

The Autodidacts

THE AUTODIDACTS

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For Cami and Dylan

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PART 1

1

THE LIGHTHOUSE, 1982

There is a man living in the lighthouse. At night he governs the lamp across the sea. The lantern's beam a secondary, weightless moon folded through waves and governing nothing in its turn. No boats have landed here for a hundred years or more and the lighthouse has fallen into a state of disrepair. Rust climbs its walls like a rot of fire.

The man is sat at a desk in the service quarters of the lighthouse. He opens the desk drawer and removes a photograph. He places the photograph

over the text he has been writing. The man cannot remember the words the picture is obscuring. It turns out the world is sad enough.

The man stares at the photo and touches his face. He recoils. There is something that wants to come out of him, that his face could not survive: it is as if there is another body conceiving itself within him.

There are times when the man does not remember who he is, or how he came to be here. Times when he seems to act out the script of a desire that is not his own.

Either this place is cursed or I am, he thinks.

The man lies down on his bed and bends his arm over his eyes, his eyes that insist on being open though they comprehend little of what enters them. He turns on his side. Tonight, he will not pass the light across the sea. Tonight, he thinks, he will figure out how to leave this place.

Under the loose floorboards, a rotary telephone skips into the air. He reaches for it.

– Hell, hello...Hell, Helene?

The man is remembering himself.

Now everything remembering is pain.

This is a small town and one she has never really wanted to escape from. A town artlessly arranged, braiding the cliffside with property which falls brazenly, fiscally, through the landscape. Cliff-top mansions and hotels give way to judders of shops, housing estates and wild closeting fields that sad, homeward called children pock with abandoned toys.

Helene had been among those children once, part of a pack roaming their containment. The park was a no man's land, council designated. She and her friends, all dirty faced, leaping out of the too tall trees, ankles twisting on impact with the roots ridged out of the hillside. Those hard wood tentacles gathering notches of bone. She can still see the odd broken bottle glittering the dirt, and friends, gone now, with teeth poking through lips, gurgling mouthfuls of blood, their knees having been driven into their gums as they landed.

The park was where they met. 'They' as in everyone. Almost.

Helene considers the verticality of her life. The accident of her being here, in this house. In this house at the peak of the cliff. In this house that fixes and dwarfs her. She is steeled, she hopes, against all possible futures. Still, there were things she found herself wanting. Wanting against herself.

And why now and again?

Still, she couldn't help feeling that it was wrong to believe your life mattered.

And so it must be for others, for one another, for one other. Life that is.

She must be someone else.

For life.

And yet, the way she acts, the things she is suddenly doing. She felt she must be someone else to do them. She felt unbelievable.

How stupid, she thinks.

Helene looks through the French doors that frame the lighthouse. She stares into their elongation.

In a cot, in the corner of the room, her baby begins to cry. Helene goes to her. She picks up the baby and walks towards the French doors looking at the lighthouse. She stops in front of the table. The table with 'the elegant walnut finish.' On the table with the elegant walnut finish there is a telephone, the slight spill of her hip, and a small ring box displaying her future.

Helene holds her baby and the phone receiver in each hand, not exactly. The child cleaves to her,

comfortingly. The knuckles on the hand squashed under her ear lean into her cheeks at the sound of his voice.

*

The man in the lighthouse returns the phone to its cradle. He is very still. He is still for longer than they spoke. But not for as long as their silences were connected by the telephone. He walks towards his desk and removes the picture from what he has written. The man can still hear her voice, can feel her name mark the eddy of his blood. He understands now, he thinks.

His hand moves across and around the pages of the notebook. This has all already happened. There is nothing left of him. He stands up and moves as if he is no longer part of this world, as if the world as it stands was no longer there for him.

The man walks towards the lamp room. He points the lamp toward the cliffs. He stands in front of the lamp and stares into its lens.

Click.

The phone brackets her breast and collarbone, static crumbling like crushed snow through the receiver. The receiver falls and bounces around her knees. Helene begins to rock her baby with

both arms. The baby's small pink hands are cuffed by the telephone cord which she grabs and straightens only for it to return to its scrawled and looping curls. The baby cannot understand why the telephone cord insists on remembering itself. It is a trick she is not yet victim to. She runs her gums around the straightened wire, encasing it in gloopy, plasticky, spittle. The baby lets go of the cord and again the cord springs agonized into its ready-made position. The baby wears a frown that puckers her image.

Evelyn, Helene says bending to pick up the receiver. Evelyn, please stop crying. She jiggles the tiny bundle of her daughter rhythmically as other, tinier, poorly held things patter and fall within her. But Evelyn has not been crying, though her frown threatens to ingest itself in the rumpled cushion of her face.

Helene places the receiver back on top of the phone. She looks at Evelyn directly for the first time since picking her up. Evelyn though does not reciprocate her gaze. She is frantically trying to turn around in her mother's arms. She is turning her small body towards the lighthouse, her arms asking to be carried by some invisible other.

The room is blinded. The mother and daughter radiantly erased by a flood of white light. Helene's mouth forms a tiny, teethed void. She cannot believe what she is thinking.

Helene is in the corner of the room hunched behind the sofa, holding the strangely quiet infant

when her fiancé enters five minutes later. Enough, enough, he says. The Fiancé is a black hole in the centre of the sun. You encouraged him. Lawrence, no I...

He drags the telephone from the table and sets it at the base of Helene's feet. Crouching, Lawrence dials the number nine three times, each time allowing the dial to click back to nought before tersely dialling again. He speaks briefly to the police, turning away from Helene as he does so. Something has to be done, he says more than once. He places the phone back on the floor, takes Evelyn from Helene and walks to his car. At the sound of the car starting, Helene screams. She screams to silence the clamour of being, to staunch time, but the scream itself is an act of irony and it ends, as it must, in exhaustion and defeat.

A further irony has occurred, Helene has become the ghost of her scream. A ghost standing up and walking through the light, through the French doors and garden, a thing immaterial floating up and over the cordoning fence.

Helene drifting. momentarily, over the cliffs.

*

Lawrence is giving a statement to the police on

the beach. The power to the lighthouse has been cut. Two policemen are rowing out towards it. The rest wonder what they can do. They rub their hands together and maintain radio contact. They pass Lawrence a mug of tea which he blows shyly into.

Evelyn has remained in the car, arms outstretched, torso fixed in a large H. A police officer is tickling her. The police officer leans towards Evelyn, her mouth open and in full coo as Evelyn, triggered by the surprise and the various sensory inputs of the tickling hands, defecates violently. The police officer's expression changes from clownish to rictus stricken to clownishly rictus stricken. The officer places her arm on the roof of the car and inhales deeply. She looks around for the father. She gestures at him. Lawrence waves back and then, confused, returns to his tea.

Evelyn is crying hard. Her hands attempt to grip and remove the straps holding her in place. She stops breathing. Her face looks like a planet coming apart.

The police officer continues to gesture at Lawrence who frowns and walks towards them. He walks past two policemen, listening to them while they are on the radio:

– Crackle, there's crackle no crackle
crackle sir

- No one's come ashore over.
- Crackle, crackle?
- No one has come ashore over.
- Crackle boats crackle here over.
- All of them? Over.
- Crackle, crackle. Over.

The constable lifts up a different radio to his mouth.

- I want a crackle party now crackle!

Lawrence is asking the police officer if he can return home, Evelyn needs changing and he is tired and needs to get some sleep before work. He can answer their questions tomorrow, he says, but right now he and his daughter need to sleep. She tells him that he has been free to leave since he gave his statement.

He thanks the officer for looking after Evelyn and drives up the hill.

*

Helene is lying on a shelf of rock. Her arms and legs are askew and there is a curtain of blood opening across her knee. She tries to sit up on her elbows, to crawl backwards. She moves up the slightly bowled curve of rock that she fell, or rolled, or dropped into, or onto. She can't

remember. Perspective is hard and variable. Helene can see the police lights discoing the sand.

James, she says. She knows he is gone.

A helicopter noses around the lighthouse, its searchlights cast towards the darkly ruffled waves. The pilot scrutinises their surface for the shadow of some monstrous thing blooming underneath. Nothing. The pilot circles back towards the cliffs for another pass. The lights of the helicopter catch something irregularly slender and smooth amid the craggy rock face. The pilot edges towards it. Helene's dress unfurls over her head like a party horn.

*

Lawrence enters the house and calls out for Helene. No answer. His shoulders slump. He lays Evelyn on her changing table and begins to disassemble her nappy. He calls out to the empty rooms again. He shouts that he's sorry, that he's not to be hated. This is what he's saying, essentially and in other words, as he liberally peppers Evelyn's behind with talc before folding her neatly within clean linen.

He calls her my little sushi roll and then, smiling, picks up the dirty nappy and walks towards the kitchen. He stops in the centre of the room and calls for Helene again.

I'm sorry Helene, he says, I'm really sorry. Please don't be mad. I'm sick of that weirdo.

Somebody had to do something. Please? The telephone rankles from the floor. Lawrence stoops to unlatch the receiver and draws it to his ear. It is the hospital calling. Lawrence presses the nappy against his cheek and then, realising, jerks backwards, the nappy unfurling and spilling its contents over the rug. The receiver is stretched out in front of him; he brings it to his ear again. He can hear Helene in the background, her voice farmed out to the painkillers she's taken. Lawrence stares at the nappy on the floor. He thinks she doesn't know what she is saying. He drives to the hospital.

*

Helene changes the channel on her bedside television and rolls onto her back. She stares at the ceiling. Her eyes may as well be one of the fixtures there for all of their input. She was discharged from hospital at around seven thirty a.m. Lawrence drove her home before leaving for work. That much, at least, she knows.

Helene can hear the cleaner moving around downstairs, dismantling and then reconstructing the domesticity of the house. She's not meant to be here today, Helene thinks, Lawrence must have called her to look after Evelyn. The sounds from downstairs, oddly inhuman and strangely gear-like, rumble under the carefully constructed optimism of her bedroom t.v's plethora of voices.

Helene closes her eyes and unburdens time, time that shifts tectonically within her, forming chasms into which her consciousness pours.

A voice is communing with her in the television. Helene tries to follow the indistinct murmur that comes to her now in the dark of herself. The murmur is constellate, faintly musical— first near and then far— before drawing itself together in binding accusation. The television is asking Helene about her pain, it is asking her about her child, it is sternly asking her to participate in a duel to the death. Helene's mind stands back-to-back with herself and separates, falls into nothingness. She opens her eyes. For a moment, Helene believes she has gone blind and each muscle in her body contracts around this fear as if in sudden audit of itself.

The cleaner is stood in the doorway clearing her throat. Helene whips her head towards her, a rash of relief and then annoyance colouring Helene's face. The cleaner is eyeing Helene's bandaged foot but catches the ragged look in her eyes. The television is playing an old Western. The cleaner turns it off and begins to speak.

*

I've just the bathroom to do and then the stairs. Was Mr Muir unhappy with the way I cleaned yesterday?

No, no. I suspect he was just wanting to have you in the house and not knowing how to put it. I've had an accident you see.

The cleaner nods, looking at Helene's foot. Helene stares at the ceiling again. The cleaner remains in the doorway. The cleaner is younger than Helene. Helene thinks, 'she doesn't haven't a bucket, where is her bucket?'

Helene's mother had been a cleaner. In this house Helene cannot remember her mother. She cannot remember whether or not her mother would have looked how Helene imagines a cleaner in her house would look if the cleaner in her house were also her mother. Helene begins to hate herself, lying there, half listening to the cleaner.

If you like I can stay and look after the baby. That's what I was asking before, if you wanted me to stay?

Helene is reaching for her medication by the side of her bed. Helene and Lawrence had gone private just after Evelyn was born. Helene remembers Lawrence spending an inordinate amount of time in the hospital's corridor staring at a painting of a lake during sunrise. He had kept saying *it makes me feel calm and that's what I want*. She remembers that he'd even tried to buy it during that first excruciating session. Now, Lawrence plays golf with the doctor on a weekly basis. He has never won a game though he still comes home beaming, wearing his bobbled flat cap and those ridiculous trousers and saying things like:

– I'm getting better, closer today.

And.

– I really feel that I have a handicap now

And

– How are you feeling?

And

– I love you.

Helene is telling the cleaner that yes, she would like it if she could stay until four at least. The cleaner smiles and says good and then pauses as if she still has something to say before wordlessly leaving the room. Helene is alone again. She sits up on the bed and shakes some pills into her hands.

Last night James disappeared.

Last night.

James is gone.

She picks up the glass of water from her table and swallows the pills. She sits there clutching the glass and praying for their gifts to erode quickly into her blood. She puts the glass down.

– Evelyn, Jim has gone and he is not coming back.

And what would that ever mean to her? Probably nothing. There will be answers that you

couldn't pretend to have the questions to. James used to say that. He said it once. She remembers.

*

The cleaner has been working for Helene for ten months now. She started a few weeks after Evelyn's birth. They have grown, the cleaner believes, if not close, then attached. They have sat for cups of tea together and talked over biscuits, often in bitter declamation of the biscuits! Helene has allowed Diane to bring her children to the house whenever she has pulled them out of school for whatever obscure reason Diane is always dragging her children out of school.

Diane is grateful for this. She likes Helene. In small, polite ways she has tried to save her. Literature has been discreetly proffered and politely accepted and then left to age at an unnatural rate in the secondary bathroom as if intently browsed.

They have talked about Him before of course, the subject of Him marking, with an increasing regularity, the end of the biscuits. 'God between the crumbs' is how Helene would have liked to describe it to someone, had there been anyone she believed capable of listening to her.

Diane picks up the last brochure she gave to Helene. She knows something is wrong, that Helene is in a great deal of spiritual pain, that she has a duty to try and help Helene. Diane though

does not know how to help Helene, what could she say to bring her to God?

– It is not for us even to direct our own steps.

The line makes Diane flush with beauty. She has said it out loud, accidentally, almost tonelessly. It cannot now be caught. The words are suffusing the heavenly white enamel of the room and Diane feels their truth physically emerging from the gleaming tiles, the words floating towards her and becoming a buoy on the spiritual plane of the here and now.

– Become a fisher of men

(and women)

Diane believes herself spoken through. She thinks *Helene is ready to come to God. God wants Helene*. She stands up and washes her hands. She picks up a magazine next to the toilet and walks to the bedroom. She will tell her the good news.

Helene is staring blankly at the oval portraiture of the door when the cleaner's slender frame takes up residence there again. It takes Helene a second or two to register the change. She lifts up

her hand. There's a pant of a smile on her face and her lips are browed with sweat. She hears Diane say something. The drugs capsize. Helene falls out of them and into the room.

– What did you just say? What did you just say?

Diane steps back frightened by the edge in Helene's voice. Helene feels replaced— literally replaced— in space and time as if she'd just been abducted and had her memory re-organized. She doesn't know when she is. She takes a tentative account of herself. It could be years before she discovers what's lost or missing.

– Are you talking about last night? Steps?

Diane's hands wring the top of the magazine she's now hiding.

– Last night, I fell in the garden. Down the steps. I twisted my ankle. Thank you.

Helene leans over and takes a drink from the glass of water on her bedside table. The glass is quite out of keeping with the rest of the room. It is a plain pint glass stolen from a pub several years ago and which she has kept much to the baffled chagrin of Lawrence. She stole it in nineteen seventy-eight. She remembers the very

night then grows sadder. She hates how that equation works.

– What’s my remainder?

Jim.

Helene begins to cry. Diane steps forward. From behind her skirt a child bursts through the door. His arms are whirred out and he is flying a car in irregular looping patterns through a fantasy roller coaster.

– Henry!

The child stops short at the sound of his mother’s voice. He looks at his mother and then at Helene. He brings the car down to his stomach and shines it with his thumbs. Henry’s hair is tousled into a rough fringe that hangs above a straight nose. The child has a thin mouth that at rest settles into the shape of an upside-down canoe.

Helene tries to smile reassuringly at the boy. Fails. You mustn’t panic, she thinks. She pats her face and eyes until the last traces of sorrow sink under her skin. She tries again. Helene feels herself to be a sifted person, barely held together, prone to scatter. Her smile has a submerged quality like an animation grafted between the stasis of her skull. Henry can see it floating around her face, not quite fixed. He stares at his

car and then at his thumbs as they buff the immutable surface of the metal. There is something about the car that he does not understand, that he will remember not understanding. The bare fact of its existence under his gaze, or something. Helene looks at the child's wan face. It is as if you could see the adult crouching unbidden in him, she felt. Not a strong adult or a glimmer of the person he would become but rather the adult of sadness fossilised in his youthful stare and weighted with permanence within him. Helene recognizes this look. She gave her own youth to trying to discover its secret. Jim.

◦

Henry walks towards Helene and hands her his car. He maintains eye contact. After he has given Helene the car he walks towards his mother in the doorway and stands there holding her leg. Helene leans off the bed and rolls the car towards him, the car jackknifing across the carpet and bumping his toe. Helene asks Diane if she could bring Evelyn into her. Diane turns to leave, gesturing at Henry to follow her.

- He can play here if he wants. I was just going to read to Evelyn.
- Would you like that Henry, do you want to stay here?

Henry looks at the floor and then his mother, his mouth shifting from side to side, his elbows splayed out. Diane smiles, tells him to stay here and to be a good boy. She leaves and brings back the baby and hands her to Helene.

Helene pats a space on the bed and Henry climbs up into it. Evelyn falls between them, grabbing a tiny fist's worth of his cheek.

– She's little isn't she Henry?

Henry nods.

– Would you be her friend? She is going to need friends soon.

Henry steers his eyes from the carpet and lets a tear glaze in them.

– I want a friend.

Helene nods. She opens a book.

– Once upon a time

– In the beginning?

– Yes Henry, in the beginning.

*

Monoliths shorn from the cliff face compose the visible bulk of the isle from the shore. The largest rocks jut nearly thirty feet into the air

and form a nest of calcified javelins that roughly encircle the hidden heart of the island. Out of these the lighthouse rises like an exit wound.

Detective Richard Fort is standing on the island. He is looking up at the lighthouse and dashing off equations in his small leather notebook. Equations he'll erase moments later with a tense flourish of his wrist. Every few minutes he reflexively shakes his left foot. His left sock sodden with water and wrinkling under his heel. The rubber of his shoe having been skewered on the island's staggered rocks as he disembarked. Richard Fort limps towards the entrance to the lighthouse.

The day brightens then dulls as he walks, a Theremin light shrinking and expanding with an almost sentient feel for the 'crime scene aura.' A slow wash of salt appears across the wood of the door in the wake of the sun's tides like a granulate residue of dead light. Richard Fort presses his hand against the door and pushes. The door swings against the web of shattered locks behind it. He walks to the edge of the island.

Richard Fort is on leave due to the recent break-up of his marriage and some interrelated displays of insubordination directed towards one Sergeant Dawkins. Richard Fort should be at home or whatever amounts to a home for the broken-hearted. Instead he is here, walking the length of the island, counting his steps and closely monitoring his breathing for tremors or halts.

He understands that his sadness is not only ugly but burdensome to those around him. He believes that each of the people around him serves a principle whether they are conscious of that principle or not. He understands that although morale has few rational edicts it is a necessary component for the principle they serve to be effectively, i.e. rationally, applied. He doesn't want to be seen; he just wants to work— to feel the fidelity of his labour— and so Richard Fort is here in a 'semi-official' capacity investigating a dead end disappearance he's certain that no one else on the force is at all interested in.

At the edge of the isle he plunges his hand into the water. The water is shallow. There is no sudden drop-off in depth. He turns around and looks up at the lighthouse. At the top there is a dome surrounded by a balcony. The balcony runs circularly around the outside of the glass dome like a wastebasket. The sun glares in the wastebasket like a dropped egg. Richard Fort enters the building and finds the switch. Light clatters up the hollow. He mounts the stairs.

In the living quarters of the lighthouse there's a scrappy looking single bed with springs rising like tornadoes through the covers, a threadbare rug piled with books that Richard Fort is diligently writing down the titles of, and a desk cramped with items that, as is Richard Fort's M.O, he's leaving till last to investigate.

Richard Fort was in the year above James Burke

at school. He doesn't remember much about him though he recognized the name over the radio and the bizarreness of the allegation had piqued his curiosity enough for him to pull James' file the day after. There wasn't much to it. A few minor drugs charges, a count of vagrancy, one or two logged complaints of harassment by Lawrence Muir and that was all. He looks at the photo of James Burke and the accompanying description.

James Burke: 33 years old
Caucasian male
Brown hair
Green Eyes
6ft 2

No other distinguishing features.

Richard Fort kneels and touches the frayed rug. He looks at the telephone in its crib, half-submerged in the floor, and pulls it out. He searches under the loose floorboards. There's nothing of interest there. He walks over to the desk. A lamp cranes over the desk. Richard Fort turns it on. On the desk there is a notebook. Next to the notebook is a photograph of a woman. It is a photo of the woman that Mr Burke is alleged to have been harassing. Richard Fort looks at the photo without touching it. The photo is of a personal nature. Richard Fort pulls open the desk drawer. He finds a plastic baggy turned inside out

and possibly licked clean and one small syringe. Richard Fort takes a Polaroid of the desk with the drawer open. He holds the Polaroid up as it begins to develop. He senses a poetry might emerge in its composition that'd render it inadmissible as evidence. He puts the Polaroid into his top pocket before it has finished developing. He picks up the notebook. He flicks to the last few pages. These last pages are filled with a series of drawings of varying detail and technical ability.

The first drawing is of a child with long hair, presumably female though otherwise featureless, standing on a ledge and looking out towards a lighthouse half her size. The child is embraced conically by light. The light is represented in the drawing by two divergent dotted lines emerging from the lighthouse that extend to the top and bottom left corner of the frame. The last dash at each corner is half the size of the preceding ones suggesting— Richard Fort notes— that the light continues exponentially along its path. The second picture shows a delicately shaded close up of the child's shoulder separating from the torso. The third is a detailed drawing of a leg separating in three places: Hip, knee and ankle. The areas of separation— both the appendage and its former joint— appear smooth and curved like a pebble, as if both were either immediately cauterised or never truly connected.

The depiction of light is constant in each picture and signified by the same diagonal lines at the edge of each frame. These lines occurring either to the bottom left or top left of the frame, or concurrent in both, and suggesting— it would seem— that the light is somehow destroying the child. This supposition being confirmed to some degree, Richard Fort felt, by the final picture and the title underscoring it.

The final picture is a close-up of the child's face. It is at once the most intricate and inscrutable of the drawings. The picture takes up the whole of a page. It is of a face drawn and then neatly erased, scrubbed, of all identifying aspects with the exception of the lips which are drawn up in either pain or, more disturbingly, pleasure. The drawings are collectively entitled "The Death of the Jubilant Child". Richard Fort extracts a Dictaphone from his pocket. He relates, as best he can, the details of the pictures.

He picks up the picture of Helene from the desk. Helene is naked in a portion of sea, haloed by the lamp of the lighthouse. It is night and she is turning towards the camera with one arm riding across her chest. Her other hand is cupped around a smile that escapes it and her back is slightly bent in laughter. There is a faint suggestion of her ribs written under the captured

movement of skin. The ribs look like mounted wings waiting to emerge from the luminosity of her flesh. It is as if her skin is being x-rayed by joy. Richard Fort turns the photograph over. The date 07/06/80 is written in pencil on the back of the photograph. He turns it over again. The waves are fringed white. Helene's hip is lightly curved around the onyx reflection of the pier's hulk in the water and there is a small silvery arrowhead of light glistening at the base of her spine. The whole sea seems to lap at her.

Richard Fort places the photograph between the pages of the notebook. He walks to the lantern room.

The room is domed and the windows are stained with filth. Several generations of spiders have left their webs to grow freighted with dust, to bend greyly in cremated rainbows around the darkened glass. Richard Fort stands in front of the disconnected light and then turns around until he is facing the cliff. He can make out the victim's house and three to four other building sites. He takes the notebook out of his pocket. He starts to read it from the beginning.

*

Lawrence Muir is sat gingerly at his desk visualising an aqua blue inflatable rubber cushion, one donut shaped and recently extracted from a large industrial freezer. He is visualising

it being gently inserted under his clammy thighs, a coolness finally coming to rest there, the ring of the cushion encircling his own within its oval frame and somehow, he hasn't quite worked out how yet, creating a tunnel of soothing arctic air that'd waft up that troubled passageway in a soothingly holistic breeze.

Lawrence has lifted this technique from the self-help book *Imagined Success You Can Have It*, gifted to him by his Doctor and golfing partner.

Other images Lawrence Muir has used in an attempt to alleviate his current discomfort have included: a lake composed of placid moisturising lotion soundlessly quenching a burning asteroid in some incredibly humid jungle setting, a frost like a graft of skin settling over the scarred earth of a drought ridden plain, and the well-lit interior of an industrial fridge filled with frozen corpses.

All these, however, have failed to adequately distract him from the gush of evil he's had repeatedly torrent out of the lit oil well of his stomach over the last few hours.

Lawrence Muir's stomach is prone to complaints anyway but the stress of last night and the cold coffee he drank and the egg and cress petrol station sandwiches he bought and ate only the filling from, not to mention the promotion

he is pushing for and which he expects to hear about soon, very soon he hopes, have all adversely affected his stomach to a degree he's never before tenanted. Lawrence has just returned from the staff toilets for the eighth time this morning. The temperature of his extremities is unholy. He has been at work for only three hours. This means he has been to the bathroom once every twenty-two and a half minutes. If you factor in the amount of time spent in the bathroom as well as the time expended travelling back-and-forth he has spent only fifteen consecutive minutes at a time at his desk working.

This ratio and its negative implications cannot fail to have been noticed, he thinks. Lawrence Muir looks around the office. At each desk there is a person apparently engrossed in their work, heads bent in fierce concentration. This striking him as somewhat suspicious, conspiratorial.

In between his trips to the bathroom Lawrence Muir has struggled to decode his co-workers' hushed conversations. He has strained to hear anything of pertinence or sense in those opaque and frosty tones that have run half-lit around his head like the strips of fluorescent lighting strafing the office's ceiling. Eight trips to the bathroom coupled with his unheard-of tardiness and not a glance from his co-workers or an excruciating innuendo levelled at him by his boss. Perhaps they have heard something about Helene and are

choosing to ignore him out of embarrassment, he thinks. Lawrence reassures himself, *how could they know?* The moment Lawrence threatens to relax a subtle but distressing change occurs in the stress of his reasoning:

– How *could* they know?

Lawrence Muir is working himself carefully towards the seat's edge. His cheeks, tensed into two peaks of barely qualifying muscle, attempting to tippy toe towards freedom. It is a doomed attempt.

Something sour and anachronistic is gathering within him. He steers his sight across the map of desks, oceans of space slowly drying up around him. His stomach gargles. The stomach gargle sounds like the weakening drone of a dying fly, its low battery death bent by universal affect. His body seems to have gone into shock in reaction to the enlarging sting of pain that spreads and opens now onto the spiritual world of his soul and denounces it. Yes, it is a soul-denying shit brewing within him, one, though in truth it is legion, held back only by the rhythmic resistance of his metronomic foot. His testicles feel like two shelled peas.

– Why am I always so conscious of my balls?

Lawrence holds his stomach, a fountain-shaped sweat breaking out across his back. He turns and looks for the minuscule icon of the toilet marked 'male'. He has the pose of a man heroically confronting a fatalistic future. A tear forms in his eye. At the same time a piece of paper is dropped and then blown down the aisle by some errant rotary fan. The crushed paper tumbling past him just at the moment that he blinks a large hot tear.

– Hey Lawrence you look just like that famous Red Indian guy!

That is all he would need someone to shout now.

In order to make it to the bathroom Lawrence must negotiate twelve sets of desks. He is calculating a new route to the bathroom, one that must vary significantly from the last few trips. He has used the same route for the last couple of trips as he did the first.

– Have I become so short-sighted?

Lawrence stares into the wild plain of his desk. A pen grazes it. He leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. He turns around slowly and

tries to discreetly plot his way to the bathroom. It is impossible. The tops of each desk preclude any strategic view. Each desk is heaped with complexly arranged objects either drained of, or charged with, totemic life. Symbolic figures snatched from the lives their inhabitants dreamt of, still dream of, though these places, or the shades of these places, existed somewhere outside of here in the crumbling reality of their leisure. Those that have staked out a career in the office, journeyed into a heart of rendered grey, their desks are among the most savagely and sentimentally enjambed.

Lawrence hopes to reach the bare, touristy, singularly lined desks of the temps before any serious accident occurs. Lawrence straightens up. The pain seems to have alleviated a little in a rare moment of grace. He is going to be fine, he thinks. All done. Lawrence is smiling vacantly as his eyes fix upon the watercooler in the corner of the room. He watches a thick gelatinous bubble rising up in the large plastic container. It is followed by another and then another. Lawrence can sense the babble of water, understands that the bubble's infraction in the still of the water is not at all placid, understands it on a seemingly cellular level. His stomach replies in kind. The two have started to converse.

Lawrence cannot take his eyes from the water cooler. He watches a slow bubble, of significant

circumference, forming in the base of the cooler. It rises tortuously at first, as if too heavy to float, and then with increasing speed careens clumsily to the surface. Lawrence watching as the rim of the bubble becomes oval, impressing itself on the surface limit, indented, breaking, splitting at the sides, exploding, releasing...

– Not now, Jesus, no, not now Jesus. Oh Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

Lawrence Muir is on his way to the bathroom for the ninth time. He is past the first three sets of desks with relative quick footed ease when, distracted by the sight of a co-worker rising to greet him, his elbow brushes a plant pot off of an empty desk. The liberated cactus has landed in the classic pose of a murder victim, the white peat providing the iconic outline.

The cactus and pot belonged to Susan Donaldson. Susan Donaldson is even less popular in the office than Lawrence Muir, though for wildly different reasons. One reason being the care and attention she likes to lavish on this cactus during her breaks, the whispered sweet nothings that have either been overheard or crassly imagined and then hastily scribbled on the toilets' walls.

Lawrence is hastily picking up and tossing the cactus back onto the desk when a provident shadow engulfs him.

– You ok there Lawrence? You look a little worse for wear, heavy night?

It is Ian, Ian of all people, the office prince of the office fuckwits. Lawrence stands. He is sparkly with sweat.

– You’ve killed that cactus, wow. It’s definitely dead. Cactuses they can

– Cacti

– They can survive a lot, but not that I think. Susan will be dressed in black for a month.

– Erm yes. She is, er, absent today...fortunately for her or...er.. us.

Lawrence, having tried to convey in his words and manner the casual friendliness of a parting witticism, smiles and leans forward at the same time. He almost butts into Ian who remains inured to the plea in his voice.

– Ha! Ha! Haahaha...ha... In all seriousness though, Susan is pretty ill, we shouldn’t be laughing.

Lawrence murmurs an 'oh' as he cranes his head around Ian and begins to employ the breathing techniques he had memorised for Helene's pregnancy.

– Yes, she's in the hospital with a kind of stomach flu. Ate some dodgy sandwiches from a petrol station I think. My wife said that...

– Susan is in the hospital? Since when? Are you sure?

– Yeah my wife is a nurse there, she told me that Susan really did not look well. Come to think of it, you look a little like how she described Susan being. Pale, sweating. Have you been having any auditory hallucination? Because that is not a good sign if you have. CAN YOU HEAR ME? BLINK TWICE IF YES. Seriously though I think you should sit down. You don't look well.

– I'm fine, I just need to

– You don't look fine. My wife is a nurse I should know. She is always telling me medical facts that would make your hair curl. I'm sure she exaggerates. Actually, and this is funny, this one time

– Your wife is a nurse at the hospital?

– Yeah, anyway this one time she starts

telling me I must have been cheating on her because there's this terrible rash all over my groin. It came up literally overnight I tell you, on a Sunday of all days.

– She was working last night?

– Yeah all last night, and I say there's no way, 'I haven't been cheating on you' etc because I really hadn't been cheating on her, I would never do that. I mean, I love my wife. But there's this rash you see and she's a nurse and it has got me to thinking about how I got drunk at Sam's, you know Sam right, Sam in accounting? You know him?

Lawrence nods vigorously.

– Well I got drunk at Sam's the week before and I couldn't remember getting home. Lots of beer and vodka, a sort of wahey the lads kind of evening, and we went out somewhere and then that's all I remember, and so I'm starting to think maybe I should just confess except I'm adamant that it's not possible that I cheated on her, no way except...you know... *is there?*

– I have to go now.

– And my wife she starts saying that she knows 100% that what is currently tearing burgundy up my balls and shaft is a V.D and I should just come

out and be a man and admit because she's a nurse and she knows exactly what it is I've got and how I've got it, you filthy brute, cock sucking bastard etc etc and so she goes to the kitchen and grabs this knife and comes back into the bedroom where I'm still bare naked and all but ready to confess

Lawrence shoulders past Ian who spins around, his hands finned around his crotch, a manic smile at play on his lips.

Lawrence can hear every pen scratching, every word processor clack, he can hear the quiet desperation of the room very clearly, can hear it as if the 'quiet desperation' was in fact screaming very loudly and insanely in his face. Ian, raising his voice to a hoarse shout:

– Turns out it was all a hilarious practical joke! She'd gotten hold of my allergy tests and decided to play a trick on me. Of course what she wasn't to know was what the long term effects of inducing this rash would be or the effect it was to have on our...

Lawrence quickens his step. The toilet door is visible to him now. The woman closest to it looks up at him, frowns, how many times has this woman seen him today? Her desk being unavoidable bringing up, as it does, the rear. The association puns on his

abdomen. Onwards, regardless, he pushes the bathroom door open and enters a grey tiled room charged with latent grace and a smell of poverty. A bathroom not unlike a school bathroom with toilet rolls more akin to tracing paper than the double woven, gently moisturised, tastefully embroidered tissues he generally likes to see a toilet furnished with.

Lawrence begins to fret now, allows himself that luxury, as he lowers himself onto the hard enamel rim. The police have yet to call. He hopes that they do not call at all. He hopes that there will not be a scene and that they will not enter while he is still in the bathroom, sat here with his trousers netted around his ankles certainly not catching butterflies. He is remembering now as the first umbrella of shit gives way— its form forged only through velocity—that Ian has a wife and that Ian's wife is a nurse in the hospital where Helene was treated. Also, the secretary has a husband in the police force while Clarice, in marketing, had a relative admitted to the hospital only a few days ago. Lawrence feels the world closing in around him, the world shrinking to the pain in his stomach, the world exiting him with force.

He wishes to be recognized for his contributions to the company, to efficiency. He does not wish to be known because his wife has a stalker or because his wife has a penchant for

throwing herself down cliffs— of all things— in her free time.

Don't be so harsh, he thinks, you love her. You. Love. Her.

A lot.

He loves her so much.

Lawrence places his palm flat against the cubicle wall and tries to master the burning sensation. He leans his back against the cool tank. Sweat breaks around his temples in morse code:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Kendall is a writer from a small seaside town. His work has appeared in a couple of places like *Userlands: New Fiction From the Blogging Underground* (Akashic Books) and online at Entropy and Lies/Isle. A section of this novel was first published on Lies/Isle. Thank you.

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