For Leonardo
Meaning is served far better—and literature and language far worse—by the unrestrained license of bad translators.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” translated by Harry Zohn
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BEFORE

They are only boys.

Tall enough to be men but something gives them away, even with parka hoods pulled tight over their heads. From a distance they might appear as two swaying drunks debating over which of the paths ahead will lead them home. But look at their faces: freckles standing out against bloodless cheeks, chapped lips held tight against the wind. Their fear is neither a child’s nor a man’s. Nothing is real enough to be entirely believed by boys like these, although they’d like to believe in something if it might make them look a year or two older. But for now they’re too in-between, afloat in the not-quite-thereness of their boyhoods. Look at their faces: sometimes their eyes show a hurt they haven’t even lived through yet. It’s like a vision the two of them have shared, a premonition of the life ahead as an ongoing trade of damages. It’s why boys sleep as much as they do. And in their dreams they are caped crusaders. Human but with impossible talents like x-ray vision or freezing breath or flight. Dreams that often end badly nevertheless, with an assassin’s blade slicing their throats or tumbling out of the sky to gasp awake before they hit the ground.

“What’s it say?”

“That way, I think.”

“Which way?”

“Through there. North.”

The slightly taller one returns the compass to the inside pocket of his parka and points a trembling finger into the trees that surround them. It’s officially winter, but up until a couple hours ago the snow had been cagey, dusting and melting and looping around but refusing to settle in for good. Now it’s coming down straight as marbles.

“It’s getting dark,” the shorter one says, and it is, the sky a purple
sheet lowering over the cedar branches. It’s also getting cold. A drop of several degrees within a minute of the sun’s retreat.

They’re lost, but neither has said so yet. It’s their Outdoor Orientation exam—blindfolded then dropped off three miles in by sniggering prefects who kept calling them “lover boys”—and now it’s clear that they’ve failed. Why did the parents of one and the guardians of the other send them to this school in the middle of the Canadian woods anyway? It’s obscene, as the shorter one has taken to saying about all things that bore him. And to make matters worse, it’s one of those schools without girls. Its unspoken specialty is keeping the young gentlemen of the wealthy out of trouble. But what kind of trouble could you get into up here even if you tried? Nothing to do but drink smuggled booze and look out classroom windows at the wall of trees and prickly creeks that lead to farther nowheres. It’s as if the people that sent them here want them to get lost.

“You better get rid of that,” the shorter boy says, eyes on the mickey of rum pulled out of the same pocket as the compass.

The taller one lifts the bottle in salute and throws back a gulp. Passes it to the shorter boy, who drains the spitted backwash. At first the alcohol had made being stuck in the woods kind of funny, then it had offered temporary blooms of warmth. Now it does little but root them to their places, as though all the stuffing above their waists had poured down their legs and into the frozen earth. The shorter one chucks the bottle away and it takes its time in midair. A half dozen tumbles before burrowing under the white blanket on the forest floor.

They go on. Put a few more miles behind them, or around them, for there’s always a river or sudden cliff that pushes their path into spirals. And with the hours come new surprises of exhaustion. It takes all the talk out of them. There is little to be said anyway except the obvious, which, if stated aloud, would only make them more afraid.

Neither wears a watch, but the air is solid in the way the middle of the night is. Hardly moving at all now except for their arms, rubbering about them for balance. The cracked skin of their hands skimming in and out of view.

They come to a stop in a small clearing encircled by a solid web of
brush. How’d they get through it in the first place? For a time each of them believes they are speaking, although it’s impossible to tell. When they lift their heads to face each other the snow fills the air between them as falling bits of shadow.

“Which way now?” the shorter one asks, his lungs stinging from the air it costs him.

“It doesn’t matter. We keep ending up in the same place.”

“Or what looks like the same place.”

“Same difference.”

“But we have to keep going.”

“Why?”

“To get out of here.”

“We’re not getting out of here.”

“Yes, we are.”

“And you’re going to save us?”

“That’s right. I’m going to save us.”

“Here then.”

The taller one pulls the compass out of his pocket and hands it over. But it’s too dark to get a fix on the gyrating arrow, anxiously skipping between each of its four options.

“The compass is lost too,” the shorter boy says.

“I’m really tired, man.”

“We’re both tired. But we have to move.”

“I don’t think so.”

“C’mon. Another half a mile.”

“Where?”

“Might as well be straight ahead.”

“I don’t—”

But the taller boy doesn’t finish. Instead there is only the whoof his body makes as it collapses forward into a creamy drift.

“Get up!” the shorter boy thinks he shouts, but immediately begins to doubt it. Frightens himself with an oddly hollow laugh.

For a minute nothing moves. The night muffled as though brushing against a closed window. At his feet the snow already collecting over the body, sculpting its outline into another shape of the wind.
“You have to get up now.” The shorter boy has fallen to his knees. Certain of his voice this time, at once fierce and cracked. “You have to.”

“No, I don’t.”

“I’m asking nicely.”

“You go. I’ll wait here.”

The shorter boy considers this. Calculates the possibility of lucking out and finding a road or cabin. Getting help. Considers the particular darkness of the night, the particular hardness of the cold.

Even if he made it, the fallen boy wouldn’t. The shorter boy tries to make the questions in his head as complicated as he can in order to buy a little time, but instead the answers come simply and terribly. He might leave and live, or stay and probably die.

He rolls the taller boy onto his back to show a startling mask of sealed eyes and lips. Drags him the few feet it takes to lean him up against a tree out of the worst of the wind.

“Hey, are you with me?” he asks, catching sips of breath.

The taller boy can only clench his jaw in reply. He’s about to fall away into sleep, or someplace deeper, once and for all. The shorter boy knows this because he isn’t far from falling away himself.

He lets himself lie down next to the taller boy and unzips their parkas. Slips his arms around the other’s chest, brings him close in a wriggling hug. Stretches the layers of their parkas as tight as he can around their necks and knees.

“A sleeping bag,” the shorter boy says.

“This is weird, man.”

“Just pretend I’m a girl.”

“But you’re not.”

“Pretend.”

Their bodies find a hundred new ways around each other so that soon they are neatly joined as two lumps of clay. Under their coats their breath mixes in puffs of white steam.

Do they speak of things that matter? The odds they’ll be alive to see the morning? Of their love for their mothers? For each other?

Serious words are not their talent. Instead the one who stayed behind whispers to the other practical jokes they have both planned and already performed. Lullabies the cruel nicknames of teachers into
his ear. Then even he runs out of things to say along with the strength to say them. The snow drumming on their shoulders.

Soon they are blasting through the star-pocked sky with silver capes flapping behind them. Alert to the shouts for help below, ready to be heroes.
“Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Marcus Wallace, and I’d like to personally welcome you to your futures!”

This is in Brazil, but it could be anywhere.

A long conference room lit by dimmed halogen spots in the ceiling, a dozen rows of chairs, potted ferns circling the lectern. The front reserved for photographers, whose flashbulbs explode like distant artillery fire whenever one of the two people on stage makes a face or gesture of any kind. Behind them, slouching journalists scribble in notepads as they always have, or tickle laptops, as they do more and more. Then the rows of money: suits, silk shirts, Swiss watches of a price equivalent to an entry-level American sedan.

The person speaking to them is a boy. The other person on stage is a boy as well, although he hasn’t spoken yet, and doesn’t appear interested in starting any time soon. Instead, he sits at a small desk made out of a single sheet of clear, molded plastic (beneath it, his knees visibly jiggling within their cargo pants). He keeps his eyes squinted at a computer screen in front of him, and from time to time makes stabs at its keyboard, as though a cockroach were running back and forth across it. They are far enough apart that even from the back of the room you can’t take them both in at once, so you move your eyes from one to the other. Decide that your first impression was wrong. They aren’t boys at all. They are young men. But the word continues to cling to them, nevertheless. It seems right. You feel certain it will never leave them.

“Before we move on to this afternoon’s presentation, I would like to introduce my partner—God, it sounds like he’s my wife or something whenever I say that!—the real brains behind the success of Hypotheses, Jonathon Bates.”

The young man at the clear plastic desk jiggles his knees more
violently and raises his hand over his head in a kind of wave. A smile fractures across his mouth without him appearing to be in control of it.

“This is going to be one of the first public demonstrations of our product,” the standing one says, “so we’re pretty excited up here—or down here, I should say, seeing as this is South America.”

A giggle escapes from his lips, which in turn initiates a round of chortles and cleared throats from the audience. He’s cute. Everyone wants to like him. They already do.

“Why are we excited? Well, it’s pretty simple. We feel that Hypothesys is something that is truly going to change the way we conduct our lives. And that’s not just more of the same hype you guys have no doubt been served plenty of all week. Because this isn’t like the stuff you’ve seen all week. It’s not another Internet site where you can buy groceries or books or watch porn broadcast live from a rented room in Amsterdam or get twenty-four-hour webcam coverage of some Joe Nobody arguing with his girlfriend or brushing his teeth. Hypothesys isn’t about any of that. In fact, it can literally be anything you want it to be. Something you need. Your confidant. Your best friend. Your nondenominational spiritual advisor. Night or day, it will be there to help. To offer guidance about life’s most difficult questions, or even the easy ones you just feel you’d like a second opinion on. As the banner over our stall in the convention hall says, ‘Hypothesys helps you make the best decisions of your life!’ ”

At this, the dimmed lights dim further, and at the rear of the stage a large screen glows blue. Gradually, the word HYPOTHESYS comes forward in white, a cloud taking shape in a clear sky. A jet streaks across with a roar, leaving “New Human Ethics Technologies” formed out of the dissolving exhaust behind it. Even from the back of the room you can see the encircled c asserting copyright over every one of these words.

Now the two young men are silhouettes against the perfect blue, except for pancake circles of light on their faces, spotlights following them wherever they go. They look like ghosts in a high-school play.

“Some have called our project a morality machine, but that isn’t quite right,” continues the young Wallace’s disembodied voice. Only
now, in the new darkness, do you notice how full it is, at once boyish and suggestive of experience. “Hypothesys doesn’t deliver morality per se, nor is it a machine, strictly speaking. What it is, however, is a library of contemporary ethics. The process behind its development is known as collaborative filtering, but it’s not as complicated as it sounds. It’s just a survey, really. A big survey. One that has resulted in a collection of data that, once it has been thoroughly cross-referenced, can tell us something about the way we behave. So far, collaborative filtering is a process that has been employed for the most predictably commercial purposes. You know, the old ‘If you liked that movie or CD, chances are you’ll also like this movie or CD’ based on the stuff other people have bought before you. Hypothesys is considerably more ambitious. It has nothing to sell but ourselves. It is who we are—all of us together—right now. It forms, in effect, a universal human mind.”

Bates begins to work furiously at his laptop, and an animated brain appears on the screen, huge and pulsing with white bolts of electricity.

“Over the course of the past several months, we have conducted one of the most extensive studies of individual sensibilities ever undertaken,” Wallace says, his spotlit head floating from one side of the stage to the other. “And we weren’t asking about what color of sneakers people most like to wear, or what kind of car they drive, or whether they live in a house or a hole in the ground. In short, this was not the dead-tired market research you’ve all heard too much about already. We weren’t interested in the market at all, as a matter of fact, but only in people’s answers to hypothetical questions. Scruples. The way we decide to live our lives. Bates?”

As a buzzing swarm of static on the screen nibbles the brain away from stem to lobe, it is replaced by a shot of a crowded city street. People moving in undulating waves, half heading north, half south. It takes a couple of seconds to recognize the scene as computer-generated (it’s only the slight over-vividness of digitized color that gives it away). Then you notice something else not-quite-right about it. The people are made up of men, women, old and young, skin of every graduated pigment between black and albino, a cross around one neck, a Star of David around another, a turbaned head and a veiled face. A street that
had to be made by a computer because none could possibly be this perfectly representative anywhere in the real world.

“There is, needless to say, no single law that guides our actions. Our different religions, cultures and experiences shape our ethical orientations in a million discrete ways. But Hypothesys is indifferent to those distinctions. It’s about what we have in common, not what sets us apart. And because the data we have collected does not take into account the identity of those who participated in its collection, it is a system that can be applied with equal effectiveness in any nation, and be relevant to any way of life. We have, in a sense, created an electronic Everyman. Or Everywoman.”

Now the street scene blurs into a palette of brilliant colors that reassembles into a vision of the earth viewed from space. Different strains of shimmering, twinkly music seem to come from every corner of the room to converge between our ears. A chorus of synthetic human voices coming from the inside out. Home, they sing, Home!

Gradually, though, the planet’s blues and Browns and benign cloud masses become more detailed, hostile. Soon we are hurtling toward the surface.

“So how does it work?” Wallace’s question cuts through the soundtrack, which has built up into a Wagnerian climax of swirling synthesizers. “Well, my friends, let’s go straight into the mind of Hypothesys and find out!”

The earth entirely fills the screen in bulging 3-D and with a clap of thunder we crash somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, plummet down into the depths until the shafts of sunlight from the surface whither away and the entire conference room goes dark.

Somebody blows their nose. A goose honk in the silence.

Then a woman’s face appears on the screen. As we watch, her features—hair color, skin tone, nose length, lip shape—subtly change so that she is never fixed. Never one woman, but an infinitely revolving carousel of women.

“Meet Camilla,” Wallace says, softer now. “She has a problem. She knows something that her husband doesn’t know, and she can’t decide whether to tell him about it.”

The woman’s face fluidly morphs into that of a man. Of men.
“Camilla kissed Stephen last week. Stephen and Camilla’s husband are friends, they play golf on the weekends, get together for family barbecues. But last week Stephen called Camilla and asked her to lunch. Now, this is important: Camilla felt something was strange about this. Camilla and Stephen had never had lunch alone together before. And the fact is, she’s caught Stephen looking at her strangely lately. You know, giving her the old Latin lover eyes. But this is Brazil—you all know about that!''

There is appreciative laughter at this, along with a lusty whoop from somewhere among the journalists. Hoo-ha!

“But Camilla met up with Stephen anyway. They had some wine. They had a nice time. Then, over the tiramisù, Stephen drops the bomb. ‘I love you,’ he says. ‘I won’t get in the way of your life if you don’t want me to. But I just had to let you know.’ Camilla feels like a kid. She feels her cheeks get hot.” (The women’s faces reappear on the screen, all of them blushing.) “They pay and step out of the restaurant. And right there on the sidewalk, before she knows what she’s doing—although she does, of course, she knows perfectly well—she kisses Stephen like he was about to head off to war. We’re talking passion here, people.”

The face of the men returns and the women and men kiss on the lips, a pink flash of tongue visible before they meet.

“Now Camilla doesn’t know what to do. She’d ask her girlfriends for advice, but they’d blab it all over the place. And as for her priest? Her rabbi? She hasn’t seen those guys since her wedding. Besides, it all feels so complicated. She might just love Stephen herself. But what about the kids? And her husband? Sure, she still loves him, but quite frankly, a good deal less than she used to. Is her last chance for adventure staring her right in the face? Or is this the tough spot she’s heard about, when she goes to her husband and lets him know everything so they can try to work it out together? Is her duty to her own happiness or the happiness of others? As you can see, there’s a lot of factors at work here, even in a situation as common as this. Too many for one brain to handle. And this is where Hypothesys comes in.”

The word RELATIONSHIPS appears at the bottom of the screen, and then, rising up from it and branching out in different directions,
MARRIAGE and DISCLOSURE and CHILDREN and SEX. As the tree of words grows higher, the branches become more intricate, and eventually overlap into a single, wavering mass of dense leaves caught in a breeze.

“Camilla uses our system to sort out her problem one step at a time. She takes a good look at how she honestly feels, then enters the facts of her situation, detail by detail. She rates certain perception factors on a scale of one to ten, such as the pain she would endure if her husband left her, her physical and emotional desire for Stephen, the degree of discomfort she would experience in carrying on a long-term deception behind the back of the man she made solemn vows to years before, et cetera, et cetera. And these factors are then matched up with the responses of every other participant in the Hypothesys library. Within seconds, the system can give Camilla her answer.”

On the screen, a spreadsheet appears with dozens of figures arranged in columns under the same headings that appeared at the base of the tree.

“And what do we tell her to do? Well, reading the responses is something of an art in itself—it’s not exactly a simple yes or no sort of thing—but it’s basically ‘Go for it! Life’s too short! But don’t tell the husband unless you’re sure Stephen’s in it for the long haul.’ Hey, it may not be the most honorable course of action, ladies and gentlemen. But it is the most true to who we really are.”

The numbers on the screen skitter away, and in their place Camilla’s faces reappear, nodding back in gratitude at Wallace’s slender shadow before her.

“Thank you, Camilla,” he says to the digital representation of womankind, then turns back to us, the broad swath of flesh and blood sitting at his feet. “And thank you all for coming. Of course, this demonstration has been only a most basic exercise of the system’s capacities. Hypothesys is as complex as you are—and only you know what that really means. So I hope you get a chance to try Hypothesys out for yourselves at our exhibition area in the convention hall—and remember, confidentiality is guaranteed!”

Camilla disappears. The screen lulls into a fractal, one of those lines that create cities of fantastic architecture before wiping them out and
starting over again. The halogen lights bathe the room in enough orange to identify us as separate heads. Wallace looks out over every one of them.

“I think we have time for a couple of questions,” he says, glancing at his watch.

The journalists thrust pens, PalmPilots and index fingers into the air.

“Yes, Kevin?”

“Do you foresee any applications for your system outside that of a personal guide?”

“We’re always working on things. There’s been calls. The Pentagon has seen some potential for military deployments. Certain governments have shown interest in its use in policy development. NGOs, religious leadership, corporate management. Anywhere a decision has to be made, Hypothesys can be there.”

“How are sales going?”

“This trip alone has been very fruitful,” Wallace says, lowering his eyes in a half-second show of modesty. “Barry and Lydia, our associates on the money side of things, just yesterday sold world Portuguese rights for, well, what can I say? A significant amount.”

“We hear four million.”

“You hear pretty good.”

“What about the movie?”

“What’s with you guys and the movies? It’s like you’d all rather be working for Variety or something.”

“Hey, we’re all in it for the glamour, right? So what’s the deal?”

“The deal is that as of two weeks ago the film rights to our joint autobiography have been optioned by Paramount. I understand that a screenplay is already under development.”

“Who are they thinking of to play you and Mr. Bates?”

“Naturally, I think the twenty-million-per-movie pretty boy of the moment would have to play me. I guess we’d need two of those, now that I think of it,” he says, offering an apologetic pout over at Bates. “One concept the studio people have mentioned is an updated version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I’m rolling with that. What do you guys think?”
“Would you be the beauty or the beast?”
“Very funny, Diane.”
“Has the autobiography even been published yet?”
“Hey, we’re still living our lives here. We haven’t had a chance to write about them yet.”
“This one is for Mr. Bates. Ever get tired of playing second fiddle to your exuberant partner here?”

The young man behind the computer looks out at us directly for the first time. His face elongated and blanched clean of expression, as though someone has accused him of something terrible. But this is more or less the way he always looks.

“There is no second fiddle with Hypothesys,” he says evenly, though his knees are now thudding up against the underside of his desk. “In our partnership, we both play first violin.”

“Very well put, Bates,” Wallace cuts in and gives Bates an unnoticeable signal that turns his head back to his computer screen. “OK, everybody. Last question.”

“What is your opinion with regard to the possibility of your team being the first to one day develop authentic artificial intelligence in computers?”

“I think that day is already here, Brad.” Wallace blinks earnestly. “If our program can advise you as to how to live your life, and that advice is no worse than what most other people would likely advise, isn’t that a demonstration of intelligence? Assume for a moment that wisdom is adhering to the law of averages—and who’s to say it ultimately isn’t? I mean, that’s what rationality is—then what we have here is the old wise man sitting on top of the silicon mountain, my friends.”

With this Wallace smacks a fist into his palm and Bates punches at his computer one last time. The synthesizer music returns, a single, thrumming bass note like a far-off freight train. As Wallace steps back from the lectern mouthing Thank you and pointing directly at recognized faces in the audience like a presidential candidate, the sound enlarges. The screen at the back of the stage becomes a slow strobe of colors that freezes the room in half seconds of blue and yellow and underwater green. And as the sound fully enters our chests (noticing only now that we have been painfully applauding since the first thank
you) Bates rises from his clear plastic table and joins Wallace at the front of the stage.

They bring themselves toward each other with their smiles, arms rising to curl around the other’s waist. These pictures of them stay in our minds longer than any of the catchphrases or special effects that preceded. It’s somehow clear that this is the only part of the presentation that wasn’t planned out. A gesture too fluid to be rehearsed, too familiar, without the stiff hesitations of thought. Two young men caught in the lingering wash of adult applause, standing so close they could be joined at some hidden point, tied to one another by a transparent wire that allows a range of individual movement but can also reel them back together at any time. They could be brothers. Or fashion models beaming their good luck out from a page of gloss. Or street hustlers starting their shifts.

I stand at the back of the room and hold them there for as long as I can. We all do. A last look at how things are, before they turn into whatever comes next.
Less than two hours after Wallace and Bates’s sales presentation, I’m shaking the prime minister’s hand. (He’s nice, clammy-palmed, shorter than on TV. As I pass him in the reception line I tell him he has my vote, but this is a lie. A harmless, favor-seeking sort of lie.) This is in São Paulo, at a reception in the ballroom of the Canadian consulate. There is “Canadian champagne” and Ontario Mennonite cheddar sweating on the buffet tables, the room lined with pale faces glistening like wet plaster. It’s immediately clear that these people—government officials, international lawyers, CEOs, millionaire writers of Silicon Valley software code—are dangerously new to breathing unrefrigerated air. Almost all of them are men.

I am here with the other members of the Hypothesys team, have to be, as I’m the translator they’ve brought with them for the trip and they couldn’t order a plate of rice without me. It’s a good gig, as my fellow part-time interpreters like to say, imagining ourselves as seasoned journeymen well used to international travel, protocol, war zones. The truth is we almost never find work that takes us out of town. Surprisingly enough, holding an unmarketable Ph.D. in Economic History and having as my only other skill the ability to speak both English and passable Portuguese hasn’t led to the most dazzling of lives. I live on my own. Galbraith, my mewling, tumor-ridden cat, recently had to be put down. A Friday-night watcher of rented Scorsese and anything with Gwyneth, in a basement one-bedroom, usually alone. I once counted nine and a half days between the ringings of my phone (and when the call came it was from my gym, asking if I was dissatisfied with their services, seeing as I hadn’t dropped by for several months). So a free trip to Brazil, a per diem that would pay for an entire month of cable, a hotel room with a fully stocked mini-bar all to myself—it’s a good gig, all right.
What makes it particularly sweet is that I am only responsible for the conference participants directly connected to the Hypothesys product, unlike some of my colleagues who, like overworked border collies, have to round up entire herds of departmental bureaucrats. In my case, there’s only the four of them. Wallace and Bates (the two twenty-four-year-old “Boy Geniuses of Canada’s Great White Web,” as the cover of Newsweek called them); Barry, the managing partner they headhunted from an Atlanta pharmaceutical firm best known for developing prescription cures for male pattern baldness before their breakthrough discovery of the “female Viagra”; and Lydia, the English rose who is their European counsel, a few years older than me, forty and change, who “read eekonomics” at either Oxford or Cambridge, I can’t say which for sure because she alternately mentions her “days up” at both.

I met them all at the boys’ Toronto office the week before we came down here. A catered brunch in their “studio space” intended as a chance to “just hang out and chill,” as Wallace’s message on my answering machine put it. But the studio turned out to be the entire floor of a former button factory down in the docklands, now outfitted with a Dukes of Hazzard pinball machine, a sofa set covered with what appeared to be ostrich feathers, and a handful of desks draped with wires, distant as Pacific islands. Bates was the first to introduce himself. Shook my right hand and slid a flute of Pol Roger into my left, then pulled me to the center of the room to show how the remote-controlled blinds opened the windows up to the metallic field of Lake Ontario. Lydia picked a stray hair off my sleeve and kissed both my cheeks. Barry offered me Blue Jays box seat tickets he couldn’t use the next day. Wallace challenged me to a pinball game and let me win.

“There’s a lot of room,” he said with his arm over my shoulder, peering through the forest of concrete pillars around him.

It was unclear to me whether he meant the office itself, or the potential opportunities within the company, or the global marketplace that everyone had begun talking about so much. I now know he was saying that there was room for me among them. If I chose to, I could be part of this odd family of English mother, cowboy father and two sons, all of them joined by the chemistry of commerce instead of blood.

“We’re pretty close,” Wallace explained after tickling Barry into
weeping, “Cut it out!” submission on the ostrich sofa. And it was true. They had each made more money in the past four months than any of their parents had made over their entire lives. Their time together was a fluid mixture of laughter and shared secrets and initiation rites. They were enjoying themselves.

They called me only by my last name—with collegial affection—right from the beginning.

Now we’re here. In sales. All of us are part of the official Canadian trade mission to Brazil, host nation of the Southern Hemispheric E-Business Conference, a “historic opportunity to introduce a new dawn of hope to the developing world” (as described in the prime minister’s toast, glass of fizzing plonk raised high). The applause at this was loud and long. We’d heard sentiments like it before over the last few days, of course, in a number of different languages. But still, everyone seemed to be reassured by the endless mention of the sort of ideas crammed into the prime minister’s sentence. They liked “making history” and “hope” and “the world.” More than anything, though, they liked “new.” All of them had fallen in love with the mere evocation of it. A single syllable acting as a universal polish, sprucing up almost anything you applied it to. Three letters to do the job of sweeping away the geriatric millennium that had passed and lifting the curtain on the next. It was enough to make even a room like this one giddy, to send blood rushing to cheeks and hands flying up to hide lopsided smiles.

And nobody has more new at this conference than us. What we offer is precisely what everyone wants. Or, more frequently, are told that they want, and that we’re the only ones who have it. (I’ve been kept busy all week translating “buzz” into Portuguese—expectativa!—every few minutes.) As the banner over the conference hall stage declares, The Whole World Is Looking Forward to the Future! And we’re here to sell it something so new it never knew it needed it before.

The particular slice of future that our boy geniuses have developed is a website that teaches you morality. This is not how they describe it, however. Instead, Wallace speaks only of the program offering “helpful advice,” of “knowing what options are out there.” He frequently reminds us of the expensive focus group market research the company had commissioned prior to the launch. Hundreds from a “cross-
generational/racial/income strata" handed over their consumer profiles in return for fifty dollars an hour and all the donuts they could eat. Their principal finding is that explicit mention of terms such as morals, ethical good, guilt or even conscience has a distinctly softening effect on most respondents’ “purchasing drive.”

For these reasons, we prefer to say that Hypothesys answers questions for you. Not trivia game–type questions, though. Not “What’s the capital of Idaho?” or “Who won the 1956 World Series?” Nothing with a determinable answer. Rather, existential questions, the tricky inquiries of principle, like “Should I lie to save my best friend from a life in prison for murder if I know he did it but I’m certain he would never kill again?” (one of Wallace’s favorites) or “Is it wrong to take the bathrobe from my $350-a-night hotel room if I was assured I’d get away with it and the hotel is owned by a faceless, excessively profitable conglomerate?” (the one I entered on my laptop this morning after having already packed the bathrobe from my closet). What’s ingenious about the thing—what Barry calls “the hook” while making quotation marks with his fingers—is that the answers come from ourselves.

For the purposes of my job, I’ve come to refer to it as a compendium of contemporary ethics. After months of conducting detailed questionnaires in chain e-mails and random door-to-door interviews around the world, followed by a cataloguing of the tens of thousands of responses, Bates’s team of college dropout programmers (working for take-out Chinese and stock options) has put together a cross-referenced set of human behaviors. The trick is that when you mash them all together, the differences between the individual answers disappear, and you’re left with a single stand-in for one of them. Your fellow man. The Joneses. The blue-shadowed households that constitute a Nielsen ratings point, purchasers of discount mail-order life insurance, the parents of the kids that soap your windows on Halloween. The vast majority. Just like you, but less determined somehow. Happily compromised, nameless, getting on with life. A backdrop.

This is how I have explained it to myself, at any rate.

Wallace is somewhat more poetic about it: Hypothesys forms a collective mind. Not just them but a them with you included. What’s helpful from a sales perspective is that there’s no right or wrong about it. As
Wallace frequently points out, the program promises not moral correctness but the law of relativism.

People seem to think it’s something they’ve been waiting for. The current bid for world cable TV usage alone stands at $6.4 million, although Barry has turned it down in the expectation of “more heat” in the months to come. There is talk of industry awards, humanitarian recognition, secret military applications. The boys’ personal website receives two dozen marriage proposals per day, on average. But as Wallace noted in a recent New York Times feature on the world’s “bravest” web pioneers, “The real fun stuff will happen when we go public.” Forbes magazine has estimated that Hypothesys’ initial public offering could generate capital “on a scale equal to the GDP of smaller industrialized nations.”

For the moment, however, we’re just selling an idea. Everybody here is. Around us, the Caribou Ballroom of the Canadian consulate is overstuffed with buyers and sellers of ideas. With handshaking, decorative palms, platters of rolled Quebec ham melting in the air of cooked sewage blowing in through the open windows. I’m standing next to one with Wallace and Bates, ready to turn their English into something else if the need arises. It rarely does. Almost all the Brazilians in this room speak English (they claim it lacks emotion and is therefore better for doing business). Listen with eyes closed and all you can hear is the familiar dialect of American marketing.

Suits push through other suits to meet us. They know who Wallace and Bates are, they’ve been briefed and advised to show keen interest. Although they would likely come in any event. To him, anyway. People come to Wallace without knowing that’s where they were heading all along, to step within range of his blithe masculinity. Too young to realize the brevity of his sort of physical gifts, but old enough to know what they could make others do.

Look: here they come. The Argentinean Director of Education, the Colombian Minister of Justice, a VP of personnel recruitment for Microsoft in a low-cut Donna Karan—they all drop by to say a word of support for the “dramatic change” young fellows like themselves are visiting upon the planet. Even the U.S. Secretary of Trade makes a special trip across the floor, bobbing at the center of half a dozen Secret
Service stiffs (three, I swear, wearing aviator sunglasses and wires trailing out of their ears).

“And how are you boys enjoying yourselves?” the Secretary asks them hungrily, lips bubbling out around his “boys” as though the word itself is an unseemly joke. I seem to recall that he was once governor of Mississippi.

“We’re having a fabulous time. Aren’t we, Crossman?” Wallace nudges me with an elbow. “Better than spending all winter in Canada, eh?”

“Y’all actually say that up there, don’t you?”

“You mean the ‘eh’? Not really. We just throw it in for the amusement of Americans.”

“Oh?”

“It’s like the igloos. And the Mounties. And all that damn hockey. It’s for the tourists.”

“And they say Americans are the ones who invented smart alecks,” the Secretary of Trade says, giving Wallace a look of strained amusement. “Way-ul, way-ul. It should be no surprise that you’re selling so much of your wares down here. They tell me you’ve got quite a little racket on your hands.”

“Everyone’s been extremely enthusiastic.”

“I’m sure of it. Now, tell me. is it one of those games? What do they call them? A virtual reality game?”

“If you want it to be.”

“How would I play?”

“You?” Wallace says, holding his chin in his hand and squinting down at his own reflection in the Secretary of Trade’s Guccis. “You’d probably ask it the questions you couldn’t ask your advisors, or your wife. You know, something like ‘Based on my annual salary, projected pension and speaking engagement income, what is an appropriate amount of change to give to the heroin addict who lives outside my neighborhood ATM?’ Or maybe, ‘Is it wrong to decimate that defenseless rogue state that poses no real threat to national security—but happens to be run by a colorful demagogue—if it raises us five points in the polls?’ That sort of thing. And then your questions mix with all
the other subscribers’ answers, and the program generates the correct course of action. Relatively speaking.”

“Uh-huh,” the Secretary says, wincing. “This could be of special assistance to those of us in the political arena. You know, we’re always looking for the middle road.”

“We’re all looking for that, Mr. Secretary. It’s natural to want to know what others would do in the same situation.” Wallace gives him a confessional smile. “If the majority of others wouldn’t run into the burning house to save the baby, then how wrong could it be if you decided to stay put yourself?”

The stubble darkens on the Secretary’s sunburned jaw. Coughs his first inclination out of his head, then asks with all the restraint he can muster about principles being a different matter from following the herd, how perhaps sometimes doing the right thing is the opposite of what the majority would do. But Wallace has heard all this before.

“Hypothesys is a guide, not a bible.” He shrugs. “It tells us what we are—you know, the current state of the human condition—whether we’re ashamed of it or not. A database offers truth, not ideals. And in the case of Hypothesys, we offer assistance when you need it, to let you know what the most popular answers to life’s questions might be. And while that answer might not be the most right in the eyes of God, well, we’re not designed to be holy, are we? We’re designed to get by. And doing what most others are doing has been shown to be the most efficient way to accomplish that. I mean, you’re a Republican, right? Or is it the Democrats now? In either case, surely you can appreciate that.”

At this moment the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs jumps out from behind a melting ice sculpture of a maple-gnawing beaver. Former head of Transportation, Defence before that, and a successful year mumbling his way through Indian Affairs straight off his first election. Cheeks so carefully shaved as to be waxed. The sort of career bureaucrat born with a gift for sensing V.I.P. discomfort from forty feet off. He works up a doubtful guflaw, squeezes the Secretary of Trade’s shoulder with a meaty palm. They appear to be old friends. Everyone in the room appears to be old friends.

“Well, I’ll be leaving you now, Mr. Wallace,” the Secretary almost
shouts our way as he steps back into the waiting circle of Secret Service linebackers. “I wish you luck with your video game, or your igloos. Whatever it is you’re pushing.”

“Thank you! Come up and visit us any time, eh!”

For a second, the two of them share a real smile.

When the Secretary has left, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is careful to avoid eye contact with Wallace, so deliberately turns to Bates.

“And how are you enjoying things here, young man?”

“Very well, sir. Brazil is such a beautiful country,” Bates offers, although I know for a fact that all he’s seen is the convention hall, the view from his executive suite at the Hilton, and this place.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it? And you haven’t even been to the rainforest yet, have you?”

“No, sir. But we’re scheduled to fly out to Manaus tomorrow, then up the Rio Negro for a few days of sightseeing. We’re really looking forward to it.”

“So am I. Us government fogies will be traveling in a sister riverboat to your own, I understand. Don’t forget to bring your bug spray! We don’t want our country’s business future being devoured by mosquitoes, or struck down by malaria or some such thing, do we?”

The minister shows us his bleached front teeth for a long second. Winks before clenching both of the boys’ elbows and melting back into the crowd behind him.

“‘No, sir. Looking forward to it, sir.’ For Christ’s sake, Bates,” Wallace snaps, “have some pride.”

“The dude is paying for this trip.”

“No, he’s not. The Canadian government is paying for it, and we don’t owe them anything but a percentage of what we’re going to make. Isn’t that right, Crossman?”

“Death and taxes,” I say through a mouthful of orange milk solids. “The only certainties.”

“And the future,” Bates adds so softly I believe I am the only one to hear him. “That’s certain, too.”

O futuro.

How many times have I translated “the future” into Portuguese on this trip? It appears in every other sentence, perking up conversations
like a sprinkling of exclamation marks. Hypothesys is technically nothing more than an IP service provider you can link up to right now for a special introductory rate of twelve dollars a month. But it is also, according to Wallace and Barry’s pitch, “the way all of us will be living tomorrow,” and thus unavoidable. And these boys apparently come with it, grinning with dyed blond tips and wearing Rage Against the Machine T-shirts, inevitable as the clock ticking off the hours. This is their trade mission to the rest of the world. But what do they have to sell but themselves? Faces of a North American future, a reliance on gadgets-to-come, answers to questions we haven’t yet asked coming down the line. They offer nothing but promises. Tomorrow on sale today, threatening and absent.

Just look at them. Uncomfortable in borrowed shirts and ties, scuffing prep-school loafers over the marble floor. Laughing between themselves. At what? I can never tell for sure, aside from knowing that the joke is always on us. Or on me anyway, only half a generation too late to get it. Less golden boys than the whitest kind of white, the masters of something repeatedly called a revolution. Could anyone afford not to buy whatever nothing they had to sell?

It should perhaps be noted that I wasn’t the only one to meet the prime minister at the consulate reception. Later, Bates told me he was surprised how bad the old man’s breath was, and Wallace admitted to having forgotten his name.

We see our first blood two days later.

This is in Manaus. The regional capital of Amazonas built by the European rubber barons in the middle of the nineteenth century and now the principal eco-tourist gateway to the rainforest. Before we see the blood, though, we see the river. As we descend through the clouds in our chartered jet, the pilot instructs us to look out the windows at the encontro das águas, the point just outside the city at which the dark waters of the Negro and the milky brown of the Amazon run side by side like a pair of ribbons for several miles before finally mixing together.

At first we can see nothing beyond this but jungle, which from ten
thousand feet up appears as a field of broccoli that spreads out farther and farther until the earth gets tired of it and drops away. After a time you can see other things in it, too. The perfect rectangles of clearcut forest, for one thing. Shaved tracts stretching back from the river’s edge where the barges take the timber away and down three thousand winding miles to the ocean. And along with these, irregular gray divots that I know to be open-pit gold-mining excavations. I know because some of the men I’d met at the consulate reception were Canadian investors in wildcat operations like the ones below us, and they told me I should keep an eye out for them on our approach into Manaus. “We get in and get out,” one of them said, in a tone that indicated he meant doing so without the tedium of attending to environmental regulations. “Get the rocks we want and bang! We’re outta there!”

Farther in, beyond the patches and holes, is a jagged line of smoke. This was caused by lightning. But the others, the ones unwaveringly straight as if drawn by a ruler, are manmade. Fire lines set off by corporate ranchers making way for new cattle farms. “Each one the size of a Texas county,” the pilot says over the intercom, and we all laugh a little without knowing why. Sometimes one of the ranchers’ fire lines and the bald patch of a clearcut meet, and we can see how the fire has carried on into it, ripping through the dried stumps and whatever else has been too small to load away, so that only a slice of charred earth remains. Even from up here we see how some of it is still smoking, the branded mark left by the jungle’s new owner.

We bank around to line up with the runway that is presumably somewhere below us, although Wallace calmly points out that this looks more like a crash landing. There could not possibly be anything down there meant for us, let alone for planes. And as we lower the horizon is lost too, leaving only the particular square mile directly under us, one exactly the same as the other square miles between here and Belém at the Amazon’s delta going one way, and going the other, the mountains where those Uruguay rugby players also crash landed and eventually ate each other.

Setting ourselves down here would be of little consequence to the jungle. One metal tube needling into the trees, finding a hole for itself. We would hardly leave a scar. Something about the ease of vanishing
into this shag as seen from a pressurized cabin with your seat cranked back and a plastic cup of Chardonnay gripped in your palm makes the idea of it strangely inviting.

The plane completes its turn and the river appears once more. Both of the rivers, one black and one brown. Each noodling off into the broccoli garden, sending back glints of sun from miles down their course. And the *encontro das águas* just like the postcards: the two riversshouldering close in the same bowl like a confection of chocolate and caramel ice cream.

Then, some way up the chocolate stream, a gray scab attached to the shore. Apartment blocks lined together like stucco dominoes, two or three office buildings with punched-out windows, orange shots from a petroleum smokestack, an accidental web of streets radiating out from the port. Manaus.

A forgotten Portuguese fort until 1850, when, in another part of the world, it was discovered what could be done when you combined rubber and latex compounds and factories. Within twenty years, three thousand tons of raw rubber were being exported annually. By the end of the century, the output had multiplied twenty times over. There was money. Money of the instant, preposterous, doomed kind. The barons sent their wardrobes back to the Continent to be properly laundered. Chinese work gangs, French prostitutes and Italian tenors were brought in on the same boats that took the rubber out. There were electric street lamps and a trolley system in Manaus before there was either in New York.

Soon, however, it was discovered that rubber trees could be transplanted to lands in southern Asia that the English, Portuguese, Spanish and French had already acquired for themselves. Why bring Chinese slave labor to the jungle when you could bring the jungle to the slaves? Within two years the barons had packed up, leaving the colonial souvenirs of a river port, children of mixed blood and the Teatro Amazonas, a world-class opera house, behind them. By 1920 the entire place was bankrupt. The only Europeans that remained were those who’d been too stupid to put aside enough gold to leave.

Years later, the Brazilian government designated the city a free-trade zone in an effort to provide the half-million hangers-on with a
chance to survive. Now Manaus boasted smuggling rings, drug traffickers and an open-air market that sold cheap electronics, American porn and Taiwanese running shoes to all of Amazonas. It was also the starting point for “sightseers from around the world” to head up the river on package tours of “anywhere between six hours and six weeks.” I learned all this in the way tourists do, as facts pulled from a pamphlet or shouted from a guide at the front of a bus.

We see the blood while on a bus tour ourselves. After landing we are immediately hustled onto a private van. Our first stop is the opera house. “Everything was brought from Europe for its construction—the very best things. The stone from England, the flooring from Italy, the crystal from France. You can imagine the difficulty of bringing these materials all the way to this place,” the tour guide says, although only a moment’s thought proves it quite impossible to imagine. “Many died building it,” he adds with excited wonder, even pride.

We are led out onto the plaza in front of the building, each of us staggering into the wall of afternoon humidity. The plaza is broad and unshaded, the ground made of imported Portuguese tiles arranged in a disorienting pattern of snaking white and black stripes. Enough room to accommodate outdoor concerts on Christian holidays for the peasants of a hundred years ago, or the several coachloads of squinting Americans, Germans and Japanese of today. The sun x-rayed through their Bermuda shorts and cotton blouses to reveal the osteoporosis and suspicious freckles beneath. All of us looking up at the facade of the opera house, its pink dome dotted with gold tiles winking up at the sky. Around us, guides offer information in a goulash of foreign languages. We half attempt to listen, fixed in attentive poses, staring up at the Unique Piece of South American History. And what we see is stunning, insoluble, ugly as sin. An absurd lump of European culture heaved into the heart of the jungle.


It’s about then that we hear Lydia’s scream. Standing on the outside of our small circle with her hands clasped to her cheeks in a Victorian display of shock. A jurisprudence degree, important participation in
the merger of international media conglomerates and eight years busting balls at the London office of Goldman Sachs doesn’t stop her from acting like a storybook English girl when faced with a pool of blood at her feet. And there it is. Red as salsa. Splashed over the marble tiles brought deep into the rainforest to decorate the plaza for the arrival of the great Caruso in 1901.

Everyone turns at once. The Germans, the Americans, the Japanese, Barry and Wallace. The entire world stops being educated about its colonial past to look at it: bright and thick in the perfect clarity of midday. Then we look to each other to see which of us has been knifed by the glue-addict pickpocket we’d been repeatedly warned about.

It’s Barry I think of first—his white Brooks Brothers button-down seems just the thing to be seeped through with hot insides, his swollen fingers trembling over the wound. Maybe he knows this, too. Or maybe he just follows my eyes, for he looks down at his stomach with alarm before figuring out he is still intact, that what he thought might have been his own blood is only a broken bottle of guarana, one of those syrupy fruit drinks they keep offering him but, his ulcer being what it is, he would rather not try.

As each of us recognizes our mistake (it was the rather theatrical British scream that made us think the worst) and turns to husbands and wives and package tour strangers to register the fact that we are all still among the living, Wallace strides across the spilled juice and pulls Lydia to him. Tells her it’s all right, we’re fine, perhaps she should sit out of the sun for a while. And she yields to his comfort. His young arms.

“That’s Wallace,” Bates whispers to me. “Ever the gentleman.”

And although Bates means this as men of his age mean most things, as a sarcastic joke, there’s something truthful in it. The swiftness of Wallace’s action—stepping directly into a pool of someone else’s blood (as far as he knew) to offer aid to a woman in distress—was too automatic to not be built into his nature. It’s true that one of us might have done the same thing a second later. I’m quite certain we would have. But still, he was first.

It makes me wonder whether Wallace might be a misplaced piece of history himself, as unlikely a leftover of Old World manners as the jungle opera house looming above us. A gentleman? Overnight million-
aire, developer of a virtual morality machine, born and raised in the passively corrupted suburbs of North America more than a decade after what the century’s-end coffee-table histories referred to as “the last gasps of idealism”? After the draft and its dodgers? After Woodstock?

I can only suppose that stranger things have happened.

Manaus is burning. The air as steamy as you’d expect of the equator (two linen-suited government officials traveling with us collapsed seconds after stepping onto the airport tarmac, as though the laptop cases they carried had taken on sudden new weight). It makes one aware of breathing, its deliberate ins and outs. The rainy season still a couple of weeks off and not a cloud in sight. But there’s a wetness that still gets into everything, your socks, your wallet, behind the lenses of your glasses, your lungs. Within hours of arriving it’s like carrying ball bearings around in your chest.

But the place appears to be literally on fire as well. A city where a city shouldn’t be, boarded up and crumbling and what’s left now set alight. Look from the windows of the airport hospitality van, our rooms at the Tropical Hotel atop a gated bluff on the edge of town, from anywhere, and there is always what looks to be black smoke in the distance, flapping like a villain’s cape into the sky. But turn away from it and it moves—now spiraling up beyond a different rooftop. Is it from land being cleared to make way for cattle or of natural origins? Is it coming closer? Somehow these questions can’t be asked out loud. None of us mention seeing it, at any rate, although I’m sure we all do. Nor do we speak of the black vultures circling high over the rusted church spires.

On the day before we are to embark on our riverboat trip up the Negro we take in what we haven’t already seen of the city. An air-conditioned bus is chartered for the afternoon, along with another guide from the hotel. We spread out down the coach’s length, each of us separated by several rows of empty seats that take up an entire block of the town outside. From where we sit, levitating six feet above the streets of brick and tar, Manaus looks uncomfortably full. Plaster
walls push against men wearing jeans and soiled long-sleeve dress shirts in the visible blooms of heat. There are also girls young enough to have not yet lost their layer of chubby cushioning just beneath the skin, walking sleep-eyed in super-minis and V-neck T-shirts that say “Bad Ass” and “Sugar Baby” across their chests. We watch them all pass through the tinted windows. And they look back at us with what we imagine to be either lust or hostility.

We walk through the covered market by the river with its tables of futuristic fruits and fish that all seem to be grotesque variations on a catfish theme. Bates views them through his Palmcorder and the rest of us envy the protection the tiny machine offers him. No larger than an ice cream sandwich and yet, acting as a narrowed eye, able to block out the overly bright colors, the faces behind counters streaked with guts, even the smells. While Bates makes a movie, we are left to nod at the tour guide’s comments (the market was built in 1902 by a homesick Francophile who modeled it after Les Halles in Paris) and feel our skin burning even here in the speckled shade.

Back on the bus, we park on the city’s main floating dock and are told how long the river is (1,642 miles), how wide at its widest point (over 7,000 feet), why it is called the Negro (the water is black compared with the Amazon’s brown, on account of its higher acidity levels) and where it would lead if you followed it to its source (some village in Venezuela). It is a river that reaches “many peoples, many nations.” One of its main tributaries, the Rio Branco, breaks off into Guiana, and another, the Uaupés, stretches as far as southern Colombia. At the mention of Colombia, Wallace and Bates hold fingers against the sides of their noses and snort an imaginary line out of midair.

The final stop is to see what the guide calls “the poverty many Brazilians still suffer today.” A shantytown built on the banks of a creek that feeds into the Negro and extends as far as you could see from where we are, fifty feet above on a concrete bridge. A collage of cardboard, bicycle rims, oil drums and jagged sheet metal making up the walls of each box in which, we are told, at least an entire family lives. Many of the boxes sit precariously on crooked fingers of timber, a black ooze falling out from holes in the floors.

Barry shakes his head. Lydia holds her nose. Bates studiously pans
across the scene of filth and degradation with his Palmcorder, whispering notes into the built-in microphone.

“People live here. It smells very, very bad. The river is their toilet.”

Wallace stares. For the first time since I met him his face is set without the hint of flexing tendons about to be employed for the purposes of amusement. Only his eyes move from box to box, lingering on the few shadowed sets of eyes that peer back at him. Hands gripped tight to the bridge’s rail as though he would fall forward without the greatest effort. All of us notice his silence. Even the tour guide, who stands there watching him after he’s run out of things to say.

Once we are back aboard the bus, I overhear Wallace whisper to Bates so low I’m sure I’m the only other person to hear it. An odd phrase that he repeats a few times before leaning back in his seat and closing his eyes. Odd too that Bates seems to understand him perfectly, though the words sound incomplete to me. Bates nods to his friend in what might be agreement, or acknowledgment of a point made many times before. Or perhaps Wallace’s empty words put them both into a kind of trance that takes the entire ride back to the hotel for them to find their way out of.

“It’s a world,” he whispers. Amazed, as though he were the first to discover its roundness. “It’s a world. A world.”

The concierge is tall. He is also wide. From a distance, standing under a fake gaslight next to the Tropical Hotel’s marquee, he could be two men held in a close embrace. Then he turns and you see it is only a single giant, looking out with empty eyes over the tennis courts and tiered parking lots and sculpted shrubs to the river below. When you come closer, you see that his eyes are more cruelly pleased than empty, that he is fat as well as tall and wide, and that his skin is bad.

Wallace takes to him immediately.

“Where’s the action tonight, my good man?” he asks before he’s even stepped off the tour bus.

“How?” the giant says, his voice cruelly pleased along with his eyes.
“We’ve been seeing things from a refrigerated sardine can all day. But now it’s time for some ex-treme adventure tourism. Right, Barry?”
“Does that include getting a drink?”
“Absolutely. It ab-so-lute-ly involves Barry getting a drink.”
Wallace has put on one of his accents and is acting like a drunk conventioneer. Bates calls it “going American.”
“Yes-sir, Bear-man,” he says. “We is going to see what this May-naus really has to offer!”
As we wait for Lydia to collect her bags of piranha teeth souvenirs, the concierge drapes an arm behind Wallace’s neck and folds himself lower to speak into his ear. I can’t catch the words, but whatever the giant says prompts a lewd grin from his audience.
Wallace is a sexy kid. It’s not the first time I’ve thought this. One is likely to think it a lot around him. Especially at moments like this, sliding his way into the middle of an indulgent plan, telling a dirty joke. Women like him for his secrecy, his good looks, the tall certainty of his frame. Men like him for all this too, although they can’t speak of it. A little obnoxious, of course, but somehow always likable. The lean lips, forehead clean as a laundered sheet, freckles like buckshot across the tops of his cheeks—his face brings you into him, tells you that you could be in on things too, if you wanted. Or if he wanted. Yes, he is asking the concierge of the only four-star hotel in the jungle how he might spend his undeserved wealth and get into the kind of trouble he knows he can always get out of. So what? He’s a trouble maker. He finds profit in trouble.
You can see all this and still be there next to him, want nothing but to be a part of things, an accomplice. You won’t admit this to anyone. Perhaps you won’t admit this to yourself—it makes it no less true. Have him all figured out and you are no further ahead than someone who looks at him and sees only a handsome boy. Even the most envious would agree he is not without his charms. All of America is in him. Every slasher flick, pool party blow job, microwavable snack product and skipped class. Unprincipled but proud, rich in trivia but poorly read, viciously easygoing. His total Americanness comes naturally to him. But only as a Canadian is Wallace in a position to perfect it.
After we have all hunched off the bus and stand blinking for a
minute in the stunning light, Wallace turns away from the giant’s chest to address us.

“My friend has made some helpful suggestions for tonight’s entertainments,” he says, and smiles. His smiles are large and promising and unwholesome. They tell the world that it is unavoidably part of his plans.

We spend the rest of the afternoon apart. Wallace wanders around the mini-zoo in the hotel gardens. (“What did you see?” Lydia later asks him with scientific interest. “Monkeys.” “Oh! What kind?” “The kind in cages.”) Barry makes some calls to the company’s bankers in New York on his cell phone down near the river, where he believes the reception is better. Bates jogs along the groomed “tropical trail” on the hotel’s grounds. Lydia falls asleep in her room while watching a CNN report on renewed violence in the Middle East and its effect on world oil prices.

This is what they claim to do with their time, anyway.

What is certain is that, later, Wallace and I are the first to arrive under the hotel’s marquee where the concierge is trying to round up a pair of taxis to take us into Manaus for dinner. Wallace meets my wave with a theatrically gaping mouth. Steps out of the glass revolving doors and pretends to trip my way in shock.

“Where did you get your hands on that?” he says, raising an index finger at my chest.

“On what?”

“The push-up bra number, what else?”

“It’s a bikini top.”

“It’s an engineering miracle, is what it is.”

“I got it at the hotel boutique,” I say, and feel the bloom of hot regret in my cheeks. What does it matter where I got it? Why am I explaining myself at all? What right does this boy have to treat me like a pig-tailed schoolgirl? “It was on sale,” I add.

“Oh, really?”

Do you like it?
I’m about to ask this aloud, but something stops me. What answer would he give? It would be terrible, surely. Honest and mean and unforgettable. Something I would pretend to laugh at and never recover from.

Wallace continues to grin at me, waiting for further self-incrimination.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I say. “It’s not a big deal, for God’s sake.”

“Is that make-up, too?”

Without thinking, I curl my lips into my mouth, hiding their coat of Maybelline Dusty Rose. “I borrowed it from Lydia,” I mumble.

He looks me over once more from bottom to top and I let him. Hold my chin up for an extra half inch of height.

“It’s not you, Crossman,” he says.

“Oh no? What is me?”

“Wool skirts and itchy turtlenecks. A scarf round the neck and your grandmother’s brooch when you’re feeling especially wild. But this—this is what girls wear.”

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m not a man, Wallace.”

“Of course not. I just wish you’d told me sooner, that’s all.”

He must notice the collapse of my smile, because for a second he has his hands out in front of him, pleading.

“Look, Crossman, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s only a top,” I go on, though I meant to say nothing more. I cross my arms but it sandwiches my breasts into even greater visibility, and I immediately let them fall again. Nipples sighing audibly against the material as they go. “It’s hotter than I thought it would be down here.”

“You’re not kidding,” he says with a lurid wink.

The brief look of apology drains out of his face—it may never have been there at all—and is once again replaced by his patronizing nod.

“You’re laughing at me,” I say.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. I’m wondering, that’s all.”

“Wondering why a pushing-forty old bag like me would show more of her flab than she needed to?”

“No, I’m wondering who she meant to show it to.”
He means himself, of course. He thinks I’m wearing these ridiculous cups for him, to get the cute boy’s attention on our one night out in Manaus, to see what interest I might stir up. You never know if you don’t try, even with a candidate as unlikely as me. He assumes that, whether I’m aware of it or not, I want him as much as everyone else does. And he’s right, though I do my best to compose my face in a way that says he couldn’t be further from the truth.

The concierge’s shadow falls over us. He touches my bare shoulder and bends close to tell me that our taxis are ready.

“These are our cabs,” I tell Wallace, stepping away from the concierge’s cold fingers and feeling for the door handle behind me. All I want now is to be out of the light. To hide my skin from his eyes.

“Thank you for that translation, Crossman,” he says, bowing like a courtier as I scramble into the back seat and blink at my painted face in the driver’s mirror.

Among the local diversions recommended by the concierge is a restaurant in the old district of Manaus, down in the brick streets where the rubber barons kept their offices, mistresses and men’s clubs. Our taxi driver smiles at the mention of the restaurant’s name. A churrascaria called Bufalo (a giant papier-mâché steer grimaces at all that enter the door). We order two bottles of wine as soon as we’re seated, but the waiter rushes off without asking what we’d like to eat.

“So can we get any food around here, Crossman?” Barry asks me.

I tell him to hold his horses. And soon, platter after platter of meat arrives at the table—joints of lamb, roast pork, four different cuts of beef—all dripping off skewers to be sliced by grim-faced stewards and slapped onto plates the size of medieval shields. Aside from a couple bowls of grainy manioc and a sliced tomato, no vegetables are offered.

Within minutes the amount of food becomes ludicrous (“So this is what they’re clearcutting the rainforest for!” Barry roars), and each of us becomes involved in its excess. Without prompting we start laughing through bloody mouthfuls, nodding for more from the waiters when they return to our table, as though powerless to shoo them
away. An unstoppable orgy of meat pushing toward its climax with charcoal belches and slippery fingers.

Barry the most passionate of all of us. It’s like he has something to prove, having already informed us that, coming from Georgia, he “knows bar-be-cue.”

“Barry looks like he’s going to start mooing or growing an udder or something,” Bates announces, blushing under the buzzing fluorescent lights.

“Yes, Barry! You look positively bovine!” Lydia shrieks.

And it’s true: Barry does look more startled and hide-stretched than usual. He laughs along with us, though, his hand circling the air over his bald patch for another bottle. A man made of solid meat. Sausage fingers, ham hock thighs, fatty back ribs. A boundless deli case all sewn together into a new sort of animal, one with thinning blond hair who recites profane limericks. Nobody knows exactly how old he is (we all take guesses whenever he isn’t around, but something in his winking, college-boy manner discourages direct inquiry). Would he be fifty? Sixty? You’d say he is in good shape for either. It has been said about him all through his life of barreling through office hallways, convention floors and airport terminals. An air of good shape in his designer colognes and forearms tanned and hardened from a million backhand returns.

We like him. He is the kind of American the rest of the world likes best: a laugher of unforced volume, a sunburned friendliness suggestive of mixed-doubles tournaments and long cocktail hours. He smells like an old hotel—bulk laundry detergent, cigar butts and shoe polish. A man to buy things from without speaking of the price out loud. Barry knows a lot of jokes that are actually funny.

“When I was starting out, you knew where the money was going,” he’s saying after more Chilean Cabernet arrives and he’s filled our water goblets as well as our wine glasses to the brim. “You knew the deals inside out, you knew the players. Now? I’m just here to throw the cash around for these two—these two kids.”

“Don’t you mean snot-nosed kids, Bear?”

“It pisses me off,” he continues, ignoring Bates. “We’ve lost something. From doing business. We used to invest our clients’ money.
There used to be analysis. And prudence! But now grown men like me are chasing after these skatepunks, pumping millions into zero-revenue, zero-profit will-o’-the-wisps—into websites, for Christ’s sake! I mean, what the hell are they, anyway? What do they do? Don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful for the opportunity. I’m with the project. But on some fundamental level, I have to say that I don’t get it. Honestly. I truly, truly, don’t.”

He slips in and out of a southern drawl whenever it suits him, which are the occasions he wishes to appear harmless or dim. But now he’s suddenly grave, his bull’s head shaking from side to side over the charred gore inches beneath his chin. It’s somehow also clear that the moment is not meant to be entirely serious. This is his little *Death of a Salesman* scene. The touching confusion of the noble company man in the face of dubious progress. But he is a businessman first and an actor second (according to the Hypothesys business agreement, he stands to make fifteen percent of the gross profits, whether he eventually figures out what websites are or not). And sure enough, within seconds he is finishing the wine in his water goblet and telling the one about the priest, the rabbi and the Irishman walking into a topless bar in Las Vegas.

Each of us attempts jokes of our own after this, but none of them are as good. When it comes to Wallace’s turn, his face shows that he isn’t even going to make an attempt. He has been thinking of something else for a while now.

“I first got my hands on money when I turned nineteen,” he says. “Have I told you this one before?”

“No,” Barry and Lydia say at once.

“It was the final installment of my trust fund. Not a whole lot, but enough to do what everyone else of my age and means seemed obliged to do. We were taking a year off. We were getting out there. Some of us were even going to make a difference. So I did the only thing a fellow could do in such circumstances. I went to India.”

“Oh, India!” Lydia exclaims, as though it’s the name of someone she knows personally. “I’ve heard so much about it. Is it wonderful?”

“I suppose. Most of the people are what we would regard as dirt-eating poor. It’s very hot. I’m no anthropologist. But what did strike
me after I got back—and it struck me again today—is that India is still there."

"Of course it is."

"Yes. But I'm not."

"I'm sorry, Wallace. I'm not sure I—"

"I'm thinking of all the things I saw," he says, flattening the plastic tablecloth with his palms. "In Bombay, for instance. The billions of details that make up a single second—the streetcorner begging, the doorway whoring, bedpans emptied out of chawla windows, schoolboys playing cricket on a pitch where the smog obscured every fieldsman from the batter—every unconnected incident in that paralyzing city, all of it going on while I am elsewhere. Bombay is still Bombay even after I left it. It didn’t stop."

This observation crowds Wallace’s mind. It makes him dizzy. And seeing the jungle from the plane brought it back to him. He feels the same about this place. That these grease-fingered waiters, the people who live in those boxes over the polluted stream, the line of fire marching through the rainforest—they will all be doing the same thing without him as their audience. For Wallace, this is almost impossible to accept.

"What you’re talking about is nothing more than the most basic philosophical puzzle," Barry says, waving a glistening knife over the table. "It’s the if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest thing."

"No, it’s not." Wallace circles his hands in front of him, his wrists loosened by wine. "Everyone knows a tree makes a sound when it falls, whether you’re there to hear it or not. I couldn’t care less about that tree. But instead think of every tree in the world that is falling at this very moment. Now, add to that every version of birdsong being sung. Every guy in a suit whistling for a cab on the island of Manhattan. Every mother telling her kid to Stop that right now! Throw in all the car alarms waking people up in East St. Louis, just for good measure. And you’re not there for any of it. You’re here instead. We’re all trapped. Or blind. We can only see what our one consciousness allows us to see."

"You want to be everywhere at once?"

"Yes."

"And how are you going to do that, genius?"
“By expanding. And, in turn, by absorbing everything else around you, so that it is you.”
“Wallace, with all due respect, what the hell are you talking about?”
“Losing yourself. To step away from the contingencies that bind you to a single identity, so that you can live more lives than one.”
“I see.”
“Bates understands it.”
“Is that true, Bates? You get this shit?”
Bates says nothing, but keeps his eyes on Wallace to acknowledge his agreement.
“Jesus, the two of you.” Barry shakes his head so low it nearly knocks a bottle of chili sauce off the table. “Really. It’s like the world’s smallest cult or something.”
“It’s too late for you anyway, Barry,” Wallace says. “I already own you.”
“What?”
“You’ve been absorbed.”
“Well, not anymore. I quit.”
“It’s not about your job. Or money. Go ahead and quit. You’re still mine. And the thing is, you know it.”
They both laugh, though it requires some work. Until now I haven’t seen the two of them talk like this, to tease so hard it hurt. For a time there is more eating. Barry asks if he can finish the wine that Lydia hasn’t touched, knocks back one full glass followed by the other. We watch him with smiles. But there are no more words.
Steaming slices continue to be dropped on our plates, and we work away at them gloomily, as though a deserved punishment. All of us but Wallace, who chews and swallows at the same pace as when he began.
After perhaps five minutes of silence, it is Wallace who lowers his fork and wipes his blushing lips.
“Let’s play a game,” he says. “You and me, Crossman. We’ll play it once between ourselves so the others can see how it’s done.”
“What’s the game?”
“Simple. I’ll give you twenty grand if you can guess who I’m thinking of right now.”
I open my mouth and smack it closed again. Twenty grand? Wallace, money and a game involving the reading of his thoughts. There’s a good chance of being made a fool of in this. And look at him now: sliding his eyes down the line of my goose-pimpled cleavage. Not a trace of lust in it, only humor, a reminder of the gap between who I am and who I might be trying to be. He had laughed at the way I had made myself look for him. Now he wants to laugh at the way I think.

“Not enough?” Wallace asks. “I don’t blame you. Why risk losing unless the reward is worth it?”

He squeezes his chin between finger and thumb, and for a moment it seems that he’s actually waiting for a response. But again, caution silences me.

“What do you say to fifty, then?”

“Fifty what?”

“Thousand dollars, Crossman. What else? Fifty thousand Brazilian reals wouldn’t buy you a bottle of shampoo back home. Not that I’m suggesting anything about your personal—”

“You’re offering that much money for me to play a stupid game?”

“No, gorgeous. For winning it.”

I try looking down at Wallace’s hands, then up to the blond ridge of his hairline, at anywhere but his eyes, but they follow mine wherever they go. Whether it is this or the understanding of precisely how much money he has just uttered—casually, plausibly—there is a tingling at the top of my head that trickles down over my skin like spiders.

“You carry that much around with you?” I manage.

“No, but Barry does. He’s the one with the checkbooks. Aren’t you, Bear?”

Barry grunts. He works for this boy. And he is the one with the checks.

“So what do I have to do?”

“Tell me who I’m thinking of.”

“That’s ridiculous. It could be anyone.”

“It’s not anyone. It’s someone you know. And I’ll give you three questions or guesses.”

“How do I know you won’t say someone else if I guess right?”

“Because you trust me not to.”
“Look, I’m not saying I don’t . . . I’m just trying to nail the rules down.”

“Of course you are, Barry, hand me your napkin.”

Barry takes the paper serviette tucked into his collar and crumples it into a ball, which he tries to throw at Wallace’s head. But even with all the sauce smeared over it and the force of Barry’s pitch, it arcs with accidental grace to bounce twice, soft as a cotton ball, at the end of the table opposite him.

“Does anyone have a pen?” Wallace asks, unfolding the napkin. “Lydia. You’ve always got lipstick in your purse, don’t you?”

Lydia digs into her bag and pulls out the same lipstick I borrowed from her two hours ago. Hands it to Wallace, who slides the cap off and screws up its bright red head.

“Don’t look,” he says, and all of us blind ourselves by looking straight up into the fluorescent ceiling. “I’m writing a name on this napkin and turning it over. One name only. No tricks.”

He claps his hands once to signal he’s finished. When we bring our heads down to look at him again he is facing me alone.

“Take your time,” he says. “Try to occupy the name. If you open yourself up to—”

“The prime minister.”

“Courage! Who would have thought? Crossman ventures a bold guess, right out of the gate!”

“Am I right?”

“Afraid not.”

“All right. A question this time.”

“Think hard, Crossman. At the per diem we’re paying you—let’s see now—that works out to a whole year of translating you won’t have to do if you get this right.”

Barry snorts at this, but I cast him a look that prevents anything else from escaping him. When I return to Wallace I remind myself to take a breath. Who would he be thinking of? If Wallace is playing a game with me there must be an obvious way to win it. Otherwise, my losing wouldn’t be any fun.

“Is it one of us at this table?”

“It is!” Wallace snaps his fingers and points at me, his thumb raised
like the hammer on a pistol. “Last guess. But it’s only one-in-five odds now. Not at all bad. Any sideshow gypsy could get this in a flash. Are you much of a mind reader, Crossman?”

“Depends on the mind.”

“Not really. You just open it up and see what’s there, one’s as easy as the other. Like a book. I bet you read a lot of books, but not too many minds. Am I right?”

“You,” I say.

“Beg pardon?”

“You’re thinking of yourself.”

“Is that your guess?”

“It’s as good as any.”

“Take a look and see.”

Wallace makes no move to slide the napkin over so that I have to stand and bend halfway over the table to reach it, my hand over my chest to keep my breasts from slipping free. When I’m seated again I pull it up and read what’s there. Read it again. Back and forth as though a carefully worded riddle. But it’s only a name, scrawled out in garish capitals.

“Did you win?” Lydia asks.

“No,” I say, the napkin held as a veil in front of my eyes. “I wasn’t even close.”

“How could you not be close? It was one in five!” Barry slaps his knee, snorting again.

“That’s the funny part, right, Wallace?” I say. “No wonder you like to play this one. Make it so close they’ll never get it.”

“Who is it?” Lydia begs, her hands balled up into fists next to her ears as though to protect them from what they might hear next.

I turn the napkin over and lay it flat in the center of the table. Let all of them read my own name spelled out in crimson wax. Elizabeth Crossman.

“I was thinking of you, Lizzie,” Wallace says. “I was looking at the answer the whole time and the answer didn’t even know it.”

I laugh a false laugh through my nose and feel something fly out.

“Well, that certainly was interesting, Wallace,” Lydia says.

“Fun for the whole family.”
“But it’s not over yet. is it?” I say, wavelets of panic accelerating my words. “We know who you were thinking of, but not what. Why don’t you tell us what deep ideas you had while you were staring at me.”

Wallace raises his eyebrows.

“Tell me what you see,” I demand, meeting Wallace’s eyes but with my voice breaking in a bubble of sobs.

“That’s a whole other game,” he says.

For the second time none of us speak. This time, though, there isn’t awkwardness so much as embarrassment. All of them silently feeling bad for me, not only for the money I could have made but for the way it was lost. The lips I can’t stop from trembling. My failure to see that Wallace was never playing at anything, but making a point.

“When does it stop?” Lydia finally asks.

All of us glance up at the circle of waiters continuing to thrust spikes of charred livestock our way.

“Are we finished?” I ask the table.

“We’re going to die if we don’t stop now,” Barry says, forcing something thick-sounding down his throat.

I flip over a red card on top of the napkin dispenser to show its blue side. The waiters disperse.

“They keep coming until you surrender,” I tell them. “Non-stop meat.”

“I love it!” Wallace smiles at Bates. “No need to ask for anything. No need for need. It all just comes whether you like it or not.”

For a moment, I’m convinced he’s going to ask for Lydia’s lipstick again and make a note of this novel marketing plan. But instead he only nods his head with admiration while carefully finishing what’s on his plate.

Outside the restaurant, three rumbling taxis wait to take the handful of other belly-slapping tourists and ourselves back to the Tropical. But Wallace has other plans.

“My tall friend from the hotel mentioned some places we could go after dinner,” he says. “C’mon, Lydia. You and me mixing it up out there. Whaddy Ya say?”
“I say I’m going to bed, Mr. Wallace,” she says with a stagey yawn. “Tomorrow we go on our tour, and I expect I’ll need all the energy I have for that.”

“What about you, Crossman?”

“Sorry, but I think I’m going to have to call it a night, too.”

“Well. I must say I’m a little surprised. I took you for a hellraiser. What with that sly little grimace on your face all the time. I assumed you were just biding your time.”

“It’s not a grimace.”

“Fine. You’re Chuckles the Clown.”

“And Chuckles is too old for staying up all night.”

“Barry’s coming with us. And he’s old.”

“Watch your mouth, boy!”

“And furthermore,” I say, bringing two fingers to my temple in a Boy Scout salute, “somebody’s got to accompany Lydia home.”

“Ah! So the ladies toddle off for their beauty sleep and the men are left to do the heavy lifting and tell you shrinking violets all about it in the morning as we steam our way up the—what’s the name of the river we’re going up?”


“That’s right. The Black River. Mighty tributary of the mighty Amazon. Fine then. It will be our responsibility to collect some mighty stories for the trip,” he says, pulling Barry and Bates against him so forcefully that they all lose their balance and look as though they might fall backwards together, but Wallace refuses to let go until they right themselves.

“Good night, Lydia,” Bates says softly as we get into the first car, rolling his eyes at us as Wallace squeezes him even closer. “Don’t let the bed bugs bite, Crossman.”

The three of them wave as our taxi pulls away, arms cast high above their heads, their straightened teeth and white palms visible from two unlit blocks away. It’s as though they are encircled by a spotlight, and these ridge-backed streets nothing more than a soundstage of poverty and abandonment for them to carry out their parts. Or this is what one could think from a safe distance such as mine.

What do they do next? There are different versions. Each of theirs in
addition to my own. And even when pulled together there are still questions. I feel uniquely qualified in sewing these patches into a single story, however. I’m a translator, after all. And translation is nothing if not reading—and speaking—between the lines. A good deal of raw creativity is involved, if I may say so myself.

The real work is in making things up to bridge the inevitable gaps that language leaves between us. I often suspect it is not wholly unlike the task of writing fiction: more autobiography than is usually admitted to, perhaps, the collection of observed details, historical fact, all melted down into a credible beginning, middle and end. One must fall short of outright lying, of course. But if both sides can’t understand each other, and whatever’s lost in translation is lost forever, what’s the harm in a fib or two to keep things going smoothly?

As Lydia and I drive off in the taxi back to the Tropical, the others ask themselves what they should do with the rest of their evening. It is clear that whatever it is, it should involve further drinking. A whiff of trouble might be nice. The kind of recreations you just can’t get at home. Wallace mentions that the hotel concierge recommended the bars down near the docks. The recommendation was of the sort made with a wink, as these were not “places for ladies.” And there is no lady with them now.

“The hotel guy winked?” Bates asks.
“Yes, he did. Why do you ask?”
“It’s just hard to imagine him winking.”
“Well, the guy winked, OK?”

Bates shoots Wallace a doubtful look but Barry is already striding ahead of them, so they start off to join him. They figure the river must be downhill from where they are, and begin zigzagging through the broken streets to find it. Women with children’s faces poking out from between their knees stand in doorways lit by single bulbs. The smell of rice frying in vegetable oil and boiled bones. Rats scuttling through gutters so dark that only the last glimpses of their tails can be seen.

According to the afternoon’s tour guide, the buildings the three of
them pass now used to be the homes of the rubber barons. Slave owners, makers of opera houses. Now half of them stand derelict, long stripped of glass, doors and fixtures.

Without a word they stop before one that is two floors taller than the rest, as though they had heard their names called from inside. Barry and Bates are both surprised by their instant fear. An inexplicable chill that passes through them in the windless night heat.

“A haunted house,” Bates says, but his voice is too conclusive to be taken as humor.

Wallace is the only one who is unafraid. In fact, the sight of the gutted grandeur thrills him. The vines looping down over stone balconies, gripping to the plaster cracks. It was beautiful once—even he can see that. And now it’s a ruin. He finds drama in this. Not in the history it suggests but in the purity of its failure, the things-come-and-things-go lesson of economics. It’s not the ghosts that lurk inside these buildings but their perfect emptiness that he finds exciting.

“There’s some places down by the dock I’ve heard mention of,” he reminds them finally, and gathers them up by the shoulders once more.

It is a street that only men seem to enter. On the far side of the small public square next to the British Customs House, where none of the light from the strings of colored bulbs over the vendors’ tables can reach. Barry, Wallace and Bates stride around its corner as though it leads to their own homes, their clothes shining. But the hesitation in their legs is defeated only by an exercise of will. The street appears at once empty and full of faces. Popping out amongst the rubble of a burned-out storefront or floating over the edge of uncurtained windows. Each step is like moving into suckerpunches of stink: burnt machine oil, caramelized shit, gasoline. Without thinking, they form a line with Wallace at the lead.

“How’s this place look?” he asks when they arrive at a new cone of electric yellow on the pavement. Barry and Bates look up and take in a high-ceilinged room with tables and a plywood partition down one side that acts as a bar.
“Good enough,” Bates replies. “But where’s the door?”

This is meant to be funny, for the room is entirely without a wall on the street side, so that walking into it is like stepping onto a proscenium stage from the orchestra pit.

They had all been in bars that felt dangerous before—roadhouses on the outskirts of college towns or a bus terminal lounge here and there—but this place actually is dangerous. Each of them believes these men around them to be storybook pirates, smugglers, switchblade thieves. Surely such men still exist somewhere in the world, probably in the lower hemisphere where it is hot and lawless and the people are desperate. Somewhere like here. So why not these men? Look at them: wrapped in a plastic sheet of sweat, fever-eyed, swearing in toothless Portuguese at a black-and-white soccer game on TV. Take the room in at once and it seems that they all wear expressions of addled hate.

“It ain’t the Ritz, boys,” Barry says in his southern voice, but there’s a nervous whistle in it now. Nobody hears it though. Wallace is already seated at a wobbly plastic table, waving three fingers into the air and shouting, “Cerveza!”

“Cer-ve-za is Spanish,” Bates tells him after he and Barry find their way to the table. “In Portuguese, it’s pronounced ser-vay-ja.”

“Ser-vay-ja then!” Wallace shouts, pulling an American twenty out of his breast pocket and slapping it down on the table. The pirates turn to look at the three of them—had been looking at them all along—but nothing changes in their faces.

Although none of the three really feels like it, they begin to drink with aggressive enthusiasm. Bottles of Antarctica beer arrive, two for each of them, and glasses of cachaca, the suspiciously clear liquor that comes whenever they make a pantomime of throwing a shot down their throats. Nobody suggests slowing down. Some powerful, unspoken challenge animates them. The entire room is part of it. Men keep coming in off the street to clog the aisles. Before long everything is slurried and stuck in tar. The air rank with something like boiled hot dogs and burned hair. It’s so hot in the crowded fluorescence that vomiting or collapsing to the floor are constantly vacillating options.
“To Hypothesys!” Wallace toasts, raising his glass of clear fire. “And all who profit from it!”

“That would be us,” Barry laughs.

“That’s correct. But I think it’s time we once and for all acknowledge the real talent in this operation, Barry. The reason our vaporware venture is going to succeed where others have failed before us. Our bard of software code: Master Bates!”

“Hypothesys isn’t vaporware,” Bates protests, but downs his drink along with them.

“Of course it isn’t. It’s the real thing, isn’t it, Barry?”

“Ab-so-lute-ly. But remind me. What’s vaporware again?”

“Software that doesn’t actually do anything. At least not yet. A pure idea. Investors love it.”

“Well, we’ll just have to come up with some more pure ideas, won’t we, young Bates?”

“Not me. Wallace is the ideas man.”

“You flatter me, Bates. I’m not about ideas and you know it. I’m a facilitator. I bring things together and let them multiply on their own. Capitalism is human nature left to its own devices. That’s my one and only idea.”

“Put another way,” Barry starts, and pauses to suppress a difficult-sounding belch. “You’re a people person.”

“Yes! A people person! I just love people!”

Something about the lighting shows their dandruff and the ash from others’ cigarettes on their shirts so that a constellation appears across their shoulders, a starry map ringed around their collars. Barry takes a couple of ineffectual swipes at it, then excuses himself to lumber off in search of a toilet. Another round arrives without any of them having ordered it. A moment later Bates grabs Wallace’s arm across the table.

“Hey, isn’t that the guy from the hotel?” he whispers, head turned to the wide-open front of the bar.

“What guy?”

“The monster. The one you were talking to.”

“The concierge? Where?”

“There.”
Bates points at a Volkswagen Beetle parked across the street. Behind it, what may be the figure of the concierge, or a shadowed doorframe, or nothing at all.

“I don’t see shit,” Wallace says.

“He kind of unraveled himself out of that car and stared in here. At us.”

“Maybe he wants to join us for a drink.”

“Did he tell you to come here, Wallace?”

Wallace turns to him, his nostrils widened into perfect circles. “We happened upon this particular bar, remember?”

“It’s just that you were talking to him for so—”

“What’s your problem? So I talked to the hotel guy. Now you think he’s the goddamn bogeyman, who’s got nothing better to do than follow your ass around.” Wallace throws back his shot without taking his eyes from Bates’s, then abruptly pivots to face the street. “Look again,” he says over his shoulder. “There’s nobody there now.”

And Bates does look. The Beetle is gone. But the black space that could have occupied a man remains.

“He must have left in the car.”

“Must have.”

Bates looks nervous. But his face has always been long and vaguely haunted, as though as a child he’d witnessed something he hadn’t expected and his expression had kept traces of that initial horror with it ever since. A minor sort of horror, mind you. The common kind that most children toddle away from but others remember forever, as though it were their appointed duty to display shock for the benefit of those who hadn’t seen anything quite that bad yet.

Barry returns from whatever corner he found to relieve himself in and they wave another round of warm cachaca and warmer Antarctica to their table. Nobody mentions the Volkswagen or Bates’s vision of the monstrous concierge. Nobody wonders aloud what they’re doing here, people who had been quoted in The Economist and favorably profiled in Wired, sitting in this bright hole, drinking with these damp-looking river thugs. A fluorescent tube spasms over their heads, freezes the curdled humor on their lips. Each of them wishes it would
burn out once and for all and leave them in the more forgiving light of the Marlboro clock on the wall.

It’s around then that they notice the girls. Half a dozen of them of various dimensions, ages and mascara colors suddenly materialized in a witches’ circle at the far end of the bar. Denim shorts cut even higher than the Manaus average, passing the same lipstick between them.

“Well, well, well,” Wallace and Barry say at the same time.

“Jinx,” Bates says.

They come to understand that there are rooms somewhere in the back where a customer may go with these girls. From time to time one of the girls glances in the direction of the hallway behind the bar as though catching a flash of movement from out of its shadows. Mostly, though, they keep their eyes on the three drunk American tourists who, by the look of them, could be a father with his two sons.

And the Hypothesys men stare back at the girls. When they speak among themselves they find that now they share tight, business-like grins.

At first, the question of who they would each choose is only a vulgar hypothetical. The little smiley one with the huge tits? That would have to be Bates. Got Bates written all over her. And the older one with the dimpled ass and gold tooth? Definitely up your alley there, Barry! This sort of thing for a round or two.

But the drinks and the waves of cigarillo smoke and the way the girls keep looking over at them, now frankly amused, as if their table might be especially adorable—it turns their speculation into a grim selection of hardware.

“The one with the dark hair,” Bates says. “She’s the prettiest.”

“They all have dark hair, at least under the dye jobs,” Wallace points out. “And none of them are pretty.”

But this isn’t strictly true. The rules of prettiness are somehow altered for them here, such that the girls at the bar (no matter how “technically flawed,” as Wallace puts it) have small but particular
charms to offer. There is no embarrassment in plainness in this place. It’s too humid and smells too much of rotten fish for the prim demands of beauty. The girls are brown and speak a different language and associate Wallace and Barry and Bates with characters in Hollywood movies. These things alone cast a certain spell. One that relieves the men from the ongoing subconscious North American search for the perfect wife, a woman of the right sort to sit beside them in imagined convertibles driving down imagined Malibu highways. There are definite advantages that these girls and boys can offer, and as they appraise each other across a room too bright and in a country too poor to hide one’s most basic proclivities, they silently announce them.

“They all look sweet to me,” Barry concludes, an added downhome twang to his su-weeet.

“Sweet,” Bates echoes, but it’s lost in the hammering of Portuguese rap thrown down on them from the overhead speakers.

Wallace says nothing. He’s listening to the voice singing in his head. Strange and new. Strange and new.

This is Wallace’s sexual song. It comes on whenever a woman clearly wrong for him—too old, too fat—turns to cast him a second glance after passing him in the street. It isn’t the satisfaction of vanity that arouses him, but the potential delight in making a bad choice. Strange and new. The melody wouldn’t last—what pop song does?—but it delivers a pleasure all the same, cheap and mindless, like speeding in summer with the windows down.

When he first stands up, Barry and Bates assume that Wallace is going to order more drinks. He moves through the vivid light with his white boy hip-hop swagger, but with more lubrication in his joints than usual. A scuffling, buttock-pouting sort of walk, as though the referee had just ejected him from the game and he is making a leisurely show of removing himself from the field. Not the walk of an athlete but of someone who has watched enough pro sports on TV to simulate the attitude.

He bends to speak with the girls at the bar, saying something in what can only be English that nevertheless makes them laugh instantly. Barry and Bates watch him, admiring the ease with which he is putting what they didn’t know they wanted within their reach.
As though to acknowledge this, Wallace turns to them, his arms now comfortably encircling two of the girls’ waists. Raises his eyebrows. And in this moment of men being men together, well away from the prissy constraints of law and good breeding, they know that whatever is about to happen cannot now be stopped. That Wallace must bring three girls back with him to their table, randomly assigning one for each Bates and Barry, and saving his surprise choice—the gold tooth—for himself. That they will make their nameless introductions, raised glasses indicating who they are and their capacity to carry out the exchange about to be made. That they will stand and possessively lift their chins to the pirates around them, then allow themselves to be led down the hallway behind the bar.

As they blink their way into the darkness they share the belief that now, finally, they are no longer tourists. Wallace is their new guide. And he has somehow found a way into the heart of what the pamphlets sticking out of their back pockets call “The True Brazilian Jungle Experience!”

They are taken farther into the back than they would have thought physically possible. Have they entered the neighboring building somehow? It’s too dark to tell where they are or what corners they have turned, their feet too weighed down with booze to judge distances. Later, two of them will recall climbing a set of stairs, and one will deny it. No matter. Let us say there are stairs, and that they have some difficulty climbing them. So much difficulty, in fact, that the girls have to give them their hands to pull them up to the landing where the absence of light is now complete.

The girls open doors. One for each of them. Inside every room there is a single bed with a hollow trough down its center. A cross made of tied-together popsicle sticks pinned to the wall. The only illumination a string of red Christmas lights looped from the ceiling. Bates first, then Barry, and Wallace with the gold tooth at the end.

Now that he’s here, at once unbelievably and undeniably in this place, Bates finds that he’s more relaxed than he would have ever
expected. His girl turns her face up to him. She’s small and looks like no one he has ever known. The first thing he does is name her. This makes him even more relaxed.

“Lydia,” he says.

“Tipfomaid?”

“Sorry?”

“Tip for maid?”

Her hand held out, cupped for offerings. He gets it now: an up-front commission for the management downstairs. After a swift calculation, he determines his standard fifteen percent restaurant gratitude and counts out three American dollars, watches them settle before being crumpled up into her fist. If her face shows any response on the spectrum between gratitude and disapproval, he can’t see it. Through the dim light his vision has become selective: a snapshot of her lips without the nose or eyes above them, his fingernails laid out over his knees like bits of quartz. She is so small. Possibly the smallest girl he has ever seen in his life, but he still can’t get a good look at all of her at once. There’s a single flap of nausea as he wonders if he really wants to.

“You like love?” she asks, apparently satisfied with his tip.


She shakes her head once, sharply, as though from a squirt of lemon on her tongue. “No,” she says. “What you like?”

He must tell her without speaking, because in a moment it all begins. It occurs to him that this is the last thing he was prepared to consider, let alone do—her skin, another’s particular skin, a stranger’s strange hands inside his shirt—but he can’t stop it. This is the idea he has, anyway. A notion of unstoppability captures his mind in a way that, in turn, becomes unstoppable. On the other hand, he knows he could walk out right now. Pull her hands away, toss some greenbacks on the soiled mattress as the good man who changes his mind in the whorehouse has been seen to do in films. This is always an option, of course. But quite aside from the scientific matter of desire (does he possess it? does he not?), leaving is simply a less appealing idea than staying. There is the outstanding question of conclusions: where will this whole unlikely business lead him?

It goes on as it should. All the maddening, quick-edit peeks and
allowances. He feels grateful. For the girl, yes. For his Lydia. For the surprise of his own competence. And for the fact that he seems to actually like it. He’d had doubts that he would. The publicity was massive (is there anything more hyped than fucking?) and he is as skeptical of bold promises as the next educated consumer—which explains, in part, his years of conscientiously missed opportunities. But as it turns out he likes it, all right. This at once foolish and straightforward thing he has never done before.

He is grateful for all of this. But more than anything, he gives thanks for the evidence it provides that he might not be gay after all.

The three men come at the same time. They hear each other clearly through the plaster walls that stop two feet short of the ceiling: a feminine moan, weary sigh, a gasp of childish surprise. Their noises mix together into a single echo down the dark hallway. And although each of them is only showing their pleasure, or at least relief, when taken together the sound they create is a collective expression of fear.

Barry can’t believe how young his girl is and how young he feels inside her. After all the beer and the returning certainty that he was about to fall off the mattress in a dead faint and the troubling whiffs of his own armpits whenever he moves, he is stunned by the simple space she offers him. Nothing like his wife. (She crosses his mind, but only long enough for him to note how briefly she crosses his mind.) Nothing like sex at all, really. More a prolonged dream of childhood. An endless game of tag, a fit of giggles. Pushed higher and higher on a playground swing.

In the next room, Bates is occupied with the task of acting like a man. Holding his breath, his muscles. Imagining his individual parts clenching and thrusting in an athletic tribute to himself. But still, when the moment arrives, he hopes he won’t hurt the girl, so small beneath him.

And what does Wallace feel at the end of the hall? He feels that it cost too much.
Afterwards, they talk to the girls. There seems to be no rush to usher them out, so the men prop themselves up on stained pillows and answer the questions the girls put to them. They don’t think it strange that they are asked questions in the first place. And not just the expected ones about where they are from and whether they are married and what their names are, but specific inquiries into who they work for and what business they have in Brazil.

The fact is the men don’t think any of this is at all strange. They’d done a shameful thing far away from home that nobody would likely ever learn about. There is now a secret between them. They feel more interesting than bad. It seems like a very good time to talk.

Some of what they say are lies, and some of it the truth. Either way, a good deal of it is information that, in the wrong hands, could get them into trouble. This is a dangerous place. They’ve been warned about thieves who’d slice your throat for ten American dollars, Colombians who specialize in kidnapping tourists for a confused mixture of political and financial ends, smack-addled street gangs who do it for fun. It doesn’t stop them from telling the girls about all the things they possess—money, insider trading tips, the most desirable passports in the world. And the girls listen, unsmiling. The men don’t think it at all suspicious that their audience seems to care as much as they do. Or that the girls’ eyes often close in concentration, as though etching the men’s possessions into their memory.

When the men finally find each other in the dark hallway and make their way back out of the bar, a taxi is there waiting for them. They don’t think this is strange, either. It’s just the kind of good luck they’ve grown used to over the course of their lives.

Barry thinks of mentioning the black Beetle he notices parked at the opposite end of the street, one with a fellow cramped into it whose face looks a lot like the concierge’s. But his stomach is upset by the jarring start of the taxi, and the fact is he doesn’t feel much like talking anymore anyway.

Only Bates kisses his girl good-bye.
Our boat, the *Ana Cassia*, is a good deal smaller than the *Presidente Figueiredo*, the one that the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs and his gaggle of “officials” are to travel on. There are only five cabins arranged around the length of our forty-five-foot deck, none of them much larger than the toilets at the back of buses. Somehow, though, there is a set of bunks and a shower jammed into every one, where “shower” is a hose that pumps water up from the river, over our heads, and drains through a hole in the floor that also admits such nocturnal ticklers as geckos, harlequin frogs and army ants into our beds. Barry and Lydia and I have cabins to ourselves, Wallace and Bates share one (“Hey, we’ve been roommates since puberty, or at least *my* puberty—we’re still wondering about Bates’s—so who cares?”) and the entire crew have apparently been left with the remaining one directly above the engines.

There are four of them. The captain, who has a face slapped around by sun and liquor and a life of blunt razors; our bespectacled guide, whose name I don’t catch and whose movements are as drugged as a tree sloth’s; Americo, the first mate with a grin fixed to his lips as though tattooed there; and young Maria in the galley. Maria might be eighteen, and might be pretty (shyness keeps her face lowered in the sinks or turned toward walls, so it is hard to be certain) and Americo might be twenty-five and handsome, so within fifteen minutes of climbing aboard we, or at least Wallace and Bates, wonder aloud if the two of them are sleeping together.

“He’d like to,” Bates ventures, “and he tries sometimes, but she won’t let him.”

“What makes you say that?” Wallace asks.

“You look at her. You see things.”

“I see things too.”
“And you think she’s doing him?”
“Maybe not. But she’d like to be taken away by someone. Working on this boat, tourists coming and going, slipping dollars and pounds and euros into her apron. She wonders where they all go home to.”
“You assume she’s desperate.”
“And you assume she’s honorable?”
“Not necessarily. Just scared.”
“Well, you’d know about that.”
There is a walkway around the main deck so narrow that if someone comes the other way you have to flatten yourself against the wall or stretch dangerously over the rail to let them pass. At the very front is the bridge, just large enough for the captain to lean back with his Keds resting on the wheel. Immediately behind it, the ladder up to the galley. You can tell this is the boat’s designated meeting place from the table, the art (a map of the Rio Negro next to a depth chart of the Anavilhanas archipelago, a clustering of several thousand islands dotted through the river like a spilled bag of marbles), and the entertainments (a deck of cards and three bottles of rum each with a murky ounce left at its bottom).
Another ladder leads up through a hatch in the galley ceiling and onto an observation deck, the front quarter of which is covered by a flapping square of canvas. That’s where all of us are standing when the boat pulls away. Nobody says anything. Except for me, when Americo comes up to offer us beers to mark the occasion, and I have to translate for the group. They shake their heads without looking at each other, Bates and Wallace and Barry because of their near-death hangovers, and Lydia on account of it’s ten-thirty in the morning. So I have one on my own.
The truth is, I’m a little excited. Yes, it’s only a sightsee scheduled to return to this very place in five days, and we will never be far from a boatload of Canadian bureaucrats. But it’s still the Amazon, isn’t it? There are snakes here that can stop your heart with a single bite or swallow children whole. Vicious schools of piranha. And still malaria, yellow fever and other airborne concerns. Not to mention a million ways of getting lost. Anything can still happen in places like this, and we are going directly into it. The moment of adventure demands to be acknowledged. But when I invite Americo to join me he only contin-
ues to grin his permanent grin, which I take to mean that, although he’d like to, as first mate he can’t possibly start drinking with the dock still plainly within sight.

We stand and watch Manaus recede into a jumble of plaster cubes, the opera house rising up from them like a painted nipple. It feels strange to see it shrink away, and the strangeness fortifies our silence. It is a city, after all. The only one for thousands of miles. We’d heard this over and over on the tour. But it is believable now. For already, only a few hundred feet out into the river, we can see the green beginnings of the jungle rising up at both edges of town. And after that, we can see nothing but more of it.

We tremble north through an afternoon of light so pure it brings a perceptible weight down on the tops of our heads. For the first hour or two we can spot the last traces of the Manaus outskirts—a rusted water tank lifted upon knock-kneed struts, a brick building the guide tells us was once a brewery—and now there are only trees. The river is wide and we travel in the middle of it, so that we are too far away to see anything in particular. Just the trees. A jagged line of green scissored into the sky.

“It’s beautiful,” Bates says.

“It’s boring,” Wallace says.

“It’s beautifully boring, then,” Bates says.

When the sun finally starts to grow and die, Americo brings the cooler of beer up once again. This time each of us takes a can. Conversationally, this helps somewhat.

“So, Mr. Americo. Where the hell are we headed?” Barry asks the big man. Naturally, Americo had been grinning when he arrived. He goes on grinning. I translate the question into Portuguese, then he startles us all by adding a nod to his repertoire of facial expressions. And when he speaks, his voice is surprisingly soft, even womanly.

“Nós viajaremos para o norte à noite e continuaremos de manhã.”

“He says we keep going like this through the night and the morning,” I tell the others. “This should get us up into the archipelago,
where we’ll stop around lunchtime. Then we’ll do a little piranha fishing”—Americo pulling his grin wider and making a gnashing motion with his jaw—“and navigate through some of the islands. Stop for the night, and the next day go on a jungle hike.”

“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” Lydia singsongs.

“After that, we’ll head over to the Presidente Figueiredo to have a traditional Amazonian dinner with the government folks. But we must first catch some piranha, so that Maria can make soup out of the bones.”

Barry offers one of his southern laughs at this, and it makes us all feel less far away. Soon Lydia is slipping full cans of beer into our shirt pockets and between our legs.

“Sounds like a plan,” Barry announces, and gives Americo two slaps against his shoulder.

Later in the afternoon the captain comes up to greet us. Shakes our hands formally and then, once he’s completed the circle, begins to laugh. A hee-haw braying at the enormity of Bates’s high-tops, Lydia’s bleached skin, Wallace’s questions about the possibility of piranha finding their way into the toilet bowls. Despite his wrecked face, everything about the captain seems to encourage a spirit of blameless fun: the Boston Red Sox cap tilted back on his head at a boyish angle, the gray hairs blossoming out from both ears, the long arms freckled and pink as a dog’s belly. Soon all of us are laughing for no better reasons than these.

“Hey,” Barry eventually stops us. “If he’s up here with us, who’s driving this thing?”

The captain guesses the meaning to this, and in reply throws his arms around to deliver two thumbs up directly under Barry’s chin. Laughs again. And again we join him in it.

The Ana Cassia is navigating itself. Straight and slow right up the middle—where else could it go, aside from shutting off its engines and sliding back to where it came from? Out here, where the river is as wide as a sea, there are only these two choices.

After the captain returns below, the dusk drapes itself over the river and the smell of Maria frying bananas blooms through the hole in the deck. Americo brings up a bowl of fried pork rinds and unfolds chairs so
that we can sit looking out at our own pieces of darkening forest. Each of us seeing it as something else. An aspect of ourselves, multiplied and swollen. It is shame. It is grace. It is terror. Grafting these internal states onto the forest so that we start to envision it as a kind of horizontal totem pole. A neverending line of different versions of our own heads. Some true as mirrors, some leering gargoyles. All of them us.

Although we watch in our own ways, we all listen to Wallace. Bates is the only one who turns away from the jungle to look at him, though. Intent and unblinking, as if he has never heard any of this before.

“The first lie we’re told, after the tooth fairy, Rudolph the Reindeer, Jesus-loves-you lies of childhood, is that you can find meaning in history,” the voice is saying into the night, now blue as an old bruise. “But there’s nothing real in the past. There are only events that have already taken place. Courses taken. Death. The only lesson you can learn from them is that they can’t be changed. It is done. Meanwhile, the present is busy going about its business and—woops! Look at that. Another moment gone. And you can’t change that one now, either. You’ve already moved to the next second and it’s only in that second that you have any power at all. All that precedes us is written in the third person. It’s about everyone but you. But in the present, there is only you. That’s where meaning is, in the now. The only place that can be because it’s the only place that can be shaped according to an act of will. Now pinch yourself. Make sure this isn’t a dream. You feel that? That’s the realization that you are the only history that can be changed. Which is the same as saying that you are the only history worth knowing...”

Something like this. It’s hard to know if his words make sense as you hear them, and they are impossible to remember exactly once they’re said.

But he uses some of them, he must, in one order or another. What is certain is that while all of us listen, we are in complete agreement with this voice. When Wallace controls it in this way—or releases it to go where it chooses—it sounds older than mine when I hear myself interrupt him from time to time, or even Barry’s when he offers a joke. Soon we stop speaking at all and let him consume all of the rainforest’s air for the sake of keeping this voice afloat.

A lot of what he says I take to ultimately be about money, although
he never mentions it outright. It’s not that I believe him to be greedy. Greed requires covetousness, and Wallace seems to covet nothing but the desire to please. A good boy (from a distance, from a résumé), near the top of his class, the straight-As coming as much for the special thing he is as for the special things he can do. “Promising” and “boy wonder” and “gifted” are the words the magazine profiles use to describe him, and he loves all these words for their buoyancy, the sheer hope they offer. Not just to him but to the world. For surely everyone can take some comfort in knowing there are gifted, promising wonders at work among us. Who knows? The world might just be a better place thanks to the youthful innovation of the rare sort that he alone can deliver—clean, clear-eyed, stacked tight with fresh ideas. To resist a fellow like Wallace only shows something far worse than greed. It shows one’s age.

“What could history possibly mean in this place, for example?” the voice is asking us. “What does this river know of its past? It knows only to run fast when it’s dry and to swallow the land when it floods. It knows to be alive.”

Now I’m watching him, too. Watching Bates watch him. They both seem far away, unreachable. Or this may only be how I feel. Wanting to come closer to them but knowing I cannot.

I am older than they are by a difficult gap: my thirty-eight to their twenty-four. Too young to be their parent. But still an obvious difference between us that is more telling than years. I suppose I’m among the very last of the Boomers, or a proto-Gen Xer, or lost in some such uncomfortably dissociated middle ground. As Wallace puts it, I am “demographically challenged.” A product of mild, middle-class, midwestern disappointment, brought up in a small city in southern Ontario that wouldn’t be noticed if plopped down in Minnesota or Pennsylvania or Ohio, any grid of streets named after trees you now have to drive out of town to see, somewhere past the stadium-sized hardware stores and automated pork farms. A place of vague promises meant to keep you there, and slammed doors if you decided to leave.

I left. And since then I’ve seen some things. Thought I had plenty of time. Held unlikely ambitions, and went on to observe the better part
of them fail. I no longer expect greatness. Somehow all of this shows even in my brightest smile.

My parents were immigrants from Scotland who came to Canada because it was rumored to be friendlier to Scots than the States, and to the particular town I grew up in because my father found a job advertised in the Edinburgh Evening News as a lab technician at our county hospital. He liked to say that he had analyzed the blood of all our neighbors over his thirty-seven years of test tubes and rubber gloves. He was proud of these simple accidents, his wife, his only child, the careful avoidance of both misfortune and windfall. I loved him. I thought him a fool.

Perhaps surprisingly, it was the humility of the immigrant experience that filled me with the notion of entitlement. But despite the encouragement of nominal scholarships, polite letters of recommendation, near-miss appointments to the second-tier faculties of Lethbridge and Saskatoon, the ascendancy never went far up the ladder. And now I am left a blamer, given to conspiracy theories, outraged at those fortuitously born a few years before or after me.

Take our still peach-fuzzed Wallace and Bates, for example. What about them? They are nothing but expectation, rolled out flat and conclusive as a new highway. Will they ever fail? Who cares? They don’t. This is the gift of their kind of certainty. Success has attached itself to them without the formality of waiting to see it borne out.

But this is too critical, perhaps. There is a sharpness to these observations that may have more to do with me than them. One must keep in mind the sort of misgivings someone like me has a right to, after all. A less-than-first-rate Ph.D. acquired at my own expense (I am already of an age of bubble-wrap cellulite and barren follicles, yet can barely pay the interest on my student loans). Now and forever cloaked in the woolly layers of impractical education, the fastidious crafting of unread essays, the growing certainty that none of it matters much. And these dubious honors followed by the professional purgatory of overqualification. Watch them go: the passing seasons of part-time tutoring and unpaid electric bills. Despite all the warning signs, still taken aback to find myself staring down an unavoidable Old Maidship,
a spinsterhood no less musty for being visited on a supposedly free-willed woman of the twenty-first century. I have never been pretty, but in the years before these last few I had at least been youngish, which counts for something among those who are no longer youngish themselves. And now? Now the mirror plays the joke of turning a daughter into her mother, in this case a homely Scot, thin-lipped and a scoop of mashed potato in place of a nose.

But even with all this, there is surely still something of value I have over these two boys. Experience. Or something like that. The ragtag wisdom that comes with chronic underappreciation.

Yes, Wallace is clever (who isn’t clever who has idled and bullshit-ed their way through the very best schools?) and he has talent of the most general sort, forever unrealized and all the more beautiful for it. And charm? Lots of it! Or at least what we’ve come to call charm but is really a good-looking version of self-absorption. All white teeth and cracks made at others’ expense.

But what this boy has more than anything else is appetite. It doesn’t matter what, or whether its flavors agree with him. Taste doesn’t even come into it. Look at him and you’re peering down a hole that needs to be filled but never will be.

Maybe this sounds as though I hate him. But approached from a different angle, it may be that I love him instead. Among my handicaps is the inability to tell the difference.

Americo gives each of us a stick with a rusted hook tied to the end. I translate to the others that, when we get to the designated spot, we will pierce the hooks through cubes of rotten beef that Maria has sluiced into plastic bags and handed, blushing, to Wallace in the back of the canoe. When he takes them he grasps Maria’s wrist with his other hand and tugs, ready to catch her if she falls against him. She squeals and jumps back from his grip. Wallace pouts at her and she giggles in reply, then draws her hand shyly across her mouth.

“Hey, Crossman,” Wallace calls to me, still glaring playfully at the girl. “Tell Maria I’ll catch so much piranha we’ll never have to eat
that... Bates, what do they call that sawdust they eat down here?”

“Manioc. It’s a dried root that they combine with farina to—”

“—won’t have to eat manioc ever again.”

I translate all of this for them. Or at least provide a slightly personalized version, one with a few words added to suggest that Wallace thought Maria would make a perfect wife, with her spoiled meat and pretty face. It makes Maria’s blush turn into a shudder of delighted horror and, briefly, removes the grin from poor Americo’s lips.

Then the nameless tour guide starts up the canoe’s motor and, with a single turn around a finger of land, the *Ana Cassia* is lost behind us. He points out animals and birds and tells us their names, although most often, by the time we turn to look, they have already disappeared. The one thing we all manage to see is what he calls a sunbittern. Watching us pass from a tree so close we could touch it with our fishing poles. A profile of a beak as long as chopsticks atop its withered neck, skeptical and cloudy eyed, like an old woman used to better treatment than what she’s been getting of late.

We float through a series of turns around what might be either islands or outgrowths of shore. This close to the water, what we learn is that the Rio Negro is not black after all. It’s a shadow. Deep and untouched by the sun except for a skin of purple scales on the surface. But look down from straight above and there is nothing but oily shade, licking and curling upon itself.

When we finally stop it’s in an inlet where the branches come down low enough to scratch our cheeks.

“The piranha, they come for blood,” the tour guide explains in his slow manner, which, combined with his troubled English, makes him sound a little like a surfer dude. But then he spanks his hand on the water, drops his hook in and, within the space of a single breath, pulls up a flapping fish with can-opener teeth.

“The splashing, it makes them come. The blood makes them bite.”

And it’s true. Soon all of us are jerking demon dentures into the hull, where they clack uselessly against each other. As it turns out, piranha aren’t as frightening as all those matinee horror movies and *National Geographic* pictorials had led us to believe. They are nothing more than dime-store novelty items. Sardines dressed up as Halloween vampires.
Lydia screams each time she catches one, not out of actual fear but because she is an Englishwoman and therefore expected to. She looks to me to join her in this feminine ritual, but I won’t let myself. I’m afraid my voice would shatter altogether if I used it now.

“Oh God! They’re so slimy!”

“No worse than the investment bankers you have all those lunches with,” Bates says, squinting down the throat of his most recent catch.

“Good point, Bates,” Wallace cuts in. “Which is not to mention Barry here. Slimy as they come. Albeit toothless.”

“Hardy-har. How many you caught, kid?”

“Looks like eight.”

“Gotcha. I’m counting”—he pulls another up—“an even dozen.”

“Bates, what time you have?”

“Quarter to one.”

“Fine. Thousand bucks says that by one o’clock, I’ll have more little nippers than old Barry.”

“You’re on, fancy boy.”

“Gentlemen,” Lydia says, “I’ll have you know that you’re recklessly wagering with company money.” She shrieks once more at something moving around her toes. But for the moment Barry and Wallace aren’t listening. They’re staring into the water’s shadows, waiting for the tug that tells them something has taken hold of their bait.

Lydia lays down her pole to peer into the surrounding jungle. “It’s like spring here,” she sighs.

I turn and follow her gaze into a deepening madness of green. Spring? It must be an idea made exclusively for the British. Only Lydia can look into the jungle and think of it as a wild companion to April in Kent. Striving palms an analogy for bold tulips, the web of vines seen as untended hedgerows just beyond the vicarage.

“Not in Canada, man,” Bates says from behind the Palmcorder’s lens as he records Wallace and Barry’s competition. “There spring is all brown grass and dog shit.”

“Or the South,” Barry adds with a grunt, tossing up another piranha. “In Georgia it’s full-time summer, sweetheart. Sweatin’ lemonade three hundred and sixty-five days a year.”

Lydia smiles at them, knowing that none of that matters. The rest of
the world could keep its perspiring summers and salt-burned winters. England would always own spring.

I expect nothing less of her. She’s an English girl, after all, and with an English girl’s face to match: button mushroom nose (cap thumbed northward), freckle-seared skin (pale as liquid hand soap), all of it dolled up with make-up that somehow hints at the 1970s (the Twiggy Effect). Sweet, you might say, if she is sitting still. The vulnerable fleshiness, the hint of spongy jowls that suggests sympathetic attention. But only when she is still. There is something in her movements, heavier and more decisive than you’d guess possible, that makes her business capacities perfectly clear. Even her breasts are businesslike, thumping up and down inside her T-shirt like a pair of fists bringing a point home on the boardroom table.

Her face is white and her hair is dark in a way that somehow says more about her body than her face or hair. What does she look like beneath those Marks and Spencer pullovers that are too tight in the shoulders? What new version of paleness and black curls awaits the one to tug down those pleated, knee-length walking shorts? She must be British under there, surely. Dimpled and pliant as clotted cream, but with a rude whisker or mole thrown in. She has her appeal (all women must, as any attempt to count the categories of porn fetishes on the Internet proves). You just wouldn’t want her in too much light, that’s all.

Lydia finally turns away from the shore and, despite the overhanging branches, a shaft of light lands square across her face. She almost reels from the violence of the heat, and for the first time today I think of where we are. Of the hundred corners we rounded in the half hour after leaving the Ana Cassia, of the one quivering twenty-horsepower outboard engine and its single tank of gas no larger than Lydia’s purse. The piranha could be silently laughing at our feet.

“Well, who’s winning, Bates?” Lydia manages as she slides back into the shade.

“Looks dead even to me.”

“How much time?” Wallace asks. His eyes unmoving from the water. You can see the man he will become in the corrugated edges of his eyes. It’s the light here on the river: fierce and insistent and shade-
owless. It has a way of turning every face into an unfavorable prediction of how it will turn out.

“About a minute.”

“I’m outpacing you, Barry. I’ve counted four to your two in the last minute alone.”

“You know, there’s more to life than winning stupid games, kid.” Barry says and tries at a laugh. He’s the only one of us exposed directly to the sun, and half of him has already liquefied through his shirt.

“Said like a born loser,” Wallace says. “But you’re right. There’s more than winning. There’s knowing you always can.”

In the same moment, both of them bring another in, as though they are merely directing the fishes’ own desire to join them in the canoe.

“What’s the time, Bates?”

“Ten seconds,” Bates says, one eye reading his watch and the other stuck to his Palmcorder. “You’ve got Barry by one.”

“Hold it! Fucking hold it!”

Barry is standing now, his head wavering in front of the sun. Something stronger than any of the other fish pulls at his rod.

“—five, four, three—”

“Jesus Christ!”

The piranha on the end of Barry’s line leaps out of the water and lands on a circle of sweat on his shirt as though it were a dart finding a bull’s-eye.

“I got it! It’s a tie!” Barry shouts, looking at all of us at once with goggled eyes.

“Don’t look down,” Wallace says.

The fish still clings to Barry’s chest, its jaw snapping at the air, the fabric of his shirt. Then Barry does as he was told not to. He looks down. An odd sound that might be a whimper escapes his lips.

“Just stay still,” Wallace tells him, working his way over our knees.

“I’ll get it.”

“I’m bleeding,” Barry says. “It’s eating me, for Chrissakes.”

A circle of red spreads out from over the place his heart would be. But it’s not the fish’s doing. It’s the rusted hook, curled through the piranha’s jaw, a layer of cotton and half an inch into Barry’s skin.
At the sight of it Lydia falls limp against the side of the canoe as though struck from behind.

“No, no, no,” Barry says as each new layer of bad news reaches him. “Get it off me, Wallace!”

“Don’t worry. I’m coming. Keep your eyes up.”

And then Wallace is there, grabbing the fish and ripping it off the hook and tossing it back into the river in one motion. He does it quickly, but not so quickly that Barry doesn’t scream from the new pain it causes.

“Get it off!”

“I’m here, man. Stand still. Count to three.”

We watch Barry’s lips move like a brave little boy’s.

One, two—

Wallace tries to twist the hook out at first, but this only brings another whimper out of Barry. Widens the circle soaked through his shirt, already drying into a glistening wax.

“Count, Barry,” Wallace tells him. And the big man tries again.

One, two, three—

With a single pull the hook cuts its way free, and Wallace tosses it into the ripples.

But on the count of four, something else joins the hook and fish. A spout of blood that spits out from inside Barry and through the hole in his shirt, a purple arc thrown into the air. Smacks against the water’s surface hard enough to send drops of it back our way.

All of us wait for the next spurt, for surely this much blood can only be followed by more. But there is only the one. The stain on his shirt not much bigger now than it was when the hook first caught it. Barry’s hand sufficient to completely cover the wound.

“You’re going to be fine, man,” Wallace says in the voice that is older than he deserves. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to concede defeat. You took in that last fish a full second past the buzzer. And Bates got it all on tape to prove it. Didn’t you, Bates?”

• • •
The next morning our nameless tour guide repeatedly tells us to put on insect repellent for our jungle walk, but when I ask him if it will make any difference he only shrugs. The river so broad here that either shore appears as nothing more than the edge of a freshly cut lawn. Rolling over the chop in a motorized canoe, the wake bubbling up behind us like stirred Pepsi.

“Are there snakes?” Lydia shouts over the engine, her scarf parachuting out above her head.

“Yes,” the guide answers with a shake of his head, as though awakened from a dream. “I should speak about these things.”

‘These things’ turn out to be the hundreds of creatures that can do you unique harm in the forest. Among snakes, there are several that can knock you out for a week or two with fever or a violent seizure that ends in paralysis, one that turns your limbs to wood. But there are also those, like the *surucu*, that freeze the diaphragm muscle under your lungs within seconds of delivering their venom, so that you are otherwise perfectly conscious except that you have lost the ability to breathe and are left to observe what it is to slowly drown in your own saliva.

“I have seen this,” the tour guide says in a tone that clearly suggests he wishes he hadn’t.

“What else have you seen?” Wallace asks him.

“Not all things. Some I have only heard of.”

He tells us of spiders that scuttle up nostrils to weave egg sacs deep in the sinuses. Jaguars that come in the night to grip men by the throat and pull them off into the bush from where, only seconds before, they had been sleeping next to a fire on an open beach. Then the many imaginative bugs, like the beetle whose specialty is burrowing into the back of your eyeball via the tear ducts, where it can take its time chewing through the optic nerve (a process that offers unmatched discomforts, we’re told). And most exotically cruel of them all, the *candiru açu*, a microscopic catfish that, lured by any warm stream of urine, travels up the urethra and releases a series of hooks out from along its sides that fix it there for good.

“How do they get rid of it?” Bates asks.

The tour guide offers nothing but a blank look in response.
We are quiet for a while after that. Breakfast leaps in our stomachs. Neither shore is yet the closer one. The tour guide glances up at the sun, down at the water, at each of our faces, without a hint of interest in any of them. He might like us. He might wish us dead. Then, slowly, he starts to talk about parasites.

“They come inside you,” he says clearly over the slap of water and the engine noise. “Where they will live. And eat. Eat you.”

“But we drink the bottled water,” Barry reminds him. “We can’t get them.”

The tour guide blinks. “They come inside you,” he says again.

It’s an imprecise science, apparently. Some eat you hollow, so that you are constantly ravenous, and are left bony and dried-out as a famine victim. Others coil up to grow unnoticeably over time until they push out a round, pregnant belly in even the fittest men. Nothing, the tour guide tells us, not even “your American medicines,” can be assured of getting any of them out. Although the people who live in the forest have some methods of their own that have proven to be quite effective.

With this the tour guide pauses and looks to each of the distant shores, as though searching for something he might recognize along the unchanging line.

“What do they do?” Wallace finally asks.

The tour guide turns to him, cocks his head. “Do?”

“The jungle folks. To get out the parasites.”

Now there’s something in his face. A raised eyebrow, perhaps, a subtle show of teeth. Or maybe these are only the signs of effort that speech requires of him.

“First, you cannot eat. For long time. First, you starve,” he says, his eyes set upon Wallace’s, who meets this stare with one of his own. “No water, no food. Some die from this. And if you live, the snake inside—”

“The parasite—”

“—the snake begins to dance. Hungry. You are hungry, yes. But it is more than this. Days go on. The pain is lovely.”

“Exquisite,” I say. “I think the descriptive phrase is ‘The pain is exquisite.’”

The tour guide doesn’t acknowledge me, keeps his eyes in line with
Wallace's several rows ahead in the canoe. Holds them there even as the boat strikes through a new set of waves.

“It is eating you now,” he goes on. “It cannot wait for something else. And so the snake that went inside, now it wants out.”

“So you offer it an alternative,” Wallace says. The tour guide nods, and may even attempt to shape his lips into a smile.

“Milk. Of pig, of goat, of woman,” the tour guide says, the smile, or whatever it is, still hanging on his lips. “Or blood. Meat. Not cooked. These are the things the snake likes best. And so the man with the snake inside of him is held down, and his mouth is opened wide as a door, and his jaw is tied down to stay. And the milk or the blood or the meat is brought close to his tongue. Not to feed the man, but to be very close. The people around him—they wait. In time, the snake comes out. Often, it is not small.”

Everyone turns away to fix their eyes to the horizon except for Wallace, who seems to have accepted the tour guide’s strange smile as an invitation to return one of his own.

Within seconds the sun lifts itself higher above us and the river sends back a million blinding flashes. Even with sunglasses on I have to close my eyes against it. And keep them closed longer than I would guess, because when I open them again the canoe is no more than a few hundred yards from shore.

“Ooga-booga, everybody!” Wallace calls out. “Hear those drums? The natives are definitely restless!”

Something in the tour guide’s tales of poison, parasites and violation has given Wallace a new energy. He could be spirited when required to be, of course. But there is no strain in his enthusiasms for this place as there had been in Manaus and São Paulo. He is looking at the real jungle for the first time. The thing we’ve all been hearing about since we arrived in Brazil, although each of us had brought our own ideas of it with us from illustrated travel guides, from adventure books and childhood TV series, from dreams. Now it is startlingly particular: those leaves, this black sand beach, that dead branch pointing at us like an accusatory finger. And Wallace pointing back at it, already standing at the front of the canoe. All of it exciting him in a way I’d never seen in him before. Bates, too. Except it isn’t the wall of crowded
plentlife that he is taking notice of. It isn’t the cackling, chattering animals that can see us but remain invisible themselves. It is the sight of Wallace seeing and hearing these things that excites him.

Bates pulls his Palmcorder out of the bottomless pocket of his oversized Stussy shorts to record Wallace being the first out of the canoe. His foot landing on sand that farts under the foreign weight.

“I claim this continent for Hypothesys!” he declares.

“Very good, Wallace,” Barry says, the second one out, extending his hand to Lydia, but not to me. “But there’s not much of a market for us here. Unless you plan on training the monkeys basic keyboard skills.”

“There’s more here than monkeys,” Wallace says, peering into the trees as though he’s already spotted something there.

For the first hour or two, it reminds all of us but Lydia of summer camp.

“Remember the hikes they used to make us go on at Kilcoo?” Bates asks Wallace, slapping at the leaves directly behind the tour guide, who slashes a narrow hole for us to pass through with a machete.

“Can’t say I do, Bates. Nothing aside from the broken promises that they’d be fun. But I do remember the blue flame contests we’d have in the bunkhouses at night.”

“Blue flames?” Lydia inquires.

“A science experiment involving a butane lighter, bare asses and canned beans for dinner.”

“I see.”

“Down where I grew up, along the big Oconee in Georgia, we’d have to go through woods a lot like these to get to the best fishing spots,” Barry says, shaking his head. “It’s a wonder we didn’t get lost in there more than we did.”

“Soo-wee!” Wallace howls. “A plump young Barry lost in the Georgia woods! Squeal like a pig!”

Our laughter is shallow. We’re breathing too hard for anything else. It’s a lot just to keep our eyes down and move. The forest stroking over us, leaving behind powdery seeds or streaks of jam or dollops of glassy
ointment. Soon we are camouflaged by the jungle’s ooze. There is little point in trying to push it aside. It finds its way to us anyway, and we soon give up the polite habit of holding branches open for whoever walks behind us. There are too many of them to make a difference by snatching on to only one, and eventually even they must be released, whipping back into the next upturned face.

We seem to be weaving slowly up a slope of dense stuff (up close it is impossible to discern trees from ferns or whatever other things grow here), or it may be that the high steps required to move over the roots and grasping vines at our feet only make it feel like we’re trudging uphill. Either way, it serves to make Wallace more cheerful. Telling us stories of the Kilcoo Polar Bear Club (being thrown into the frigid water every dawn), failed panty raids on the Catholic girls’ camp at the other end of the lake (mustachioed Sister Julia, the nun who never slept), all the while petals of sweat blooming across the back of his T-shirt ahead of us.

Eventually, even Wallace loses the breath required for speech. When he stops, we notice for the first time since entering it that the forest is quiet.

“Where’d the birds and monkeys go?” Bates asks the guide.

“They are here. They are only watching us.”

“They’re afraid?”

“They do not fear us. They have never seen us before. Why have fear? They are only watching.”

The tour guide stops us in a tight circle that is as close to a clearing as we have yet come across. Looks up into the branches as though to give whatever watches us from there a view of his face.

“Everything comes from the jungle,” he says. “Before, most of the earth was like this. Now there is only this small part left. And these trees—they will never grow again. The soil is made of sand. It will wash away. All of it will be gone by the end of your children’s life.”

He says this without any change in his voice, although he delivers the last line specifically to Lydia, which causes her to reflexively rub a circle under her stomach.

The tour guide takes his machete and hacks a piece out of the tree nearest to him. Instantly, a white glue falls over the bark.
“This is seringueira. What they make rubber out of. And chewing gum. And this”—he hacks at a similar-looking trunk—“is where your digestion medicines, the Pepto-Bismol and the Milk of Magnesia, come from. All those things, these trees—it’s what brought your grandfathers to Manaus.”

He makes us press our fingers against the wood and taste the sap. Chops at other trees and vines within his reach, and we in turn drink fresh water from them, press healing balms against the cuts on our ankles, suck on quinine that keeps away fever and chew on fibers that the Indians use to cure impotence.

“Are there Indians here?” I ask. “Nearby, I mean?”

“Once, yes. Once there were many. Many languages, too—Arawak, Je, Carib, Pano, Tupi, Xiriana. You’d have much trouble translating them, I believe.”

“Where are they now?”

“Now? Now most of them work for the lumber companies or in the mines, and live in camps next to the big rivers. Others live in the government villages, where they do nothing. And far from here, there are the last of the Indians who move from place to place. Hunters. Yanomami. The ones who have never seen you before. Like the birds in these trees.”

“Have you seen them?”

The tour guide cocks his head and gives me a disapproving look, as though I am speaking of some foolish, not-quite-human creatures, of leprechauns or Bigfoot.

“Nobody does. They run from us, because they are dying.”

“From disease?”

“From us. We are killing them by taking the jungle from them. By giving them things they don’t need. By taking their blood to study and making them sick. Doctors and science men and andro . . .”

“Anthropologists.”

“All these people. They have come and brought vaccines and cameras and helicopters. And it has killed them, in their ways. But you know this. You have already killed the Indians in your home the same way.”

He says this without anything that can be interpreted as accusation.
It’s the same tone he used to explain how a remedy for snakebite can be sucked out of a leaf.

“So now they’re all gone,” Bates says, looking around for some evidence of them having been here.

“Now they hide. Or they have given up. Moved down to the government villages, where they watch television and learn Portuguese in order to understand television, and write letters to the state representative in Manaus asking for more televisions. They die there, too. They forget themselves.”

There is no air in these trees. It doesn’t reach down this far. But Wallace hasn’t noticed this yet. For in a moment it’s his voice again, and his desirous eyes, holding the tour guide entirely within them.

“So they could be here, couldn’t they?” he asks. “If nobody knows where they are, they might as well be here, right?”

“The Amazon has more than a thousand tributaries. Each of those has a thousand more of its own. We don’t know what lies at the end of all of them.”

“But you’re our guide. You’re supposed to know.”

“I guide you. I don’t look for them.”

“You mean the Yanomami?”

“Or other things.”

“Well, aren’t you being tantalizingly vague.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What other things?”

“There are stories.”

“We’re listening.”

The tour guide keeps his eyes on Wallace alone. It’s very hot now. A heat that comes from within as much as from the unmoving air.

“Places that nobody knows about,” the tour guide says. “They have different names, and people have thought they exist in different places. The lost city of El Dorado. It is made entirely of gold, maybe five or six hundred miles inland from here. Maybe. Or the Mines of Muribeca. Many secret people live there. Not the Yanomami. Others without a name. They have built pyramids that have been seen from the sky.” He points directly above his head.
“By satellite, you mean.”
“The cameras have looked down, and they have seen things. Made by man. But they cannot be reached.”
“You’ve tried?”
“Others have. For hundreds of years, one and then another. Even now, scientists from America, Germany. The great British Colonel Fawcett. You have heard of him, of course? All of them turned around. Or were lost. Many men have died in these expeditions.”
“How do you know for sure?” Wallace persists.
“For sure?”
“That they died. Were there bodies found?”
“There are no bones in the jungle. The ground is too wet. Too hot. Bones don’t stay.”
“There are no fossils.”
“That is right. No fos-sils. You cannot know if anyone was here, ever.”
“So they could have found what they were looking for and just not come back to tell anyone else. We wouldn’t know one way or another, because their bones would be gone by now anyway, right?”
“That is right,” he admits, with a doubtful smirk. “They would all be gone.” The tour guide then pulls his eyes away from Wallace’s to glance at his watch. “These stories are not part of the jungle walk,” he says, looking at all of us now. “They have made us late.”

We turn about in a close circle, flattening the grass like a dog settling down for a nap. But instead, once we are in something like a line again, we strike out into the trees. Whatever path we made coming to this place is now apparently gone. And although we seemed to have come uphill to get here, we must go farther uphill to return to the river. The going is no easier, at any rate. All of us fall silent except for Wallace, who talks on ahead of us about Indians and secret cities made of gold.

Have I mentioned the heat? Not that it exists, that it is hot, very hot, for what else would you expect of a jungle in this sorry year of the ozone layer’s history? It’s the character of the heat that I mean. The way it changes. Minute to minute, even within the seconds, as though
manipulated by a tireless artist constantly adding colors to create new shades on his palette. Sometimes the heat is wet. It makes one wet, but not from perspiration. Here it is permanent, a sticky second skin, as though from a glaze of tears. Sometimes the heat decides to be pitiless, inarguable as death. In other moments it has a hallucinatory invitation to it, bidding you to dream. Sometimes it is a gun at your temple, firing, firing. And once in a while even the heat is too tired, and is merely hot.

After a half hour or so I lag behind to relieve myself of Maria’s toxic breakfast coffee. I’m grateful for Wallace’s voice and the slap of branches against the backs of the others moving forward to cover the sound of my zip, squat and splash. It doesn’t take long anyway.

But by the time I’m finished, they’re already gone. No more than five seconds after I stopped to lean against the nearest tree and all of their noises have been sucked away. The green has swallowed them whole.

“Hey! Wallace! Bates! I’m back here!”

Nothing.

I’m not even certain which way they went. Or if I’ve just made a sound myself. Somehow the forest has instantly repaired itself of whatever trail they left behind.

There?

Or there?

What is there?

Every detail around me—the leaves, the sculpted ladders of fungi clinging to the trunks, the strings of ants marching over my boots—all of it has multiplied, so that what seemed particular a moment before (those ants, this jagged leaf) is now impossible to discern from whatever is next to it.

It is in this understanding of being lost, the plain fact that I will die here if nobody comes back to get me, that the jungle acquires an identity. And it is a villain. Or worse. A body of lush malevolence, motiveless, hateful for no other reason than it always has been. It took me from the others and now it gathers round to watch me become part of itself.

I hold on to whatever breath is already there. Push it out in a scream.

No names this time. Just the shattering sound of a child’s terror after
seeing the worst thing a child could see and, at the sight of it, the last of
colorhood falls away. A voice that is new to me, tumbling and fading
into the identical trees.

And then the tour guide is here with me. Arrived from exactly the
opposite direction I would have guessed he’d gone. His hand on my
forearm, breath smelling like old cheese. A beautiful, human stink. I
could kiss him. I almost ask him what his name is.

“Next time you go pissing in the jungle, bring a friend,” he says.

The Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs is already drunk by the time
we climb aboard the *Presidente Figueiredo* for dinner. After twenty
minutes of amusing us with his impersonation of a chattering spider
monkey, his aides take him belowecks to bed. That leaves us alone
with a half dozen of his policy advisors, who manage to disappear into
the few corners the boat offers before the main course is served. The
*Presidente Figueiredo* has better food than the stuff Maria makes,
though, and there is wine instead of Americo’s lukewarm rum behind
the bar. For the first time since our night out in Manaus, we have a
good excuse to get drunk.

Wallace and Bates take up position at the back of the observation
deck, their faces lit by the lamp beneath the Brazilian flag. After a
while, Wallace waves me over.

“We need your help, Crossman. Your *insight*. It’s a Hypothesys-type
situation. And seeing as we didn’t bring our laptops with us, we
thought we’d let you decide the matter the old-fashioned way.”

“Happy to be of service.”

“When is a lie not a lie?”

“That sounds more like a riddle.”

“The best questions usually do.”

“I don’t know. I suppose when it doesn’t do anyone any harm. That
makes it a white lie, doesn’t it? Although if it’s untrue, it’s still techni-
cally a lie.”

“So the moral implications depend on the damage done. I see. But
exactly how much damage is permissible for the lie to remain white? I think we still need more specific facts to determine where to draw that line, don’t we, Bates?”

“Like what?” Bates asks.

“Like that shit you told those girls at the bar in Manaus, for instance.”

Bates blanches. Blinks his surprise at the river that is somewhere out there below him.

“Go on,” Wallace urges him, but in a near whisper. “What did you tell our dates?”

“I didn’t tell them anything. There was only one. One her.”

“Tell Crossman what you told her, then.”

“What does it matter? Why are you bringing this up?”

“Because it’s funny, Bates.” Wallace grins, crossing his arms. “And Crossman would be interested, as it sounds like you did a fair job of translating, for an amateur. You managed to get across the fact that Hypothesys was not a website at all but rather a top-secret government project, possibly concerning a new generation of sophisticated weaponry. The perfect bomb. Yes! Isn’t that what you told her? You had come up with the plans for the perfect bomb? I mean, none of that could have been easy, unless you’ve been taking Portuguese lessons on the sly.”

“You said that, Bates?”

He turns to face both of us. There is nothing there to indicate shame. There is only the vulnerability that comes with the wish to be understood.

“I was bored with explaining what Hypothesys really is,” he pleads, his palms open on his knees. “And it was just talk. You know, here we all are in this weird bar in the Brazilian jungle, acting like spies, and then this girl—it was a movie, and I was saying movie things. And you know something? I swear she understood me. Like she expected to hear the stuff I was telling her.”

“You see, Crossman? Bates here is not as squeaky clean as he looks. He lies to girls. He’s invented the perfect bomb. Behold: the new Oppenheimer! This boy has an imagination.”

“What made it perfect?” I ask.

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Bates succumbs to a trembling at one corner of his lips that could as easily be a reflex of pride as restrained tears.

“It does everything that A-bombs do, but without the nasty fallout,” he begins modestly. “And it has far greater target specificity. So it could neatly flatten the downtown core of a major city and everyone in it, say, but do no harm to the suburbs around it. A useful tool in those tight trouble spots—think the Balkans, think Israel—where the town on the hillside is full of good guys but the town in the valley three miles away is full of bad guys, depending on your perspective. One drop and you’ve made your point either way. No tedious months of artillery tit-for-tat. Plus no radioactive clouds roaming the earth to worry the folks back home. It would be the first environmentally friendly weapon of mass destruction ever devised.”

By the end of this, Bates has worked up some enthusiasm. His breath popping at the back of his throat. Opens and closes his eyes in Morse code. This may have been the longest continuous speech I have heard him make.

“So what powers the thing if it isn’t nuclear?”
“That’s the secret.”
“The secret that doesn’t exist.”
“The secret that doesn’t exist.”
“And you told all this to your girl?”
“It didn’t hurt anyone.”

“Thus it’s only a white lie, by Crossman’s definition,” Wallace says. “And nobody would ever think Bates capable of hurting a fly. He’s sensitive. Are you sensitive too, Crossman?”

“When it matters.” It’s the look on Bates’s face that makes me add, “More than you.”

“I doubt that. You’ve read your Dickens. You’ve watched your Oprah. Who’s more sensitive than an orphan?”

“You’re an orphan?”

“De facto. A castoff of the New World Order. My parents were diplomats. I got sick on the water in the Cameroon when I was a kid, so they thought it best if I grew up a million miles away in a good old Canadian boarding school. Haven’t I told you this? Bates was there, too. Except he was a real orphan. His parents weren’t just selfish and
neglectful, they were actually dead. So we did what we could. We brought each other up. Didn’t we, Bates?”

“Best friends,” Bates nods without meeting his eyes.

“And what’s a best friend when you’re alone? Well, I’ll tell you. He’s all you’ve got.”

With this, Wallace pulls Bates against him and holds him in a long hug. Strokes his hand down Bates’s back as though to warm him. It’s partly another tease. But it lasts too long and appears too immediately comfortable to be wholly that.

When they part they both look up at me with canine grins.

“How’s that for sensitive, Crossman?” Wallace says.

“You got me beat.”

“Damn right I do. I’m all heart. Nothing but a walking, beating, bleeding heart.”

This strikes us as a good time to finish our drinks, which we do.

“I’m curious,” I start after we’ve clinked our empty bottles together on the deck. “What did you talk about with your date, Wallace?”

“Nothing at all, really. At least compared to Bates’s disclosures. I just told her that I was an American millionaire. Which wasn’t much of a lie, come to think of it. Of course, she didn’t have a clue what I was talking about. Although the word American may have had some impact. It’s the universal language, after all.”

“American?”

“Money.” He smiles at me with what appears to be real tenderness.

“Something more to drink, my friends?”

A buffet table has been set up with platters of barbecued pork and magnums of wine, right next to the satellite dish that feeds the television sitting on a table of its own with words from home. Within only a few minutes I pick out “down twenty percent in the first quarter alone,” “Tiger Woods missed his birdie putt on the 18th,” at least two “dot-coms” and one “You are the weakest link. Good-bye!” The channels flipping on their own.

Wallace returns with a bottle of wine slung under one arm and a stack of plastic cups under the other. We stand with our elbows on the rail as though leaning against a proper bar, except one that smells of rain and dead fish. Stare into the jungle like there is something to see.
but there is only something to hear. The coughing and burping and liquid complaint of whatever lives within it.

“It’s laughing at us,” Wallace says after a while.

“Are we that funny?”

“Stinking of insect repellent, sunburnt, blind as bats. I’d say we’re worth a chuckle or two.”

“It’s not laughing, it’s warning,” Bates says. “Walk a hundred feet straight in there and you couldn’t find your way back.”

“As I found out myself this afternoon.”

“Poor Crossman. Our Little Red Riding Hood who strayed from the path.”

Now it is my turn to have my back stroked by Wallace’s hand.

“That reminds me of a story,” he continues. “Bates? Does any of this ring a bell?”

Bates holds his eyes down to the river but says nothing.

“What story?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Bates isn’t in the mood. And I can never remember the punchline, anyway.”

No one says anything for a time. I want to push them further, but Wallace anticipates my next question and speaks first.

“For a so-called party in the middle of the Amazon, this is unbelievably boring.”

He grabs a can of Coke off the buffet table but doesn’t open it. Without a word, Bates does the same, then me. The weight of grenades in our palms.

“What do we aim at?” Bates asks.

“The darkest part. That place between the trees where you can’t see anything.”

And to show exactly where he means, Wallace brings his arm back and his knee up to his chin, major league pitcher style, and launches the can into the jungle. We wait for the explosion, but it doesn’t come. A flash of red and white caught in the light of the deck lantern and high quarter moon. Then nothing. No snap of leaves, no blast of fizz. Just the forest’s uninterrupted hilarity.

Bates’s throw next, tumbling high. Then mine, a spiraling bullet. Each of them disappearing into the same hole.
“They’re catching them before they hit the ground!” Wallace says, and we all laugh in agreement, although it isn’t clear what “they” he has in mind.

Wallace and Bates have a talent for removing themselves from others’ company without being noticed. It’s the most amazing thing. One minute they are tall and gleaming and saying things at a volume that is somewhat louder than the conversational average, and the next they have collapsed the space they formerly held and retreated to share secrets between themselves.

As they do soon after we run out of cans to throw into the rainforest. Our laughter has yet to exhaust itself, but when I turn they are gone. And in their place is Barry, swerving my way and thumping his heels upon the deck as though the Presidente Figueiredo is battling through a rough sea.

“They’ve disappeared on you, haven’t they?” he says. He must have found a private stock: his breath is curdled with the horsepissy taint of rye whisky.

“How’d you know?”

“You’ve got that just-abandoned-by-the-boys look about you. It’s unmistakable. But not to worry. They do it to me all the time. To all of us. You’d never guess by looking at them—and listening to Wallace and his yakking—but they’re fucking Siamese twins, those two. Born sewn together.”

“They’re best friends.”

“I’ve never had a friend like that. Have you?”

“Sometimes I wonder if I’ve ever had a friend at all.”

“Well, that’s rather more than I asked for, Crossman.”

“I’m just saying. Whatever it is between them, I don’t get it. I missed out.”

“Compared to them, we’ve all missed out.”

For the first time since I’ve met him, Barry looks his age. Whatever his age is. Maybe it’s the piranha-hook incident that has gouged the
lines around his eyes a year or two deeper. Or maybe it’s the anger that he seems to have found in himself, in a bottle of rye.

“What am I doing down here, Crossman?” he asks abruptly, with more than a note of recrimination.

“Here? Right now you’re a tourist. But mostly, you’re here to sell things, Barry.”

“No. They’re here to sell. I’m just a tourist. A hanger-on. Which wouldn’t be too bad, you know—I’m in marketing, I’m paid to hang on—except that it doesn’t feel real to me. I mean, I understand what Hypothesys does, and I think it’s an important product, or at least something that people will want to buy. But just being around it, being around him, gives me this unreal feeling. And look at us now! We’re in the middle of a comic book adventure down here. The sort of stuff I used to read by flashlight under the sheets because my father would kick my ass if he ever caught me. It’s like I’ve been thrown into my past, or somebody else’s future, or some fucked-up business.”

He shakes his head like a wet sheepdog. Pushes a hand through his hair. A second later, new lines of perspiration cut down his forehead.

“Are you all right, Barry? I mean, do you think you might—there’s fever—”

“I’m fine. I’m just drinking.”

Barry puts an arm over my shoulders as I have seen him do several times before with others. Except this time it feels like he actually needs me to keep him from falling over.

“None of it can be helped, Crossman,” he croaks into the side of my neck. “The thinning hair, the mudslide of fat, mixing up the names of goddamned rock bands—sorry, it’s dj’s now—mixing them up with movie titles or the newest drugs that make them all dance for sixty-three hours straight . . . And yet we are blamed! For not knowing. For failing to keep up. But you want to know something? It’s just time that we’re blamed for.”

“Nobody’s blaming you.”

“You might be right. Maybe it’s me blaming them.”

“That sounds closer to it.”

“Fine. But don’t tell me you don’t do it too. You’re not getting any
younger yourself. And you resent them a little for it. Don’t you? For the distance they’ve put between what we were and where we’re all headed now, with them leading us by the noses. Admit it.”

“I haven’t given it much thought.”

Barry scoffs.

“You’re a good listener, Crossman,” he tells me with a close-up of his businessman’s teeth. “But you’re a terrible liar.”

At the end of the night it’s Lydia who tells me things. She may not mean to at first, but she does. I’ve become used to it in my line of work. People tend to think translators make good confidants. There must be some line of reasoning that leads them to this, something to do with words and my being trained to understand them. It’s thought that if I have a facility for comprehending the things people say, I will comprehend them in the process. It doesn’t work that way, of course. But I never correct people once they get rolling. As Lydia is now.

And what does she have to report between the beginning and end of her one and only glass of British Columbia pinot noir? That for her, the narrative of life after thirty has been little more than a conquering of bad habits. Or an ongoing effort to conquer them. For years it had been smoking (learned in girls’ school stairwells and perfected in London wine bars while negotiating the terms of selling off pieces of England to the rest of Europe). Then it was food, her butter addiction first, then the unspeakable chocolate sins, followed by shopaholism (bloody shoes!), and, most recently, falling in love with men she knew full well would never love her in return. She knows it’s all nonsense, needless to say. Utter rot. But this doesn’t stop her from hoping that if she did away with just one more self-destructive tendency, or shed one last pint of toxins—well, she wouldn’t have to think about such crap so much and could get on with the real business of her life.

And what is that?

It’s delivering the baby inside of her into the world.

“No, there is no man,” she says in answer to the question I don’t actually ask. “Well, there was a man. But not one that will stay. I’m
thankful for what he has given me, nevertheless. I need to have a child. To save a life.”

“Your life?”

“Maybe mine. Although I have someone else in mind.” She pauses, as though tallying a sum in her head. “Do you have any children, Elizabeth?”

The sound of my first name silences me for a moment. But Lydia’s smile is conspiratorial, indulgent.

“I haven’t even thought about them much, to be honest.”

“It was the same with me. Women like us, out and about in the world—we need our space, don’t we? But then something happened. Something awful happened. And suddenly I saw the space I was living in as being nothing at all.”

Lydia turns to look at me so directly it takes some discipline to meet her eyes. Whatever is there makes it clear that she is not talking about any mere pre-midlife stock taking, menopausal inklings or the tolling of some biological clock. There is not a hint of tears, but there it is anyway. Terrible facts being recollected, and she looks at me so that I can see them too. Yet it only takes a single sniff to put all of it back wherever it is usually kept, and she lifts her face up to the night sky.

“The stars are different here, Elizabeth. Have you noticed?”

“Closer looking, you mean?”

“No, they’re just as far. But you get a different view of them. There’s no Big Dipper, for example. Instead there’s that absurdly geometrical square smack in the middle of things. What do they call it? The Southern Cross. Imagine. People live their whole lives down here and never see the same sky that we do.”

An orange comet, vivid as an expensive special effect, spits across the sky directly in front of us.

“Make a wish,” I say.

“You too.”

We close our eyes.

“What did you wish for?” she asks me when we open them again.

“It’s a secret.”

“You’re just a magnet for secrets, aren’t you?”

“What about you? What did you wish for, then?”
I expect her to mention the baby inside her, her hopes for it to be born and grow up without accident and to read at the same Cambridge or Oxford college that she read at. But she doesn’t. What she says surprises me, her words sure and swift.

“I wished for them, of course,” she says, and nods toward Wallace and Bates, standing at the rail and whistling signals out into the jungle. “Those two will eat up all of our wishes before they’re done with us.”

We laugh. Saying and hearing more than we perhaps should beneath an unfamiliar sky. Of course we laugh. But perhaps it is because we have frightened ourselves a little, too.

And something else from that night. Back on board the Ana Cassia, after each of us has stumbled around the main deck’s narrow walkway in search of our cabins. All of us except Lydia too drunk for goodnights.

Only a few minutes into my first attempt at sleep I realize I need some water and that I’ll have to go up to the galley where the cooler is kept. I open my cabin door and there they are. Maria and Wallace. Her eyelids closed and darkly shining. His lips at her neck, devouring her.

It would be nothing more than this—an unremarkable scene of advantage being taken—if I were alone in watching it. But as I’m about to draw my head back inside the cabin, I notice another set of eyes peering around the far corner at the front of the boat. So yellow and unblinking I at first mistake them for a pair of glowing insects. But they’re too still for that. Too focused.

They are Americo’s eyes, frozen by injury. This is what I think at first. That the absence of white where his grin should be could be explained by the thing he is forcing himself to witness. He loves Maria. Now this American boy (who is in fact a boy, but not in fact an American) is kissing the girl he hopes—perhaps foolishly, hopelessly—to marry.

He takes a half step forward to get a better view and it allows me to see him, faintly incandescent from sunburn, a dying ember. It’s Bates.
Watching, without any trace of expression, his best friend and a Brazilian cook embrace each other. Or perhaps an expression growing just under the skin that is being held there by will, by practice. An emotion so powerful that its suppression clamps all of him shut. It could be anything. Rage, despair, longing. Anything at all.

We are somewhere on two thousand miles of river on the less explored half of the planet. It’s the middle of the night. It’s impossible to say.

It all starts with that dream where there’s someone in the house. Someone who shouldn’t be.

You went to sleep alone in one of the upstairs bedrooms, the one with the embarrassing stuffed panda and buck-toothed graduation portraits where you did the better part of your growing up and left years ago. But now you’re back, swirling around in some other, more dreamlike dream. Then you’re startled awake by a sound from downstairs. Inside.

You ponder the precise nature of the sound you think you’ve heard. Only half a second has passed and already your memory of it is shifting. What you were certain was a single knock upon wood is becoming a metallic scratch, shattered glass, an exhaled breath. Although there is no sound now, whatever it was leaves an echo in the too-silent silence, pours down the hallway and under the door of your room.

How many times have you had this dream? Even as you dream it, it feels tired from repetition, although it never fails to frighten and make you do the frightened child things of pulling the sheet over your head and sending out a mental distress call to your mother, who, you know full well, has been dead for some time.

And then you hear it again. It may have been a knock or broken glass the first time but it is definitely footsteps now. Heavy zombie slides across the living-room carpet. How many times have you considered what to do next, decided to stay where you are and then pulled the sheet back and gotten to your feet anyway?

Nudged through the dark of your room (the smell of preserved
suburban childhood clinging to your skin as you go) and into the hall-
way. The footsteps downstairs have progressed to the front hall, where
they stop. Waiting.

Is that the thing below, breathing? Is it you?

Nothing can be determined aside from how it will end. So on you go.
A marionette dragged through the seamless dark.

You know you are taking steps down the stairs only from having
done it a million times before. The darkness a screen you begin to
anticipate things appearing on. Whatever waits for you below. Any
number of images half-sketched onto a chalkboard and then wiped off
to make way for something worse.

The nothing around you turns cold. You could see your breath if
you could see. Christ, you’d like to go back up to bed! Or at least grow up.
But you never will. This happens to be the particular nightmare
you will have throughout your life and tell no one about.

Then you’re there. Face to face with the intruding stranger.

And what does the intruding stranger do? It makes you wait. Or
maybe there isn’t anything there at all. This question is the next-to-
worst part, because you know the answer even as you ask it.

A single pop of light shows it to be closer than you expected.

A horrible face whose horror lies in the way it is many faces at once:
the squinty uncle who touched you in a bad place, the Doberman that
took out a hunk of your cheek when you were six, a laughing birthday
party clown with smoke-stained teeth. Even your beloved mother,
who has heard your prayers but has instead arrived in a ghoulish
version of herself, her eyes plucked out and her mouth growing wide.

What makes it so bad is that you couldn’t conjure these faces-
within-a-face as quickly as they appear. It’s not your dream anymore,
no matter how many times you’ve had it. This part always gets you.
You’d like it to stop—right now, thanks—but it holds you a second
longer until it pulls a wavering call for help from your throat.

It’s this face made of faces that wakes you up.

Except this time it’s still there. Looking back, real as you are.
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