd have the rationality to find somewhere private, but actually, that defeats the purpose. They're expressing a primal urge who's traditional ritual has disappeared over the course of millennia. Neither one of them wants to dissolve the union without the blessing of the tribe; so they put on a show demonstrating why the union may no longer last. They may not have made up their minds about breaking up, but this is the point of no return whether they know it or not. Once you start fighting in public, you know it's over.

(PAUSE)

Same is true of any relationship you could ever think of.

(A HONK; PAUSE)

**TWO:** You should have called.

**ONE:** I looked you up on Facebook and you weren't there.

**TWO:** Fuck Facebook! You should have called. Or emailed. At least.

**ONE:** I know. I'm sorry.

**TWO:** I don't want to be here.

(SOUND)

**ONE:** But you came out of your own free will.

**TWO:** I'm so angry with you... for just *leaving*.

**ONE:** I know. But you came despite that. You came because you wanted to. You came for me.

**TWO:** What?

**ONE:** You're here to save me.

**TWO:** I'm here to save you! Yes! Just hold on brother a little longer.

(SOUND)

**ONE:** Why aren't you on Facebook?

**TWO:** I deleted all of my social media.

**ONE:** *All of it? Are you insane?*

**TWO:** How dare you! I booked my psychologist on *ZoeDoc* and the wait time was three hours but it only took them thirty seconds to determine that I was in fact sane.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** Can I have another cigarette?

**ONE:** I don't think you need one. You've just had a whole pack.

**TWO:** Of course I need more than one pack of cigarettes, I don't have a job.

**ONE:** I'm not giving you one.

**TWO:** Really?

**ONE:** Yes.

**TWO:** Why not?

**ONE:** Because I don't want to.

**TWO:** You are being very mean at the moment!

**ONE:** Don't take it personally.

(A LONG DEAFENING SILENCE)

**TWO:** My mouth is still moving. My body is in the chair. I am taking in the sun. Breathing the fresh air. Watching the beautiful people pass by in their weekend best. I am having fun... I like the outdoors, and the drink. The waiter's curly hair and polite and unobtrusive presence. It's heaven, really. I'm in heaven. But there is a longing. A curiosity, maybe? For what lies below. I see myself laughing. It's a real laugh, but still it's hiding something beneath it. I'm in my head again... not present... and ashamed of it. Whatever, at this point, nobody really notices I've gotten so good at it. What am I actually doing again? My body? Oh... I'm talking to my brother—a stranger to me. It's been... what? Not since I was fifteen. If there is such a thing as an “out of body experience,” this is it. I am still there, in the present. But I am mostly here, wherever this is, talking to you, whoever the fuck you are. Friends. Oh, my friends, I have so much to get off my chest. But these feelings are so acute to me, these sensations, I can't possibly find a way to articulate them. The smallest unit of time or matter is actually impossible to fathom. We always think about how huge and infinite the universe is, but really the mystery all lies in that primal unit. The core. The source. The smallest unit of *who I am* is just the same. Unreachable. But you'll listen, won't you? I ought not be so absent minded... god I used to be so harangued for it. All my little day dreams. I'll stop, no one actually cares about anyone else's childhood. Last thing I want is to put you to sleep. It doesn't matter anyway, I've come out the other side of that, because I think now that presence is overrated; you heard me. It's a total racket, this *presence*; just another way to shame those who don't jive with the construct of what is the right way to live. Yes I prefer and have always preferred to be lost in the elaborate inner landscapes of my own mind, and the true pain is knowing that no one else can ever truly see it, let alone care to see it. Or... it's no pain at all... for there is no need for anyone to enter and *see*, if I could just step out into the light every once in a while and *show* you. And not scurry away like a cockroach afraid of being caught. I can let someone see me. Maybe my brother... of all people could... or maybe it's too late. Maybe the damage is already done.

(PAUSE)

I want to kill him. Oh yes, I certainly do. *Would he were wasted, marrow bones and all.*

(PAUSE)

I still remember a time when we did everything together.

(PAUSE)

And our sisters. How fun they were. The eldest was such a bitch.

(PAUSE)

He's still going on about being homeless and free off the California coastline. Well someone had to take care of mom, you asshole. Let her at least feel like her entire life wasn't a waste. Which it was.

But that's the whole point, isn't it? To lie to ourselves until the truth handles itself.

(PAUSE)

Still, though. He's trying. It's kind of sweet. He was never evil, my brother. Just... what? Not aware of his function.

(PAUSE)

Hahaha, that was actually pretty funny. There's really nothing like him when he gets rolling.

(PAUSE)

Oh, this might take a while. Can I tell you a story? It's not autobiography and it's also not fiction. I don't know what to call it. I can't really make stuff up but what I put on the page is very far removed from what my actual life is like. But I need to tell you this, as a matter of fact, and I think you need to hear it. I don't know why... why do I feel trapped and cold all of a sudden? You're starting to remember... what? Where am I? I don't even know how I thought up this story it just popped into my head and I have this incredible urge to tell it...

Long ago, in a time when there was still some magic left in the world; a time when a promise meant something, there lived two brothers, who promised to always look out for one another. One was older, one was younger, but not by that much. One day, the older boy had to leave and go off to fight a large ogre in the forest. Anyone who had ever went off to face this ogre never returned... in fact, the last person who attempted to did so somewhere between one thousand and seven thousand years ago, so most people had decided then that this ogre didn't exist. But the older brother was convinced of the ogre's existence and convinced he was destined to be the one to defeat him. For he knew the story of the ogre's origin... in fact, he would tell it to the younger brother at least once a week—it was his younger brother's favorite story.

And it goes like this:

**ONE:** One night, a young boy ran away from home and later found himself lost in a deep dark forest. After hours of wandering, terrified, hungry, exhausted, he stumbled upon a house where there lived two sisters. One was a kind old woman, and the other was a witch. The kind old woman said: *I will give you food and lodging for nothing!* And The witch said: *I will make you all powerful and everlasting if you kill the kind old lady.* The boy, having been raised well, said, *How dare you witch, bribe me to kill this innocent kind old lady! Kind old lady, I will not accept any of your generosity until I have killed this wicked witch!"* And the kind old lady said, *but young man, that witch is my sister and we promised to always look out for one another, and I will never let anyone do any harm to her. But!* Said the boy, *She just broke the promise by bribing me to kill you! Oh yes,* replied the old lady, laughing, *that's my sister, always the trouble maker, it's why she's a witch.... But, it makes no sense!* Cried the boy, *if one person breaks their end of a promise the whole promise is broken! Why should they go unpunished and the other have to go as if nothing happened!* The boy had always had a very strong sense of justice. The kind old lady shrugged and said, *What can I say? She's a witch and I'm not.* And the boy said, *Fine! If you are going to behave in the world with such passivity and ignorance, then wicked witch! I take your bargain! I will kill this foolish old lady and become all-powerful and everlasting, for I see how one who leaves evil unpunished is just as bad as one who performs it. And I will use my power to punish all those*

*who perform evil! Very well, said the witch, as you wish. And the boy killed the kind old lady. And the witch transformed the boy into a giant ogre. Why am I an ogre? Asked the boy. This is terrible!*

*You asked to be all-powerful and everlasting and you also wanted to punish those who perform evil and so I turned you into an ogre to punish you for killing my sister! An innocent old lady! Said the witch.*

*But witch! How am I supposed to interact with humans again! Cried the boy.*

*The only way is to eat them! Laughed the witch. And the boy wondered around the forest for thousands of years, still unable to find his way out, never just going straight through. And longing for connection, he began trapping and eating poor humans who found themselves lost in the forest as he once did. Because that was the only way he knew how to remember what he once was. An innocent boy brimming with excellent intentions.*

*(NOTE: We are transported to the brothers' bedroom when they were kids... this is the "third" universe; hopefully it will be clear in the dialogue from here on out when they are here or elsewhere.)*

**TWO:** And what's the only way to kill the ogre?

**ONE:** With the kind old lady's cooking knife.

**TWO:** And where is the knife?

**ONE:** It's right here.

**TWO:** You have it!

**ONE:** It's been in our family for generations. The one who is bold enough to enact its purpose will heal the curse upon our family.

**TWO:** The curse upon our family?

**ONE:** The witch and the old lady. They're our great, great, great, great, great, great... grandmothers. And one sister's betrayal and the other's death laid a curse upon our family. And the only way to heal the curse is to kill the ogre.

**TWO:** But what if the ogre kills you?

**ONE:** He won't.

**TWO:** Let me come with you, just in case!

**ONE:** No, you must stay.

**TWO:** But I must come! We're always together.

**ONE:** This I must do alone.

**TWO:** We promised we'd always look out for one another. How can we do that if I'm here and you're out there? You promised.

**ONE:** I'm still keeping it... I will look after you when you need me. When I've come back with our grandmother's knife after killing the ogre.

**TWO:** But what if I need you before then?

**ONE:** You won't.

**TWO:** I need you to stay.

**ONE:** I can't.

**TWO:** You know, the ogre was just trying to do the right thing! Maybe there isn't even a curse! Maybe it's all fake! Or maybe the curse has nothing to do with killing the ogre... maybe it's just about remembering what's important... *and keeping your promises.*

**ONE:** Don't be ridiculous. The ogre was once a boy who wanted to do right, but what he actually chose was control. He wanted to control the attitude our great grandmothers had to the world. And what is evil, if not that?



**TWO:** That's exactly what you're doing now! Controlling. Why can't I go with you?

**ONE:** I know. I'm sorry. But you can't come.

**TWO:** Why?

**ONE:** You just can't.

**TWO:** You made a promise.

**ONE:** I know. It's still there but I'm not protecting it as well because I have to do this *other thing!* Life is messy it's not as black and white as things are in a fairy tale.

**TWO:** Can't you see that right now I *need* the fairy tale... how else would I deal with the reality of the world without its reassurance?

**ONE:** Look. Father told me should the sharp end of the knife rust, it means you are in grave danger or likely dead. When that starts to happen, I'll come looking for you, whether or not I killed the ogre.

(SOUND)

**TWO:** But you didn't come back brother. And *I* went looking for *you*... because I knew you needed me. Funny how things work out. Funny how time and spirit work like a kaeleidescope. Somewhere else you do come back. Somewhere else you don't leave in the first place. But here and now, I am coming to save you. It's this journey that will heal the family curse. We need not kill anyone... retribution is a lie. We only need to hold fast to one another and get out of this forest alive. Oh the lives we could live brother! The things we have seen! *Are seeing*... Everyone is experiencing everyone else's life somewhere. We're all living ourselves and each other. Wherever there is suffering, that suffering is also in me. Wherever there is joy, that joy is also in me. I am myself and my brother. My brother is himself and me. And we are everyone and everyone is us. I outwit and escape the ogre to escape the wickedness in myself. Keep going... keep going... I know my story. I know my story. The only way out is through. Through this forest. Through these feelings. Through this trap. I know who I am... I am right here, right now. Get back in and go through it; you won't forget who you are when you come out the other side, but if you choose to stay in or avoid the truth, you will lose all recognition of yourself.

(SOUND)

*ONE and TWO are laughing.*

**ONE:** And so then he goes... "*And stop eating my mother's eggs!*"

**TWO:** That's the best story I ever heard. I can't believe someone who is not your mother would expect you to pay for your own eggs.

**ONE:** Free eggs is the least they can do in exchange for my living in their house for free. Tell me a story.

**TWO:** I was once offered five hundred dollars to give a hand job. Guy walks up to me and says: *I'm drunk and I'm rich.*

**ONE:** Did you do it?

**TWO:** No. Kinda regret that.

**ONE:** Whores are born. Not made.

**TWO:** Talent isn't everything!

**ONE:** I could never be friends with someone who is not talented. Does that make me a bad person?

**TWO:** I wouldn't judge it. Maybe your subconscious is trying to communicate something to your

conscious. It's worth examining.

**ONE:** Maybe in five hundred years we'll look at our current society's givens about the conscious and the subconscious; the id, ego, and superego, and all that with the same bewilderment and sense of intellectual superiority as we now look at Elizabethan society and the 'humors' which governed all aspects of psychology.

**TWO:** You don't think we're any better off than the Elizabethans?

**ONE:** Who was that guy in the 20s who said something like, "*everything has already been invented.*"

People say that obviously he's been proven wrong since—but what if he was actually right. What if history was—is—just a cycle of humanity vanishing and forgetting things, and returning and remembering them... so we don't actually advance or regress linearly, we're just forgetting and remembering and forgetting and remembering again. But what we might learn each time are better ways of interacting and communicating with each other. Ibn Khaldun dismissed Herodotus' story about Alexander The Great creating reflections to scare off sea monsters that were preventing him from building Alexandria as completely unhistorical, not because he had no proof of sea monsters, but because he was instructing *his* readers, that at the time Herodotus wrote that story, the fantastical elements weren't meant to be taken literally. Maybe we have to keep reminding ourselves that all of this is an illusion, and if we insist on taking it literally, we betray our most primal instinct—the need to attach real meaning to things that don't matter.

**TWO:** Do you ever write this shit down?

**ONE:** I think of all my best stuff when I'm away from the machine. The desire to create sings in me until the very moment I show up to do the creating. I arrive at the arena and it is nothing but dead sound; I want to leave and go live. I am always in the wrong place at the wrong time, and my imagination is like a cop—never there when I or anyone else actually needs it. I weep for all the slaughtered, maligned, abandoned impulses—all we receive from a great artist are the footnotes, the sketches, and the excrement. I imagine this is why god made the universe so ugly and full of blood and terror. There's no way the beautiful image of existence he had in his heart is the actual thing that came out when he sat down to make it a reality.

(PAUSE).

That I wrote down.

**TWO:** I thought you said to write the way people talk.

**ONE:** All advise is autobiographical.

**TWO:** If I'm meant to write how people talk then why do people write songs? We write because there is something we need to express that cannot be expressed in everyday speech.

**ONE:** If we wrote the way people talk we'd include all the dead space and the ums.

**TWO:** I always felt like speech coaches were really fascist about trying to break you out of saying 'um.' That word probably comes from saying 'om,' a primal vowel sound. Meaning mother. Ums are in a sentence are beautifully vulnerable: they basically say... my thought and my feeling are too acute to place into words, but your attention is priceless to me, and I will suffer the embarrassment of having to call upon the all-mother for support in my hopeless inarticulateness.

**ONE:** Everyone works so hard to *get to the point*; conversation is like foreplay. We're trying to build an invisible sculpture of ideas... that takes time.

**TWO:** I don't believe in having a point of view.

**ONE:** *Point of views; get to the point.* Why does everything have to be so *pointy*?

**TWO:** Penises are pointy... capitalism isn't the only thing our culture's language is submerged in.

**ONE:** Do you remember the first woman to ever make you feel in that way you knew was wrong?

**TWO:** Yes. Lindsey. She was your grade actually. I was impossibly overwhelmed.

**ONE:** I should have taught you how to be strong about a woman. Strong *for* a woman.

**TWO:** I figured it out.

**ONE:** If they even *begin* to suspect they hold no power over you, they go crazy. Women always keep their enemies close. The man's job is to pick the perfect moment for surrender. (PAUSE) You strike me as a lover, not a fighter.

**TWO:** Spent a few too many years penning sonnets for whoever I was obsessed with at the time. Audrey. Catherine. Amina. Nate. They never told me to stop because I always gave the impression that this kind of honesty would make me shoot myself. Quiet possibly the entire school.

**ONE:** Now *that* is love.

**TWO:** Old habits die hard but I don't do it nearly as much now that all the girls and boys are chasing *me*; I didn't do anything different. Well, I read a few relationship self-help books. Everyone expects a man to maintain the emotional balance. And it works. It's infuriating how much it works.

**ONE:** I once raised enough money to join the French Foreign Legion. I spent seven hours a day studying French. And I squandered it all to chase a girl to another city.

**TWO:** Can't say emotional stability did wonders for my poetry though. Still, some say I give off this *energy* that is both terrifying and intoxicating. Like, I don't think I'm flirting with anyone but apparently I'm always flirting. I've never had non-painful sex with a woman. I hate sex with a woman; I almost just want to make them want to have sex with *me*. To *seduce* and subsequently *frustrate* them. But once sex starts to happen I think, oh, they're not as attractive; I should be doing something else; it hurts when she does that but I don't have the heart to tell her. But then again the only thing that motivates me to go to the doctor is the anticipation of possible sex. Doctors are the biggest freaks of all. I have this preoccupation with fear and desire. I sometimes wish--

**ONE:** Fuck man... all these male-centric stories fucked us over.

**TWO:** No, our generation just thinks too literally.

**ONE:** What do you mean?

**TWO:** We think if we substitute the color or gender of a body into narratives that are inherently genius or crap in the first place that we're doing something right. But that's a total distraction. Did you know that the gender of a protagonist in a fairytale has no actual bearing on how the child relates to a fairy tale emotionally? The child understands intuitively that in a fairytale all of the characters stand as aspects of the same person. That person is the child themselves. The wolves and the witches allow the child to both accept those aspects of their personality that represent their lower urges, and their necessity, and also—through the heroism of the prince or princess—they understand subconsciously, the necessity of not suppressing those impossible urges but learning mastery over them. Read Bruno Bethelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment on the meaning and importance of fairytales*. The analysis of *The Frog King* and *Cinderella* are astonishing. Most stories are diluted because adults started to think they were unreasonable... people think they're smart by pointing out, yeah, I read this original Brothers Grimm story and it was so violent and dark, I wish Disney didn't take that out, and I'm like yeah but the real tragedy is the way a lot of parents change or dismiss the story forgetting that a child does not relate to a story literally, rather than tell the story purely based on what unconsciously excites them—what they remember of the story regardless of the nature of it—but by how well the metaphors in the story stand in congruence with their subconscious fears and desires. They look at sleeping beauty and say, oh, my daughter is not going to be some lame princess who needs a prince to save her. No way! Thinking they are helping their child to be strong and independent. But they're actually hurting their child's chances of being strong because they don't see that her sleep is a metaphor for the necessity of quiet, introspective growth in early adolescence; how many new adolescents, overwhelmed with the way their hormones subdue their energy while dealing with the unbearable demands of the adults around them wouldn't be comforted by that symbol? How many girls and boys would be better off knowing that as much as they are expected to

take care of other people, they do also have the right, the necessity, of focusing on themselves? And how many girls and boys would be better off knowing that in the original, when the sleeping beauty sleeps, so does her whole family, so does the whole world—when a child is born, the child is not knew to the world. The world is new to the child. Making Jack in the bean-stock kill the ogre in order to avenge his father turns the story into a flat cautionary tale about retribution, the kid ends up wondering in all these stories about people slaying dragons and ogres *well what is this guy compensating for?* But having Jack outwit and escape the ogre with the help of the ogre's spouse as it was in the original allows the child to feel secure that with the nourishment of one parent, usually the opposite sex parent, the child may face the unbearable oedipal resentments against the same sex parent and enjoy their possessions without incurring their wrath. The first sign of irreversible repression in a society is its adherents' pathological obstinance in negotiating the contradictions between reason and imagination.

**ONE:** I like the number of times you say "sex parent" in that monologue. What's the last sexual encounter that truly excited you?

**TWO:** A woman was menstruating while I was eating her out. I felt like a vampire. A sexy vampire like Edward in the *Twilight* series. But afterwards I felt extremely embarrassed and overwhelmed. I realized I'd been biting my lip the whole time and making myself bleed too. The woman told me I made the face she made the first time she had her period.

**ONE:** I have ulcerative colitis when I have flare ups I am basically like a woman on her period.

**TWO:** You should investigate whether or not that has something to do with childhood trauma.

**ONE:** What makes you say that?

**TWO:** There are things you think that are just *wrong* with you, but a lot of the time they can be things that have been *done* to you. Weren't you a cesarian birth? The final seal of the digestive track happens when the child passes through the vagina and is held by the mother. No wonder your track is funky, the first thing your body touched was hospital chrome, that fucks up the hormones.

**ONE:** The hospital cut me out because I was upside down and they were afraid of the liability.

**TWO:** I'd say they have a liability to the way you've suffered since.

**ONE:** Would you say the same about circumcision?

**TWO:** Maybe. But that wasn't their choice.

**ONE:** That hospital doesn't exist anymore; it got turned into a parking lot. Or maybe just dirt.

**TWO:** I guess it didn't matter whether or not a vaginal birth for you was a liability.

**ONE:** Maybe a vaginal birth would have killed me. And my mother.

**TWO:** It especially wouldn't have mattered then. But now you suffer because of choices made by people who couldn't care less about who you are now. Almost every lifetime defining decision is made by someone else's fear of losing money.

**ONE:** How do you know all that?

**TWO:** When you're young and poor and pretty you have all the answers.

**ONE:** There has to be a concrete explanation for why the world is wrong.

**TWO:** The joy is in the mystery. The world just turns.

**ONE:** When I was fourteen I raped my algebra teacher.

(PAUSE)

I was madly in love with her. I failed her class the first time just so I could take it again. I found her to be the most beautiful woman in the world. More beautiful than my mother even, because this teacher loved me. And my mother despised me. I was always shitting myself and this made my mother hate me. Pretty soon I took to the habit of masturbating with my door open; it was a small house as you know; of course I knew she'd be curious... she would peak obsessively, and that made

her hatred grow into terror. The algebra teacher didn't care if I failed her class or if I discretely began to force a wank under my desk during lessons... she'd wink at me and carry on as though nothing were happening, as any self-respecting woman would do. *Not like mother.* Jeez. I sound like daddy. I was the only kid in my class who had a job; who had to work after school. Four, five days a week. I was never afraid of work and frankly I liked not having a reason to go back home. At some point I volunteered myself to tidy up the algebra teacher's classroom on my days off. She'd sit there, watching me. Pretending to grade papers. A smile. An innocent stroke on the shoulder. Every half hour or so she'd notice something on the floor and go pick it up... she had the world's most perfect ass. Fit. Well-proportioned. She was a track star in college, and held on to that body all those years. She was at least in her mid-fifties then. The deep sit wrinkles suited her perfectly. I imagined they built up over years of enticing onlookers under the bright sun. She was a Christian. And married. But of course they are the most seductive. I would barely speak to her. I would bury the secret in my heart while I sweat for her. One day I couldn't take it. I said, "*I love the way you look in that dress Mrs. D.*" And she blushed and smiled like the Cheshire Cat. I was Alice. I was at a fork in the road you see, and thrillingly petrified. My eyes were telling her, "which road do I take?" And her eyes were telling me "where do you want to go?" "I don't know." "Then, it doesn't matter." She was fantastic. Wild. It was as though all I had to do was get out of my own way. She couldn't wait to get to the center of that tootsie pop... she was just like the owl in those commercials... three licks and a crunch.

**TWO:** You said you raped her.

**ONE:** She kept saying, "We musn't, no..." "Please..." "Stop..." "I'll lose my job..." That was the best part. The words saying, "Stop or I'll die." And the body saying, "Stop or I'll kill you." *Death is a double entendre for sexual climax.* Our sister used to tell me that, with all her love of Shakespeare. I was always made terribly uncomfortable by all the games she made me play with her.

**TWO:** Do you remember what they were like?

**ONE:** Vaguely.

**TWO:** Maybe you're a bit hard on yourself.

**ONE:** I don't know... if I can't escape this feeling of dread, I must have done something to deserve it.

**TWO:** You only dread it because you're afraid you displeased someone.

**ONE:** My algebra teacher was quite pleased with my performance. I got an A+ that year.

**TWO:** You feel like you've displeased society with your inability to pretend you do not possess raw urges.

**ONE:** Before we continue I must ask. What's your position on rape?

**TWO:** I take the nuanced perspective of Mrs. Prentice in *What the Butler Saw*.

**ONE:** Interesting.

**TWO:** And I really like what Jeff Bridges says to Chris Pine in the last scene of *Hell Or High Water*. "*You'll never be done with it no matter what. It's going to haunt you son, for the rest of your life. It's going to haunt me too.*" An evil done haunts the doer as much as it haunts that which it was done to. James Baldwin said something similar, which I can't remember, because it's been so long, about the mutual degradation of the oppressed and the oppressor. Something, like *whoever does evil to one does it to himself*. I'm paraphrasing. Why would rape be any different? Sex is concrete. Rape is a classification related to the consuming draw of power. Sex is often involved but it doesn't have to be in order for a crime to be rape.

**ONE:** You've got balls.

**TWO:** Balls got nothing to do with it. Some got ovaries and they'd say the same.

**ONE:** You know what I mean.

**TWO:** Do you think the raped are complete victims?

**ONE:** Yes.

**TWO:** Do you think the Palestinians are complete victims?

**ONE:** Well. I mean, there's a lot there to unpack.

**TWO:** *"every man we've killed has been replaced by worse." "I cut my fingernails, they grow back." "We should have brought them to trial, like Eichman."* As though Arabs kill Jews in the vacuum that the Europeans did. As though Arabs were the unholy nails on a Jew's fingers! Arabs kill at least a thousand times more other Arabs than they kill Jews! The word *a thousand* in Arabic means *innumerable*. No one knows the names of those massacred in their homes or in refugee sites. Why is it so difficult to accept that something was stolen from us? An essential thing? A core of our humanity? Why are we so disillusioned with ourselves? Do the raped care if the rapist had also been raped? In our culture, no. Why is it so difficult? There are literally Palestinian hip-hop lyrics that are basically a disclaimer: *just because I hate what Israel has done to me and my people doesn't mean I hate Jews. I love Jews! Please please don't even have a part of you think I have anything against the Jews. I'm such a simp for the fucking Jews. Everybody hates the Jews; that's what they told us so it must be true.* Everyone is grinding their ass off peddling their own fucking suffering.

(PAUSE)

Most of my favorite writers are Jews.

**ONE:** That was a great scene from *Munich* you quoted. How do you remember it so well?

**TWO:** I don't know it's just a gift.

**ONE:** The blacks and Arabs at our mosque didn't like the influence of the growing South Asian population in our community.

**TWO:** The hierarchy of race relations is a completely forced narrative. It has more to do with how many people there are to reassure than it does with what is actually happening. People's lives are much messier than they'd like to admit.

**ONE:** But all the shows on TV.

**TWO:** Fuck the shows on TV! That's just writing made not by people who want to tell the truth, but by people who want to be accepted.

**ONE:** TV is fucking where it's at.

**TWO:** I know, I know; I hate it but I know. The business model that streaming services created made artists start to compete intensely to provide the most compelling kinds of reassurance for an affluent set of consumers with an excessive amount of choice. It made things higher quality, *but the model still favors reassurance. Just as Nazi propaganda did.*

**ONE:** I thought you were bored of that paradigm.

**TWO:** I know, I know, it's just *such* a convenient button to an argument.

**ONE:** But the majority of people still don't jive with the perspective of the more artsy stuff.

**TWO:** Only when that stuff appeals to anything other than the truth. When you are too afraid to express what you actually think, you know that it is the truth. But once you know *why* it is the truth, it ceases to be truth. I am so paranoid about coming across like I am playing a narrative of victimhood, or a David Vs. Goliath metaphor that I pass over truly traumatic experiences as though they have no bearing over how my life will unfold.

**ONE:** You're sort of throwing back what I've been trying to impart to you.

**TWO:** Isn't it strange how the human mind works? Perspectives are not so cut and dry as they would be in a well-crafted play. *People change their minds mid-fucking sentence.*

**ONE:** That might just be an excuse to be sloppy.

**TWO:** Oh, I certainly know.

**ONE:** I know you know. Do you define yourself by language or continent?

**TWO:** I don't know. I do not speak Arabic and I don't compute with the accepted idea of Africa. I have no heritage.

**ONE:** Heritage is overrated. We're here now. What does one do about that?

**TWO:** Did the algebra teacher lose her job?

**ONE:** No.

**TWO:** Oh, good.

**ONE:** Since that day I haven't been able to have sex with a woman without preoccupation with the idea that I'm raping her. Whether it's good or bad. I'll go weeks in a reverie of paranoia, wanting to kill myself for what I've done.

**TWO:** They say rape is a crime of power, not of desire.

**ONE:** The problem is almost everyone desires power.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** I was going to say when you interrupted me earlier that sometimes I wish I was molested as a child. Just seems like the easiest explanation for everything.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** I think, if something sounds good, that's more than enough reason to believe it.

**TWO:** Do you think feeling angry and ashamed about the suffering of others is a waste of time and energy?

**ONE:** Why not let it fuel you?

**TWO:** Because anger for me... it's not fuel... it's... paralyses.

**ONE:** So why are you an artist? You might as well masturbate in public.

**TWO:** The artist who creates for the sake of creating is as inherent to the earth as its oceans.

(PAUSE)

Or, I don't know. There has to be a *reason* for the unreasonable *compulsion*. Something to do with universal self-regulation. Maybe there is something in the artist the universe has to keep at bay. Maybe the artist's real job is to protect the world from herself. She gives in to her urges to make art, in order to protect the world from what might happen if those urges are directed elsewhere. And if she ignores those urges, even for the sake of something she sees as being good, for education, or a political movement, or her own family, she's not actually adding anything to those things, because what she is actually doing is *suppressing herself*, and directing that energy in a way that it was not meant to be directed, and that may very well turn her into a tyrant. For what is a tyrant but someone who felt obligated to suppress a magnificent energy within them, only to have it explode violently out onto the world, crying for murderous retribution? Whatever raging fire that's in the artist, that drives her to that impulse to make art, has to be directed somewhere. And so she should just be making art all day, and not care about anything else. The artist who creates for the sake of creating is as inherent to the earth as its oceans. It seems as though the artist lives in a world where this is ok, where there are no laws to suppress her urges. But for one reason or another the artists have taken it upon themselves to suppress each other, and they think this is good, that this will make them better people; more beneficial to the world, more functional and more enlightening. But no, all they're doing is squeezing themselves into docility; we think we're helping each other play a better part in the world, when no, we're forcing our witches to be queens, our sorcerer viziers into sultans—and what do all the stories say happens when we do this? Tyranny. Destruction. When we don't have

people who give us space to release ourselves from our rational minds, or we have those people but they're convinced that their job is something else... to influence rational thinking, which, from whatever direction, is nothing short of *propaganda*... we're not building each other up like this, no, no, we're fighting a civil war and we barely know it. And when all of a sudden all of our carrion bodies are strewn about the field, like chewed up straw, groaning for burial, who will be left to soak in the stench of all our slaughtered impulses, smelling above the earth? Who will be left to step over all of that wasted potential, onto a clear path, raging to consume what's left, with a terrifying vengeance? The tyrants. And who will be left to blame? All those dead artists, who slaughtered their own kin out of the conviction that anything less than the deep secret truth of their hearts was worth grappling with.

(PAUSE)

Do you ever think your life is a metaphor for something else happening in another universe? I mean every piece of art constructs metaphors for our given reality. And all the arts and art pieces have a process that are metaphors for each other. And we're all metaphors for one another. We're like in a funhouse of mirrors of creation. And every piece of art is its own universe, and our existence is just as much a metaphor for the universe of that piece of art as that piece of art is a metaphor for us. What would you and I look like as a painting?

**ONE:** Two naked old ladies with fishing rods who can't hold their liquor. One of them is a witch.

(PAUSE)

God handing earth over to Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH.

(PAUSE)

A peanut.

**TWO:** When I look at a painting I'm not thinking at all, not what it means or anything, not what it stands for or what statement it's making, I sort of surrender, melt into it if it pleases me aesthetically and that's how I want people to respond to my writing or my story or my voice or whatever, without looking for what I'm trying to say, I'm not trying to say anything. Why do words have to say something? Nothing is more beautiful than a painting so dramatic it seems as though the painter has arrested time within you, turning eternity into an instant or an instant into eternity. They make the painting unfold. They challenge your ability to see it in its entirety, perhaps your ability to see it at all, and so they make you want to spend time in front of it. That's what you get when you're looking at the whole picture, and the picture is beautiful. What if a painting of two brothers making their way through a forest that was home to a terrible ogre was a metaphor for our lives... or our lives were a metaphor for it...

(PAUSE)

I actually think that might be true.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** You've never had a job, have you?



**TWO:** Not more than two or three months at a time.

**ONE:** It's that blood greed. Your parents act generous, but they're actually trying to hold on to that most precious thing: any future where you might actually be happy.

**TWO:** Mother was a gorgon.

**ONE:** And your father?

**TWO:** A complete monster. Beyond the pale.

**ONE:** Did you love them?

**TWO:** Are the stars fire?

**ONE:** I doubt it.

**TWO:** Good.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** I loved them more than life itself. Still do. I would kill god and burn in his father's hell just to be in their arms again.

**ONE:** Cheers to loving all the wrong people.

**TWO:** I was listening to a slovanian man on the radio with a salivating lisp talk about god killing his son who is in effect god himself thereby in effect losing all faith and belief in his own worth thereby in effect god is an atheist. I only believe in god *because* he doesn't exist.

**ONE:** You sir have come closest to the answer to Quantum Gravity!

**TWO:** How so?

**ONE:** You've figured how to tolerably be the two most despised types of people on earth at the same time: A Christian and an Intellectual.

**TWO:** I feel like it's too easy to hate on Christians.

**ONE:** Why?

**TWO:** I don't know... *because everybody fucking does it.* I don't know what else to say.

**ONE:** Every conversation I have is always missing *that thing.*

**TWO:** What thing?

**ONE:** That thing that I *actually think; unequivocally.*

**TWO:** I know. That's why we're talking.

**ONE:** When I talk I feel like I am talking for someone else, who is not engaged in the conversation. A lover who's attention I am trying to grab.

**TWO:** You're a born actor. The camera or the audience is like your crush at a party. They're the one person you *don't* talk to, but everything you say or do is designed to hold their attention.

**ONE:** Shut up.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** Why do we say '*on earth*' as though there must be a race of humans elsewhere?

**TWO:** I once paid a Taro Reader forty dollars to tell me that it was upon me to heal the family curse.

**ONE:** It's always the son.

**TWO:** She did a lot of really convincing weeping and told me my family was headed towards destruction unless I paid her three hundred dollars so she could go into contact with the spirit world for nine days and give me instructions on how to heal the curse. I left saying that I'll come back tomorrow, and she said *I trust you.* And I never went back. Somehow I feel I made it worse by lying to her.

**ONE:** I thought you used Co-Star why would you need a Taro Reader?

**TWO:** Um. Huge difference ok. Besides, even if they were providing the same service, a computer is still not even close to a decent replacement for genuine human interaction.

**ONE:** Why are there computers?

**TWO:** Remember that scene in *Halt and Catch Fire* where Lee Pace tells Scoot McNairy “*Computers aren’t the thing; they’re the thing that gets us to the thing.*”

**ONE:** You’re awfully good at quoting people.

**TWO:** We’re aiming for that point where everyone knows what everyone else knows. And everyone can express what everyone else is capable of expressing. The ability to gather the word is what separates a prophet from a poet. The centralization—not homogenization mind you—of knowledge is the first stage towards the unification of the all-being. And humans are the ones who ushered that stage in. Or maybe the gathering of the word is supposed to happen on earth, and there are also other worlds gathering their words; centralizing their knowledge—and once we’ve all done that we might eventually be able to strike out into the depths of the universe so that all the worlds may know one another. The coming historians will divide space travel and the centralization of knowledge as two cleanly distinguished stages in our ultimate desire to seek other worlds, but then revisionists will insist that it is not so clean and dry, that we were conceiving of all the stages of our development all at once all the time, that history is not linear—and in fact now we attempt space travel even as we are still in the process of centralizing knowledge. Or maybe the moon landing was staged. Our ability to generate outlandish conspiracy theories or reductive interpretations of the world and to become radicalized on the basis of them stems from our inability to conceive of time as a ball of yarn rather than a string.

**ONE:** What’s wrong with you?

**TWO:** Huh?

**ONE:** Didn’t you always talk about wanting to be an astronaut? What happened?

**TWO:** I remember wanting to be a fireman.

**ONE:** All you talked about was space. You were a space nerd. You wanted to make a space-time machine.

**TWO:** Every rocket looks like a giant penis penetrating the sky. If it’s got enough thrust and power it won’t burn itself to oblivion, but how could it ever truly go deep enough? That always terrified me. That infinity was not something we could ever meet. I used to tell girls that god spoke through the female orgasm. They thought I was the member of some exotic eastern religion. God, if only when I sat down to write the words could flow like water out of me like they do when I am so intent on having a woman melt enthusiastically into my bed.

**ONE:** I’ve always hated how natural you were with women.

**TWO:** Somehow telling the truth feels like breathing when I’m in front of a woman. And listening to them, I don’t get annoyed; I feel like they’re one half a brain and I’m another half, and we’re trying to form a complete super-brain, where all of our ambivalence and contradictory urges can be made at peace with.

**ONE:** When I was a kid I was always jealous of watching the women in our family gossip. Everyone had a place at the table, no matter how old you were. I never spoke as a child; my place was to shut up and listen. This made me quite resentful of other men. But grown women can be scarier than the men. Grown men beat the shit out of you, but grown women try to steal your penis. Men are so dick-centric because they know women are jealous of their penises. I wish I didn’t have a penis. I want to know what it’s like to feel pleasure throughout my entire body. Women like to ridicule men because they know men are jealous of their vagina. Women think they’re being radical when they ridicule men... actually, this is and has always been their most biological function. To humiliate men who are too afraid to fight in wars or get married or whatever.

**TWO:** A lot of men are total pricks. A lot of women are total cunts. A lot of people are beautiful

and heroic. You don't have to be a prophet of received wisdom in order to speak properly about humans or gender or whatever. You can just be honest. If someone is pointing a gun in your face, metaphorically or otherwise, you're not thinking about how their superficial make-up indicates potential historical suffering. Everyone is suffering. We choose to speak through the metaphysics of a binary... woman and man, black and white, muslim and catholic, arab and jew, the world and america... and we quote the artists and intellectuals on either side to support whatever position we happen to hold, even though we know, deep down, any responsible artist or intellectual only has the need to articulate because they cannot negotiate the contradictions within their own perspective. Best to call it as it is and say to hell with it. *All of these wars will be won or lost with language. A great word or a sentence communicates essence; it allows us to move forward. We don't have to know all the names that Adam was taught, we can simply find new things and teach each other their names.*

**ONE:** If you're going to ignore history than who are you?

**TWO:** I'm not ignoring history I just refuse to whine.

**ONE:** You have internalized self-hatred.

**TWO:** Everyone does.

**ONE:** Me too?

**TWO:** None of us is alone, and yet we all choose to stay isolated.

**ONE:** I have lost the ability to decide even what my perspective is; to say *this is who I am* and *this is what I think*.

**TWO:** We're not so different you and I.

**ONE:** Is that supposed to be a you and I sentence or a you and me sentence?

**TWO:** I don't care to look it up.

**ONE:** We're really not so different, are we?

**TWO:** No.

**ONE:** It's like we are two aspects of one being; all of us, all of us humans are aspects of one being. And so why do we endeavor so obsessively to control the course of our lives? Our only responsibility is joy.

**TWO:** This conversation gives me joy.

**ONE:** Why didn't you become an astronaut?

**TWO:** I wanted to be a soldier. No. A warrior who answers to no one but his own conscience.

**ONE:** When I look up at the sky I see civilizations constructed out of magic. I see unfathomable ways of dreaming and learning. I think of what humanity might be. A race of people dispersed throughout the galaxies, building a universe of bliss and harmony; an all but abandoned mother earth, but an eternal bond and longing shared between our races' members to preserve and comfort the earth mother—to make up for the pain she suffered in a purpose well-served: our moving on to new worlds; our climbing out through wormholes of blazing light. And when the sun dies she will melt in the warm memory of our love.

**TWO:** You should have become an astronaut.

**ONE:** I wanted to be a soccer player.

**TWO:** I remember I was a king. A king who ruled over a domain such as the world had never seen before or since. Just on the outskirts of the kingdom was a small valley which contained a people who would never dream of taking up a sword out of love for all that lives, and the valley was being terrorized by a race of flesh eating savages. The king was called upon by this people to use all his might to save them from their plight. Being a ruler who had deep care for the innocent and defenseless, the king gathered a group of his bravest warriors and marched on to rescue the valley. The king and his warriors fought the savages as long as they could, but there were too many. They wouldn't cease attacking. They seemed to be a race innumerable. They would rip the flesh right off the face of a warrior and have it as a meal right then. They were the most fearless and unrelenting

creatures the king had ever seen. Finally, the king decided the only way to escape these creatures was to evacuate all the people of the valley and seal all the creatures inside behind walls of molten iron. The king succeeded in trapping the creatures and preventing the people of the valley from being annihilated. But they had no choice but to disperse; some were able to make the journey back to my kingdom, some sought out other tribes that would take them in, and some journeyed alone into the deep lonely night of parts unknown. The creatures are held under that valley sealed by walls of molten iron to this day, and who knows when their cunning will make the creatures find a means of escape and a refueled drive to devour humanity.

**ONE:** The kingdom is your ambition—it is large and virtually impossible to wholly manage, but with a little bit of courage and self-sacrifice you might manage to not let the whole thing fall apart. The valley of the pacifists is your soul; it is pure somehow, and protected; it's as though you are being held by some strong, deeply loving force, and that your inherent nature is one of honesty and virtue. But you hold your soul just outside yourself, the valley just outside the king's realm, because its majesty threatens your concern—your preoccupation—with matters of the physical world. And the race of flesh-eating savages is your evil, though necessary, impulse to devour, to overpower, and to conquer and annihilate. This must live in you for you to have a desire to do good in the world. You must accept its reality. You must go out and greet your soul in order to protect it. The savages must attack the valley for the king to acknowledge it in the first place. So, you see a threat to your soul, *and you must act on it. Now.* And you do. But every solution leads to another problem, maybe a bigger one. You've succeeded in saving your soul from destruction, but now it is all dispersed throughout the world and even in parts unknown. How a diaspora comes together as one is the question humanity has not been able to answer. Bringing your soul back together is the challenge of your whole lifetime and beyond. The warriors who gave their lives, your bravest ones, being dead, eaten alive, are your woundedness. Will you be able to muster the strength to do what is right the next time you are called upon to do so? And, finally, the savages trapped in the valley with walls of molten iron is your shame and the fear that entraps your basest impulses. But they have to come out some-how, eventually.

**TWO:** Are you saying the king ought to find a way to keep humans alive, without having to suppress this fierce and powerful race?

**ONE:** Yes.

**TWO:** But how would he do that? They eat people. They're innumerable. What can the king do in order to live properly with such creatures?

**ONE:** That's the question isn't it? Humanity takes to building walls; walls help us pretend that the chaos is not there. But your soul is a much more important matter; it's not as easy as putting on a hard cover, and forgetting what's on the other side desperately trying to break through.

**TWO:** Do you like smelling your own farts?

**ONE:** Yes. What is the most beautiful thing in the universe?

**TWO:** A human voice. It was the voice of a freed slave that called the faithful to prayer. Trained actors on a stage speaking simple and beautiful language is the most thrilling sound in the world. The human voice is a beautiful thing. I imagine that the body is trapped and finite, but the voice transcends time and space. Maybe our voices jump across different universes; maybe that's why we often find it so terrifying to speak up. Our voice is off in some other universe, lending itself to a version of us we don't know exists, one that needs it more. And maybe our voice shows up just when we need it too. The voice seeks its own level, like water. Our voices are the oceans of time and space, each of us in this world creates a tributary with our voice, and all the flow carries itself through out existence. Sometimes there is so much our voice has to say that we start to flood inwardly, and drown ourselves. We must not keep silent out of fear, or else, the voice, which is meant to flow outwardly into the oceans of spacetime, will drown us.

**ONE:** Do you think maybe our voices are here when they should be somewhere else? I get this feeling sometimes, in fact I'm feeling it a lot now, that there is this other me somewhere in existence, and they really, really, really need help—because they're trapped, trapped and being held hostage by a monster they sought out to destroy.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** I hope you're right. About this different universes thing. I am really, really afraid of death.

**TWO:** There is no such thing.

**ONE:** But I don't want to get too old, either.

**TWO:** The idea, I think, is to live so long as to be able to bury your father. And know what living is like after you've done that.

**ONE:** If life is forever, do you ever think I can figure out a way to escape all of the bad things I've done?

**TWO:** That's what forgiveness is. But seeking it is audacious and humiliating. And granting it destroys the irresistible fantasy of victimhood.

**ONE:** I once believed I was strong enough to carry the sword of *Zulfiqr*.

**TWO:** Ah yes, the original *sword in the stone*. The champion of Ali, the second to declare allegiance to the prophet. Everything they know about self-sacrifice; about weeping and vulnerability; about love for love's sake, and a few key concepts in mathematics, they took from us.

**ONE:** You're over aggrandizing our heritage.

**TWO:** No I am not. Do you know how I know I am not aggrandizing? I know because I just learned this shit *yesterday*. From my white friend, who is dating a Jewish girl getting her PHD in history. The namesake of the *Fibonacci* series was a man who dressed in the humble garb of the muslim to sneak into arab universities and steal their methods; and those methods were actually found in carvings in Nevada predating the conquistadors... our ancestors came to establish intellectual trade with the Americas, before the Europeans nearly wiped out their entire race. And the crusaders came back home with the idea of *love for love's sake* that inspired the knights of the roundtable from the muslims they encountered in the wars. The Roman empire adopted the faith of Christ, without the parts that actually challenged them, Muhammad took those parts and made them essential to the continuation of the faith of Abraham and Moses. And Adam. *The Dark One. Made Of Earth*. I learned this all yesterday, from my white friend. Can you believe it? *The Green Knight* in sir Gawain's journey in the Arthurian legends could be the same as *Al-Khidr, The Green One* in the Qur'an who takes Moses through a trial of patience. The trials of Moses in the Qur'an are trials based around the complex nature of Justice. Garwain's trials, in European fashion, are also trials of patience but in terms of lust and greed. What we learned from the Europeans was greed and a fear of women. That was never actually part of our tradition until they intervened forcefully. I downplay our contribution to the world all the time. And then I hear some white-ass atheist-ass motherfucker tell me just how magnificent it is. And I never know what to say.

**ONE:** I guess then that I didn't not believe in god. I just wasn't satisfied with him. Or her. Or them. Or in the limited ways our language could conceive of god.

**TWO:** We've never spoke our own language with one another.

**ONE:** No. We haven't.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** Why are you here?

**ONE:** Just wanted to see my long lost little brother.

**TWO:** No, really.

**ONE:** I got my boss pregnant and we kept the child a secret until I accidentally ran over it while backing up out of the driveway.

*(a HONK and a PAUSE)*

**TWO:** Fuck you.

*THEY laugh.*

**TWO:** From the moment you were born—your whole damn life—have you ever once told the truth?

*(PAUSE)*

**ONE:** They're going to make legends of us. Me and you.

**TWO:** Like Seth and Osiris?

**ONE:** I don't know that one.

**TWO:** Seth is the younger brother. He drowns his older brother Osiris and dismembers him and scatters his body parts throughout the Nile Valley.

**ONE:** The inheritor to the Ottoman throne used to, by law, slaughter all of his younger siblings as soon as he assumed power, in order that he may eliminate all immediate threats to his rule.

*(PAUSE)*

**ONE:** When you rewrite your story about being detained at the bus station, keep what the cop said to you about "*it was like you'd never met but you've known each other your whole lives.*" Good line. Feels like what's happening now.

*(PAUSE)*

**ONE:** I can't believe that actually happened to you. And all you did was make it a story.

*(PAUSE)*

**ONE:** That bitch on the bus. The one in the story who told you to not take it personally. You should have told her to fuck off. And those cops... you didn't have to talk to them. You've got to know your rights.

**TWO:** Never occurs to me to be angry at these sorts of things. That's kind of the truth I want to convey.

**ONE:** It didn't occur to me either, and it fucked me over when I could no longer do anything about it. Let this shit *occur* to you. If you don't assert yourself *now*, the system *will* toss you into a literal hell.

**TWO:** What is there to even be angry at anymore! All the stuff that made people angry in the past are just things we've gotten used to!

**ONE:** Do you know why in a fairy tale, the villain always gets punished, but only after the hero has made many sacrifices and astute judgments? Because connecting with a raw sense of justice is the only way for a child to come to terms with all the terror they face in the world. You said it yourself:

the existence of the villain allows the child to intuitively accept the existence of their own destructive urges, and to find a way to negotiate with them. To achieve mastery of themselves.

**TWO:** So you read the book!

**ONE:** Yes! I gave it to you!

**TWO:** But that's not how things are where I actually live... where all the stories are disneyfied to the point of a *generational lobotomy*. Cops and privileged women handing out advice on the bus are not such easy stand ins for, I don't know, an ogre that eats people!

**ONE:** They are stand ins for the ogre that eats people. And for you. They are you and you are them... it all has meaning! The point is... what are you going to do about it? It never pays to be docile.

**TWO:** Look, I am too inebriated to get into a philosophical discussion right now. I think I'll end my story the way *I* want to.

**ONE:** Forget about the fucking story. I'm talking about your *life*.

**TWO:** Oh, and all of a sudden you care about my fucking life?

**ONE:** I'm here, aren't I?

**TWO:** And after how long?

**ONE:** Don't squander your youth with one foot in life and the backfoot in the womb, only to take that backfoot out of the womb and put it into your grave.

**TWO:** *I don't want your unsolicited advice!!*

**ONE:** That's it, stand up for yourself.

**TWO:** What is your fucking problem?

**ONE:** You're guarded. Your stories don't acknowledge your pain; your baser feelings. They might be well told but they are a pack of lies.

**TWO:** Why would I want to speak about pain?

**ONE:** You have so much of it!

**TWO:** No I don't.

**ONE:** Yes you do.

**TWO:** I'm doing *great*. There are people on death row who do not deserve to be there and we never heard their names; there are people who've been raped and slaughtered wrongfully and we do not know their names; people wrongfully incarcerated; people enslaved; people living in an industrial sized concentration camps and people being exiled from their homes; people in situations we couldn't possibly fathom, that are not of their own doing, but simply something they've been born into. Why the fuck would I assume I can tell stories about their world just because I am one or two generations removed from a similar fate? I've got what I was born into and I'll take it over all that any day of the week.

(PAUSE)

I was made soulless. I just roam around aimlessly and eat and drink and jerk off and live like a king one day and a foreign concubine the next. I've poured my soul into making sure no one has anything against me, and I still feel like I've never had one good honest day's work in my life. My fate was sealed decades ago by circumstances completely out of my hands. People told me to listen to them and I trusted them but they didn't know what the fuck they were talking about. I missed out on so many opportunities for growth, for *release*. I am underdeveloped. Delayed. I go whole days without speaking to a soul because I am in preemptive grief over a wasted life. I want to destroy. I want to be ruined. I am a human shell desperate for something to fill me up.

**ONE:** I am sure there are plenty of opportunities to get filled up around here!

**TWO:** I'm not joking. If I don't catch up with the world's forward motion I will die. All the stories I

knew, I can't even remember them. I can't even remember if I knew any stories at all.

**ONE:** If the enemy tells you that war starts at midnight, you have to realize *it's war*.

**TWO:** What the fuck does that even mean?

**ONE:** You don't have to do any catching up. You can start this war and end it whenever you want no matter what anyone else says. You're perfect the way you are. You feel *behind* because that's how you've been taught to feel your whole life. *I know this because I went through it too*. You have *so much in you* and *so much fucking time*. *There are so many stories to live and to tell*.

**TWO:** God! Shut up!

**ONE:** (*Laughing*) Come on, come on do it! Punch me! Telling god to shut up and then raising your fist, huh? Just like the good old days.

**TWO:** I said shut up you goddamn fucking cocksucker!

**ONE:** That's right! Threaten me with politically incorrect terminology! *Get through the feeling*.

**TWO:** You think you can show up here and assume I'll act like I'm grateful! You *failed* me. You *left*.

**ONE:** I had no choice.

**TWO:** No! *I* had no choice. I was *troubled*. I was *sick*. You left when we were so young... you have no idea what *they* did to me. You're my older brother. There was so much you could have taught me and you *chose* not to.

**ONE:** I know. I'm sorry.

**TWO:** If I hear you say sorry one more fucking time!

**ONE:** Do you remember our uncle? The way he would throw us in the air and flip us over? Wasn't it the best? Wasn't it the most fun we ever had? And do you remember our mother slapping and berating him for doing it? And how funny that was just to watch? They loved us. They loved us. A lot of times people don't say what they mean; a lot of times people don't do what they in retrospect would be proud of. Don't you miss them?

**TWO:** Every fucking day.

**ONE:** When dad got out of prison, I thought I would kill him myself, with the knife he gave me. As soon as I saw him all I wanted to do was hold him. He looked so small and helpless.

**TWO:** You're not my father.

**ONE:** No.

**TWO:** You've done nothing for me.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** Come on. It's just a feeling. Get through it. There is only one way out of the forest. Through. That's how you'll escape the ogre. That's how you'll find me.

**TWO:** Why are you talking like that?

**ONE:** I have no idea... inspiration?

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** You still have that knife?

**ONE:** It's right here.

**TWO:** You had it this whole time?

**ONE:** I was waiting for the right moment. I didn't know you even remembered.

**TWO:** It's the first thing I remember. Would you have pulled it?

**ONE:** No.

**TWO:** Even if I was killing you?

**ONE:** No.



**TWO:** Why should I believe you?

**ONE:** You shouldn't.

(PAUSE)

**ONE:** When I got here, I thought I had a lot more to say to you but now I'm just... tired.

**TWO:** The knife. It's rusted at the end.

**ONE:** It's supposed to mean that you're dead. That's why I came looking for you.

**TWO:** An old part of me is dead. A younger part. One you were too selfish to see.

**ONE:** I know.

**TWO:** What makes you think that just by waving this magic knife in my face I would embrace you with open arms?

**ONE:** You don't have to do anything. I just know that I made a promise. A promise to find you when you needed me most.

**TWO:** And you kept it? All these years?

**ONE:** Yes.

**TWO:** Did you kill the ogre?

**ONE:** It doesn't exist.

**TWO:** Yes it does. You just couldn't find it, like everyone else! You were too scared! You didn't want to find it and that's why you couldn't.

**ONE:** Yes.

**TWO:** You left me for nothing.

**ONE:** Yes.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** I can't believe you.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** I'm not scared of anything. You took all of my fears with you. Just because you can't do it doesn't mean I can't.

(PAUSE)

**TWO:** Give me that knife.

**ONE:** Let me come with you.

**TWO:** No! You elected to go alone! So I elect to go alone too!

**ONE:** No one can do it alone, brother. I know that now.

**TWO:** I will do it alone! I will do right by the world alone!

**ONE:** Brother. The ogre was once a boy, just like you and me.

**TWO:** Me and you.

**ONE:** The boy wanted to do what was right, but what he actually chose was control. When we try to run away from our unbearable feelings by controlling the situation, we lose our understanding of what is right; we lose who we are.

**TWO:** You sound insane! Everyone is watching us!

**ONE:** I don't care!

**TWO:** Wait a minute... it doesn't matter.

**ONE:** That's right nothing matters!

**TWO:** No brother, it does matter, but, because... yes! Yes! Come with me!

**ONE:** To slay the ogre!

**TWO:** No! To escape the ogre's trap! And to run *straight through* the forest.

*(SOUND)*

**TWO:** You're starting to know where you are.

**ONE:** Where I am? Ah... it's dark...

**TWO:** Keep remembering. Stay present.

**ONE:** What's that clanging? And is someone shouting?

*(SOMETHING CRACKS WIDE OPEN)*

**TWO:** Brother!

**ONE:** Brother?

**TWO:** It's me! I came after you!

**ONE:** I told you to stay home!

**TWO:** Yes but I made a promise so it doesn't matter what you said.

**ONE:** Where am I?

**TWO:** The ogre put you in a magic time cocoon to butter and fatten you up before the ogre eats you... humans always taste best when they're being sentimental. That's why our parents taught us that our feelings don't matter, so that, should an ogre try to eat one of us, they have to spend a lot of time seasoning, and so the other would have time to come to the rescue.

**ONE:** Is that right?

**TWO:** Yes. Now, take my hand.

**ONE:** It's good to see you again, brother.

**TWO:** And you too brother. We can kiss and make up later. Now it's time to get out of this forest before the ogre realizes we broke out of the time cocoon.

**ONE:** But should we slay the ogre? To heal the family curse?

**TWO:** We are cursed or blessed by what we do today. Not by what someone did thousands of years ago. It comes with it's baggage... but trying to slay an all-powerful ever-lasting ogre is just an attempt to control the situation. That's what I learned from you, anyway. Better to learn from it and do what that ogre who was once a boy couldn't do... find a way out of this fucking forest.

**ONE:** Together?

**TWO:** Together.

*(SOUND)*

**ONE:** I've got to go kid, there's an ogre to slay.

**TWO:** But what if someone told you the wrong version of the story! You don't have to do what you don't want.

**ONE:** But I want to. I want to restore honor to our family.

**TWO:** Honor shmoner. Let's stay here and tell stories.

**ONE:** Ok but in the morning I really have to go.

**TWO:** You said that yesterday, and you stayed!

**ONE:** Tomorrow's different.

**TWO:** But there's still parts of the story you haven't told me.

**ONE:** I don't know them all. There's no such thing as a complete story. That's why we keep telling them.

**TWO:** Exactly so stay. (*PAUSE*) Maybe in another universe you leave. But not this one.

**ONE:** Another universe? What fairytales have you been reading?

**TWO:** The theoretical physics ones I don't get them at all but they're so fascinating.

**ONE:** Ok kid don't get carried away.

**TWO:** You don't have to call me kid we're not that far apart in age.

**ONE:** Yeah but you're a kid.

**TWO:** I'm the kid who saves you. I'm the kid whose destiny you thought was your own. And it *is* your own, too. I'm the kid who saves himself by saving his brother, and my brother saves himself by saving me. In one universe he leaves and I go get him. In another universe he leaves and comes back to find me. In another universe we're still at home telling stories. In another universe... in another universe... in another universe. We made a promise to always look out for one another. A promise is the only bond strong enough to transcend all of Time's variants. Nothing will break this promise. Not a terrible ogre or an evil witch; not time or its constructs; not the lies we've been told; not the way we've hurt each other; not the way we loved each other; not the way we forgot all that we had when we were young; not a knife, or a cigarette, or an alternate universe where we are two drunk naked old ladies carrying a fishing rod. The grownups can take our stories and twist and malign them to their own ends, but not this one, not the story that I can never manage to put into words but that I hold deep in my heart. A story with infinite realities; prologues and epilogues and choruses; an infinite number of beginnings and middles. But only one possible end.

**ONE:** Why is it so dark in here all of a sudden? Am I being digested by an ogre?

**TWO:** No. We're in our room. The story is over. I just put out the light.

### **THE PLAY ENDS**