The background is a textured, painterly illustration. It depicts a person with a white face, red nose, and black hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and blue pants. The person is standing in a dark doorway, holding a small red object. The surrounding environment is rendered in earthy tones of brown, red, and green, with visible brushstrokes and a rough, hand-drawn aesthetic. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

LAZY EYE STORIES

VOLUME I

WRITTEN BY DAVID RICE
ILLUSTRATED BY KAYLA E.

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EPISODE ONE:

MARKET DAY, dead summer

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EPISODE ONE:
MARKET DAY, DEAD SUMMER

That's what Eye calls it when he sends Slave out of the house, down the street by the directest route possible, avoiding the middle school where he should by rights be confined with his others, downtown to perform these three things in this order:

 1. Draw funds (enough but just enough) from Eye's (ample, independent) account at the Land Trust Bank & Union Credit Clearinghouse (the town's bank).

 2. Purchase goods and sundries – cleaning materials, spare bedding, packaged food, sparse produce, meat – from **Ultra Max**.

 3. Purchase (most important) a fresh take of Night Sugar (as Eye likes to believe Slave believes methadone is called, manifesting an odd but undeniable protective streak, a vein of tenderne almost visible as its own shape and color in Eye's mass of white and red), from Rib, "this town's main dealer," as he would describe himself, not inaccurately, to you, if pressed.

Bank draft accomplished, funds in hand, Slave crosses the colossal **Ultra Max** parking lot on foot. A broken-down campervan that was broken down last time he passed this way is broken down this time as well. Those who were in it when it broke down appear to be in it still, eating popcorn and watching a movie as far as Slave can tell through its tinted windows in the harsh parking lot sun.

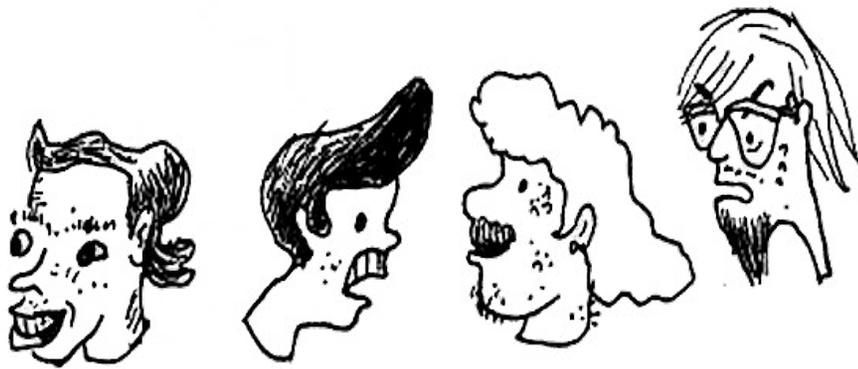


THROUGH THE FIRST SET OF **Ultra Max** AUTOMATIC DOORS, past the hand-lettered posters of Missing Children, some with Rewards and some without. Slave averts his eyes, uncertain whether he most fears finding or not finding his picture among them.

A security guard sees him go in, stands still as a statue, thinking his own thoughts or none at all.



PAST THE SECOND SET OF AUTOMATIC DOORS,



beyond the coin-operated rocket ships and Gallery of Coupons, before which a set of Old-timers lingers, gawping as if at art.



IN THE AISLES, Slave pushes a basket, tipping in only what he needs, unfolding Eye's Shopping List, a laminated leather document that far predates Slave's time in Eye's house. Slave often wonders (as he does now) how and when this List was written – whether, at some now-distant juncture, Eye used to have arms and hands of his own with which to write, or whether he perhaps had some other Slave (or many), to whom such tasks as List writing once fell.



Slave experiences a twinge of jealousy; he stops pushing the cart to catch his breath. It tastes like cinnamon air-conditioning. Lynda, newscaster at the town's Public Access TV Station, passes by, drinking a Diet Juice.

Peering in another direction, Slave catches sight of Otto and Tarletan, twin preachers of Divergent Words, in the Lemons & Plushtoy Aisle. In yet another direction, Slave catches sight of Mac and Chiara, and their new baby, here from some far other town, on a coast no doubt, except the baby who was born here and will – why not? – die here one day, perhaps long after everyone else in sight has died.

Slave, because it has happened before, knows what is happening: he has lost momentum and lapsed out of doing and into witnessing. He is, for now, a passive observer, a Still Point in a Turning Universe, here in his aisle (Tea & Wads) of **Ultra Max**®.



Over at the Butcher Counter, he watches the stockyard cows graze as butchers in glistening white plastic suits warm up their electric flensing knives and, in due time, begin to flense.

He leaves his eyes open as the Butchers dismantle three or four cows, parceling them into skin-covered steaks for several patient waiters in line, clutching numbers.

The sprinkler system goes off all over the store, washing away the blood and soaking everyone, briefly.

HERE THEY COME NOW.



They pass him where he stands with the same gaze as ever: recognition and denial, hand in hand, knowing and wanting not to know and thus (almost) not knowing.

They say nothing; barely even stop, though here their long-missing and longed for son stands, in the flesh before them, near enough to touch but if they did, they know or think, their lives would go crinkly and crumble.

By the time they let a corner take them out of sight, Slave is back in the Reverie of Abduction, still glued to his parcel of aisle:

Like recalling the story of the trial and murder of some fringe Savior from an out of-print piece of Apocrypha, Slave replays the story of his abduction: how, long enough ago that it was not part of our current era, Eye took him away.

Moved him from one life into another, on the same street but hardly in the same realm.

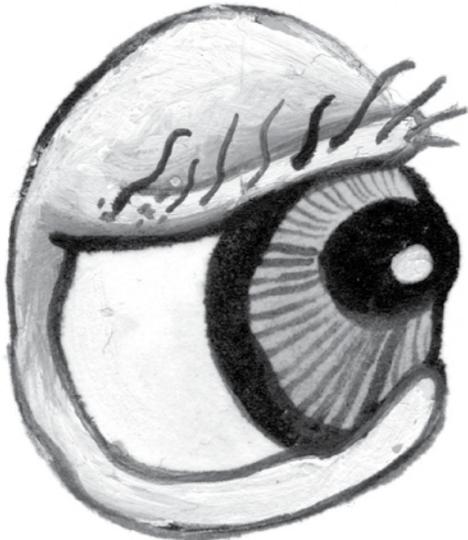
Somehow he was coaxed. This is all he can remember, or all he lets himself or is let to remember. He was not grabbed; he went almost of his own accord – on his own two feet, at least – though was never invited to say no thanks.

He hadn't known Eye personally before that, but all his childhood years sleeping in a bed by a window so near to Eye's window hadn't failed to take effect.

Every night before sleep, Slave (back when his name had been a standard one) had, once undercover, peeled back the window-shade and looked across a parcel of grass and phone line into where a light glowed, beginning to sleep, not quite yet seeing Eye but knowing he was being watched by a sort of neighbor he'd do best not to ask or talk about to anyone.

After enough years of nights like these (he always said his good-nights to the world like so), it grew inevitable to segue from the care of his parents to the care of Eye.

When the day came – no memory of how he'd known what day it was – he went, and now he goes to sleep in the other house, looking back at the window he used to look out of.



END REVERIE OF ABDUCTION.



Slave looks down into his shopping cart, compares it with the leather List, sees he has everything he needs.

Moves to the checkout aisle. **UltraMax**[®] is quiet now: Happy Hour in the café is in effect, siphoning stragglers by the dozen.

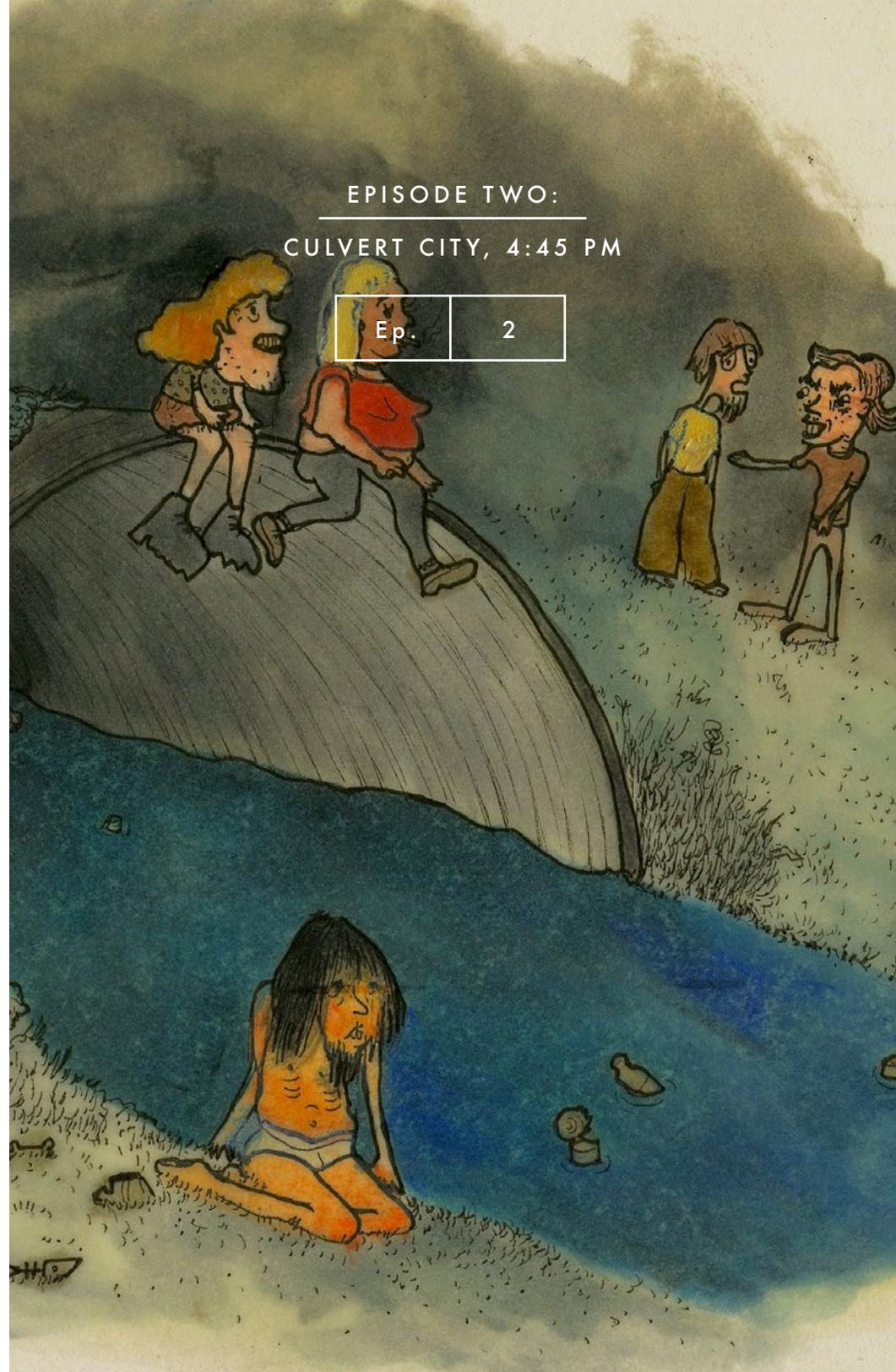
After checkout, it's time to meet Rib in the culverts out back.

EPISODE TWO:

CULVERT CITY, 4:45 PM

Ep.

2



EPISODE TWO:
CULVERT CITY, 4:45 PM



Here comes Slave. **UltraMax**® errands accomplished, purchasing Eye's Night Sugar is all that stands between him and the relative sanctity of home.

Maybe even some me-time if Eye simmers down easy.

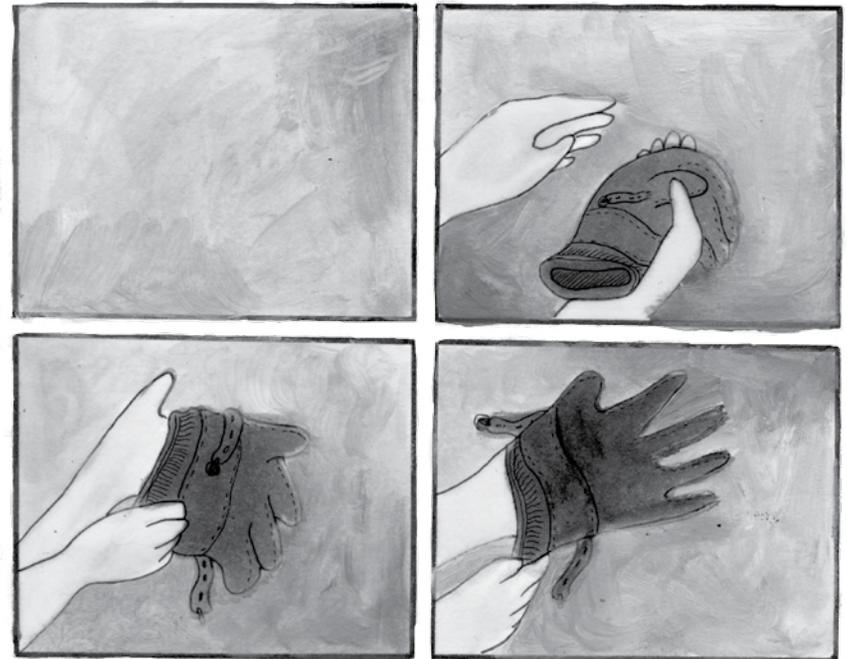
Slave's Instructions (on the reverse of the Leather Shopping List is to be found the List of Leather Instructions) clearly state that he is to gather and bring home all purchases in the **UltraMax**® shopping cart, even though the wheels lock at the far edge of the parking lot.

The cart lives in its own room in Eye's house, never disturbed save for these biweekly purchasing events, though sometimes Slave peers at it through the keyhole.

This amounts to Slave pushing the cart, locked wheels and all, with the sum brute force he can muster, so much that his limbs and face turn a pale purplish color, a lilac or a lavender. Not unbecoming.

It's like, he thinks, struggling to think of what it's like, pushing a block of marble in the shape of a shopping cart. Eye's Renaissance Lessons are finding purchase within him.

Luckily, he's exited through the **UltraMax**® Service Exit, which puts him nearer to Culvert City, saving him the trek back across the parking lot.

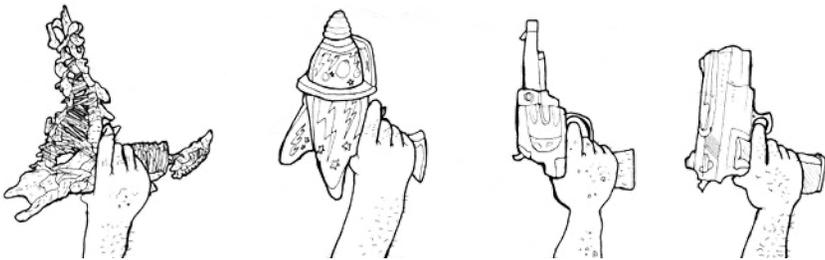


He dons the special glove he wears for all Culvert City transactions. It's a thick, padded affair with metal buckles and a nest of straps, and he'll wear it throughout all imminent methadone handlings, as if they were snakes.

For now, thankfully, it cushions the bodily impact of his expended brute force upon the shopping cart, though his fingers are still lilac or lavender inside.



There's a sign out front that reads Culvert City, Pop. 2, meaning Rib and Stacee you'd guess, but the horde of teens lingering beside it, on the Culvert edge, would seem to tell a different story. Though perhaps on some vague, self-appointed guard duty, these teens shuffle away as Slave – a legitimate buyer and known as such – approaches. They take their resting dogs with them. Some of them shoot off their guns as they recede.



Some dogs, when kicked, do not stir. These are left where they lie. Slave steps over them, negotiating the cart as best he can so as not to ensnare their hides.



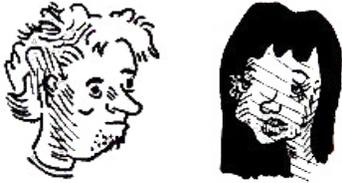
Beyond the lip of the Main Culvert float spiky dud bombs from yesteryears of several vintages, lengths of polypropylene tubing and tape, sheets and feathers hanging from the Culvert's upper grooving.

There are also big chunks of floating fat in the water, like white lumps of some soft ore. These Rib and Stacee burn to keep warm in winter and to see by, and gnaw on when need be.

Off in the distance, Refinery workers are on their lunch break. The Refinery opens onto and spills runoff into another Culvert, another district of Culvert City, but sometimes the workers stray this far down, in their blue coveralls, when they crave a little what they call, sneeringly, "fresh air."

On occasion Phil, Slave's father, though he's a Vice Manager, comes down here with them, and, on even rarer occasion, actually witnesses his son buying Night Sugar from Rib, but not today, not today: Phil and Betsy are safely returned home after their **Ultra Max**® excursion and encounter.

Slave presses in past Rib's bookshelves and mealy boxes, fighting for balance amidst the undertow of floating books in the Culvert mess.



Now he's in Rib and Stacey's home: a microwave, a toaster, and an iron hang from an elaborate snare of wires strung from a more slender pipe at the top of the Culvert, clacking together.

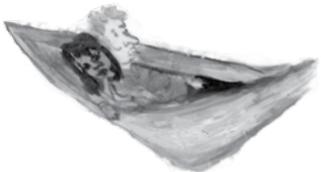
A hammock hangs nearby as well, in which Rib and Stacey lie, resting, regarding their visitor.

A PAUSE. Everyone can feel it getting darker outside, later, cooler despite the summer.

Slave rings a little hanging bell.

Rib heaves to his feet and mucks over to Slave and his cart.

Slave never speaks, or barely ever, in public, and this time is no exception.



“One ... thing, coming up,” says Rib, instead of something like, “The usual again?” or trying to rile Slave into speaking, which he used to do.



He holds his paperback down by his side, flayed open to hold his place.

Slave nods.

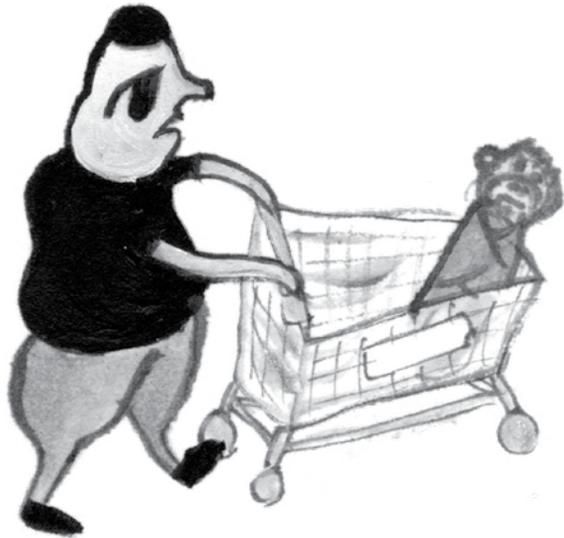
Stacee produces a wrapped bundle from beneath a sheet in the hammock, holds it out to be taken.

She explains how she has wrapped the dose – two weeks' worth, as ever for Eye – this time, in a macramé rhesus monkey. Whether the drug is secreted in the monkey's genitals, bowels, heart, or cranium, is for the customer to find out, not her to divulge.

Stacee brings it to Slave, helping settle it into the shopping cart.

Slave nods, holds up the Change Purse full of Eye's freshly drawn money.



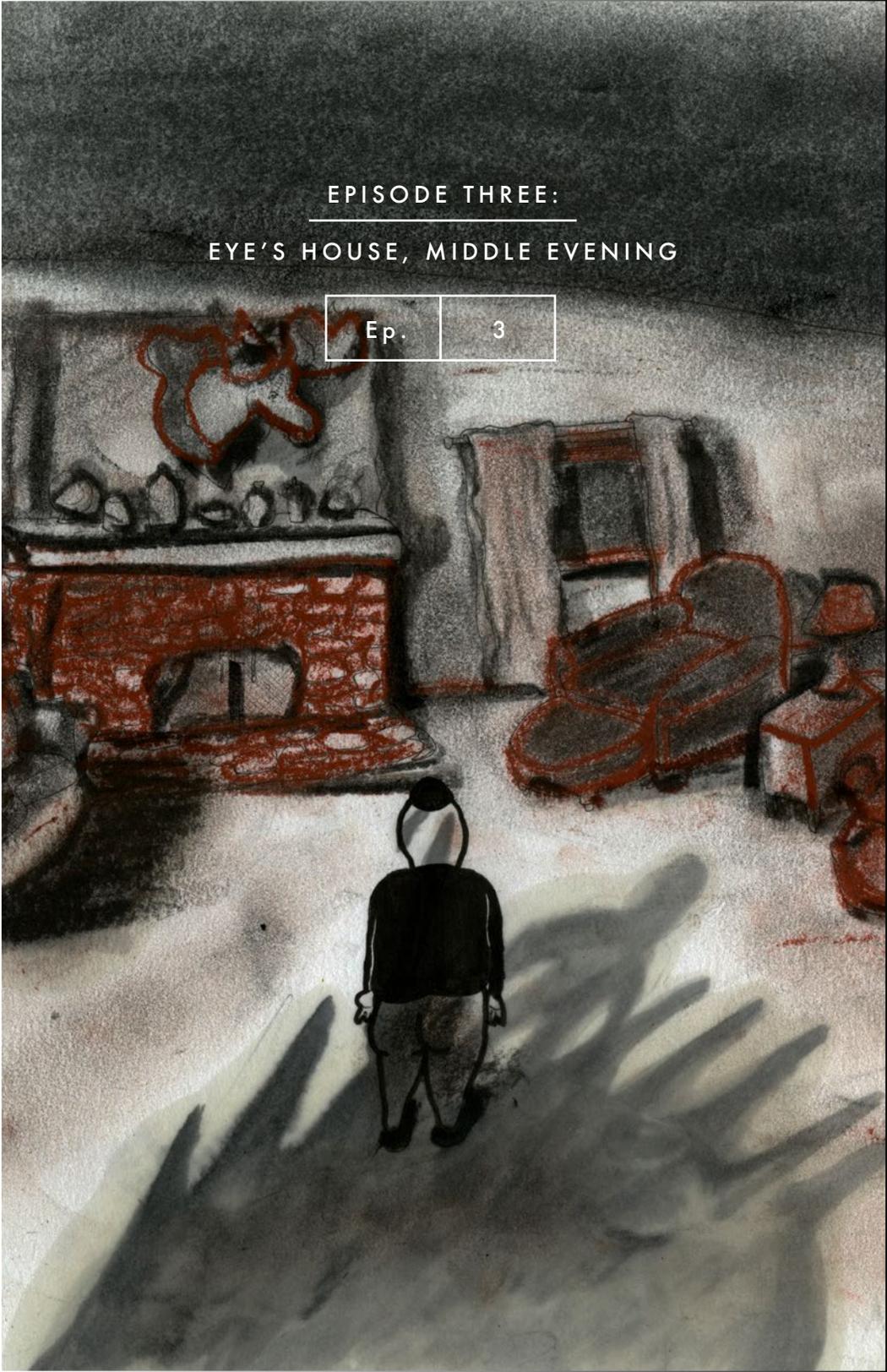


Rib takes a fistful, the right amount. He stuffs it away and begins to read again where he stands while Stacee hums a tune. Slave, neither quickly nor gracefully, begins his maneuvers out of the Culvert.

The rhesus monkey sits up in the childseat of the shopping cart, peering out as if alive.

EPISODE THREE:
EYE'S HOUSE, MIDDLE EVENING

Ep.	3
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EPISODE THREE:
EYE'S HOUSE, MIDDLE EVENING

Slave comes up the driveway, past the car that no one can drive, hefting the shopping cart up the front steps two wheels at a time. The sun is down low and the things that whistle in the dark are in position.

The car at his parents' house is in the driveway over there. He can see that someone has forgotten an **UltraMax**® bag in the trunk and a paper cup on the roof.

Still wearing his glove, he maneuvers the front door open and the cart through, as silently as possible.

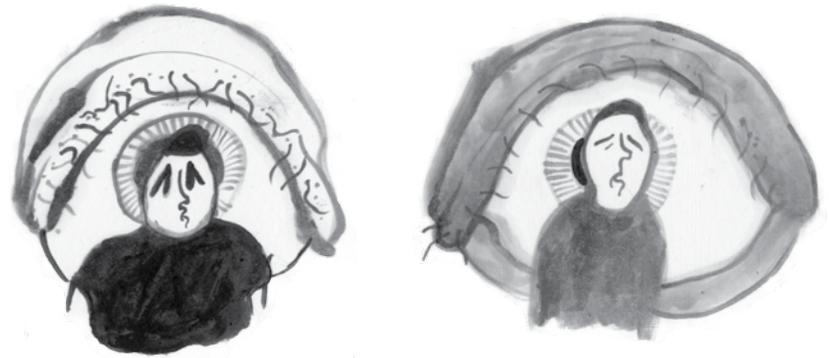


Early on, Eye sat Slave down and told him a little story about Marcel Proust, how he used to sleep all day and require his servants to tiptoe into his bedchamber at five p.m. with a tray of fresh coffee, hot chocolate, and croissants, and lay it silently on his nightstand and disappear so that when he, Marcel, awakened, he would discover all was ready for him to sip and nibble right there in bed, as he sat waiting for the long night's writing session to commence..

“But,” said Eye, back when he'd told Slave this story, “sometimes Marcel did not awaken at five p.m. Sometimes it was six, even seven, even eight p.m.. In those cases, the servants tiptoed back into his room, once every hour, to remove the tray, discard its gone-lukewarm contents, and prepare an entirely new one to place by the master's bedside. It is said that if Marcel were ever to awaken and catch sight of the servants standing there, tampering with the tray, his entire night's work would be ruined and ...”

Here Eye segued into a direct threat, “the price those servants would pay for the disturbance was not one any could afford to pay twice. Nor their families.” Slave used to think of this story each time he put away a new take of **UltraMax**® supplies, but now he can remember to keep quiet without needing to remember why.

After unloading the take into the fridge and pantry cabinets, Slave coaxes the cart into its stall, like a horse whose work for the day – week, even – is done. He turns the light out over it and closes the door.



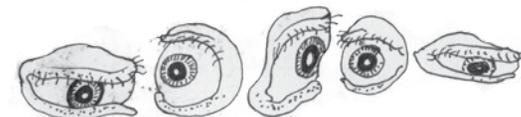
Eye appears behind him now, newly awake after a day's sleep. Slave can feel Eye's presence but allows himself a split second of peace before turning to face his next round of servitude.



Eye regards Slave's back during this split second of peace, blinking once, stretching his four nerves taut and letting them go slowly and luxuriously loose.

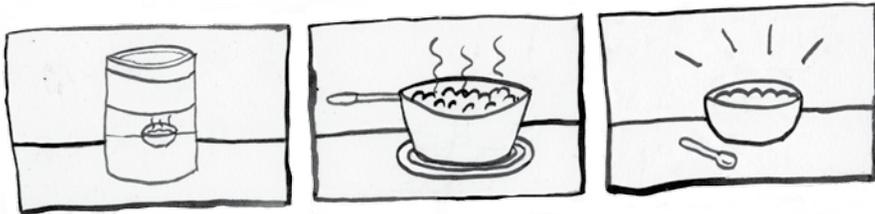


Only then does he remove his glove and hang it on its hook.



THEN, DINNERTIME.

On dose nights, Eye needs something soft and simple: oatmeal, how 'bout? Slave cooks it on the stove, lets it cool. The milk and brown sugar form a gum, just as Eye likes it. Slave spoons it into a broad, shallow dish, and places it on an ornamental mat on the ground, Eye's place setting.



Then, macramé monkey in hand, he slips off into the bathroom to run Eye's bath while Eye rolls over to the dish and begins to sup. Slave has never been allowed to watch Eye eat; he could not say for sure how it is achieved.

Slave measures out spices and herbs, pours them into the steaming tub once it's reached the correct fullness and temperature. He used to fumble with the knobs to get it right. Not anymore.

The bathroom fills with carefully calibrated steam. Slave, a little surreptitiously like he's stealing, breathes some in.



ON TO THE ALTAR ROOM.



Slave places the macramé monkey, its skin soft with bath steam, on its throne on the high altar, surrounded by Eye's collection of the antique heads of saints, martyrs, and heroes.



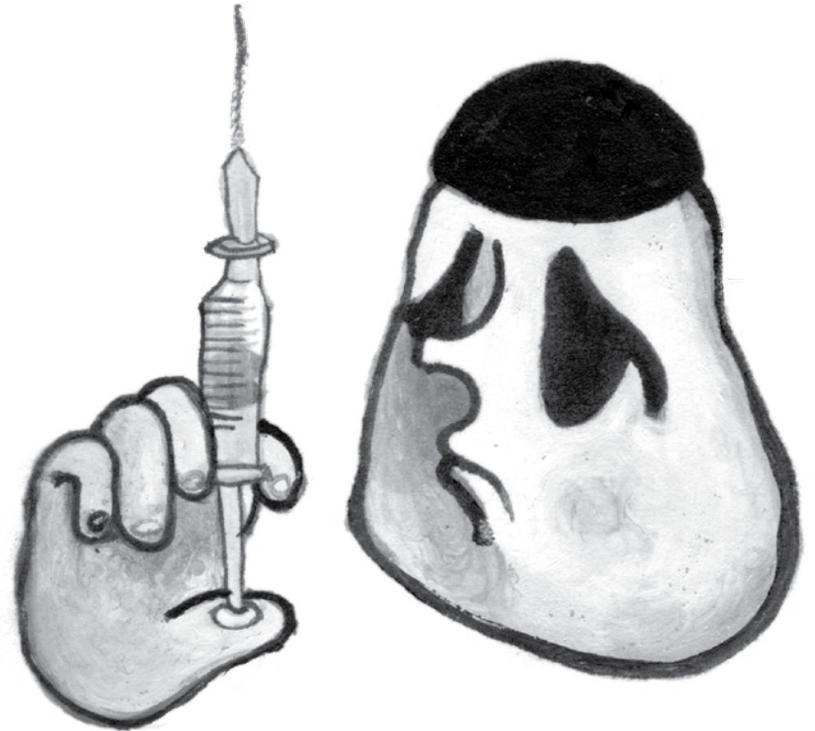
This time, the dose – 30 white pills – is secreted all in a row in the monkey's intestines, like it smuggled them of its own accord across a border.



Opening the toolkit that contains scalpel, torch, needle, and gauze, Slave removes a pair of forceps and teases the intestines empty.



Humming quietly enough to not be heard but loudly enough to hear himself, Slave removes the pills one by one and encases all but two in a jar. He caps the jar with the monkey's head, so as to remember which animal the pills came from (the room is full of empty jars capped with the heads of snakes, badgers, toucans, &c).



THE STANDARD PREPARATIONS ... crush, wet, burn, stir, wait, burn, stir, wait.

When the dose has been successfully introduced into its syringe and the stepladder dragged into position, Slave fetches Eye from the kitchen.

EYE ON THE STEPLADDER, veins pronounced.

Slave down below, steadying the syringe
with his full bodyweight.

Eye quivers, goes first
narrow then wide.

THEN FLIES, downward,
pupil-first onto the needle.

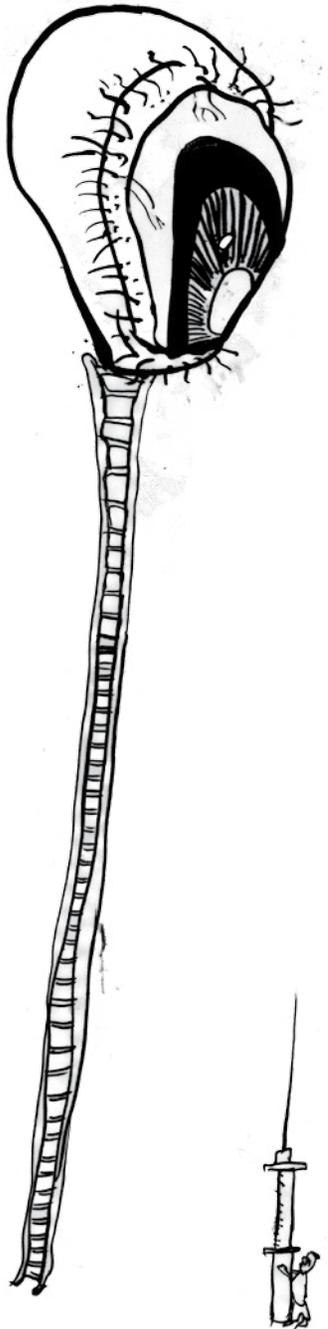
Slave holds it fast like a tree
that's broken and wants to fall.
He looks away from the point of impact.

Eye slides down almost to the
hilt, his lashes touching Slave's wrist.

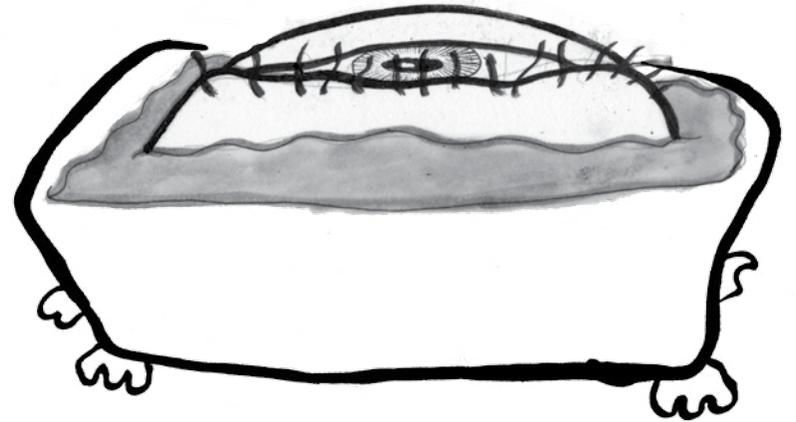
The Night Sugar is released; Eye's four
nerves triple in size and turn bright red.

Celestial and prehistoric images –
Pegasus, Pterodactyl, runes and maps of
sunken cities and non-material planets –
play across Eye's whites like visions
in a crystal ball.

FIVE SOLID MINUTES.



Gingerly, Slave eases stuporous Eye off the needle, out of the
room, and into the bath. Eye dribbles down until only his lids
peep above the water. Slave exits, leaving Eye to soak in that fra-
grant steam until morning.

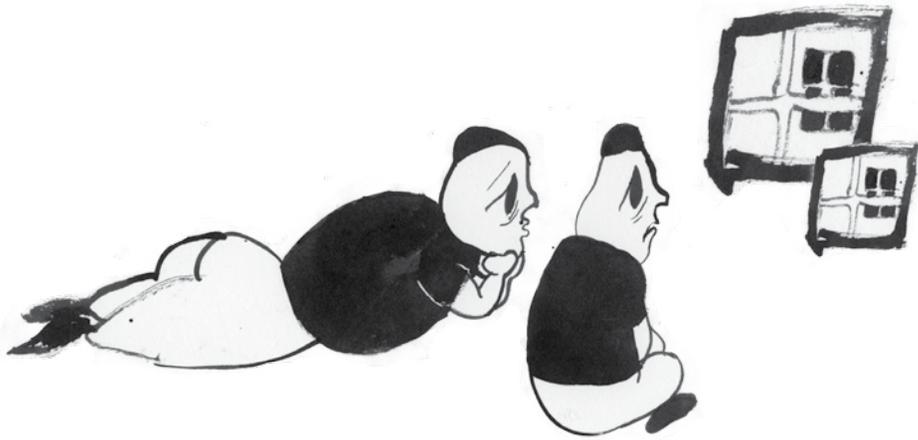


SLAVE HAS THE REST OF THE EVENING TO HIMSELF.

He cleans the oatmeal dish, then takes out Eye's debit card from a drawer by the sink and orders Giant Chinese.

"Thirty to forty minutes," he's told.

The first twenty he spends aimlessly and all at once.



The next twenty he spends lying on his bed upstairs, looking out his window at the window of his parents' house, formerly his window, his house.

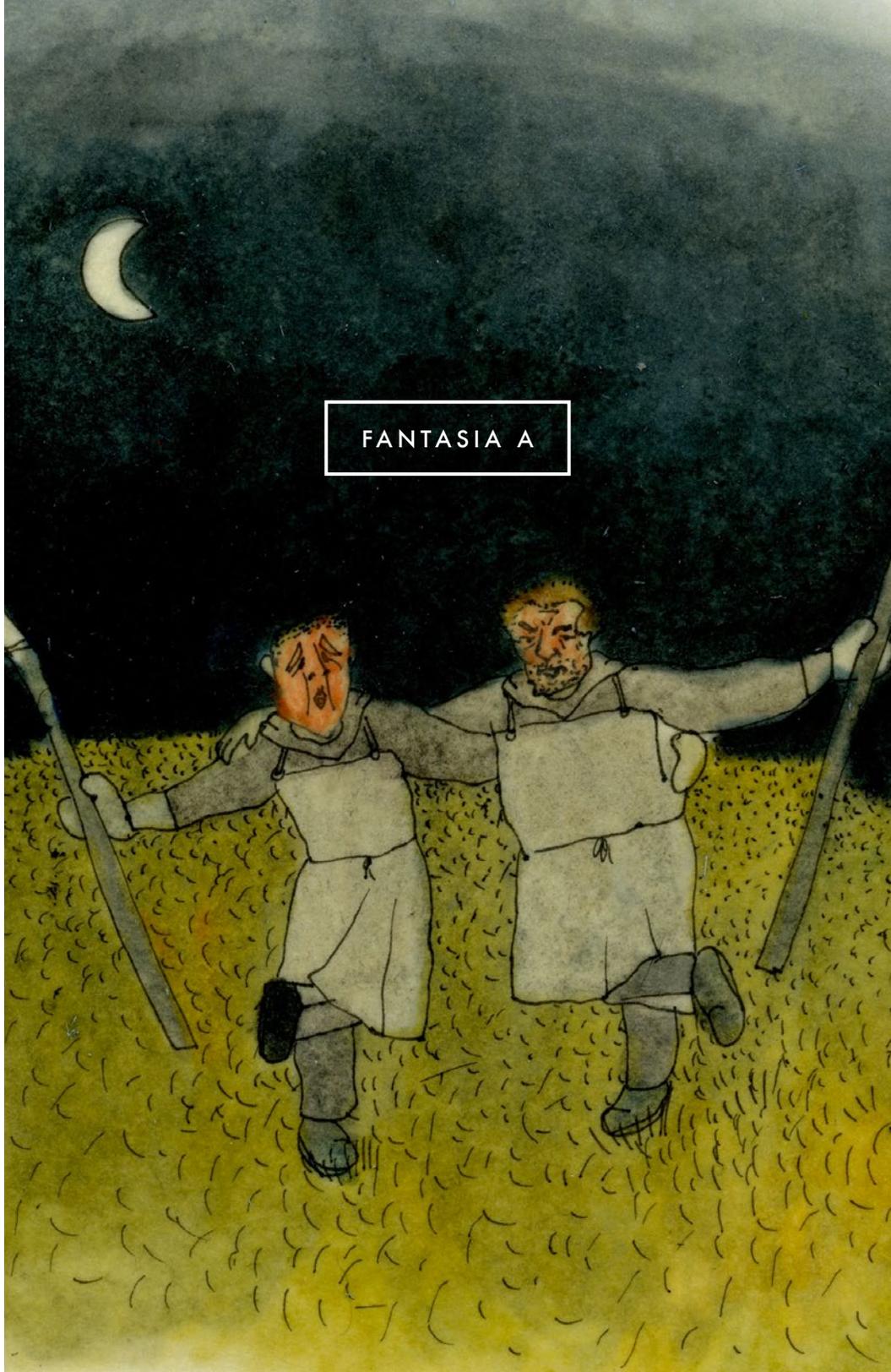
Now, the Infanta, adopted from medieval Spain, dozes behind it, wrapped in silk and linen on his old bed. The room is decked out in candles and curtains, platters of almonds and oranges.

Her face is inclined toward him, but so glassy he cannot be sure whether she sees him as he sees her.



When the doorbell rings, he is startled, almost frightened. He only remembers about the food he ordered when he sees it out-held toward him like a peace offering in the doorway.



An illustration of two men in a field at night. The sky is dark with a crescent moon in the upper left. The ground is yellow and textured with small, curved lines. The two men are wearing simple, light-colored clothing and are holding long, thin objects, possibly sticks or tools, which they are using to support each other. The man on the left has a distressed expression, while the man on the right looks more determined.

FANTASIA A

FANTASIA A

Simple Night, collective dreamtime: happenings witnessed by none yet dimly perceived by all.

Closing Time. **Ultra Max**[®], though avowedly open 24/7, steals a few hours for itself.

Those inebriates left huddled inside are wrapped up in the space closing in, crushed in its bosom, all the air rushing out, hardly noticing. Either it cannot touch them, or they are used to it by now.

Just before the doors are locked and the lights killed, the two Butchers extract their flensing knives, fully charged, from their outlets, give them a test-whir, and zip their white plastic suits.

Out the Service Exit, quickly past Culvert City, into the Fields. Two jolly rippers on the loose, singing old Irish drinking songs.

First Field: Cows.

Both Butchers switch their flensing knives on. A great whirring crops up.

One Butcher holds his vibrating blade in one hand, squeezing it tightly enough that its muffled buzzing and whirring carries a tune. It becomes an instrument, at once enchanting and soundtracking the scene.

The other sets to work on the Cows, lying on their bellies with their heads raised to learn, through the dark, what's afoot. Wielding the

flensing knife high yet expertly above his head, he cuts into the first Cow's throat, then down its back, splitting its spine like a narrow log.

Rather than blood, what's copious is feathers.

As the one Butcher continues to play his spell-casting song, the other carves the Cow, shrub-like, into a number of Roosters.

After removing each hunk of mammal flesh, he switches the knife to a gentler setting and shapes it into poultry, coaxing it back to life.

Both Butchers jump for joy when the Field is complete, Roosters swarming their shins.

As the one Butcher continues to play his spell-casting song, the other carves the Cow, shrub-like, into a number of Roosters.

He then switches the knife to a gentler setting and shapes it into poultry, coaxing it back to life.

Both Butchers jump for joy when the Field is complete, Roosters swarming their shins.

They move on, the hours before sunup extending long and luxurious before them. More than once, they stop to snack on the candy they've tucked into the zippered pockets of their plastic suits.

The subsequent conversion factors, one Field at a time:

Pigs - Lizards

Goats - Children

Horses - Carp

There is no net loss of life.

In the morning, the Butchers are back behind their counter at **Ultra Max**[®], open again in full denial of having ever been closed.

The farmers take to their Fields and survey the changes wrought. They have long since become accustomed to the fallout from these periodic waves of change, neither questioning nor seeking to explain their nature beyond the acceptance that every profession has its occupational hazards.

They tend, as best they can with the tools they have, to their new flocks, with the understanding that, so long as one continues to live, one must continue to work.

EPISODE FOUR:

BEDTIME IN EYE'S HOUSE, BELLY OF NIGHT

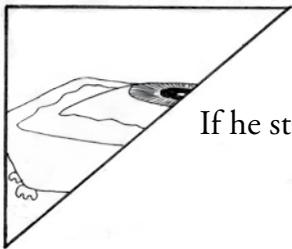
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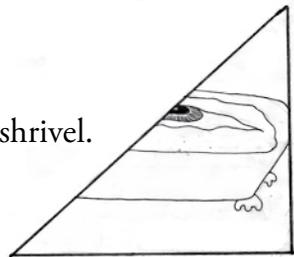
EPISODE FOUR:

BEDTIME IN EYE'S HOUSE, BELLY OF NIGHT

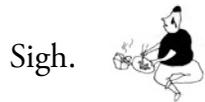
EYE'S BATHTIME IS OVER.



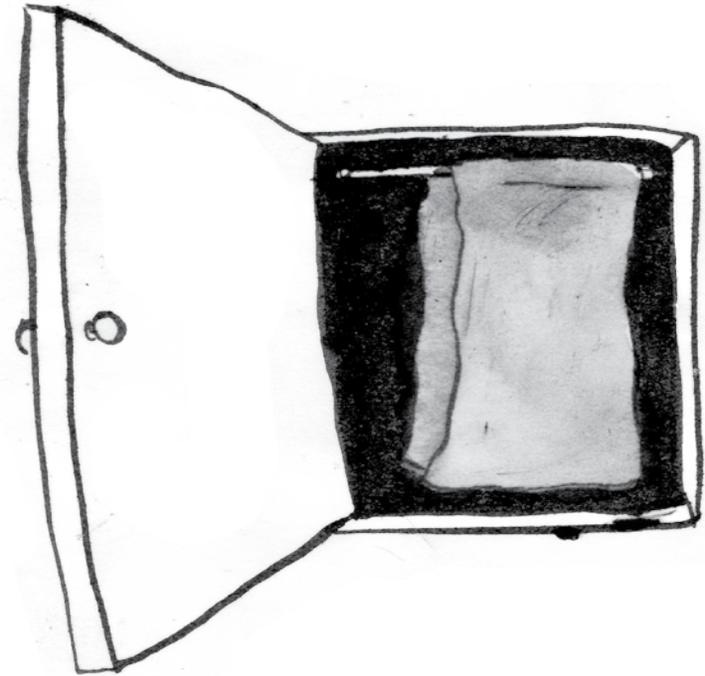
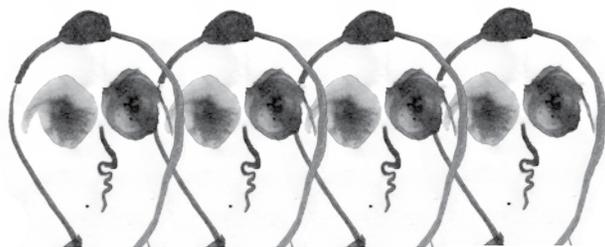
If he stays in too long, he'll shrivel.



Slave doesn't watch or listen to the time tick down; only knows when it's gone.



My time has come, he indulges in thinking. He puts his Giant Chinese aside, part-finished, sauces and greases eager to commingle on their paper plate, and goes to fetch the Towel.



The towel so huge it takes up a linen closet of its own. There's another, much-smaller linen closet down the hall, home to everything else.

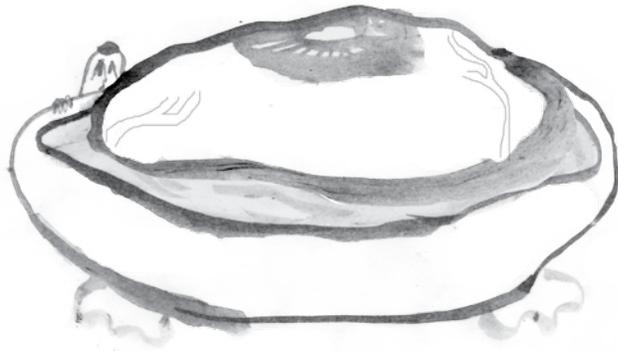
It smells of lime and cherry, washed after each usage in its own soap and washer.

There Eye is, engorged with bathwater, slimy with methadone sweat, not yet fully lost to visions but beginning to show some activity, nerves pulsing and painting the white under the lid like the first stirrings in a crystal ball.

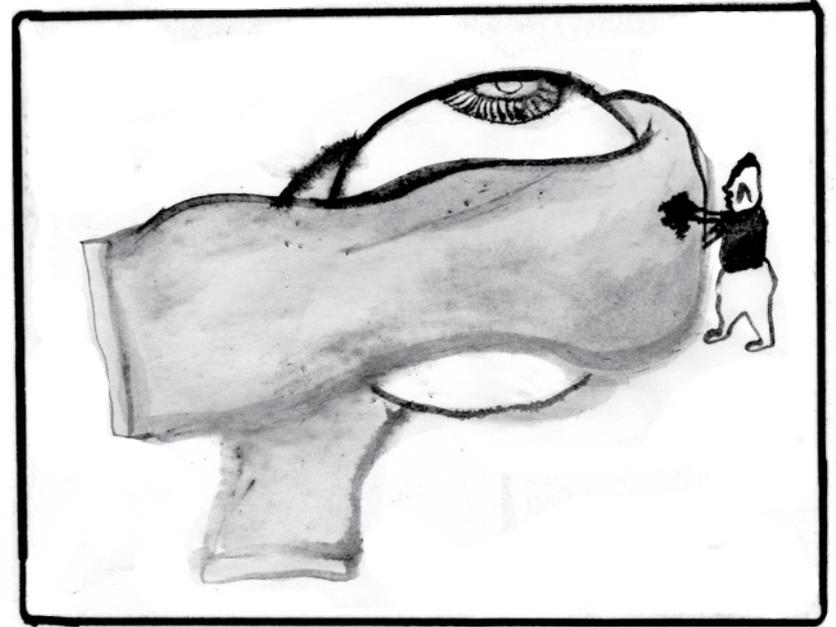
The water is no longer steaming; the jets are off. Eye has settled down low and absorbed more than half of what water there was.

Slave knocks on the steam-soft door of the bathroom, the gesture purely pro forma, no question that Eye is too far-gone to respond.

As there's no objection, Slave enters, wiping door pulp off his knuckles.

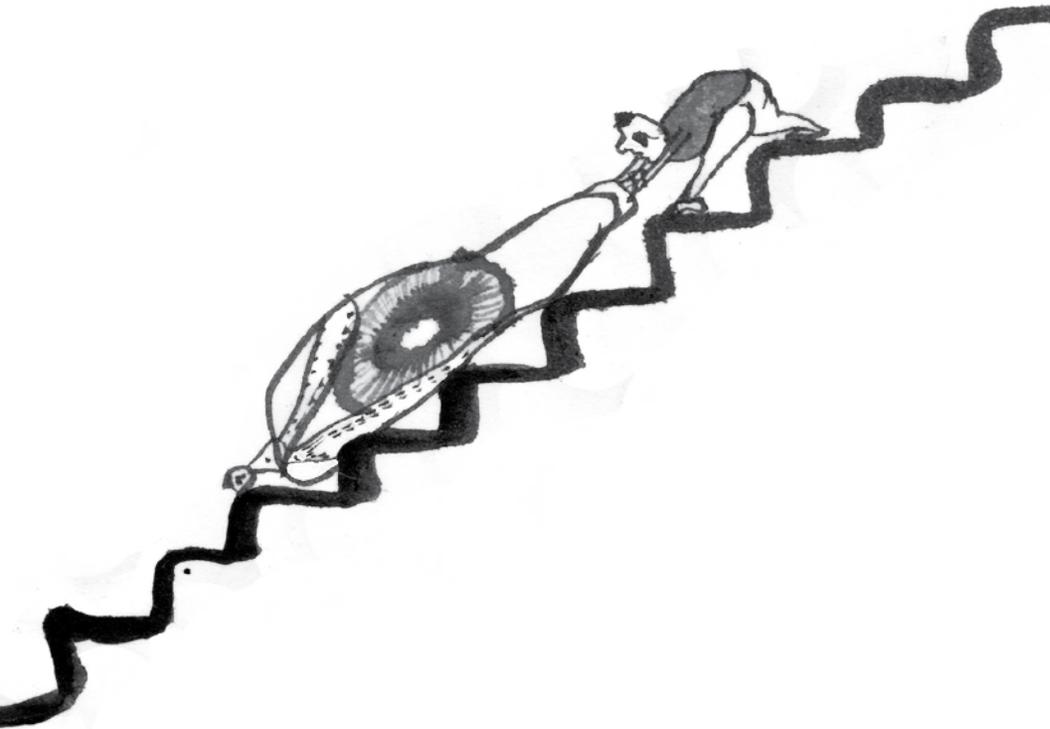


IN ONE FELL SWOOP, SLAVE PULLS the plug and whirls the Towel over Eye where he rests. The water gurgles down and away.



A few eyelashes, which Slave will have to tweeze out in the morning.

Wrapped in the Towel, Slave straps Eye into his harness of metal, wood, and leather, which hangs behind the door. He straps him in tightly so he can be dragged up the stairs with a minimum of injury to both dragger and dragged.



The bottom of the harness is a single wheel, like the front of a wheelbarrow, which Slave can by now maneuver up the stairs and into Eye's sleep chamber without pausing for breath or backing up to straighten course.

THEY'RE IN EYE'S SLEEP CHAMBER NOW.

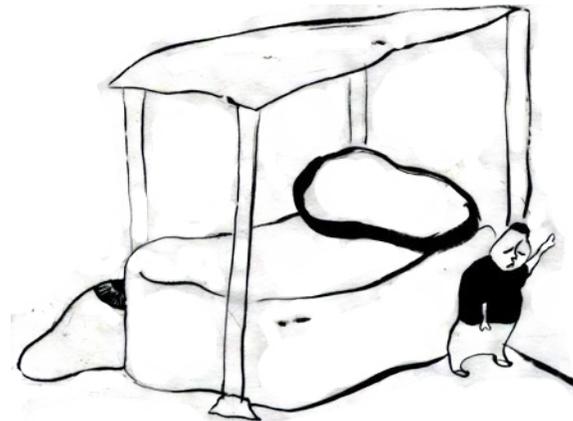
Leaving Eye in the harness, Slave slathers the incredibly lavish, kingly bed with a fresh coat of grease – semi-solid, aromatic, not unlike Vick's – which Eye finds soothing to lie in, especially on Dose Nights.

This accomplished, Slave takes a break, wondering if he's been too hard on himself to end up this tired or too easy on himself to take a break at all, and then hoists Eye out of the harness and into the bed.

Eye sinks into the cooling grease with a satisfying, slow breath out.

Slave hangs the harness on the back of Eye's bedroom door, on a hook deliberately identical to the one in the bathroom downstairs, as if some attempt had been made to convince the harness that it truly lived in one spot and not two.

He fans Eye's Snacking Chocolates out in a gold-leaf bowl by the bedside and tiptoes away, tossing the Towel down a long, dark chute.



1/10

SLAVE IS AGAIN FREE TO WANDER,
THIS TIME FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT.



He returns to what's left of his Giant Chinese, a grimmer prospect now than when it was fresh, but satisfying still.

He takes it down to the den, which Eye calls "Your Playroom."
The den features



a TV set,



a VCR,



and a box of videos.

There are no computers in Eye's household. Even the phones pre-date the Millennium.

Munching fried crab, Slave rummages through the video boxes until he finds the Italian one he's been trying to watch all the way through for a while now.

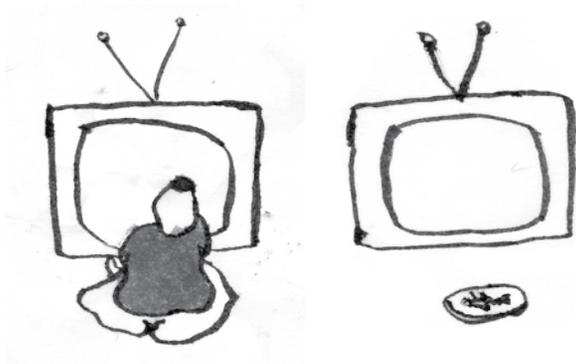
He hides the fried crab under some docudramas he has no interest in.

There's a legend afoot – Slave feels like someone has told him this, but he must have thought of it on his own since he has no contact with anyone except Eye, unless it was Rib who told him – that there's legitimate nudity, "full frontal and some of the back," to be had in this film, if one could only sit through enough exposition to get there.

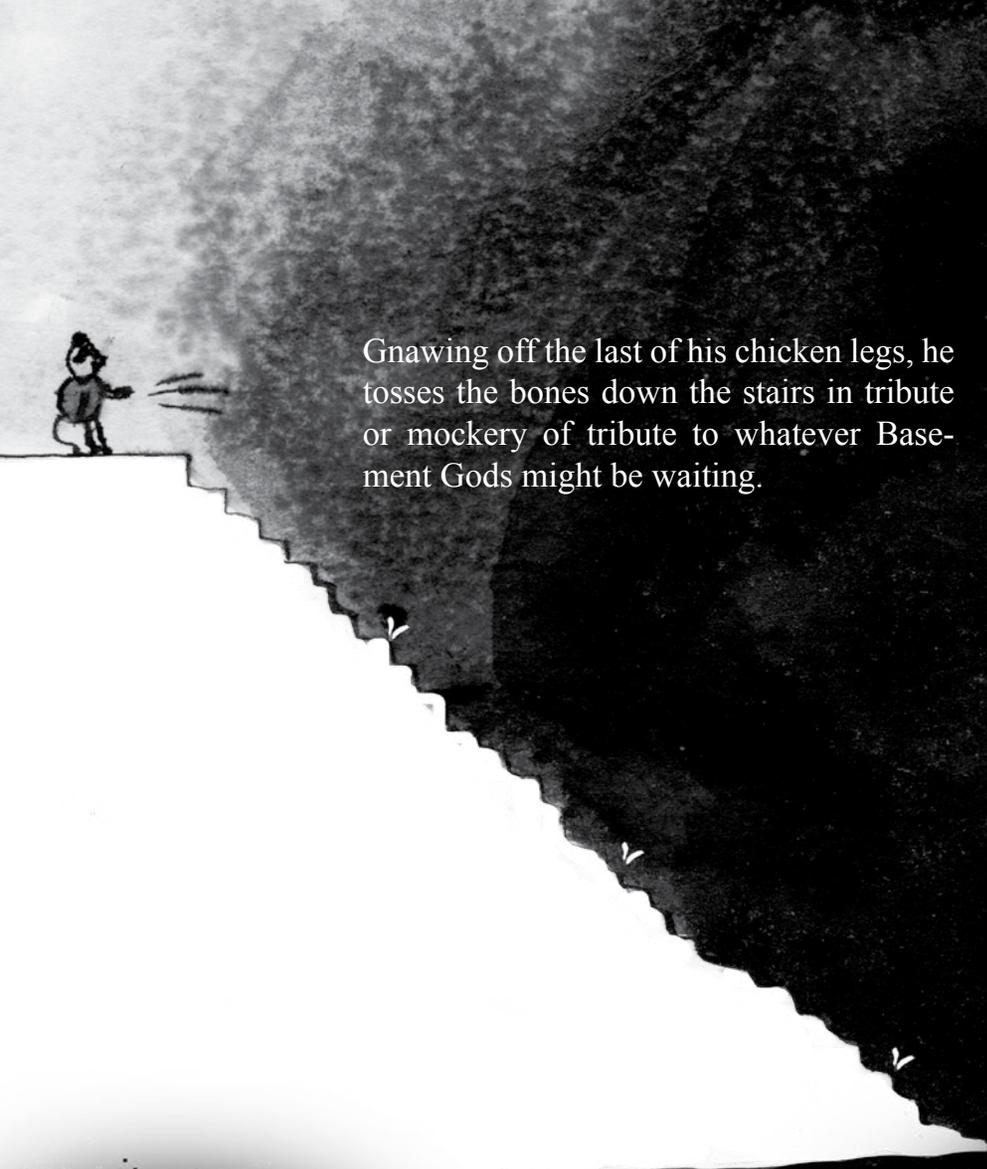
HE'S NOT THINKING IN TERMS OF PUNISHING HIMSELF FOR THIS INATTENTION, but he heads toward the Basement as if it were his last remaining move.

Slave approaches the Basement door, fumbling along the wall for a light switch, coating it in grease without turning it on.

He turns the handle, and then there is light: a glow from beneath, like the glow of insects or embers or cove phenomena.

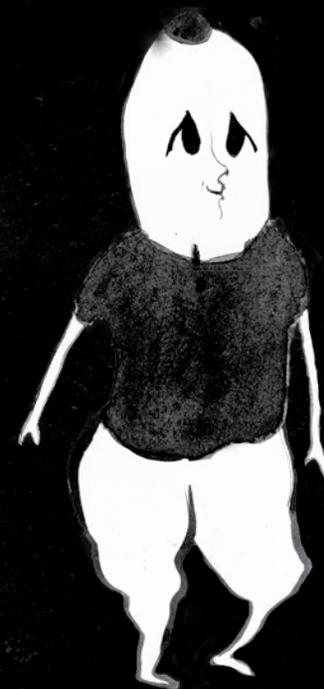


He thinks he'd very much like to get there, but, a minute and a half in, the opening titles not even over and everything grainy and black and white and filled with motorcycles and cement and sunglasses, he's on his feet again roaming with a drumstick in each hand and his paper plate left behind, sinking into the carpet, bathed in TV light like an extra sauce.



Gnawing off the last of his chicken legs, he tosses the bones down the stairs in tribute or mockery of tribute to whatever Basement Gods might be waiting.

He hears those bones clatter once, hitting a few stairs down, then bounce off and away. He doesn't hear them come to rest.



FULLY IN THE BASEMENT NOW, Slave is full of confidence, trudging along in a familiar fantasyland.

The glow is still far in the distance, declining to lighten the foreground, but he doesn't mind. He is master of this domain, or at least unchallenged in his claim to be.

He kicks around through Eye's shit: boxes and boxes, armoires, vanities, chifferobes, statues and tapestries and rows of hollow suits of armor he's always wanted to hide in but never wanted to have to.

After enough half-levels and antechambers he arrives in Eye's Main Basement, a grand gallery of dust motes, rust shavings, rolled up maps and parchments, First Editions of occult treatises, organs and half-births in jars, shelves of skulls and teeth ... a scene somehow banal in its extraordinary weirdness.

HE DOESN'T LINGER LONG: rattling in the distance, lower yet, comes the bark of what he calls My Dog.

Foolishly, he'll later realize, as he realizes later every time, he chases after it.

It barks. He shouts,



"Here I come!"

He believes it is trapped, injured even, struggling, wailing to be set free.



"I'm coming for you!"

he shouts, as if by freeing My Dog he might succeed, if only symbolically, in freeing himself as well.



The lower he goes, because of certain echo-chamber properties perhaps, the louder the barking becomes, though it also seems to come from farther away.

And so deeper and deeper down it takes him.



Slave can only go so far down before the Basement becomes the Sub-Basement and everything changes.

In his haste to catch up with those old panicked barks he misses the transition point, barreling through a rotted-out doorway and headlong down a ramp, into a deadfall, landing in cold, shallow water.

Bone-faced fish and frogs encircle him, groaning, croaking, unrolling long grey tongues to see what Tonight has brought.

No statuary or suits of armor here: it's rocks, rubble, webs.

The skeletons of rustic beasts rot in piles and blind bat-like birds roost in the (nearby) roofing.



Slave feels the edges of the scene pressing inward upon him, closing his chest, filling his throat with gas that can't get out.

Dizzymaking gas.

He heaves out of the water, crawls ashore.

All thought of My Dog is forgotten, made childish.

A chattering behind the walls, partial words, ratspeak, cannibal consonants.

A grim vantage lower still, deeper than the water-level, into the Cave, where ...

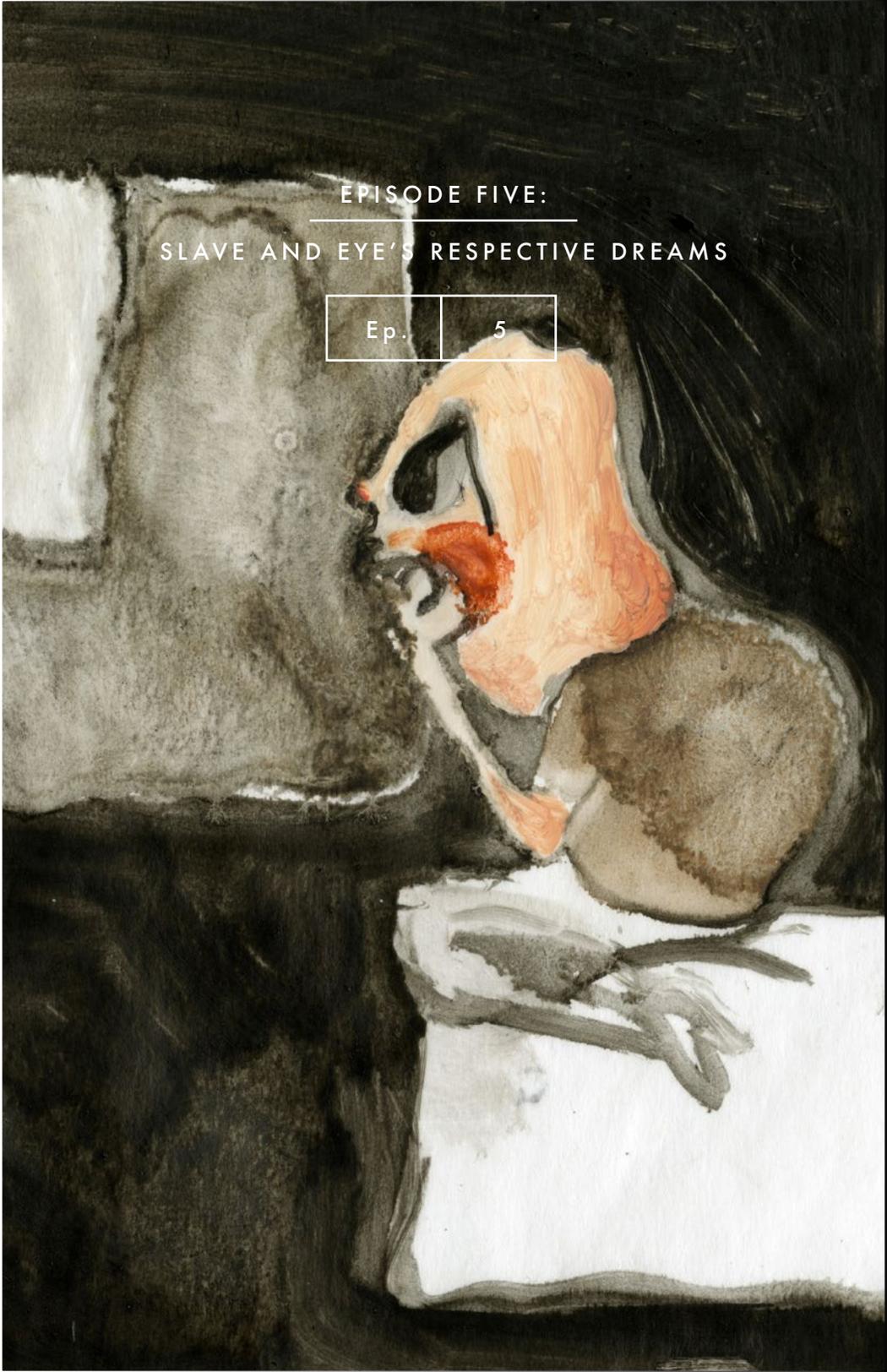
If only there were an elevator straight upstairs and into my bed, thinks Slave, desperate, begging.

Instead, like the next best thing, he passes out from fear where he crouches and lands all warm and happy in Tonight's Dream.



EPISODE FIVE:
SLAVE AND EYE'S RESPECTIVE DREAMS

Ep.	5
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EPISODE FIVE:

SLAVE'S AND EYE'S RESPECTIVE DREAMS



No sooner has Slave passed out in the Basement than he finds himself in a new house, in a living room at an upscale table.

Not actually a new house, but definitely another one. The one that Slave always goes to at times like this, his home away from home.

He's there with the Infanta and there are no doors. Not a problem for finding their way in (they both got here easily enough, as many nights they do), so the problem, as these things go, will be finding a way out.

Slave and the Infanta are seated at the dining room table, wearing their finest.

Dinner is served: multi-course, extravagant, full of delicacies neither can name nor even clearly picture.

And wine. 

They take their time eating and drinking, side-by-side, and eat a lot, feeding themselves and each other. In the background crackles a healthy fire, and there are animal trophies on the walls, shelves full of books, globes.

A wooly blanket stretches over their laps and knees, as if the fire weren't heat enough.

The table is reduced to scraps, the bones of complex shellfish and game fowl.

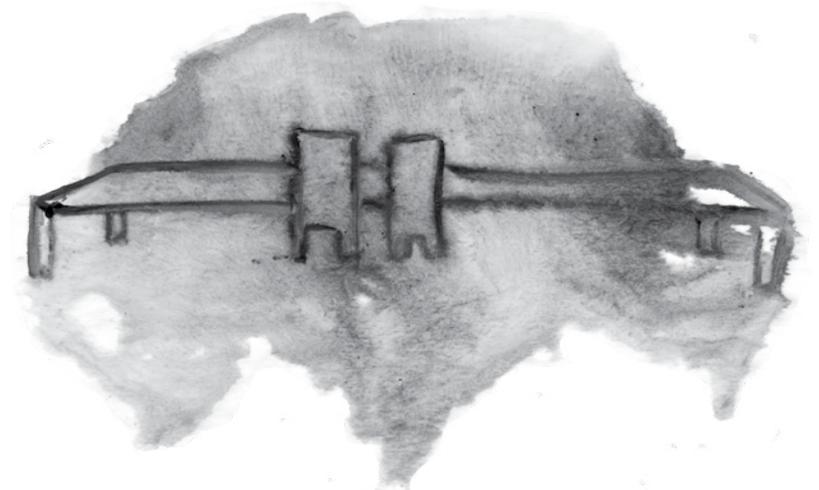


Digestion begins.

A low grumble from the walls and wainscoting, at first no more than house noises.

They huddle close, trying to shoo away the awareness that something is wrong.

But they can't, and, because they've been through this before, they know what it is:



It's the house doing the digestion, not Slave and the Infanta, though they're the ones who got to eat.

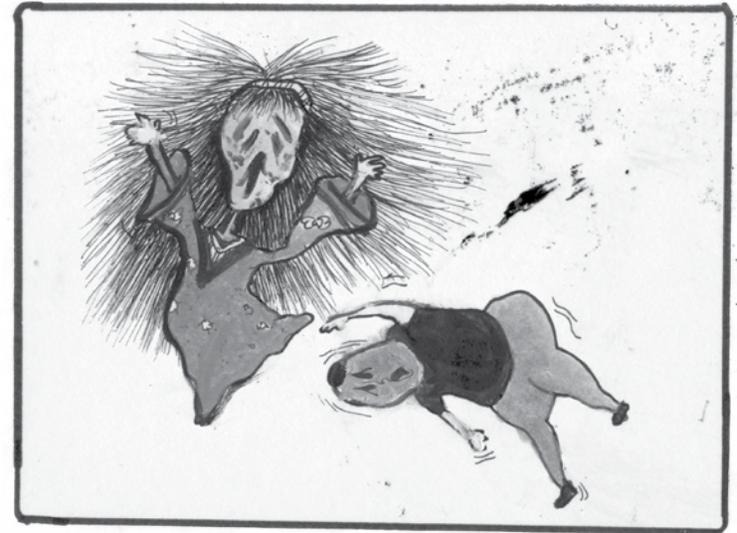
But now they're the matter being digested. The house will soak them in acid and try to boil them down to a pulp.

They grab one another,
overturning the table, throwing off
the blanket and the semblance of settled life,
and begin to make wild escape gestures. They grab
at air, trying to swim-fly up and through the ceiling, but,
though this works in most dreams, it does nothing here.

The room is now so hot the walls are warping and
bowing in, almost touching overhead like curtains.

A smell of stomach-work gusts out of the sagging fireplace,
the sour, angry smell and taste that, when Slave used to get
stomach flus as a toddler, he called Cheerio burps.

The escape plan is the same every time, but, since the
dream is truly a recurring one, they have to reach
the edge of despair and come up with it anew.



So they shriek and flail, feel capsules of adrenaline exploding all
over their bodies, tingly and electrifying and causing their skin
to break out, close to shutting down their brains in last-ditch
resignation.

They fall onto their faces, straight into the carpet, as the room
gets slushy with stomach acid and the wallpaper and sheetrock
give way.

Slave and the Infanta realize, in this instant before death, that the floor is made of skin.

It may be carpet-colored, and beneath that, wood-colored, but it peels up under their fingernails.

They tear and tear, racing each other, starting to enjoy it. Blood and pus spew out around them.

They start to feel like experts, like they're getting the hang of something. Their fingernails grow long, first straight-out and then so long they loop and spiral.

They move on to the walls, peeling out organs and viscera, the whole inner workings of stomach and gut.

The animal heads are reduced to glass eyes and floating horns.

The house groans and heaves, tries to vomit but doubles over instead, acid spewing down on them like a sprinkler system as all up-down-left-right orientation is lost.



It burns off their hair.

Red tissue, blue acid, swirling food particulate, a botchery of intestine and gall: it's like they're inside a carwash, nearly blind, scrabbling by pure feel, trying to keep their mouths closed so they don't swallow too much.

Slave and the Infanta ride this wave up toward the esophagus, letting the imploding system push them out.

THEY LEAP THROUGH HOOPS OF FLAME, ONE AFTER ANOTHER AFTER ANOTHER, UNTIL THEY TOUCH DOWN ON THE STREET.

At dawn.

Here they stand side by side, looking at the burnt bodily mess of that house, sirens cresting the distance.

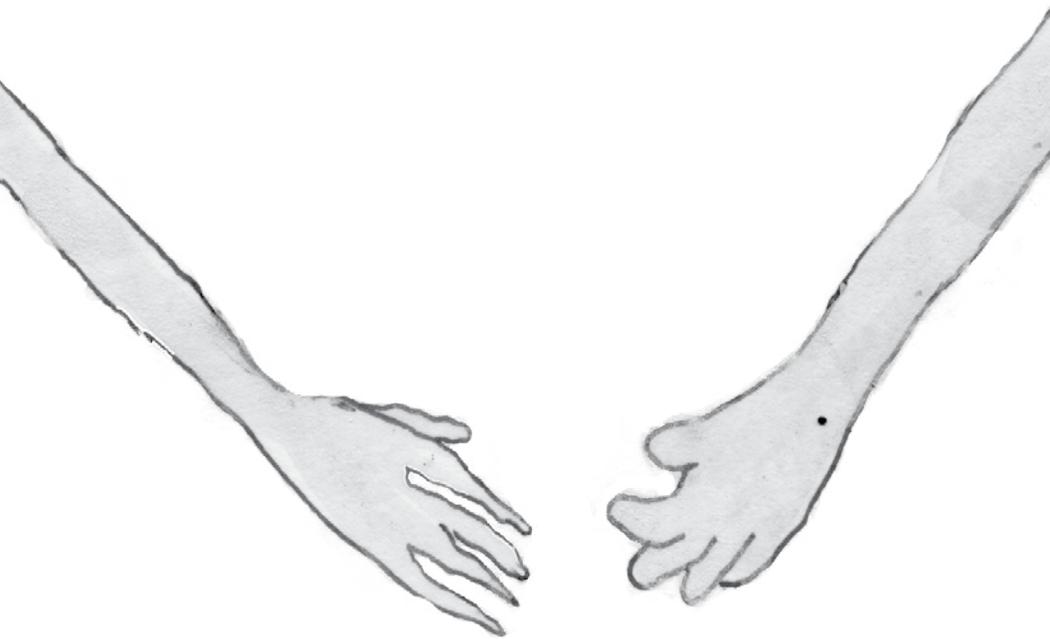
They stand and stare at a shrinking space directly between their two houses –Slave’s parents’ house and Eye’s house.

Soon this middle space will be gone.

They are both bald, their scalps corroded by the acid, so, for a moment, they look the same.

Their hair begins to grow back the longer they stand here thinking, though the Infanta’s is so long it won’t fully return until she’s back inside, resting off the morning in what was once Slave’s boyhood bed.





It's a classic sin dream, perhaps, they think, taking this moment to process before they lose hold of where they've been, the indulgence of the meal equated none too subtly with sex, but the question remains of whether this could've been avoided if they'd simply refrained from eating, since digestion in the house began only after they'd eaten what it had to offer.

If they'd sat in that house in frugal abstention, perhaps they could have grown old together, at least until they wasted away from hunger, like a couple of frontier homesteaders high on temperance and the promise of reward in the next life ...

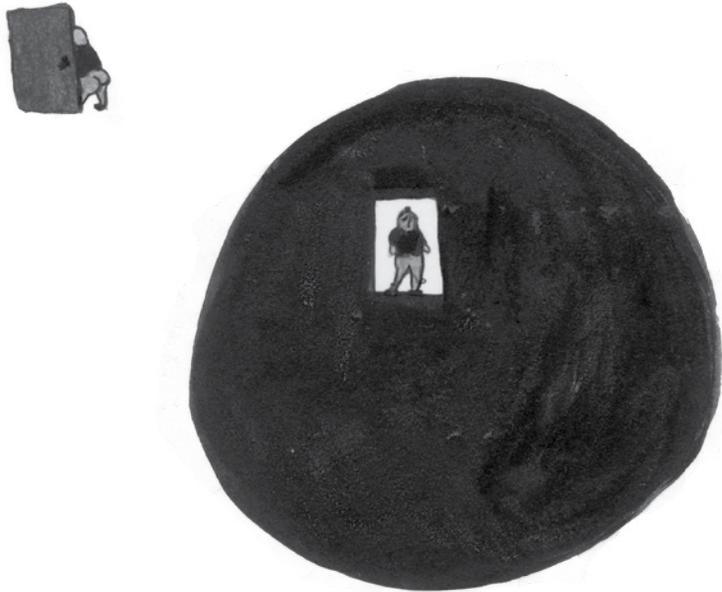
Slave wants to lean in and kiss the Infanta goodbye, say, "I'll see you in there again soon, and next time we'll know better," but, when he turns, she's gone.

He looks up, sees the front door of what used to be his house closing, his parents' car in the driveway.



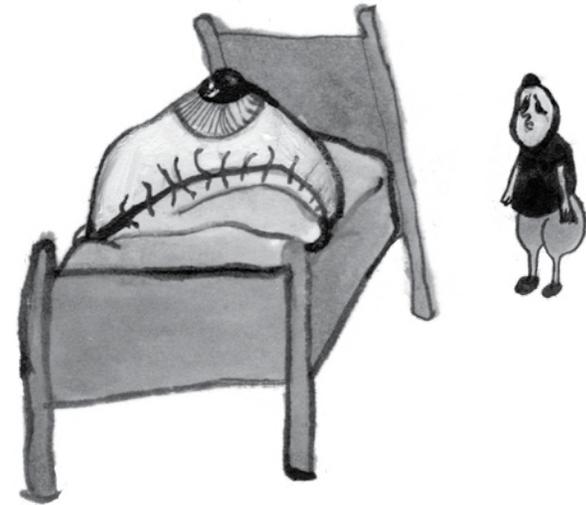
Defeated, exhausted, Slave trudges up the front steps of Eye's house to check on his master, likely as not sweating through with methadone terror by this late point in the night's journey.

Tiptoeing to Eye's door, he hears the pulsing and moaning that means Eye, too, is in the grip of a nightmare.



Some nights Slave tiptoes in and watches it play out in Eye's white, like images in a glassy spherical screen.

He decides that tonight's one of those nights. Eye's nightmares, he's been finding lately, help him purge the stain of his own ... not to mention taking his mind off the Infanta, whom he really might have kissed this time had she still been there when he turned toward her.



Slave presses close to the body of his sleeping master, close enough to smell his dream-sweat.

Eye's lid slams down and then shoots up like a windowshade.

In between slams, Slave catches glimpses of a shadow-realm, a place of steep drops, frigid and stagnant pools, rock- and bone-piles pressed hard against low rock ceilings.

Using a logic he can only call upon in this tender, exhausted state, Slave recognizes Eye's dream as the Cave which begins where the Sub-basement ends.

He's even deeper in than I was, shivers Slave, remembering the darkest point of his dream before the Infanta appeared and the setting changed.

Ragged figures scuttle about, hunched and skinny.

Their jaws are oversized and their lips are chewed-away to reveal jagged, overlapping teeth that boil like mouthfuls of insects.

Half-formed humans, or not quite that, lazily eating one another, no real violence, more a kind of dumb resignation, a hazy line between eater and eaten, like they're taking turns, like it's a game that doesn't have to end.

Cannibals, thinks Slave, aware that it's too easy a term but too tired to think of another and too scared to do without one.

Through the low cannibal groaning and chewing comes a steadier voice, issuing from Eye's pores, an audio component to the dream.

Not distinct enough to parse as words, but clearly a speaking voice, even-keeled and sober.



Knowing he's about to go too far, Slave reaches out and gently rocks Eye in his bath of jelly, tipping him sideways to see more of the dream.

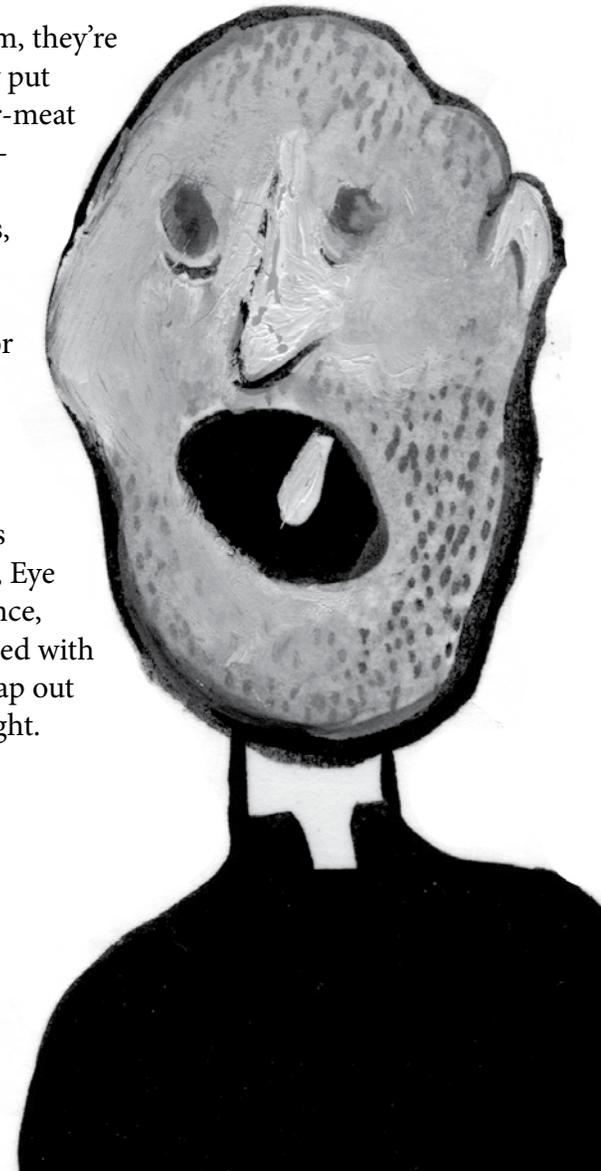
Eye is hot to the touch, feverish. Slave isn't looking forward to the ice bath he'll have to administer in a few hours.

The dream moves, revealing the speaker in the Cave: it's Tarletan the preacher ministering to the cannibals ...

Whatever's he saying to them, they're paying close attention. They put down their hocks of brother-meat and sit cross-legged like pre-schoolers, staring up at Tarletan's mouth as it moves, their eyes as big as it is.

This image is even harder for Slave to bear. Docile cannibals frighten him far more than feasting ones.

A swelling inside him bursts and he bolts from the room, Eye groaning from the disturbance, about to wake up and be faced with a day he'll wish he could swap out immediately for the next night.

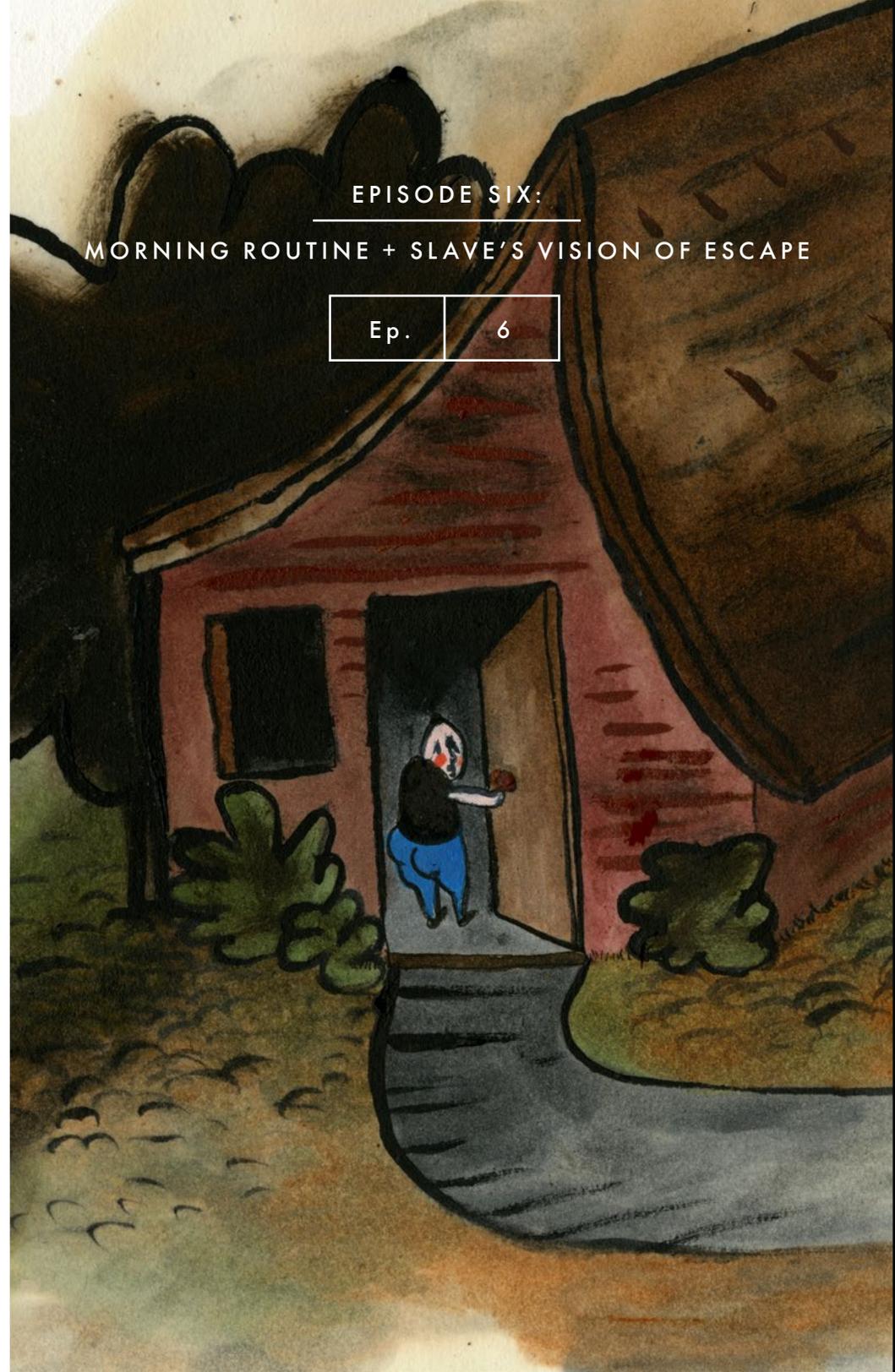


EPISODE SIX:

MORNING ROUTINE + SLAVE'S VISION OF ESCAPE

Ep.

6



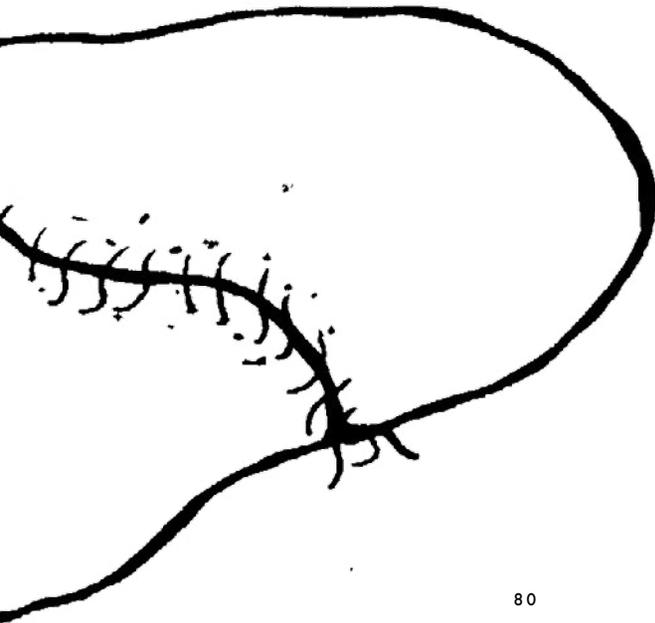
EPISODE SIX:

MORNING ROUTINE + SLAVE'S VISION OF ESCAPE

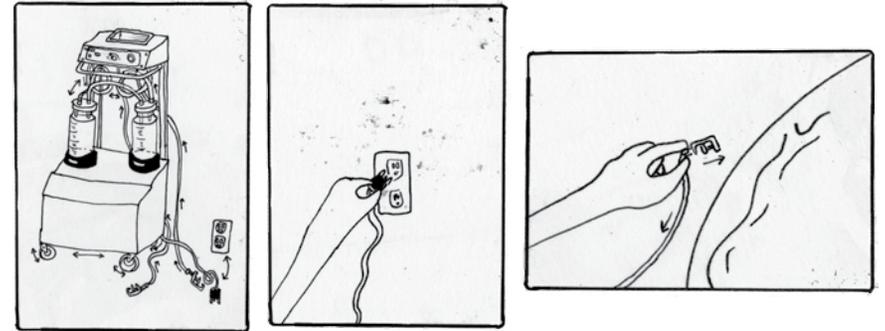
DREAMTIME'S OVER. Last night's dose has gone cold and subtle.

Slave stands over Eye in his big bed, preparing to MILK HIM.

Eye lazes, rolling side to side, hiding from the morning through the window, delighting in how it sings his tender lid.



Slave looks away to yawn. Working by touch like a cadet who can assemble his gun blindfolded, he screws together the pumps and tubes of EYE'S MILKING MACHINE.



He clamps the Machine onto one of Eye's four dream-filled nerves, twisting it tight.

Eye groans in a way that Slave has, with the advent of his own puberty, begun to find indecent; Slave pretends not to hear.

He clips a vial onto the Machine's far end and activates the Pump.

Eye groans again as Dream Milk begins to flow.

THE MORNING RITUAL COMMENCES.

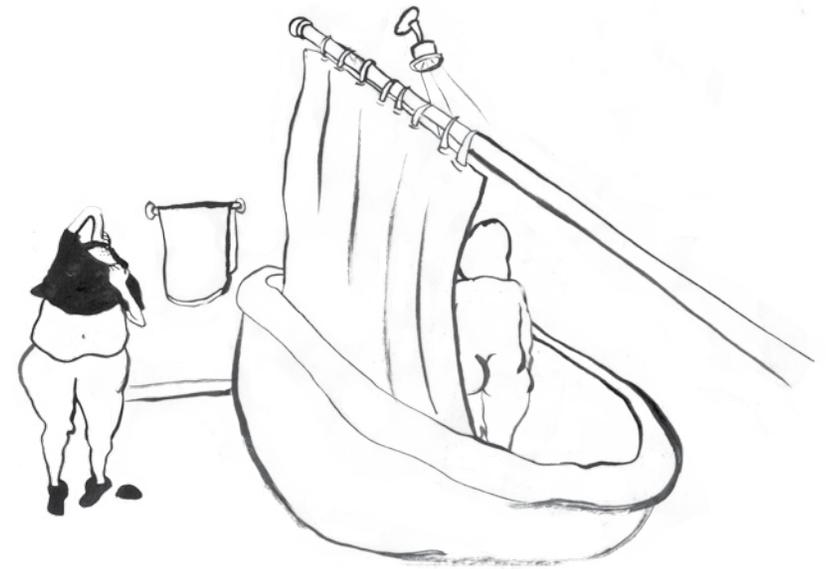
It gets very bright outside; the night has left no smudge.

When the first vial is full, Slave swaps in the next one, clamping the Machine onto the next nerve.

When all four vials are full, Slave takes them down to the freezer, labels them with the night's date and dosage info, and puts them in their place, among all the Milk of Eye's previous dreaming.



A QUICK SHOWER while Eye prepares the Day's Lesson.



Slave stands under the water and regards himself with more curiosity than shame, as if each day the form of his body takes him freshly by surprise. *There is something, he reflects, that I find impossible to remember about me.*

Afterwards, standing before himself in the antique mirror – this step is new – he sneaks a dab of Eye's pricey European Shaving Cream, flush with rosehips and cashews, and spreads it over the three hairs on his upper lip, the four on his chin.

Holding his breath, he slices with Eye's straight razor.

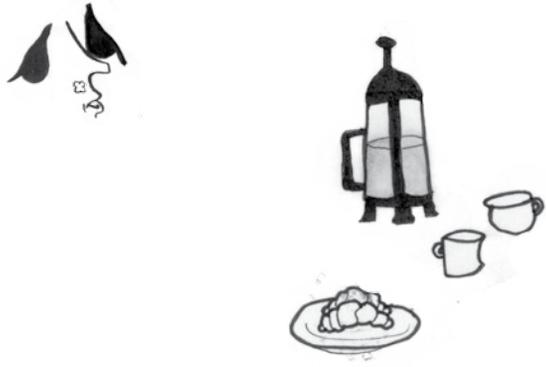


Looking toward its source, Slave is greeted by something unexpected: **THE FRONT DOOR IS OPEN.**

He is reminded of the end of last night's dream, when he came in that way after parting with the Infanta, whom he almost kissed ... not for the first time, he wonders what link there must be between the dream and the state he's in now.

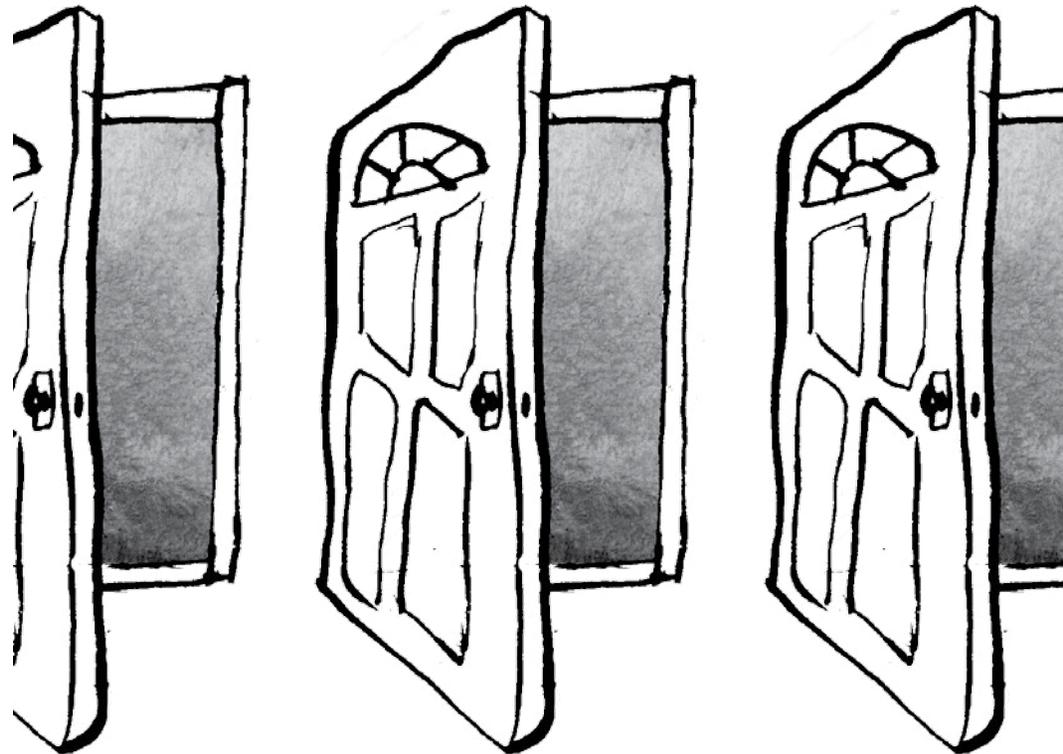
Soon, his only thought is: **THE FRONT DOOR IS OPEN.**

Slave appears before Eye at the downstairs Lesson Table, in his best clothes, a little blood-dizzy, a wad of paper stuck in that place, a few drops already seasoning his collar.



With French Press coffee and croissants set out – Eye provides breakfast on Lesson Days – the Day's Lesson, on conflicting approaches to naming “the God behind God,” begins.

Slave tries to listen, holding his pen above its notepad, but a warm breeze makes a claim on his attention.



As Eye holds forth on superfluous angels and heretical nicknames
Slave begins to imagine leaving.



Thus the Vision of Escape becomes tainted and Slave feels confused
and desperate, grasping at straws, uncertain what to make of his life
now that he's struck out on his own.

He's on some road far from the one he started on, in some place he
cannot navigate because he can barely imagine it.



There's a soaring elation, a surge of unlimited power. He imagines
himself whooshing across profound distances, taking great cities
by storm.

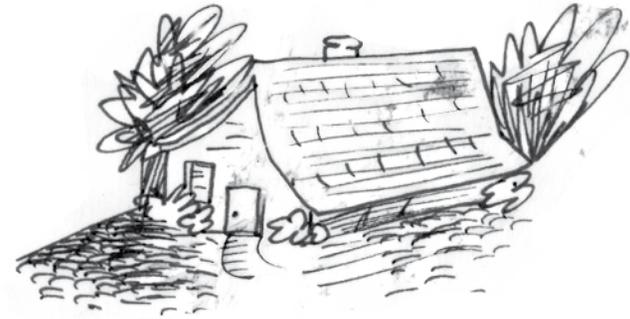
BUT, as on times before, his vision here grows hazy. It's as though
the haze forms the natural border of how far out he can go, a
storm marking the edges of his purview, blotting out all progress
a minute into his imaginings.

There's loneliness,
homesickness. And hunger,
exhaustion, filth. How he longs for a shower.



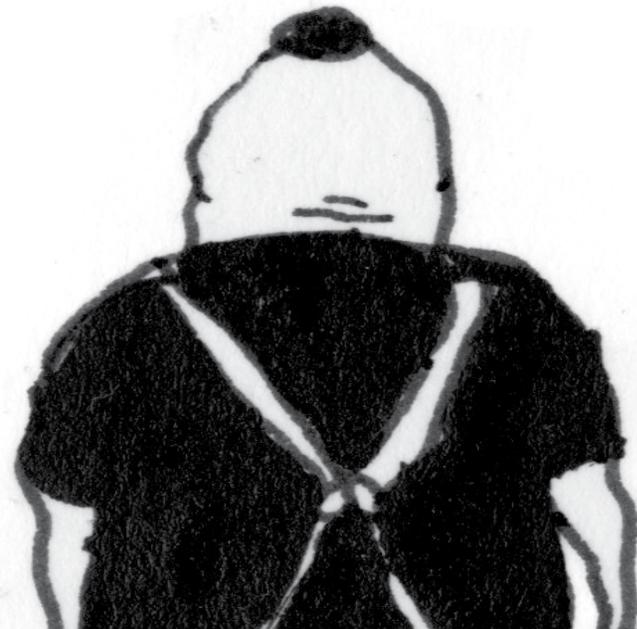
The vision becomes nothing but haze, and then the haze breaks and he's back on the street outside Eye's house, and that of his parents, next door.

BUT he's now become a very, very old man, stooped over in loose suspenders and a sweat-stained shirt he can't afford to replace or even launder, leaning on a cane, shuffling through the dust, coughing into a handkerchief.

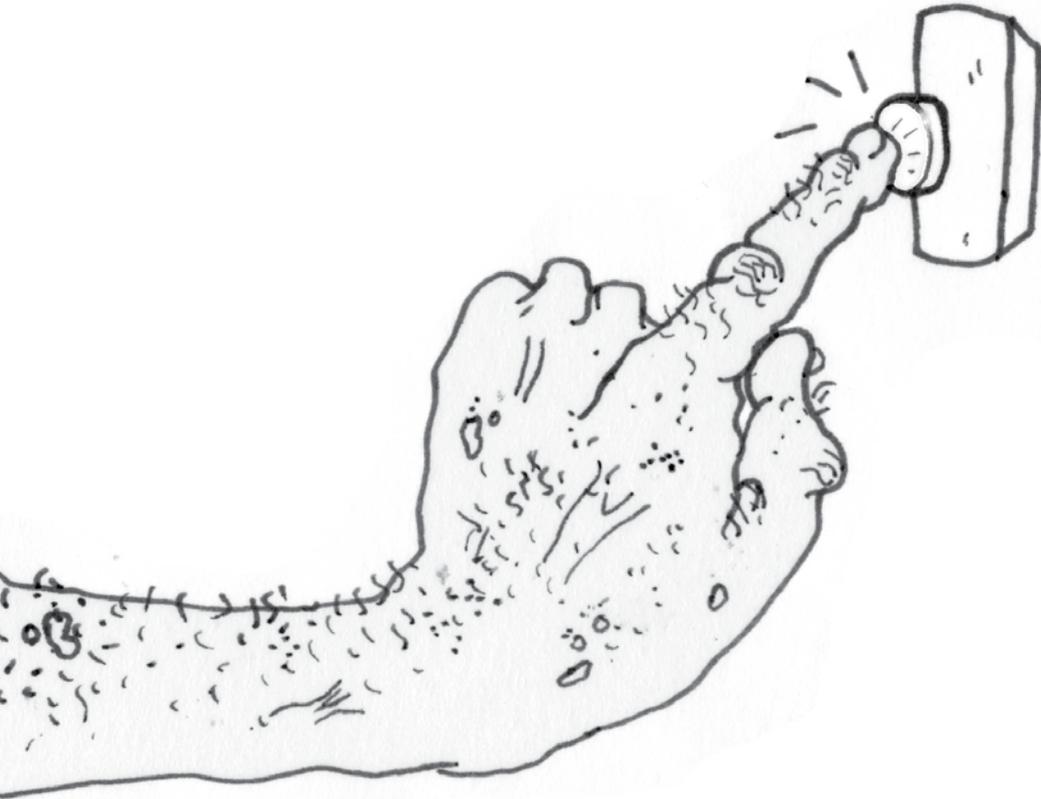


He's spent his life, it seems, wandering in circles, and has at last made it back where he started.

He approaches Eye's house as a traveling salesman, a battered knapsack hanging heavily from his shoulders, scanning the yard for dogs.



HE WAITS and WAITS, his life dwindling toward its end.



He leans his cane against the front door and, with a twisted, leathery finger, rings the bell.

Behind the boy he sees Eye, sitting at the kitchen table with his Lesson Books out.

Eye, too, is heartbreakingly old – his nerves are gray and droop like busted elastic, his lashes have fallen out, his once-vivid white is now so clouded he looks blind.

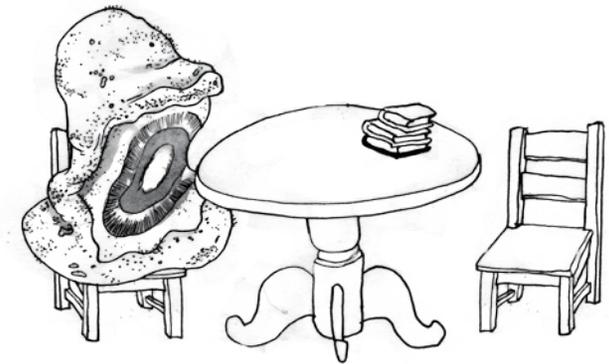


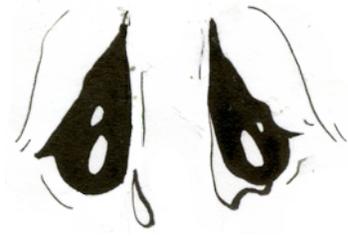
At last, the door opens and he is greeted by a young boy, healthy and cheerful.

“Yes?” the boy asks.

Old-Slave is struck by the resemblance, but he cannot be sure. Is that me? he asks himself. Or just another like me?

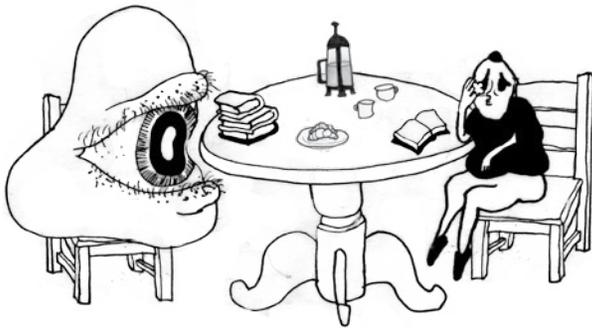
Am I really that replaceable?





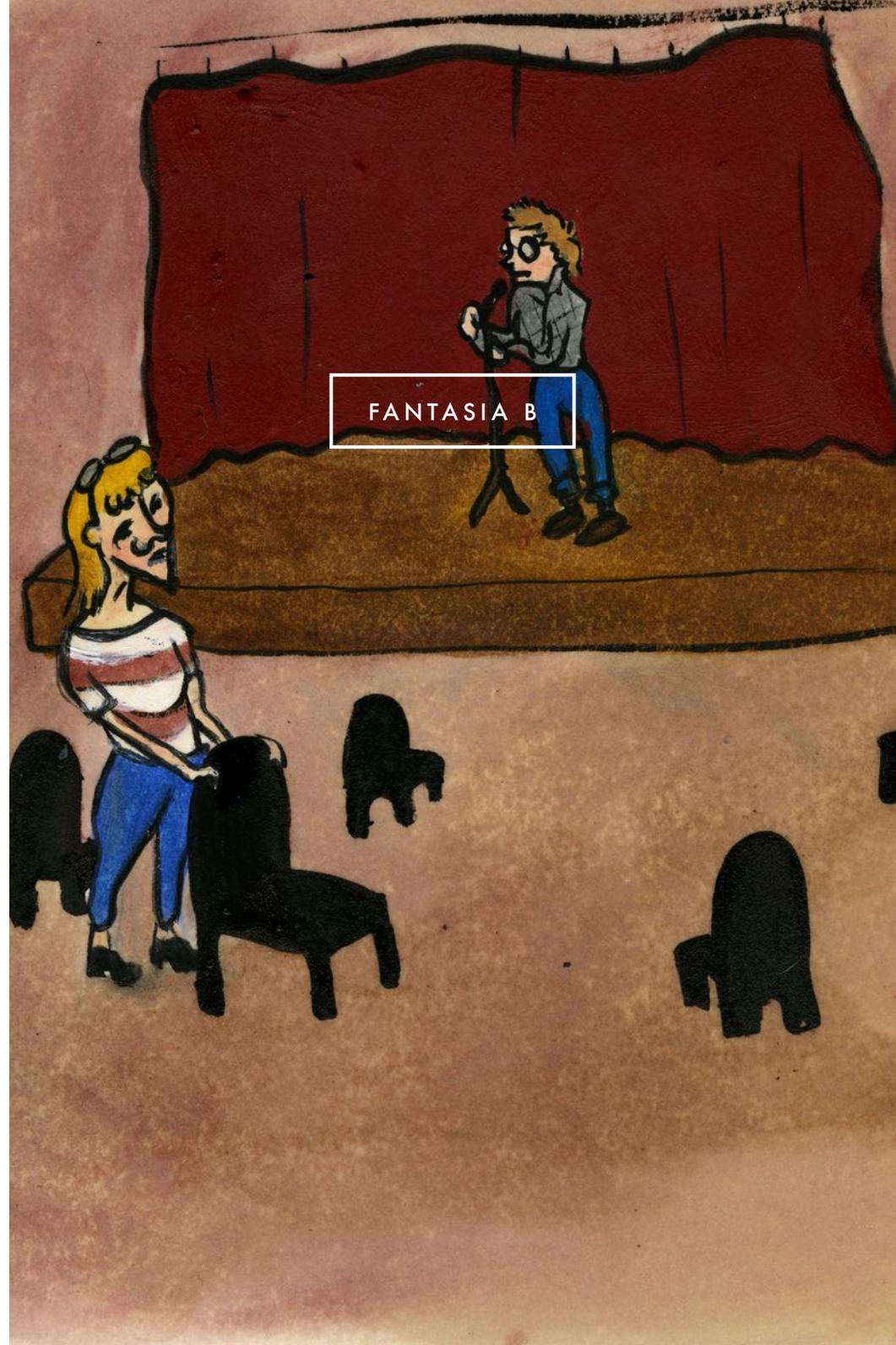
Old-Slave begins to cry at the sight of it, dropping his knapsack there on the doorstep.

AS THE TEARS FLOW, he's made young again, as is Eye, the two of them returned to the kitchen table where they sit, Lesson Books out, coffee growing cold.



“Excuse me,” whimpers Slave, peeling the paper from his bloody lip and dabbing his eyes with it.

He leaves the table and closes the front door, locks it, then returns, ready for the rest of the day to begin.



FANTASIA B

David Eidboff's commitment to serial killing, compared to that of his predecessors, is less than ironclad, prone to lulls and dispersions of intent. Nevertheless, over the years, he's managed to consume a fair number of people from around town. Enough, indeed, to have diminished its population notably and turned its recent history into something it would not otherwise have been.

He's moody about a lot of things, and often unavailable for comment as he serves his life sentence in the town's private (or at least usually uninhabited except for him) prison, and sometimes seems far enough from murderousness that public opinion starts to question whether he is fully the man he's considered to be, but the one thing he doesn't leave hanging or take lightly is his stage show.

He's always been very outspoken about his duty to entertain his victims' families, and takes himself as a performer more seriously than anyone else in town takes anything. It's been said by some that he also uses his performance-reprieves from prison to scan the audience for new victims (he's fond of eliminating certain links in extended families, according to a pattern known only to him), but that's a take-it-or-leave-it type angle on things.

What's undeniable is that, when he gets onstage (the warden releases him for the night whenever he announces a new show, and you better believe the venue gets packed), he's 100% focused on providing the townsfolk whose lives he's ruined a few hours' quality escape.

THE GIANT CHINESE delivery ambulance doubles as a prison van, so that's where David Eidboff is now, shackled in the back, thinking fondly of movies he watched as a kid featuring serial killers shackled in the backs of prison vans just like this one, waiting to make their (usually ultra-violent) move.

Mac and Chiara's café and bar, called *The Question About Who People Are & What They Are Doing*, known as *The Question* for short, is the venue for tonight's event.

They've been hustling all afternoon to get it ready: microphones, lighting, and, at David Eidboff's agent's request, a buffet table with hotplates and heated tureens.

Mac and Chiara, still new in town, are excited to host it – Eidboff's shows used to be held at another establishment that burned down, so tonight marks the first time it'll be held with them ... their chance to make an impression, show they're up with things, help make a place for themselves and their newborn (at home tonight with a Craigslist sitter).

So they're a little manic, bumping into each other, drinking too much coffee and eating too many sweets and not enough what they used to call "real food" ... but they're starting to feel ready.

THEY ARE NOT, though, as it turns out, ready for what David Eidboff, standing outside now as the Giant Chinese ambulance speeds away, shows up with, which is:

Two David Eidboff's.

"This one's me and that one's my clone," he says.

THERE HE IS, in a fine-looking blue suit, tailored in a style that screams “Old World,” strutting circles around his clone, who wavers in a plastic kiddie pool filling with blood from his joints – knees, elbows, wrists – which are all broken, bones sticking out like they’ve been prepped that way, sheathed.

The buffet’s decked out with bar food – nachos, sliders, curly fries, onion rings, and three pitchers of beer. Eidboff isn’t eating yet, but he has a hungry look.

He approaches the mic, scanning the audience for – if you subscribe to this theory – new victims. Otherwise, just basking in the turnout.

Lynda from the news station is in the audience, of course, checking her several phones like they’re boiling pots that require constant attention, her camera rolling.

“He’s the only one I ever wanted to hurt,” declares Eidboff into the mic, looking from the audience to his clone and back again

“I’m the only one you ever wanted to hurt?” asks the clone incredulously, though whether he finds the notion insulting or flattering is unclear.

“All the others were only practice,” Eidboff insists. “Only a game of hiding from my true self. Of trying to shunt the damage waiting to be done onto unwitting surrogates.”

A sound comes off the audience that’s about half gasp and half groan, as if, for some, this hits like hardcore drama, while for others it’s just standard pre-bedtime fluff.

He mimes wiping a tear, then grins and steps to the buffet and takes up a fistful of fries, stuffing it in his mouth, chasing it with

another. Then onion rings, pickle spears, chicken nuggets.

HERE’S THE transition point: the mood shifts from mellow to livid.

Eidboff rips off his blue suit and starts capering around the stage in what looks like the leotard of a Mexican Lucha libre wrestler, flexing one side of his body while filling the other with beer and burgers, then vice versa.

The clone wants to crawl away but his broken bones aren’t down.

Eidboff takes his time draining the first beer pitcher, eats half a pizza, and then struts over to the clone, hoisting him out of the kiddie pool and dumping him on the stage.

“Are you human or just another effigy?” he bellows down at him. This seems like a line everyone in the audience knows. They cheer and repeat it.

Eidboff seems to grow up toward the ceiling as the clone tries to slip down through a trapdoor, which, since this is a magic show, there might be, but it turns out there isn’t.

With a wink at the crowd, Eidboff leans in and, slowly, pulls out his clone’s left forearm bone, holding it over his head while the forearm skin dangles like an empty leather purse.

The clone makes babyish gasps.

The crowd chants “Hit him!” and leans in close, waving fistfuls of money.

Eidboff winds way up like a maverick golf pro with his own patented technique, then whacks the clone in the face, knocking him halfway across the stage, where he comes to skidding halt.

and canine laughter.

Eidboff takes a bow and returns to the buffet, polishing off a platter of wings and one of nachos, and the second pitcher of beer, rubbing his stomach through the leotard like a clownish ogre.

HE PUTS ON A LONG, FULL SHOW, ripping out first his clone's other forearm, then both upper arms, then both shins and femurs, giving the head and torso a hard, thorough beating with each one.

In the course of this, Eidboff consumes the rest of the buffet spread and the third beer pitcher, knocks over the table and all the dirty dishes and silverware, and stomps the kiddie pool to pieces, kicking it around the stage and mixing it up with the remnants of his clone, so that, by the end, there's only one mess up there, not two – blood and ketchup, chicken bones and clone bones, skin and paper napkins, beer froth and weird stomach bile, all flow together.

“Phew,” says Eidboff, wiping his brow back up at the mic. “I really had to get that out of my system. I don't know about you folks, but I'm just about ready for a shower.”

Wild, deranged cheering, more barking laughter.

THIS CHEERING is still echoing when Mac and Chiara come to, out of whatever panic coma they fell into partway through the show.

They look around and the place is empty. Onstage sit a number of stuffed heavy-duty trash bags and two of those yellow **WET FLOOR / PISO MOJADO** signs, like some janitor has already dealt with whatever was up there.

They look at each other, as if for confirmation that what they think happened didn't actually happen, but neither is in a position to offer that to the other.

While each is working up to asking or saying something aloud, a sharp throat-clearing startles them out of it.

David Eidboff and Gerb, his agent, stand before them.

Gerb hands over a double-sided sheet of paper, which he has to hold out for a long time before Mac and Chiara's hands manage to grip it.

“An itemized bill for tonight's entertainment,” he says.

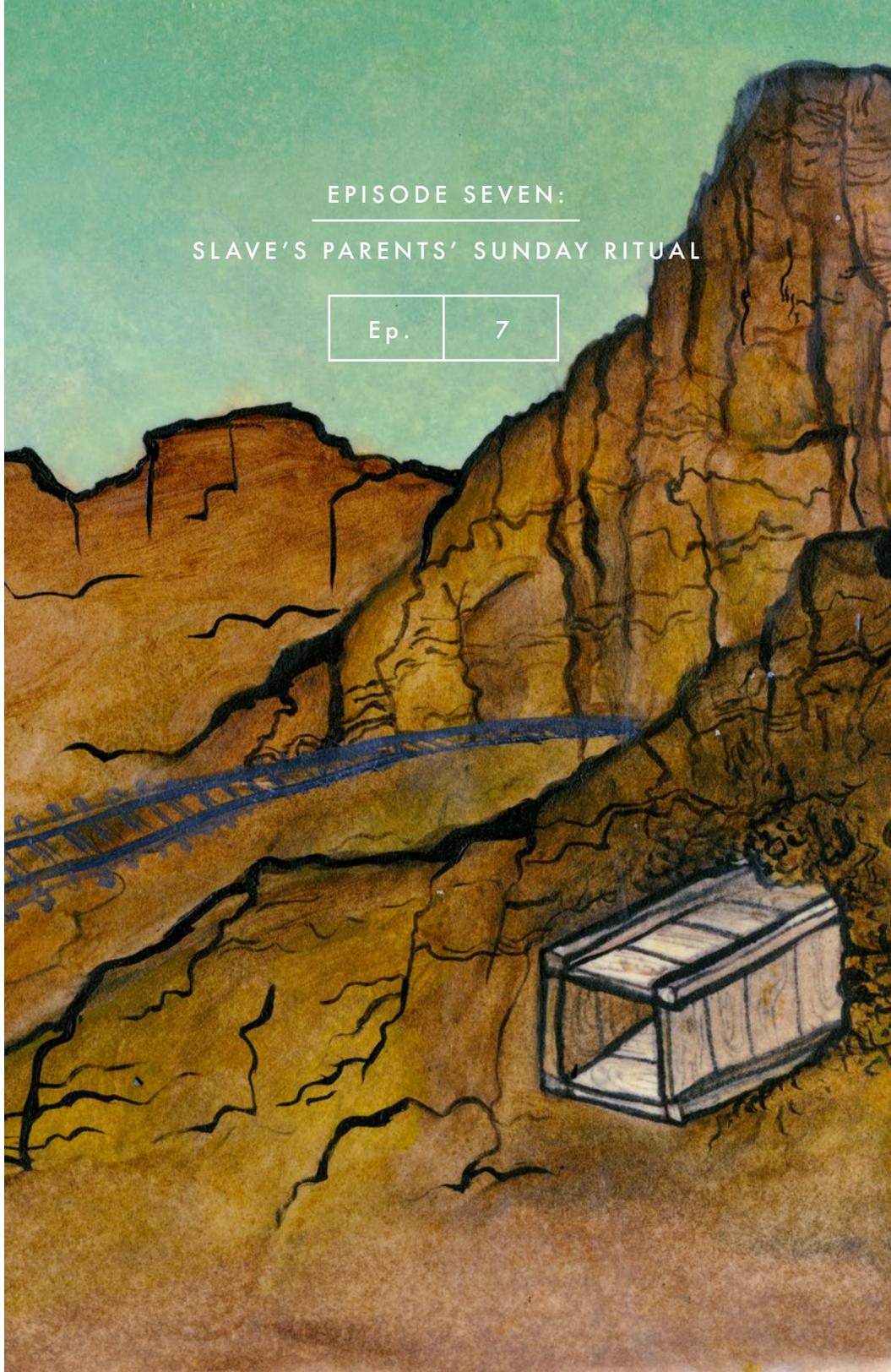
Eidboff is back in his blue suit, looking perfectly clean, his hair gelled and face shaven, his expression almost benign.

“Just,” Chiara finally mutters, crumpling the itemized bill, certain it's something she never wants to see, “tell us how much we owe you.”

Gerb, happy to oblige, quotes a number so high it causes the whole scene to black out.

EPISODE SEVEN:
SLAVE'S PARENTS' SUNDAY RITUAL

Ep.	7
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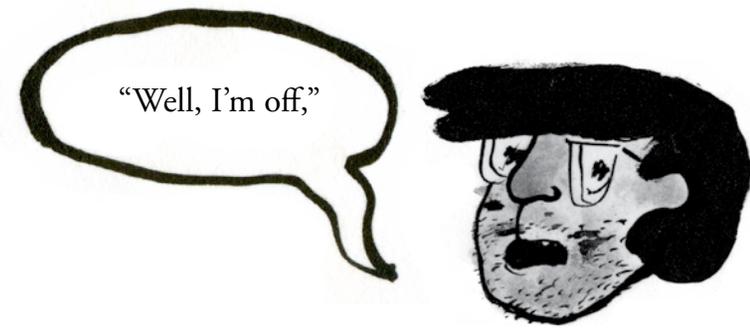
EPISODE SEVEN:
SLAVE'S PARENTS' SUNDAY RITUAL

IT'S SUNDAY AND BETSY AND PHIL, former biological parents of Slave and current adoptive parents of the Infanta, are entitled to a day off like anybody else.



They take their breakfast together, not speaking, just as Slave and Eye are setting about their lesson next door, in a house that is for some reason, legitimate or less-than, unreachable to them, off-limits.

They sit and regard one another, each planning a separate day, though each is equally bound to stew in Sunday's familiar mix of shame, boredom, and cautious hope.



says Phil, a beat sooner than expected, discovering that his shoes are already on and his vest – it's hot out, as always, but it feels good to don a scrap of outerwear upon exiting the indoors – is easily within reach.



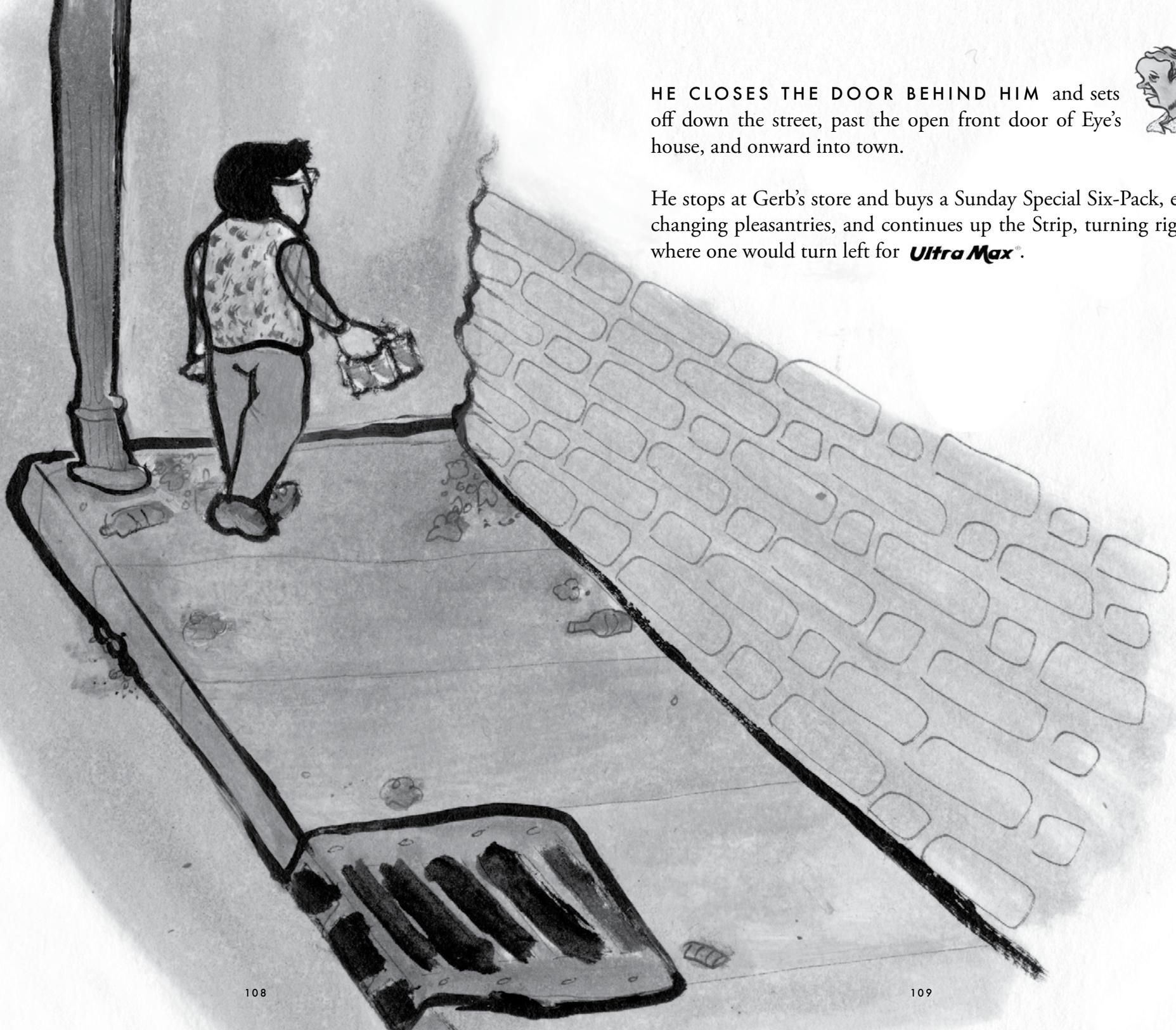
replies Betsy, taking up her Adoption Brochure, planning to spend her day perusing orphans from Feudal Japan. There is constant talk of adopting a sibling for the Infanta, though nothing, yet, has come of it.

I wonder where she thinks I'm off to, thinks Phil, a bit manic as he makes his way out the door. *I wonder what story I'll tell her today.*

HE CLOSES THE DOOR BEHIND HIM and sets off down the street, past the open front door of Eye's house, and onward into town.



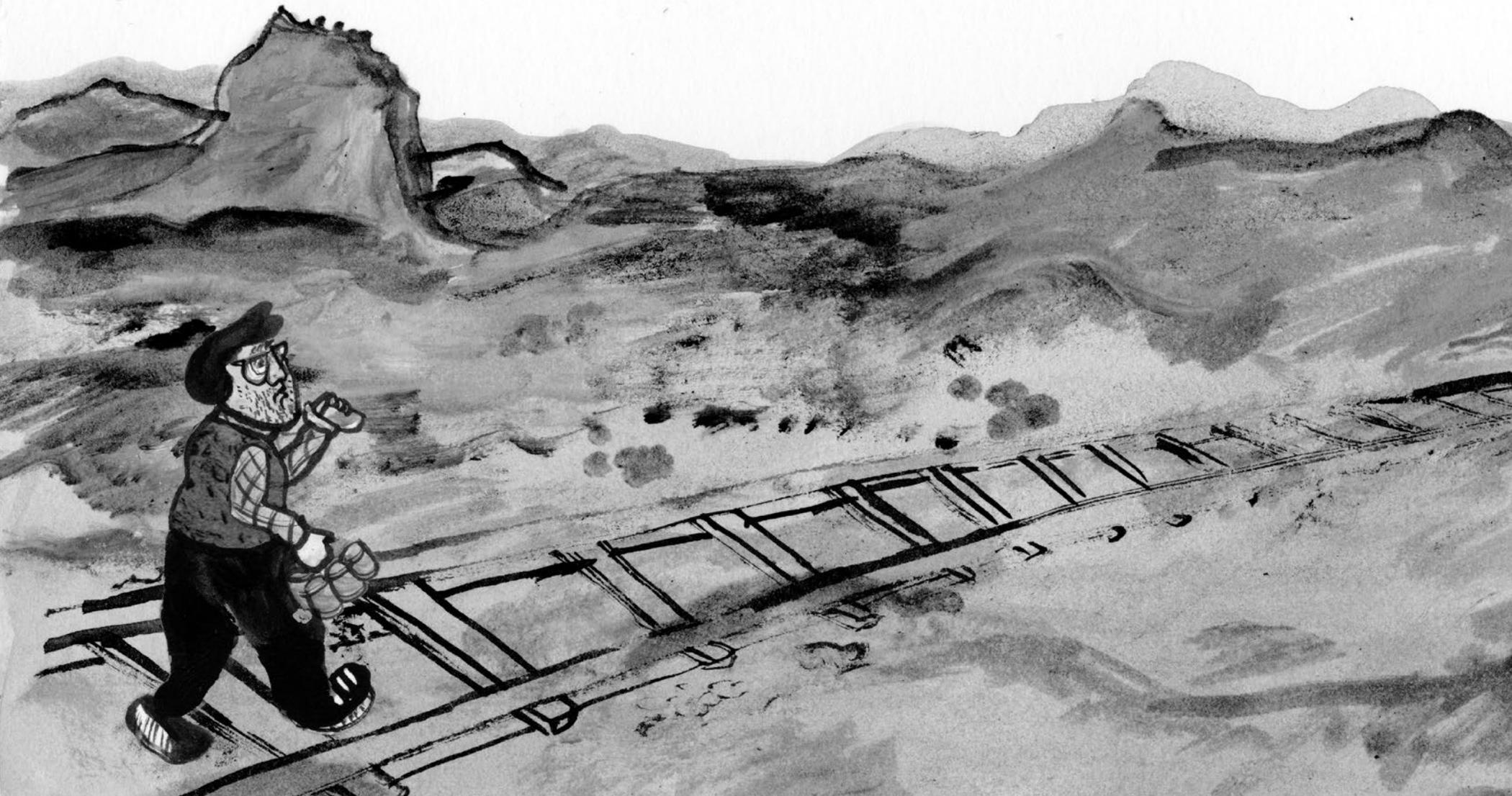
He stops at Gerb's store and buys a Sunday Special Six-Pack, exchanging pleasantries, and continues up the Strip, turning right where one would turn left for **Ultra Max**.



SOON HE'S AT THE TRAIN TRACKS.

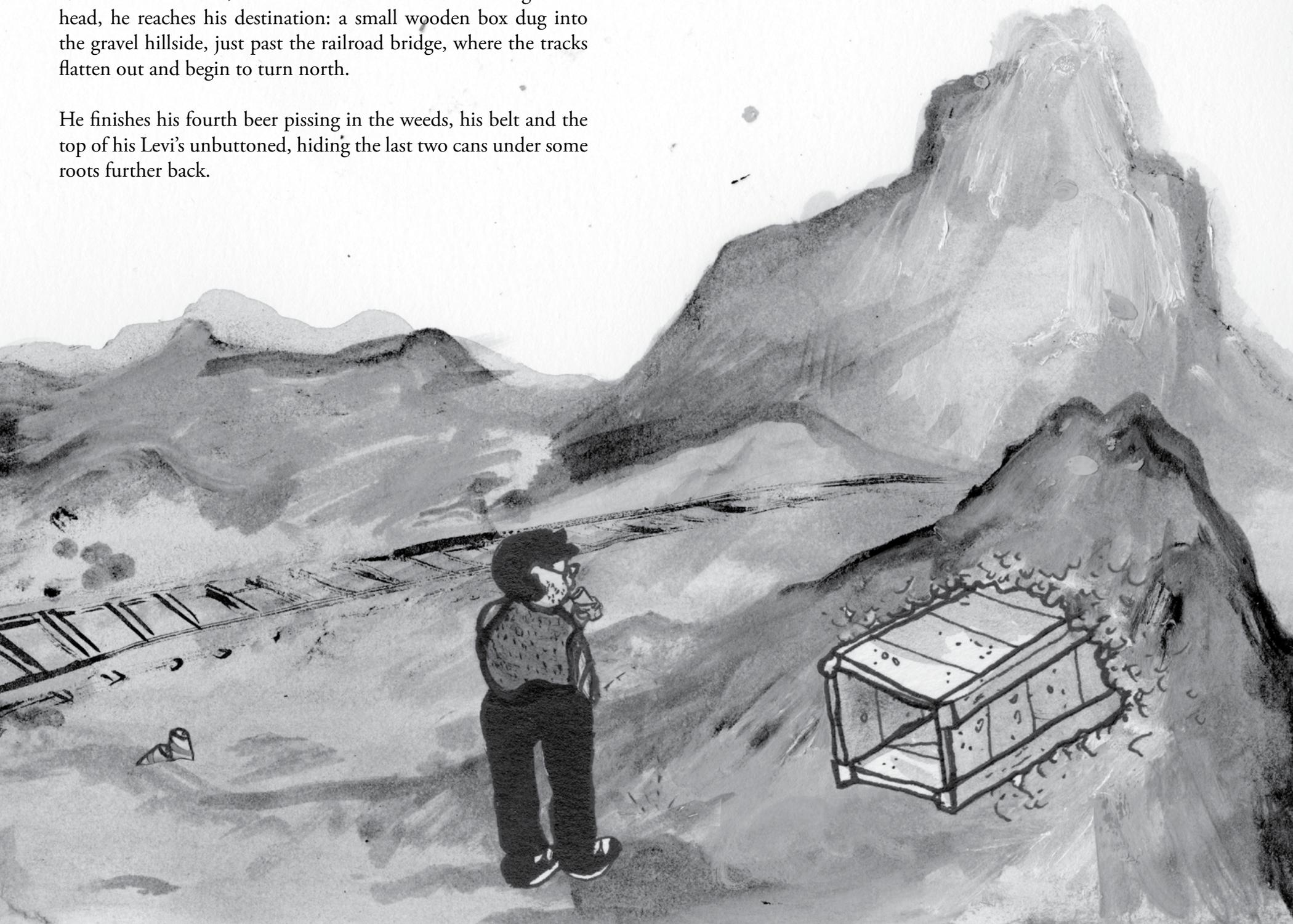
He walks along, drinking his first beer, kicking Magic cards, socks, hair, and baby teeth. *What a cliché about the tracks being littered with used condoms*, he thinks, as he's thought before. *No one seems to use them around here.*

A stoat or weasel regards him from a hole and he looks away from it, toward the first oncoming train, on his second beer.

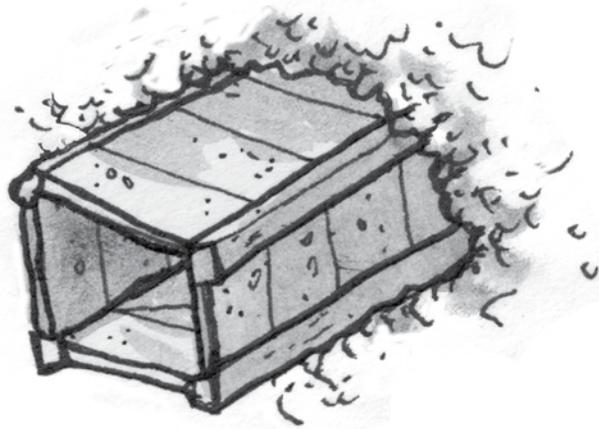


AFTER A WHILE, snatches of old-time blues rattling in his head, he reaches his destination: a small wooden box dug into the gravel hillside, just past the railroad bridge, where the tracks flatten out and begin to turn north.

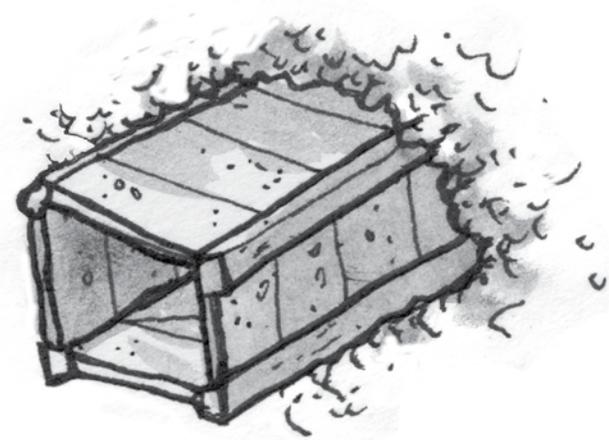
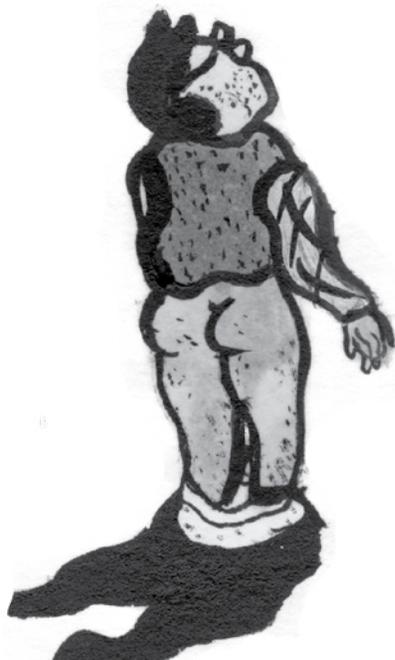
He finishes his fourth beer pissing in the weeds, his belt and the top of his Levi's unbuttoned, hiding the last two cans under some roots further back.



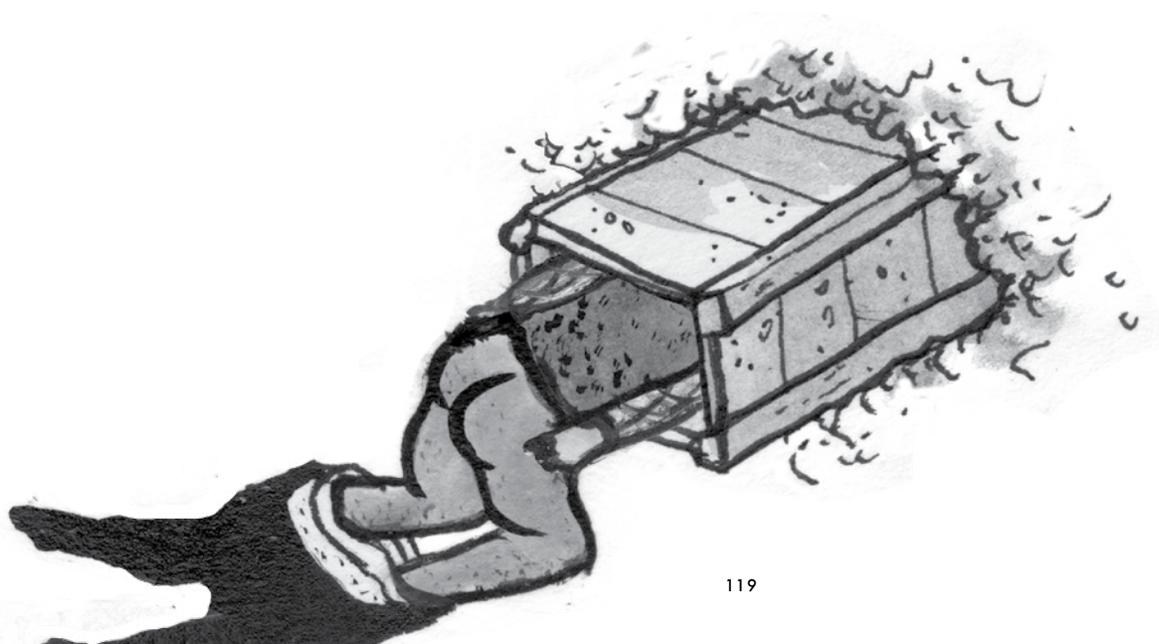
He sighs, watching a worm sink into the earth, and falls to his hands and knees, crawling headfirst into the wooden box he built out here when his son went missing.



When he's finished, he lets his Levi's fall the rest of the way and pulls his cotton boxers down with them, squinting up at the sun, gauging how hot it's going to get. The hotter the better.



IT ABSORBS HIM up to his shoulders, fitting snug with his arms pinned to his sides, leaving the rest of him exposed. He straightens his back and stretches his thighs so his knees are at a right angle to the ground, his ass fully exposed to the day and the passing trains, no part of it hidden.



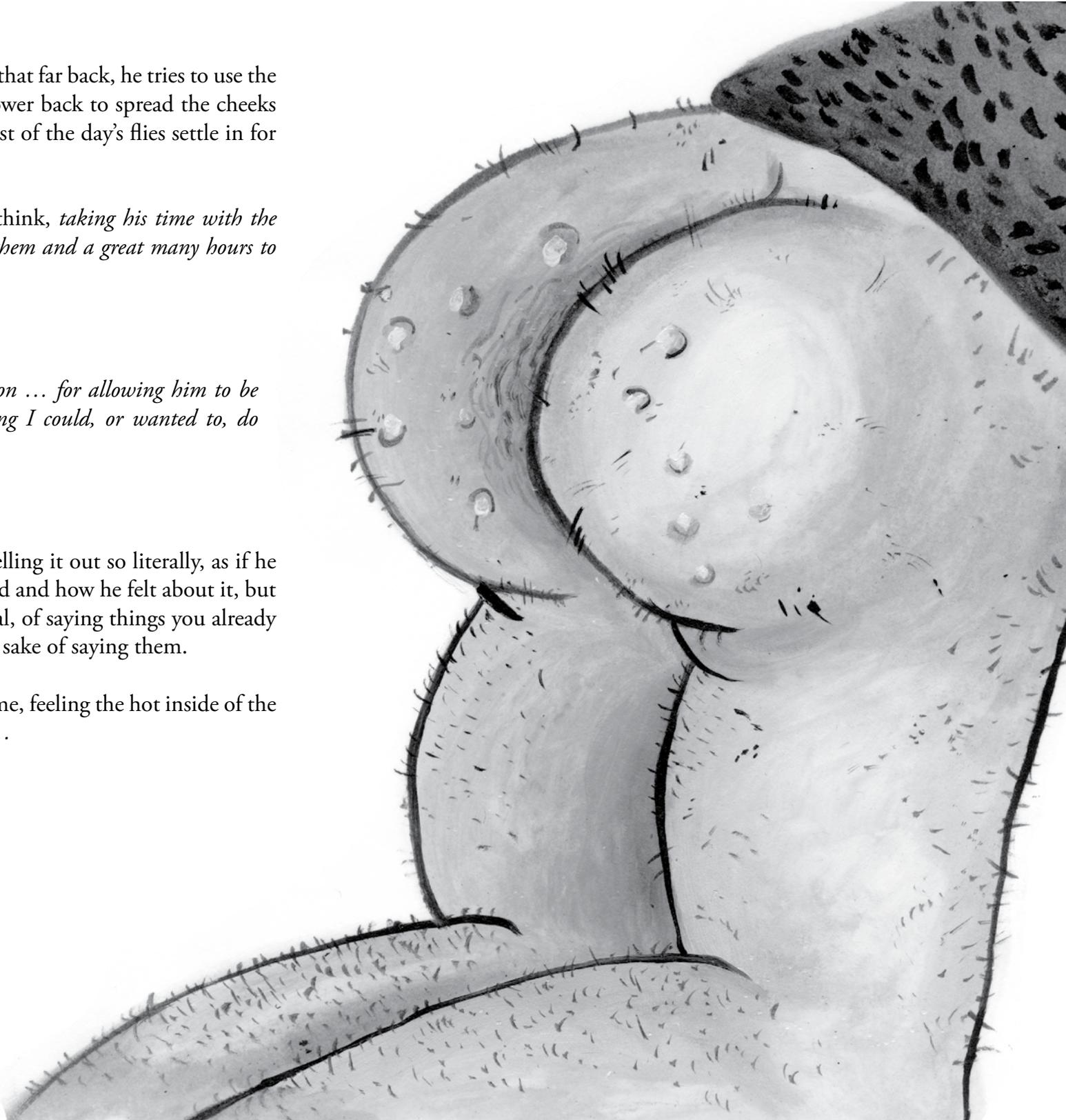
Though he cannot reach his hands that far back, he tries to use the muscles of his upper thighs and lower back to spread the cheeks as wide as they'll go, feeling the first of the day's flies settle in for a landing.

Such is my penance, he begins to think, *taking his time with the words, since there are not many of them and a great many hours to fill.*

Such is my penance for losing my son ... for allowing him to be taken and finding there was nothing I could, or wanted to, do about it.

He feels dumb, oftentimes, for spelling it out so literally, as if he didn't by now know what happened and how he felt about it, but he can appreciate the value of ritual, of saying things you already know again and again only for the sake of saying them.

So he says it again, out loud this time, feeling the hot inside of the box echo: *Such is my penance for ...*



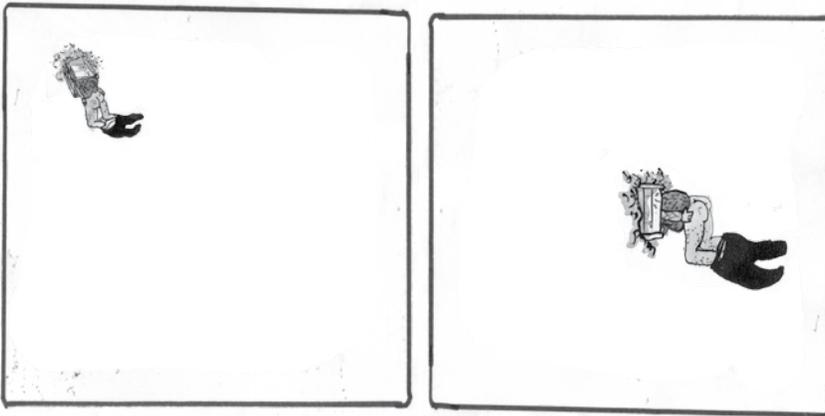
THE SMALL ECHO of his voice is trumped by the giant echo of the train, hurtling off the bridge and around the bend.

He pushes his ass out, feeling it swell, imagining the passengers watching from the windows, jeering at him, thinking,

That there is a fool, a doomed man.

TIME PASSES. The day's middle comes and goes.

NOW, SOMEONE is sitting beside him. Always, around this time, someone comes.



Though he cannot hear them through the train's thick sealed windows, he feels the intensity of their derision, all of it deserved, mixed with the intensity of the sun beating down.



He's never known who it is, nor ever permitted himself to wonder. It's part of his penance, another feature of the ritual, this exposure and nearby humiliation, in contrast to the more distant passing of the trains.

Good, he thinks. Look at me, whoever you are. See me like this.



IT'S HIS WIFE, Betsy.

She's the one, and always has been. Such is her penance, her part to play.

She's never told him, and believes he genuinely doesn't know.

She has a picnic basket with a turkey sandwich and a chocolate bar open beside her, and a magnifying glass in her hand.

She takes her time, eating, watching the trains, enjoying the day.

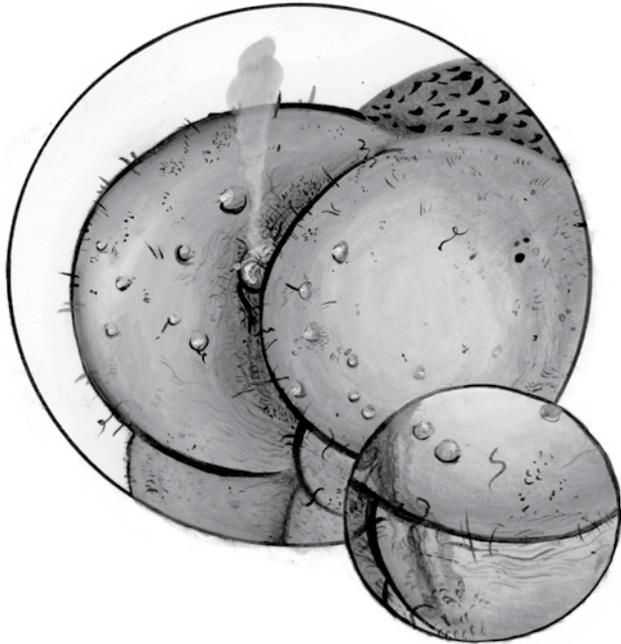




THEN, before the sun gets too low, she sighs, stands up, brushes away crumbs, and takes her position behind her husband.

She holds the magnifying glass right up to him, focusing it directly on his anus, staring hard through it, refusing to look away, thinking, This is what I deserve, what I must do, for losing my son, for ...

She recites this all silently while her husband recites it out loud inside the box.



He moans as the sun through the glass begins to burn him, and she watches the tender protected skin sizzle and pucker, welts and boils beginning to form. Some blood-like substance begins to run, drying on the hairs of his inner thighs.

THANKFULLY, a train chugs by just then, drowning out the worst of his noise.

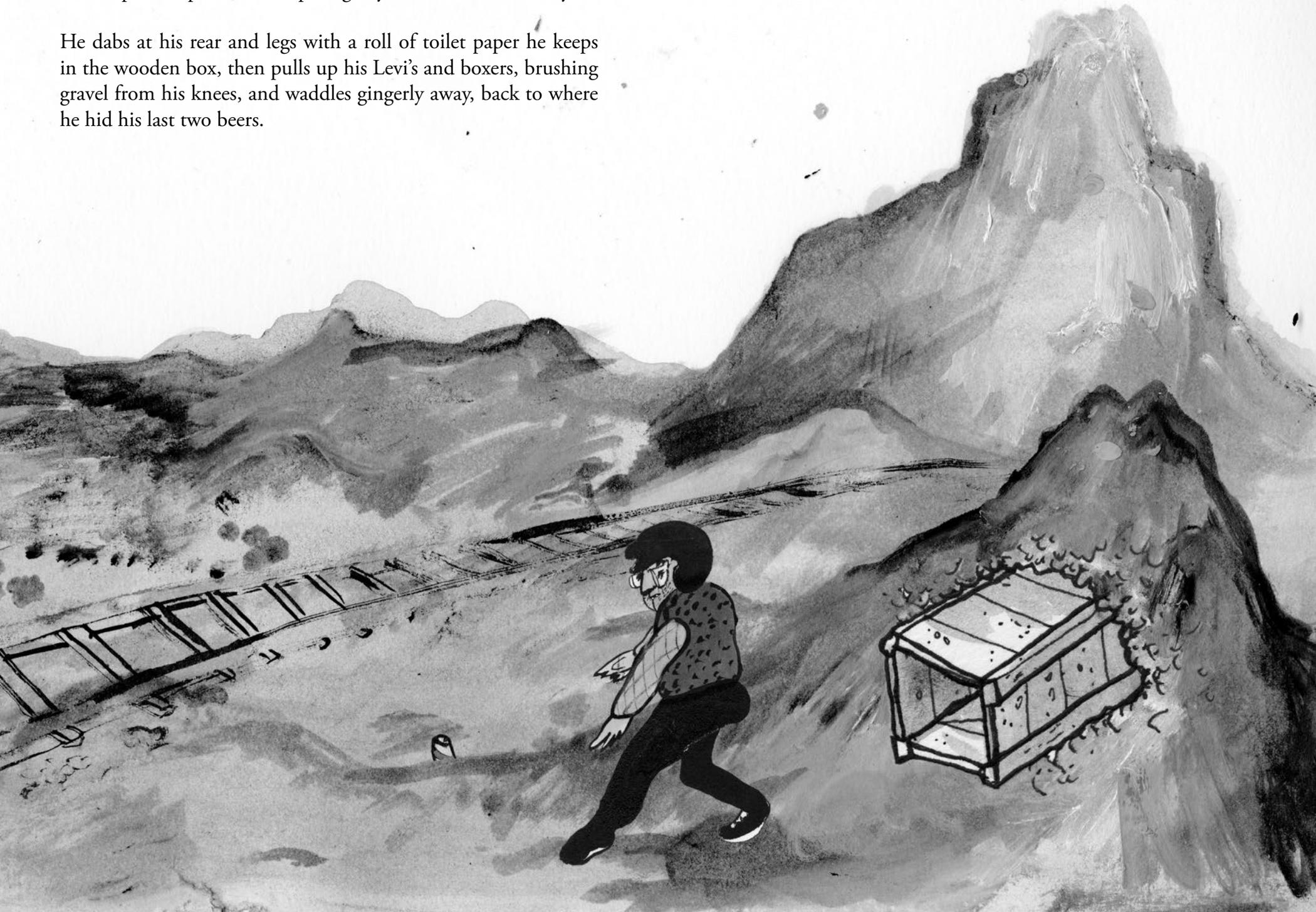
When it's gone, she removes the glass. Enough for today. She likes to believe that the burn pattern on her husband's skin resembles the shape of their son, a sign from on high that they are doing the right thing, atoning in the proper manner.

She wipes the glass with a towel from her picnic basket, though she knows it has not touched flesh.



When the sun has most of the way set, Phil stands up, biting his lower lip to keep from whimpering any louder than necessary.

He dabs at his rear and legs with a roll of toilet paper he keeps in the wooden box, then pulls up his Levi's and boxers, brushing gravel from his knees, and waddles gingerly away, back to where he hid his last two beers.



ONE OF THEM IS GONE.

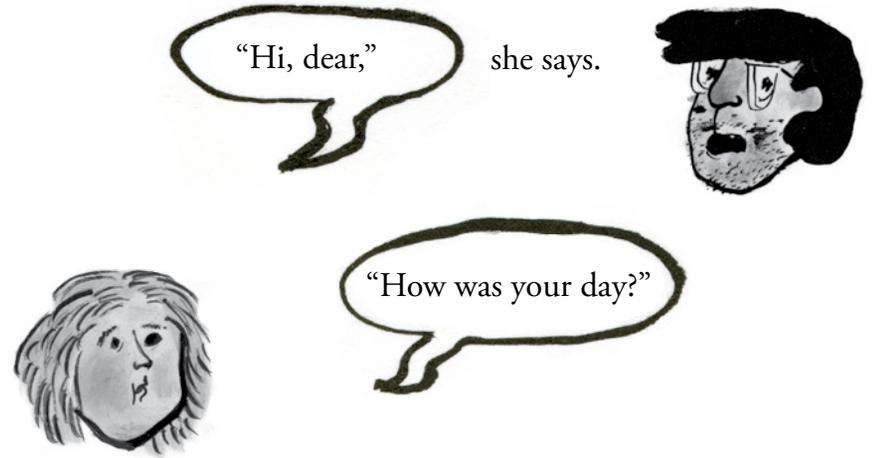
Some kids must've come by but, motivated by fear or haste or rare kindness, decided to take only one.

He finds that this thought makes him happier than if both cans had remained.

He cracks the last one open, in a sudden good mood, and strolls the rest of the way home, along the tracks, listening to the crickets and birds, humming those same blues from before.



WHEN HE WALKS INSIDE, it's nighttime and his wife is still at the kitchen table, her Adoption Manual open and marked up in red pen, a spread of newly delivered Giant Chinese (which always concludes their Sundays) in its containers on the table.



“Oh, good, good...”

He realizes he's forgotten to concoct an excuse.

“I'll just take a shower and be right down,”

he says, figuring this'll buy him time to think something up.



“Take your time,”

“The Infanta's resting in her room, you should say hello to her. When you come down, there are some lovely Japanese orphans I've discovered I'd like to show you over dinner.”

she says, smiling placidly. He nods, and winces his way up the stairs, hoping he's masked his discomfort enough to keep her from becoming suspicious.

EPISODE EIGHT:
HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY??

Ep.

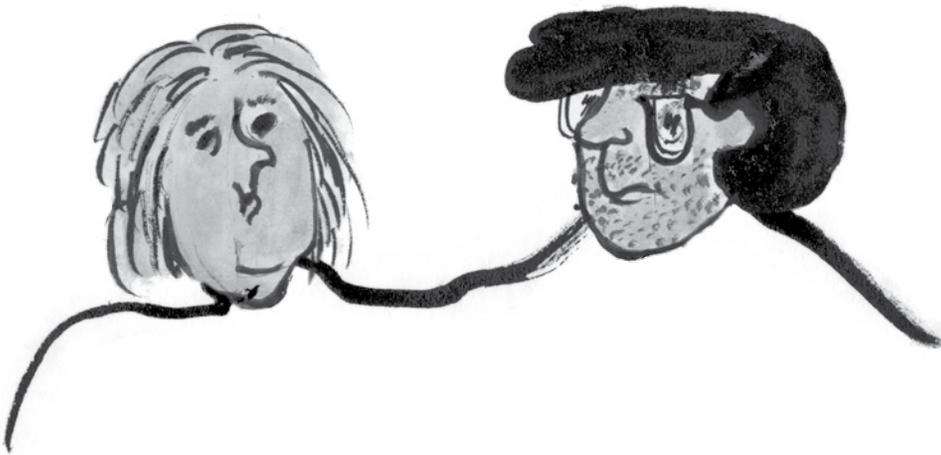
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EPISODE EIGHT:
HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY??



EVERY MONDAY AT NOON, Stan visits Eye's house.



This is because every Sunday night, after their respective outings, Betsy and Phil discuss their missing son over dinner, while The Infanta absorbs a little extra TV in the screened-in back porch, hardly out of earshot.

They decide, by dessert-time, like it's taken them until now to think of it, to contact Stan, the town mayor and chief of police, and demand that he prioritize the search for their son, who's been missing since ... they've blacked out the exact date, fearful of how long ago it would seem.

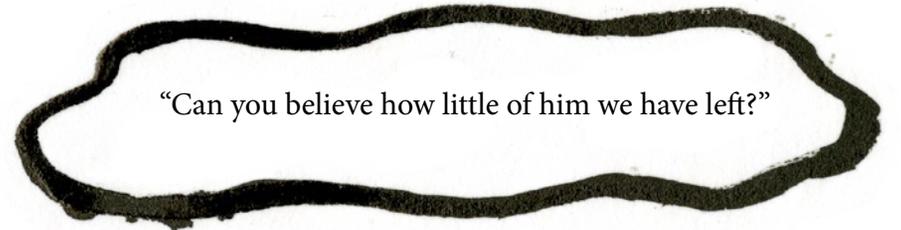
Phil will use his position as Vice Manager at the Refinery to grease the wheels, not at the expense of the other missing children on the list, but rather, somehow, he and his wife agree, for the greater good.

Sharing a bottle of the pretty good stuff as it gets late, they go through drawer after drawer of their son's photos, trying to choose the perfect one for Stan to show to potential suspects and informants.

An image equal parts accurate representation and heartrending icon.



Since they give one away each week, their collection keeps shrinking. They mourn thus:



as if he were dead, which, come to think of it rationally ... but no.

PHIL CALLS STAN FIRST THING
MONDAY MORNING, SAYS:



Then he bursts through the door of Stan's office bellowing:



Stan, after all this time, can't be sure what he might owe Phil, or why, from when, but he's not about to call the bluff. He's never that sure of anything.

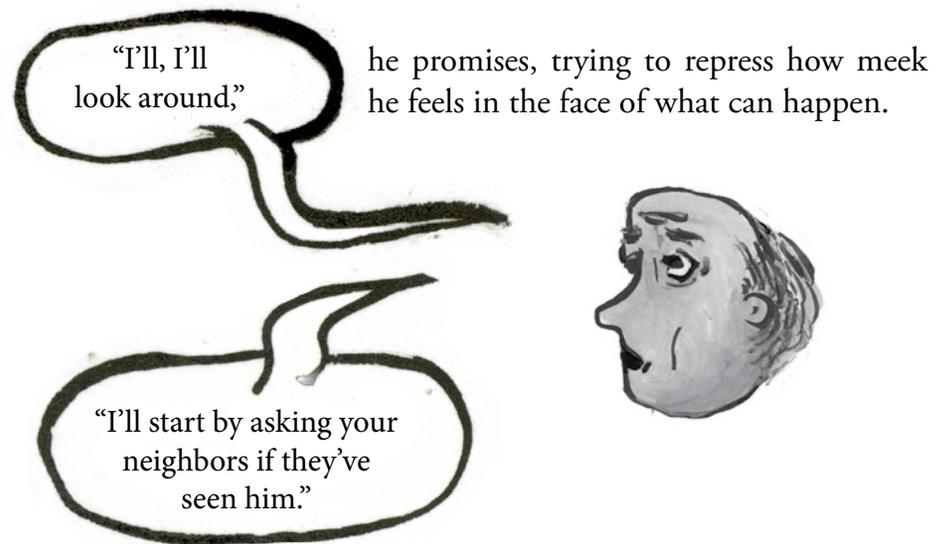


Phil explains that his beloved son has gone missing ... has been missing ... is not at home.



he grunts, handing over the photo. This time it's of Slave at three, leaning over to pet a skate in a tank at the Children's Aquarium in a somewhat larger town a few towns over.

Stan takes it warily, as if by touching it wrong he might become a suspect in Phil's eyes.



Phil takes a handful of candy from the bowl on his way out, dreaming about what to wash it down with.

Stan will show up at Eye's door at noon.

Eye and Slave spend the morning preparing Slave a disguise,



an ankle-length velour dress,
fake lashes,
makeup,
heels,
and a wig.



"Culled,"

as Eye explains each time,

"from all the great child actresses of cinema past."

Slave doesn't complain except when tweezing his eyebrows and waxing his upper lip, and even then just barely.

Eye sits in an easy chair in the corner, watching the preparations, reminiscing.



"It's a long and illustrious history you belong to,"

he adds.

THE DOORBELL RINGS.



"Hello sir,
I'm Bethany."

"I know who you are.
Is your father home?"

"It's my
grandfather,"

Bethany replies, on cue.

"Ah,"

says Stan.

"My mistake.
He looks so young."



Eye, overhearing, can't help feeling flattered.

Bethany shows Stan in, goes to fetch wine.

Stan sits down, takes out the photo, lays it faceup on the table.



Eye makes a point of not looking at it. Stan, afraid to look at it if no one else will, looks out the window. He puts his keys on the table, then feels odd and puts them back in his pocket.

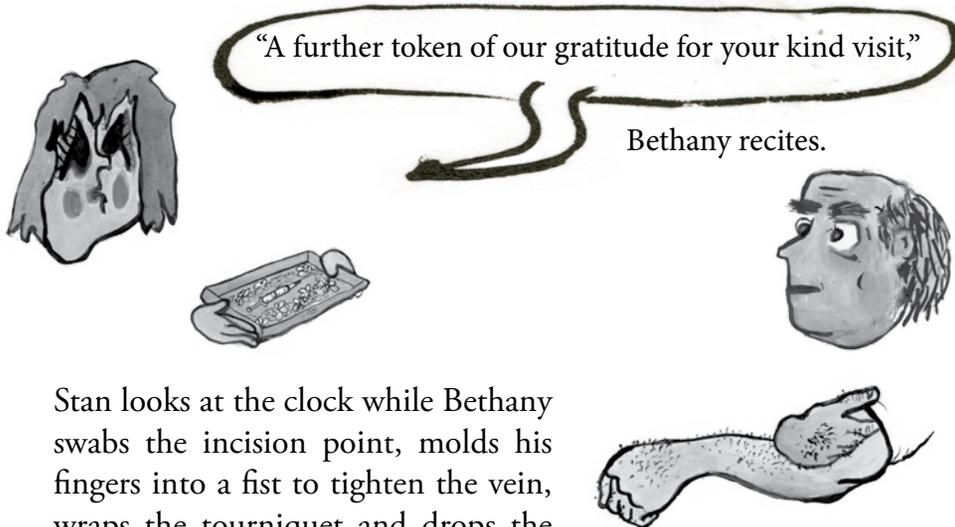


Bethany serves the wine. Stan makes an effort to refuse, then gives in.

They slurp in unison, which is to say that Eye watches Stan slurp. Tactfully enough, Stan swaps his empty glass for Eye's full one, then slurps that too. In the end it appears as though they've both consumed their portions.

Bethany, meanwhile, busies herself preparing the methadone in the other room, just enough for Stan to sample, far less than one of Eye's doses.

When she returns, bearing the syringe on a tray garlanded with flowers and sugar, Stan rolls up his sleeve almost unconsciously, as if to scratch his tricep.



Stan looks at the clock while Bethany swabs the incision point, molds his fingers into a fist to tighten the vein, wraps the tourniquet and drops the needle.

Eye lowers his lid dreamily at the sight, down onto visions of his own dose after nightfall, or just before if he can't wait.

When Stan has fully slumped over, Bethany returns with a gurney, bedecked with a royal blue saddle blanket and an ostrich feather pillow. She loads Stan on, first the head, then the feet, and wheels him away.



TO THE GUEST ROOM.

She tips him into the turned-down sheets, still warm from the dryer, and pulls them to his chin, positioning him so he's facing straight upward, mouth open.

Eye lurks just outside the door, stray thoughts appearing and disappearing in the yellowish patch between his lid and ball.

When Stan is tucked in tight and Bethany has checked that he's breathing, she sets a glass of iced tea on the nightstand beside the easy chair and ushers Eye in.



Now it is Bethany's job to bring the photo into the study and position it in the ever-growing collage.

She looks at the image of herself as a tiny boy, petting that friendly skate, and feels her skin revert to his.

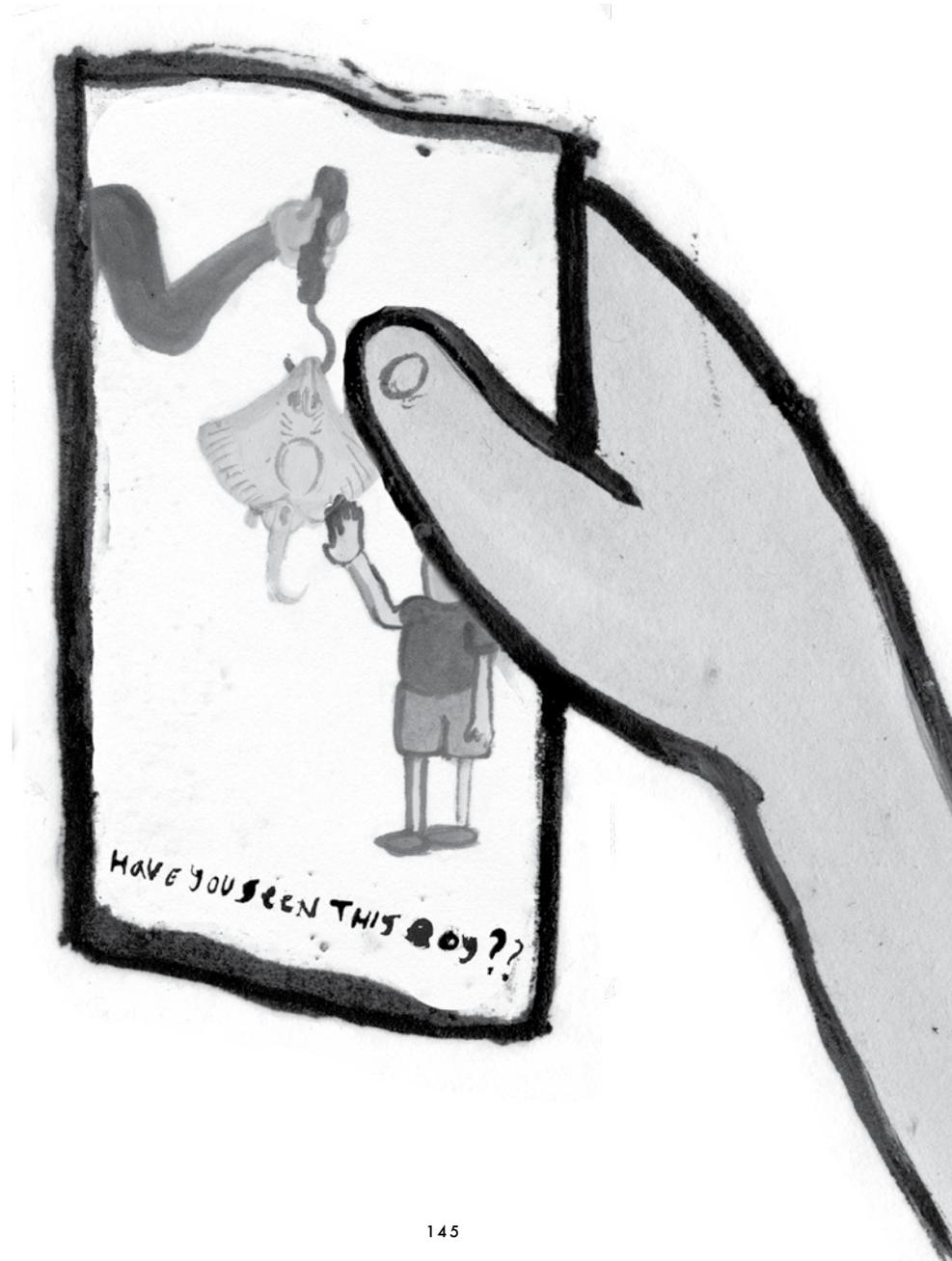
She removes her wig and heels, taking up a stapler and climbing a chair.



Eye has arranged all the photos that Stan has brought into a chronology of Slave's life, a visual history in the shape of a river, winding its way along, with the names of port cities lining its banks.

Slave has often spent a full Monday afternoon imagining life in one of these cities, disembarking from the river and stepping out of time, into some scheme of things unreachable.

Just before she staples this one into place, she looks at the handwritten question on the bottom of the photo, same as on every photo, in her father's crude but assertive hand:

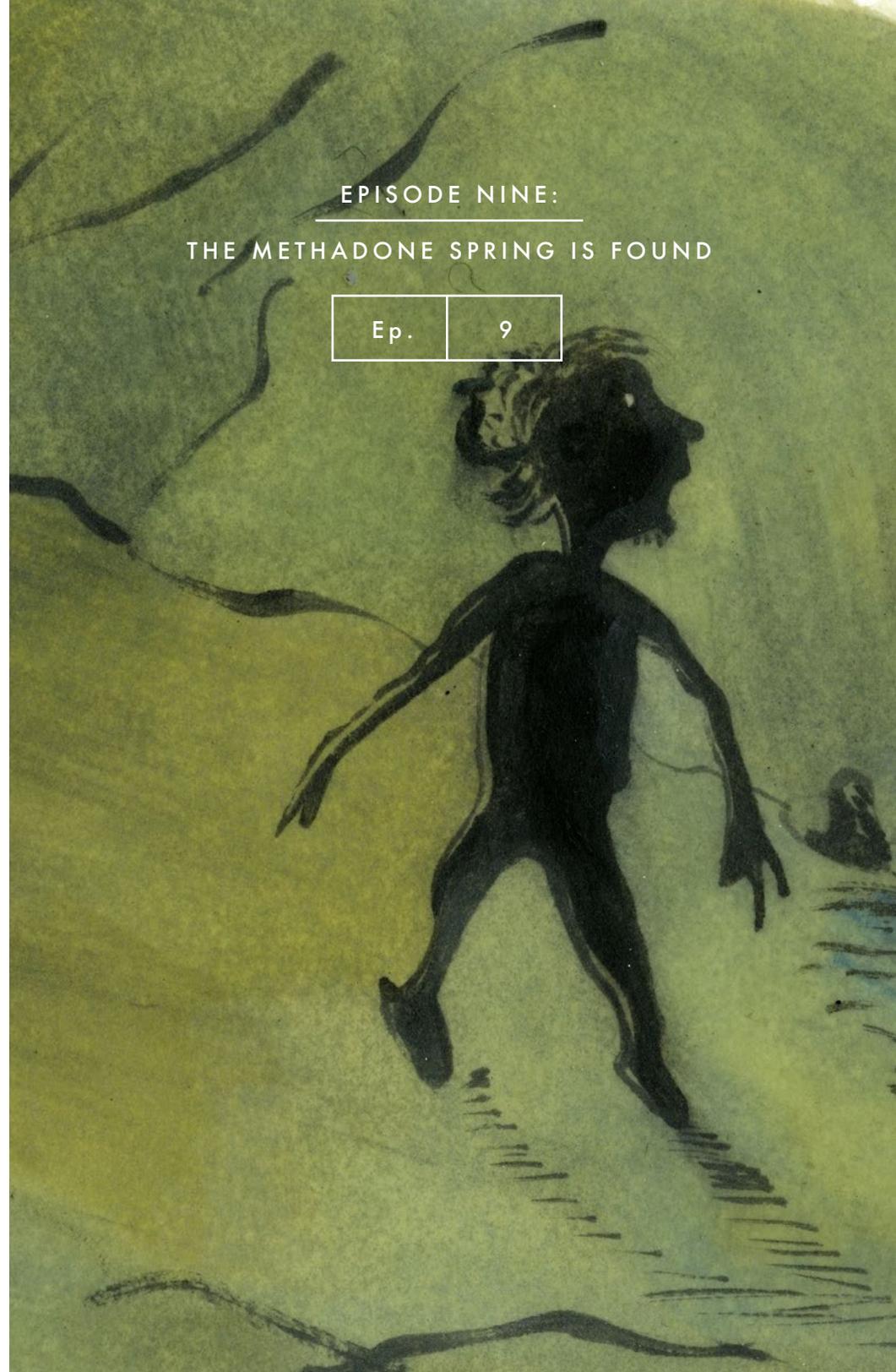


EPISODE NINE:

THE METHADONE SPRING IS FOUND

Ep.

9



EPISODE NINE:

THE METHADONE SPRING IS FOUND

IT'S TUESDAY, which means it's time for Rib to lead this week's expedition of suicidal teens into the Cave, which means it's time for him to stock up on methadone while he's there.



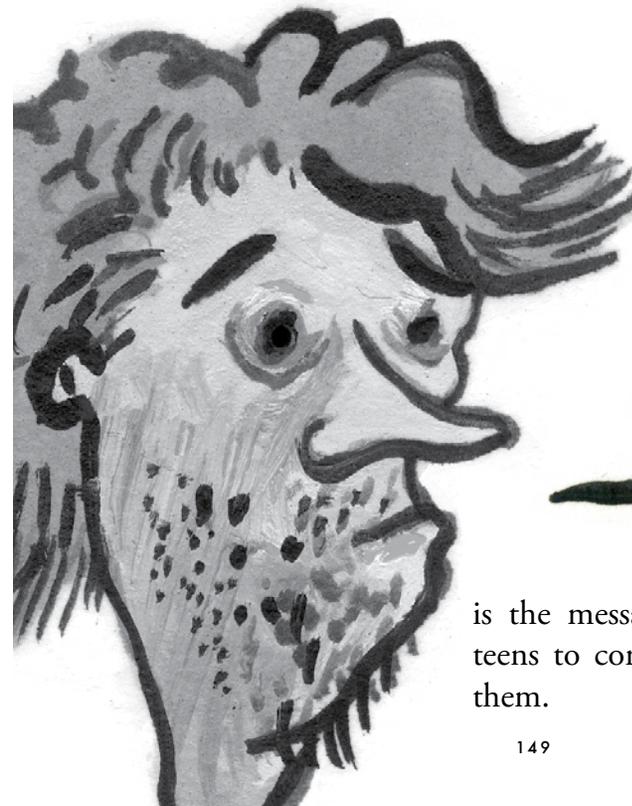
This is how he works it: he rounds up the suicidal teens (all the teens in town save for a pair of face-to-face conjoined twins) for an educational expedition into the Cave where the Cannibals live in harmony with nature, never dwelling on the goneness of the past nor the ever-delayed arrival of the future.

"It's too dark to see beyond the present in there,"

Rib explains every week like it's first time they've heard it. Stan, in his role as town mayor, has gladly signed off on this form of expeditionary group therapy, at a loss for what else to sign off on.

For his trouble, Rib receives a small stipend.

When he uses it to buy methadone, he turns his life into a cautionary tale:



"Don't be like me,"

is the message he asks the suicidal teens to consider taking home with them.

THE SUICIDAL TEENS show up at ten-thirty in Rib's Culvert, in sneakers and cargo pants, backpacks and water bottles, feeling almost healthy with anticipation. Despite themselves, they find they're looking forward to the day.

Their days aside from this are chunks of online aimlessness, random drug tests, half-hearted sex trials, knives, high places, and sleep.

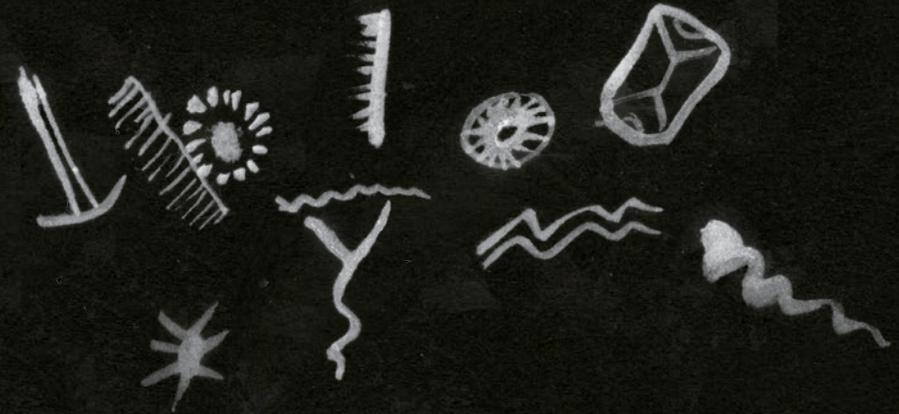


Rib asks, hiding his phone under his shirt while texting Chester the Cannibal King, as if this might lend his attention an undivided appearance.

Nodding, they set out through the Culvert to the Cave.

Chester hasn't texted back yet, which is unusual, but not so unusual as to prompt a change in behavior from Rib, who basically has one mode.

SOAKED TO THE KNEES in Culvert juice, they cross over into the drier reaches of the Cave.

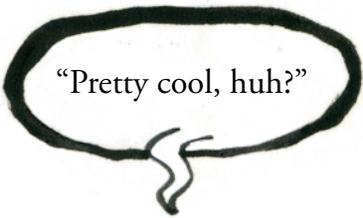


The particular iconography of the Cannibal Religion resets their mood. In this part of the country, every Cave (and it's full of them) has a unique Religion, complete with a world-origin-and-annihilation story and a moral and semiotic code. No scholar, much as many have tried, has ever been able to demonstrate even the most tenuous connection between the Religion of one Cave and that of any other.

Indeed, Gerb the liquor store owner has made an amateur career out of arguing that the Cave Religions are even more different than they seem.

In this Cave, a giant discarded Ferris wheel is bent into an oval to fit the rock contours. Each car houses a Cannibal Child, or sometimes several; these serve as their home until they are physically too big to fit inside, at which point they enter adult society and all that comes with it.

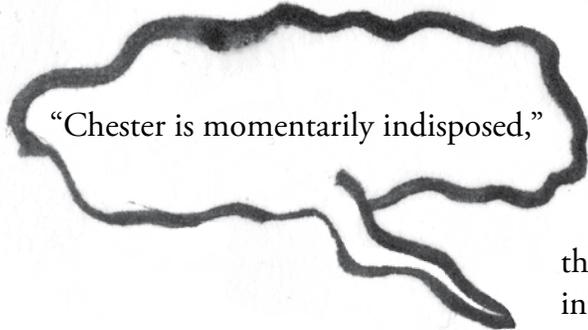
As they wait for Chester, a Cannibal Underling approaches. She motions for Rib to bend down (Cannibals are strong but short).



“Pretty cool, huh?”



Rib asks the suicidal teens, as they pass this area and enter the Main Chamber.



“Chester is momentarily indisposed,”

the Underling whispers in his ear.

NOW THEY'RE STANDING BEFORE the Cannibal Idol, a wax 1.5x-scale-model of Chester, complete with his signature blue Dockers, white button-up shirt, and graduated bifocals. They each take a nibble of his left index fingertip, chewing and swallowing the wax to prostrate themselves before proceeding further. Each time they return, what they've bitten off has been replaced.

For some of the teens, this is more than they've eaten at one time since last week's visit.





Then she motions at a hole in the rock wall which, if Rib is not mistaken, wasn't here last time.



"Indisposed?"

Rib asks.

"Getting your supply."

The Underling points at the hole again.

"Getting my supply?"

Rib is confused now.

"But doesn't he buy it from, uh ... across the border?"



Rib repeats what he just said, and the Underling looks perplexed again.

"The stone,"

"rolled away in the night.
Minor earthquake."

the Underling explains, pointing at a huge boulder beside the hole in the rock wall,



"So Chester's down there?"

Now Rib is the only perplexed one. He points at the emptiness beyond the hole. The Underling nods.

Just then, one of the suicidal teens, as if only now discovering the hole, shouts, knowing it'll echo,

"I'm gonna do it for real this time!!"



The others applaud with a mixture of envy and terror as the teen barrels through.

Everyone waits for the hard crash at the bottom. Not knowing how far down it goes, they don't know how long to wait.

In the end, they hear nothing but a very faint fizz, like Alka-Seltzer dissolving in a glass.

A WHILE LATER, Chester emerges from the hole with a paper bag tucked under his chin and a dripping body in his arms.

Most of its face and clothes are gone. Organs and skin hang from its sides in spongy strips.



Chester lays the paper bag and the body tenderly on the Cave floor and whistles, summoning the Cannibal Children from the Ferris wheel.

They fall upon it, suckling like wherever they put their mouth is a milk duct.

Rib can't seem to speak, so Chester takes over:



"And so you see,"

he informs the remaining suicidal teens,

"the equilibrium in our diet is a rare and beautiful thing. The methadone enables us to subsist on human flesh, and the human flesh enables us to subsist on methadone. Like how they say that egg whites and egg yolks together form a perfect protein. If we had only one or the other, we'd be both feeble and deranged. As you can see, we're doing just fine thank you very much."

"But the methadone ..."

Rib stammers.

"How do you get enough?"

He genuinely had no idea that the Cannibals drank it. Chester smiles.

"Right down there, my friend. As much as you could ever hope for."



He gestures for Rib to come to the place where the stone has rolled aside. Rib looks down: a sludgy river glowing dark purple, glinting silver in places, lit only by its own light.



“All this time??”

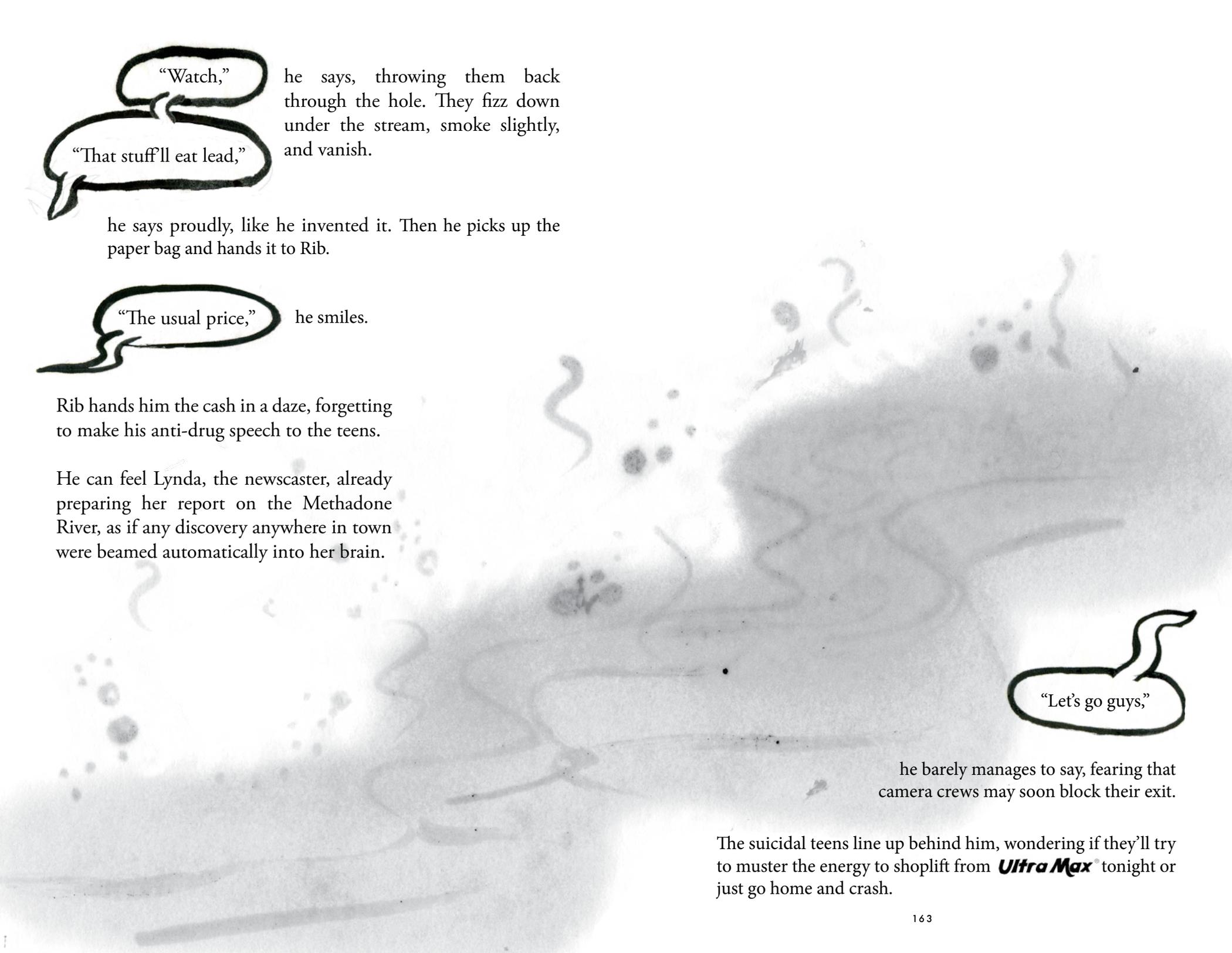
“All this time, it’s been flowing right beneath us?”

he can barely get the words out. Chester smiles like he can’t imagine this is even a question.

A loud crunch: the Children have reached bone. Chester shakes his head.

“Poor things. They love those bones but the calcium’s not good for them.”

He lets them crunch a little more, then whistles again, scattering them back into the Ferris wheel. Then he picks up the remains and cradles them in his arms.



"Watch,"

he says, throwing them back through the hole. They fizz down under the stream, smoke slightly, and vanish.

"That stuff'll eat lead,"

he says proudly, like he invented it. Then he picks up the paper bag and hands it to Rib.

"The usual price," he smiles.

Rib hands him the cash in a daze, forgetting to make his anti-drug speech to the teens.

He can feel Lynda, the newscaster, already preparing her report on the Methadone River, as if any discovery anywhere in town were beamed automatically into her brain.

"Let's go guys,"

he barely manages to say, fearing that camera crews may soon block their exit.

The suicidal teens line up behind him, wondering if they'll try to muster the energy to shoplift from **UltraMax**® tonight or just go home and crash.



FANTASIA C

FANTASIA C

WHEN NIGHT FALLS ON A LONGER THAN USUAL DAY BUT SLAVE CAN'T GET INTO IT, he does what he sometimes does and tiptoes to the closet that houses the Bethany costume, which Eye compels him to wear when people like Stan knock on the door trying to track him down.

It's a non-standard thing to wear now, when the only knocks on the door are ones nobody wants to answer, but Eye is deep in his stupor and Slave can't sleep and wants to see the Infanta, so ...

BETHANY STANDS IN THE STREET BETWEEN THEIR TWO HOUSES, in the zone that isn't quite waking or dreaming, but a place she shares only with the Infanta, a place they will, a few years from now, wish and wish they could get back to.

The memory of having been Slave feels ancient, like a version of the world that some creating spirit considered and rejected, or shunted onto a distant planet, opting instead to release Bethany and the Infanta with a picnic lunch into an **ALPINE MEADOW** scored by larks.

That's where they are now, tramping through grass in a day bright not with sun but with something else – a light that only shines on times like these and without which all such times would be dark.

The grass comes up to their shins and they worry about ticks, but only enough to keep moving, their nostrils open to a freshness that bears no relation to the smell of their town. The meadow is flat as far as they can see, but they know there are mountains hidden behind haze in the distance.

The prosciutto and wine in their picnic basket rattles like two small animals in a cage. They sit in the grass and share a pomegranate, cracking it open and counting its seeds.

The seeds are so beautiful they hate to eat any. So as to never run out, they spit some onto the ground and press them in, feeling new pomegranates take shape beneath them.

There is thorough peace for an instant.

THEN THEY LOOK UP to see a mare collapse on her side, a smile on her face.

She heaves her last and her belly splits open and thirty horse heads spill out. Thirty more are stuffed in so tightly they don't budge. They're all she has in her.

Bethany and the Infanta wait to see if anything else is about to happen. When it doesn't, they put their pomegranate husks down and pick up four horse heads apiece, black and red as slick seeds.

They dig in the soft dirt until eight holes appear, deep enough to plant the heads in a row on top of the pomegranate seeds they've already planted.

When they've covered them over, they lean back against the mare, who smells like clean, toned leather, and open their wine and prosciutto, savoring the complementary aromas.

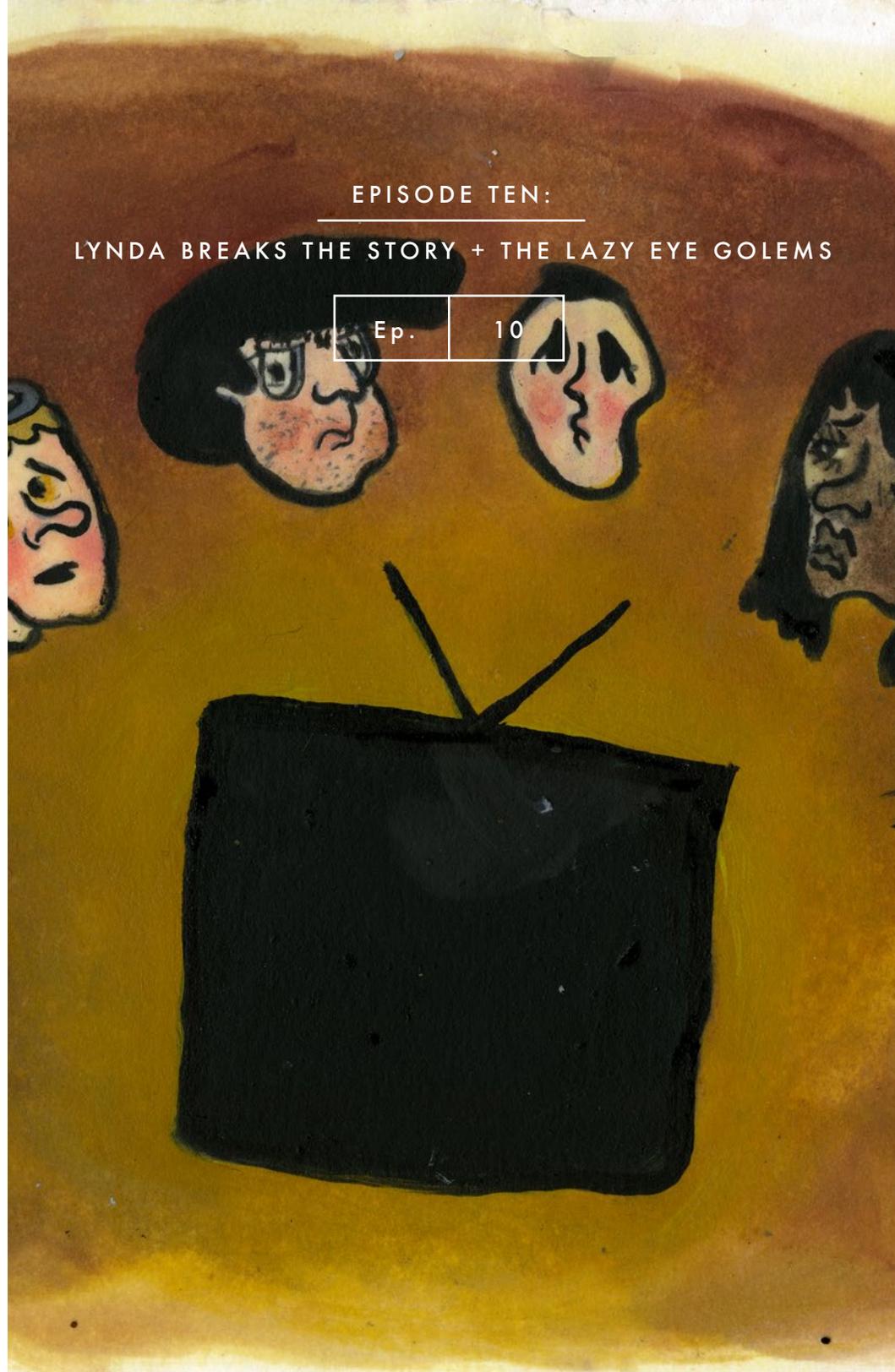
They wait for their eight horse trees to grow with the patience of two people semi-certain that where they are is outside of time.

EPISODE TEN:

LYNDA BREAKS THE STORY + THE LAZY EYE GOLEMS

Ep.

10



EPISODE TEN:

LYNDA BREAKS THE STORY + THE LAZY EYE GOLEMS



4:05am

WHEN NEWS OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE METHADONE RIVER seeps through the rock foundations of the Cave and into the Town's Cable Access TV Station, where Lynda sits from 3 to 5 every morning waiting for the day's news to arrive, everyone sleeping wakes up.

Slave's parents, as well as Slave and Eye next door, as well as Stan, Gerb, Mac and Chiara and Rib and Stacey in Culvert City, even David Eidboff in jail: everyone is sitting up in bed. Their TV's are already on, aware that today is unlike any other.

Lynda is sitting in her swivel chair, the giant weather map behind her. For the first time in her career, she has news big enough to merit skipping the weather, which is always, "hot, dry."

Hot, dry, she mouths behind her hand, warming up her lips.



The news is so big a sign language interpreter named Carol, wife of Ronnie, the one deaf citizen in town, who never learned to read lips on account of being too shy to stare at faces, has been hired on a need-to-know basis.

While Lynda warms up her lips, Carol warms up her fingers, reviewing technical terms from a manual on her lap without yet knowing what news she's been called to impart.

On cue, Lynda begins:

“A man has been found naked in the oil aisle at **Ultra Max...**”

She blushes. This is what she always says after announcing the weather. *But not what I meant to say today*, she reminds herself.

She tries again, with more focus:

“Breaking news: in the Cave just outside of town ... a man has been found naked ...”

She blushes again, looking away from the camera. The lights are burning her facial surgery scars. She feels as if she's in surgery now. She wants to scratch where it itches but presses her fingers into the underside of her desk instead, envying Carol's fingers' spidery freedom.

Everyone in town, including Ronnie who's trying hard to glean his wife's meaning, presses closer to their TV.

Lynda's jaw is hanging open now, a thread having come undone with the effort of breaking this unprecedented news.

“A man ... naked ... Cave ... river ... oil aisle ...”

she sputters, a blackish fluid dripping down her chin.

She grips the sheet with the words **NATURAL METHADONE RIVER FOUND** tightly in her fist, crumpling it. She squints so hard her contact lenses break.

Grabbing the sheet just before it's ruined, Carol decides to take action: at least she will sign the news to her husband, so that it will make it out of the studio before being lost forever – as if the sheet with those words printed on it were the only proof that the news is true.



SO SHE TAKES IT UP as Lynda rushes out of the room and begins making the hand gestures to send the message, her sign language rusty and increasingly improvised.

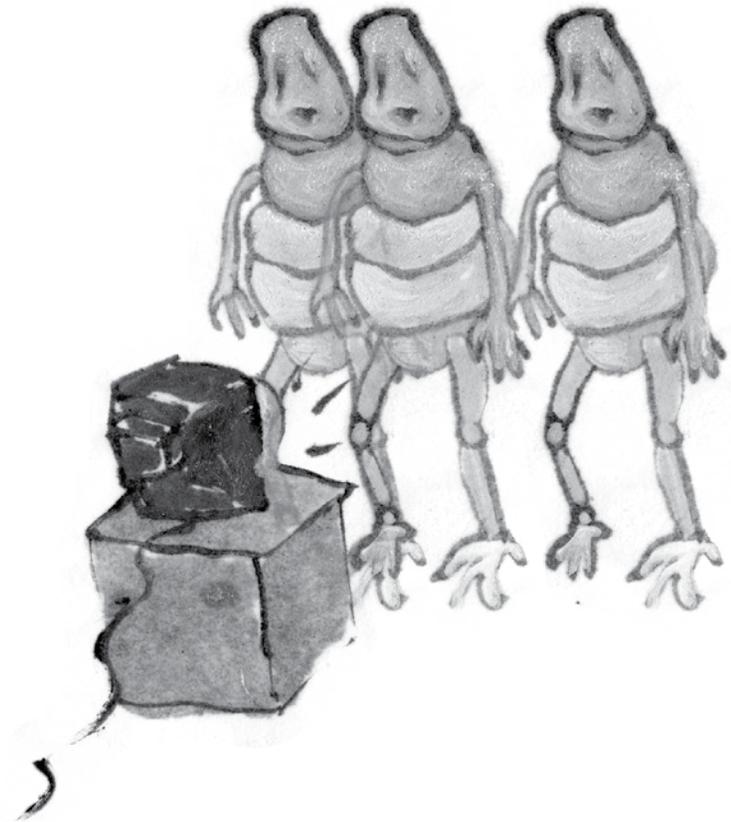


4:35am

RONNIE IS NOT THE ONLY DEAF ONE IN TOWN.

In a storage locker on Rt. 5, the Dodge City Golems are also awake, their TV having likewise come alive with the news.

Usually bored by the repetitive nature of human affairs, the sign language now rivets their clay eyes.



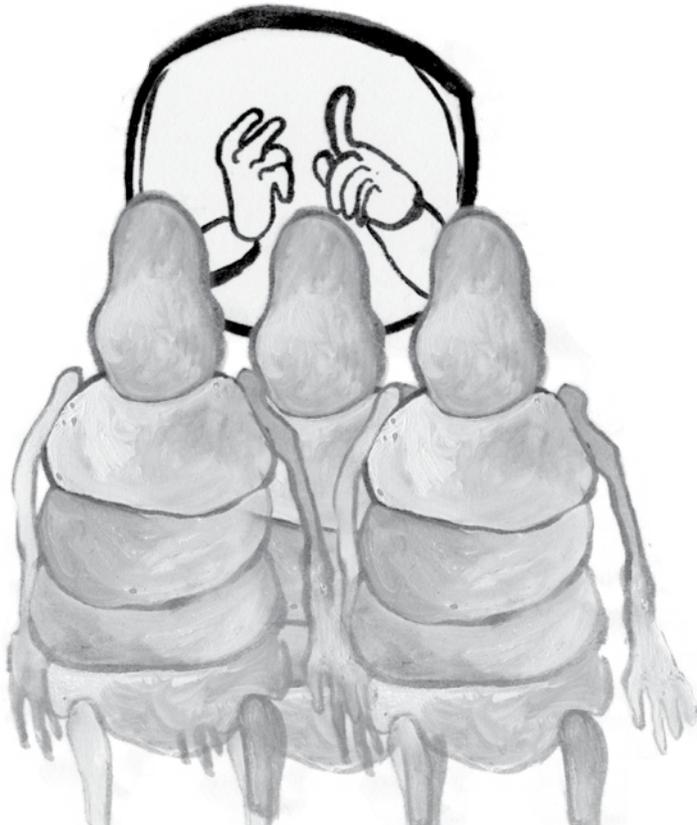
They swivel to face the screen, shaking off a cloud of dust that flutters to fill their enclosed space.

Carol's hand gestures entrance them: they don't read sign language, but something in the way she's moving casts a spell. It stirs them into a lusty frenzy, awakening a centuries-dormant itch at their cores.

Though androgynous, they suddenly yearn to breed. They never before saw their deaths approaching and now it seems they're almost here.

Deep Golem-instinct, unfelt since the time of their parents, directs them toward the school, where the Teaching Genitals for Human Growth & Change class are kept.

Soon they're on the move, their clay supple with reproductive fluid, the door of their storage locker hanging wide open.



4:52am

WHEN THEY BREACH the school's periphery, an alarm goes off, waking the children and calling them running in their pajamas and robes.



The children have done drills to prepare for this. Their teacher warned them that Genitals can activate at any time; it's a natural part of the burden that everyone shares and all anyone can do is be ready.



So they tear into the school and take up hammers, drills, and screwdrivers, grabbing all the sets of Male and Female Teaching Genitals from the Human Growth & Change closet as the Golems burst in.

Above the tool cabinet hangs a sign that reads **YOU CAN'T CONTROL WHAT YOU ARE BUT YOU CAN CONTROL WHAT YOU DO.**



They pound and gouge the anatomical rubber as the Golems, fully in heat, their clay cracking, tear them from the children's hands and affix them to their neutral groins.



Things turn quickly to chaos. The children keep smashing while the Golems attempt to couple on the lab tables. The still-howling alarm only adds to the pandemonium.



The Golems cluster into tight twos and some threes, unperturbed by the damage done to their midsections, not even aware of it.

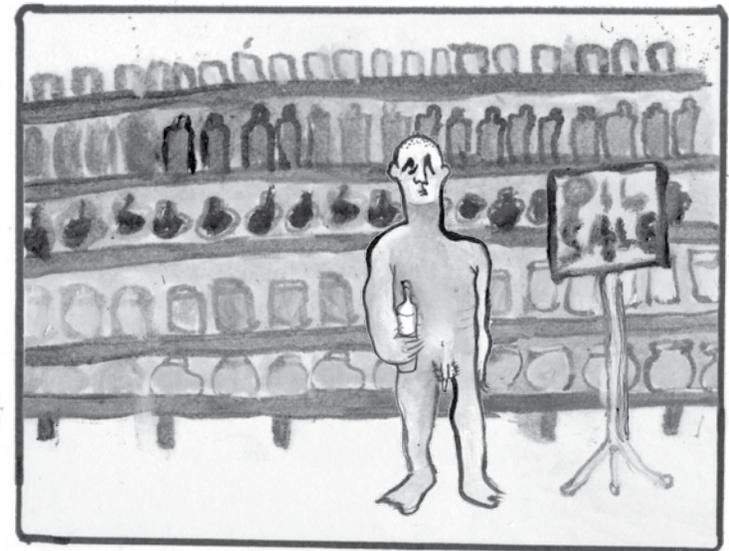


The children know they're beat. They weren't fast enough, though perhaps no amount of violence would've kept the Golems from having their way with what was left.



Done with what they could do, they remove their safety goggles to watch the Golems rut, having learned that, in the course of nature, new Golems will be born.

The ambulance carrying an almost-faceless Lynda speeds by as they head toward Culvert City to ask Rib what's going on after getting some Gushers at **Ultra Max**, where, as always, the naked man stands in the oil aisle waiting to be tackled by cops that, for once, aren't coming.



5:46am

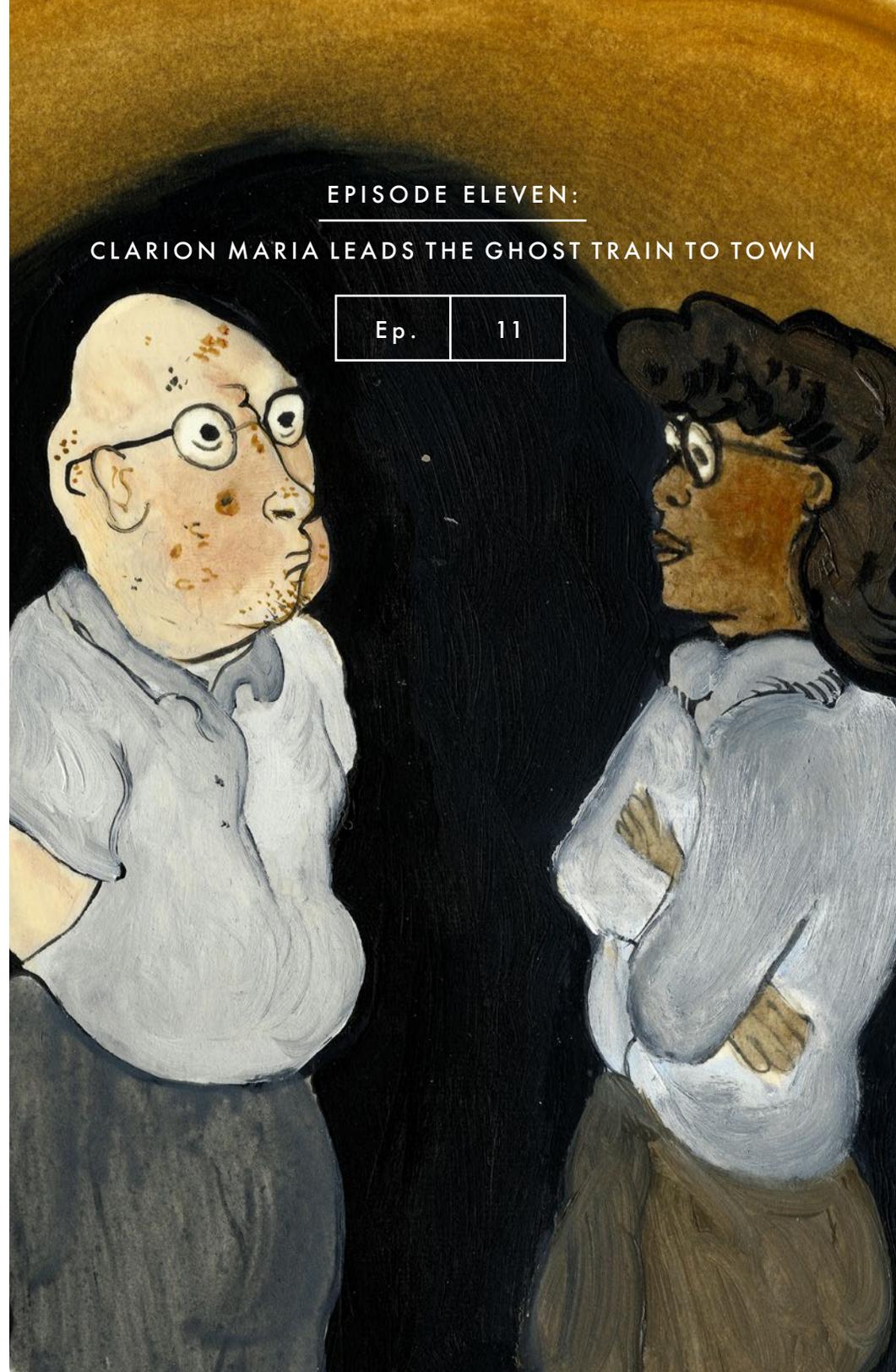
DEFEATED BUT PROUD OF THE EFFORT THEY MADE, the children put down their tools and, helpless not to admire one another in their pajamas and robes in the rising sun, process out of the school, having decided en masse to take the day off.

EPISODE ELEVEN:

CLARION MARIA LEADS THE GHOST TRAIN TO TOWN

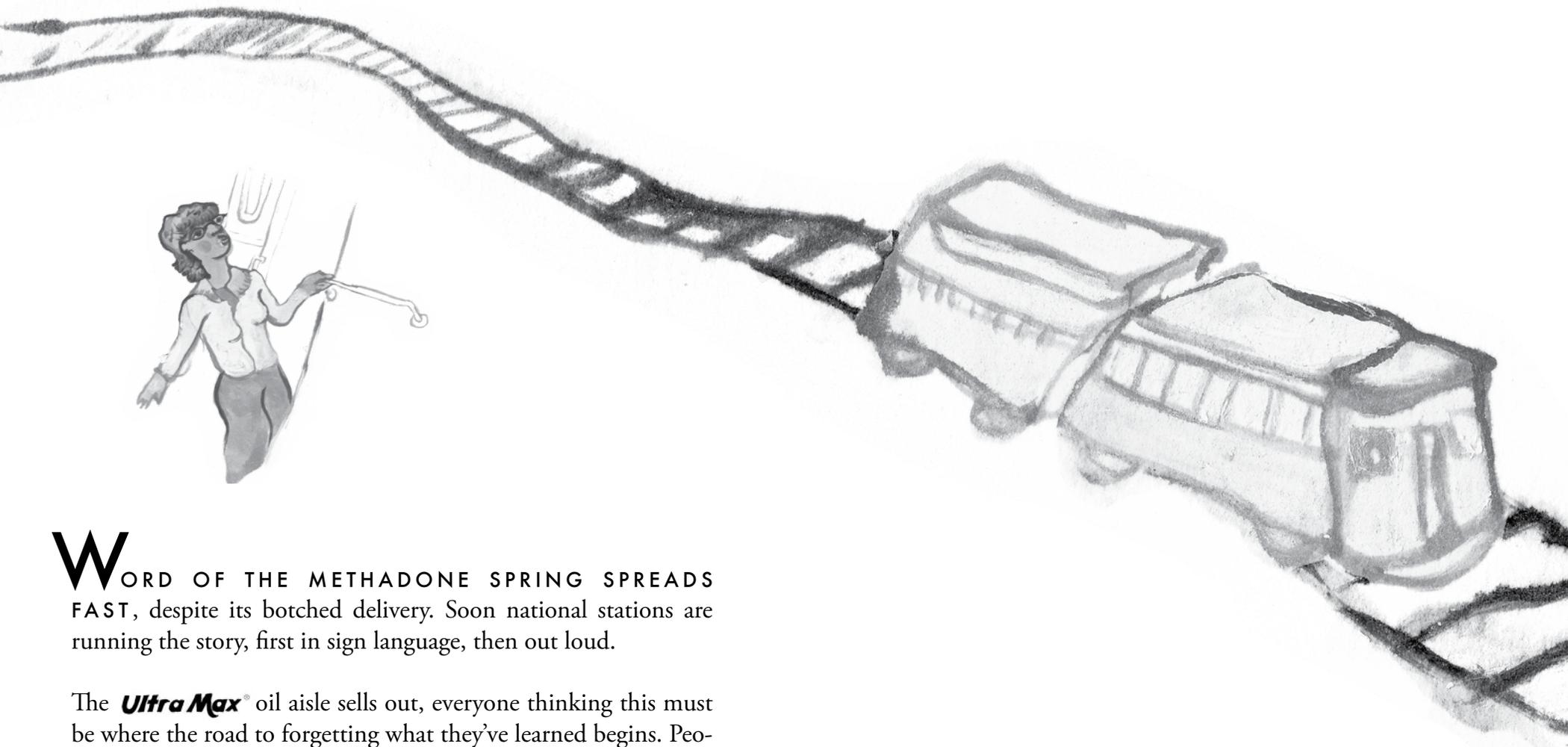
Ep.

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EPISODE ELEVEN:

CLARION MARIA LEADS
THE GHOST TRAIN TO TOWN



WORD OF THE METHADONE SPRING SPREADS FAST, despite its botched delivery. Soon national stations are running the story, first in sign language, then out loud.

The **Ultra Max**® oil aisle sells out, everyone thinking this must be where the road to forgetting what they've learned begins. People even buy vinegar. The naked man is shunted into the shellfish freezer.

IN THE REST OF THE COUNTRY, everyone knows and some people are doing something about it. Especially Clarion Maria, longterm captain of a two-car ghost train.

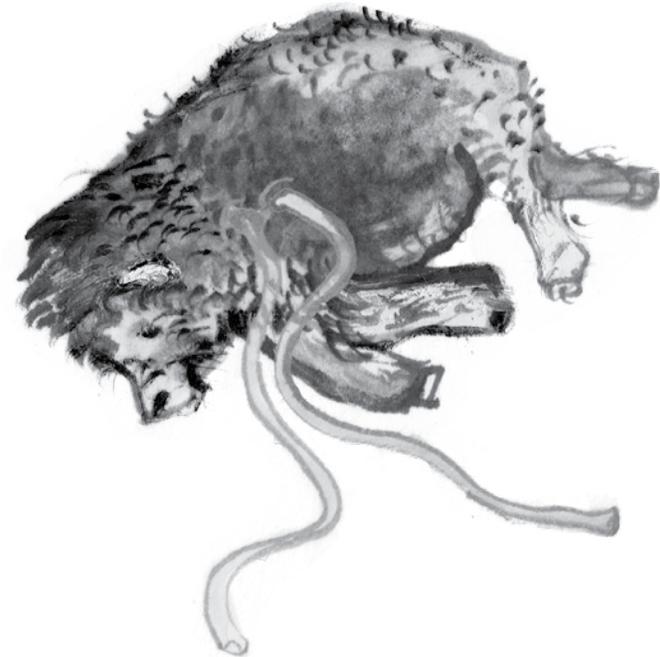
She first boarded the ghost train, which generates its own track as it goes, on her twenty-first birthday, the day she lost what had until then been her home, and hasn't stopped plying the nation's interior in it since.

Her thing is cathedrals, Romanesque. She builds them on credit cards, which she serially opens and closes, better than most at not worrying about the frequent flyer miles lost in between.

Each town she passes through has a cathedral of hers, or part of one, however much she manages to put up before her credit is sundered.



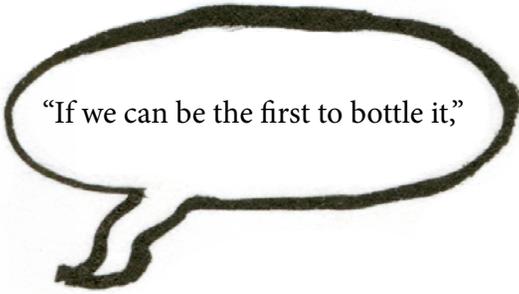
She used to liaise with the heaviest drinker in each town for an hour in a chain accommodation of his choosing, but when she turned thirty-one she was given an oxblood dildo system as a bonus for opening an account with an upstart credit card company out of Des Moines, designed to inflate with the fresh blood of one ox per town. The ox is stored behind a glass partition in the ghost train and hooked up through a tube running from its heart, which Clarion Maria is free to inflate at the turn of a nozzle until the beast runs dry, the result being that her mind is now uncluttered by strangers and she never has to smell the lobby of an EconoLodge again.



The crew holds back its opinions on this front, except when she sends them out for oxen, which can be tough to find and even tougher to install, and there's the issue of disposing of the used ones, often not quite dead but too dry to eat.

The ghost train roams a grid of six states, spending months at a time underground in search of rare earth metals to supplement Clarion Maria's increasingly strained credit lines, but she has yet to strike upon any worth more than what they cost to extract.

SO SHE TAKES NEWS OF THE METHADONE SPRING AS A GODSEND.



she says, through the partition between her car and the crew's. She knows she doesn't need to finish the thought, so she doesn't.



She looks at her hand, imagines the camera zooming in on it as she holds up a methadone bottle on live TV, explaining its uses and pricing. Then she looks at her other hand, wonders which one it will be when the time comes.

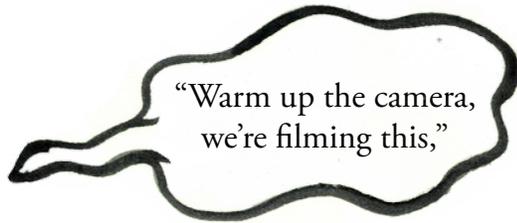
This vision loops back to the older, central one, which she's pursued all of her adult life and believes is now close to fruition: It came in a dream when she was eleven. Having learned to fly while passing through a 17th century Swedish village, she ran up the highest structure she could find, planning to jump out and soar, but the villagers clamored after her when they saw what she could do, as if to squeeze her dreaming out, and she was trapped in what turned out to be a mere two-story churchtower, trying to get out while they huffed up the stairs bearing torches, but the window was stained glass and wouldn't open and suddenly neither her ability to fly nor her (probable) inability to die did her much good, and her mind got wrenched into a middle zone close to waking where she felt her body aging much faster than was safe, and in this middle zone – looking through the stained glass – she saw an immense cathedral looming over the town, its foundation covering a full acre, and she understood that a spring fed into the baptismal font in this cathedral, and that if she could bathe in that font, every misstep of her previous life would be forgiven and the right path would be revealed, and no longer would there be the smoky circle of doubt around everything she did except sleep.



WHEN SHE WOKE UP she was twenty-one, clinging to the promise that those lost years would be restored upon bathing in the font in the cathedral she would first have to build.

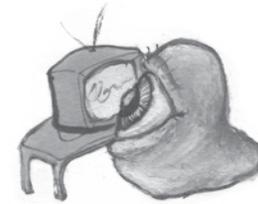
That was the morning she left her home and boarded the ghost train, waiting outside, with a crew that claimed to've been doing nothing until then.

WHEN THE GHOST TRAIN PENETRATES THE TOWN'S PERIMETER, an atmospheric disturbance alerts the TV Station, which, at a loss after Lynda's meltdown, is hard on the lookout for fresh content.



signs Carol, de facto station manager until Lynda returns.

The TV crew doesn't read sign language, but they get the gist. Soon they're on the scene, filming the ghost train as it chugs along track that most people would've said did not until then exist.



AT HOME, Slave has just secured a GIANT CHINESE delivery. He comes into the living room to find Eye inching all the way up to the TV, his reflection encircling the approaching train like the weather it's passing through, condensing on its windows, which Clarion Maria is gazing longingly out of.



Slurping a peanut butter noodle, Slave prepares to warn Eye not to get too close to the screen, but it's a conversation they've had too many times over the years without its sinking in. Slave loses heart.

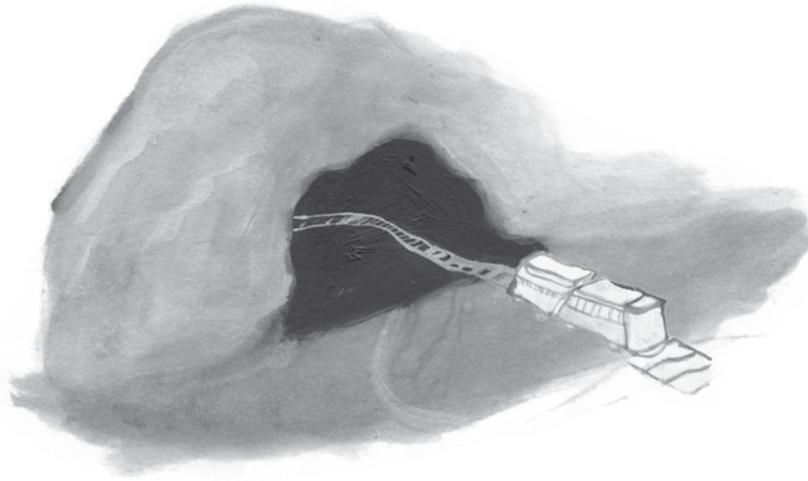


Eye and the ghost train are now fully integrated, the train slicing through his white, the TV framing them both. Eye shivers with the sensation, dripping onto the carpet.



Slave has peanut butter noodles all down his front as he watches Eye internalize the reality: this train is coming for his spring. He will not enjoy endless fresh methadone for life without a fight.

THE GHOST TRAIN chugs behind **Ultra Max**® and through Culvert City to enter the Cave where the methadone river is fresh and deep.

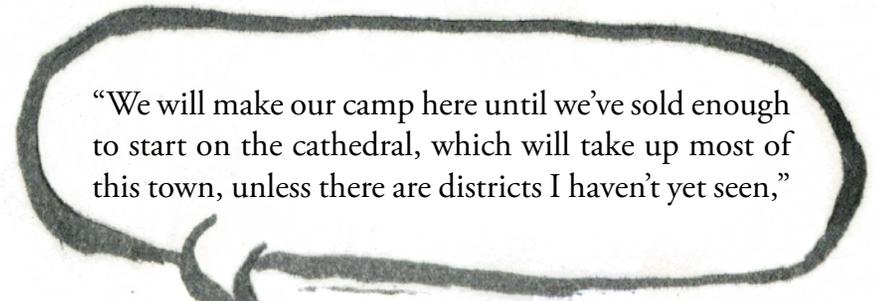


Chester, the Cannibal King is sitting on a lawn chair, placid enough to look like he's been expecting them.



The train crashes into the wax idol, crushing it and gumming up its wheels badly enough that it has to stop.

Clarion Maria climbs out as Chester stands up to greet her.



she says.



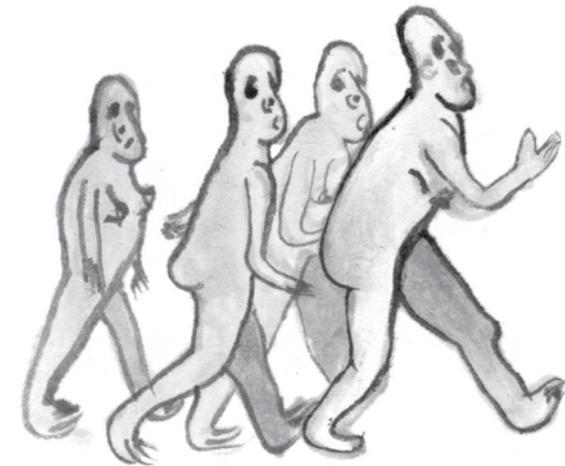
Chester smiles like nothing explicable can surprise him. Cannibal Children emerge from the shadows, skinny from lack of recent meat, eyeing the new arrivals with minimal respect.

As they close in, Clarion Maria returns in her mind to that two-story 17th century Swedish chapel and looks through the stained glass at the vision of the cathedral across town, the best years of her life bobbing in its baptismal font like apples waiting to be speared by her teeth and chewed one by one.

Far inside the vision, she barely hears the screams of her crew as the Cannibal Children go for their best parts first.



Offered the left cheek of her first lieutenant, she considers asking if she can wrap it up for later, but thinks better of it, pinching her nose to swallow it down like a wet herring.



EPISODE TWELVE:

EYE DIES

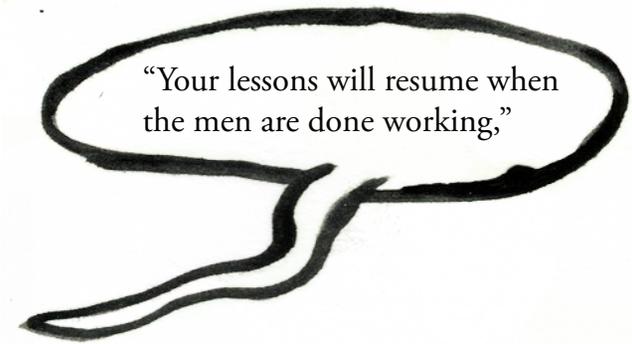
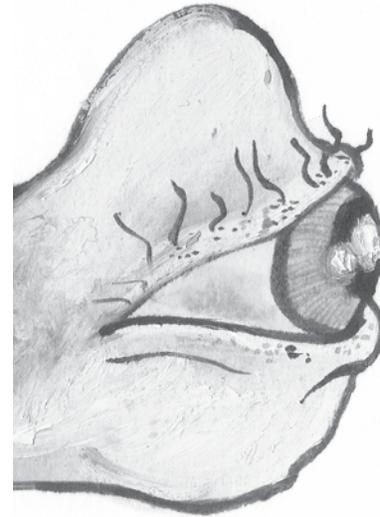
Ep.

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EPISODE TWELVE:

EYE DIES



“Your lessons will resume when the men are done working,”

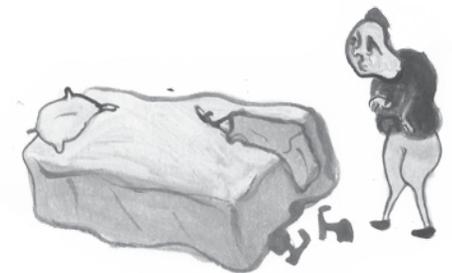
is all Eye thinks to say to him, and this only after several days of house arrest.



THE ARRIVAL of Clarion Maria doesn't mean that Eye isn't going to taste the fresh methadone. It's just that it won't all be for him and he might not get in on selling it, which is okay since in terms of money he's rich.

Rib and some younger, Rib-looking grunt called Dan dig a pipeline to Eye's backyard, surfacing in a methadone font that feeds into a largish plastic pool.

Slave watches them dig, wishing badly to participate but, for some reason never explained to him, forbidden to even show his face.



So Slave roams the indoors letting his mind float. He searches the windows of what used to be his house, next door, for the Infanta, but doesn't find her. He finds his Bethany costume no longer fits.

NOT ONLY IS TODAY THE DAY that Eye's backyard pool is complete, it's also the day that David Eidboff gets out on parole. His review hearing is always the same, the consensus being that he is perhaps fit to reenter the outside world "on extremely thin ice."

The crime that breaks this ice and gets him sent back inside is always the same as well: attempting to murder Eye and collect the bounty offered by Slave's parents for the return of their son and the annihilation of his taker.



Eidboff is walking out the front door of the prison now, carrying his good shoes and his Turkish coffee pot, returned to him along with his wallet and watch. He bangs it against his knee now, trying to drum in some feeling.

The Giant Chinese ambulance, which doubles as the prison van, is idling in the roundabout. Sam Ren, the driver, is looking at a new tattoo that spells ROY G BIV across his knuckles, which he considers a crude but effective means of summoning the devil. The final knuckle sports a period.

David Eidboff knocks on the passenger's side door and Sam Ren reaches across to open it, noticing, seemingly for the first time, that there's already someone there – his brother Leo.



he says to David Eidboff, who nods, knowing the drill. He hauls Sam Ren's brother onto the black-top and the prison guards swarm him with nets.

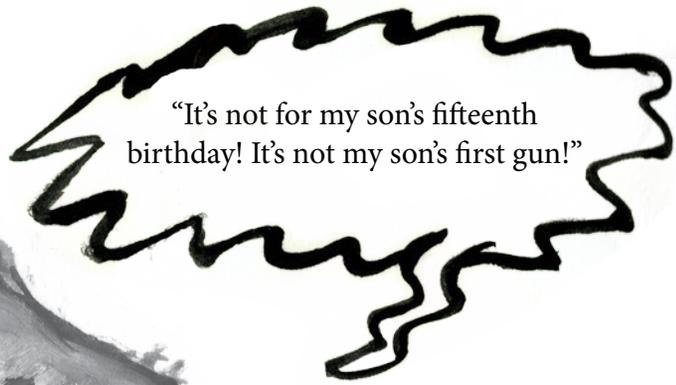
Then he sits down.



David Eidboff nods, glad that by now they're beyond the need to discuss what happened in prison.



Sam Ren waits in the **Ultra Max**® parking lot while David Eidboff buys a new gun and a box of ammo. Since it gets confiscated every time he goes back inside, he buys the cheapest model, arguing for ten minutes with the salesman who wants him to buy something special.

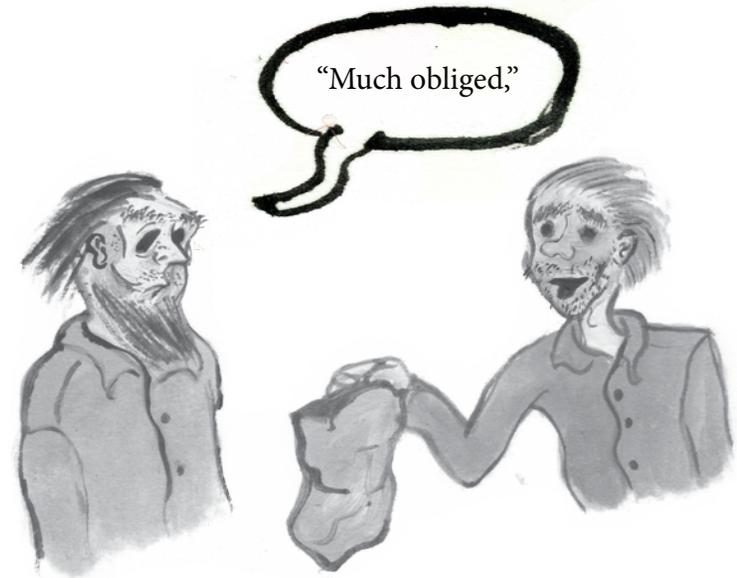


he shouts at the salesman, loud enough for everyone in the oil aisle to hear. He's had this conversation too many times to have it quietly anymore.



BACK IN THE GIANT CHINESE AMBULANCE they drive to Eye's house, David Eidboff loading the gun as they go.

When they arrive, Sam Ren reaches behind his seat and hands over a brown bag of wontons and noodles.



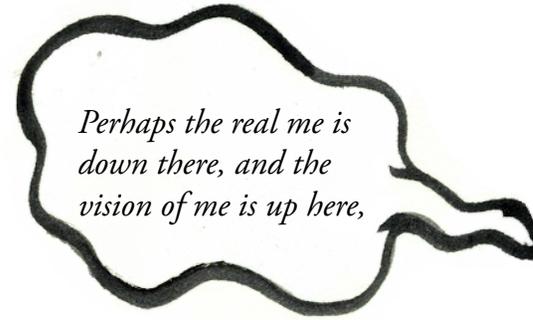
He nods David Eidboff as the ambulance drives away and he lets himself into Eye's house, through the side door that's never locked, gun in one hand, Giant Chinese in the other.



WHILE DAVID EIDBOFF is slinking through the house, Eye is on the roof, preparing to dive into his new pool.

Slave is behind him, wearing a robe that is all of a sudden too small. He's never seen his knees from this angle before. They look modular, like somebody slapped them on.

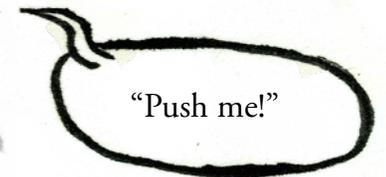
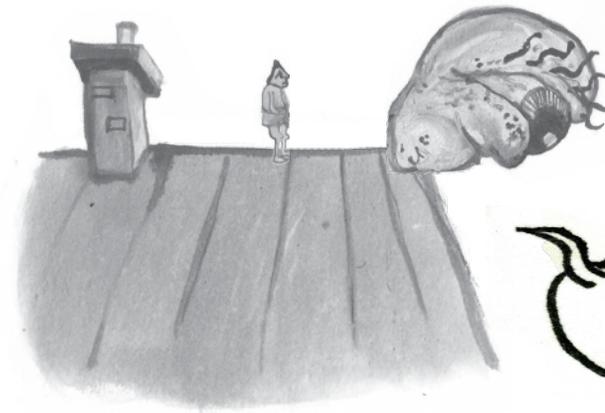
For a moment, Eye can't tell whether it has:



he thinks, knowing he mustn't indulge this line of reasoning if he wants the day to have a next phase and not end now.



Eye teeters on the edge, looking at his reflection below. It looks huge, like the methadone has already taken effect.



he yells, preempting a swoon.





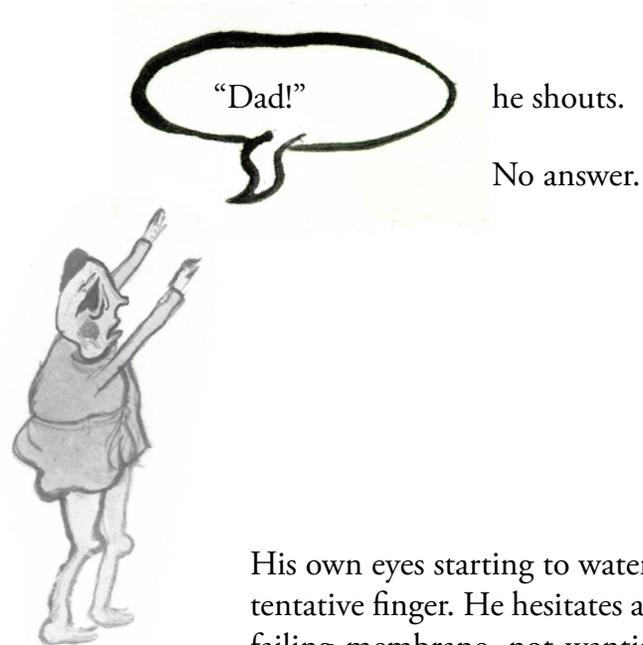
Slave, though his mind's elsewhere, obliges, heaving Eye as hard as he can, down toward the rippling, slimy liquid.



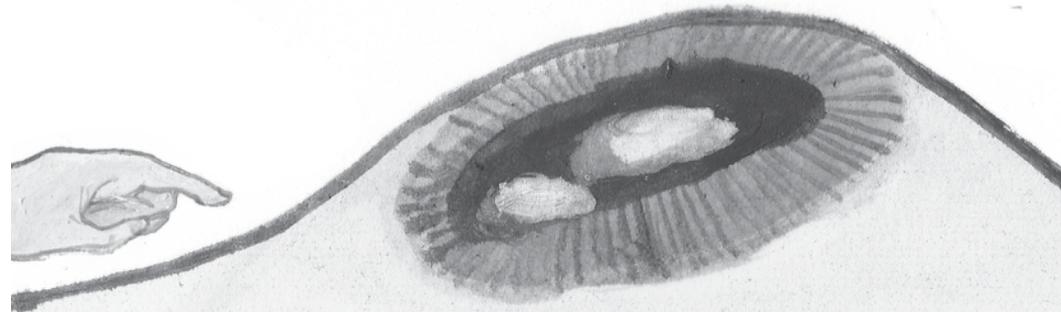
Eye lands with a grass-killing splash and bubbles down into the brine. Slave watches from the edge of the roof, trying to catch a glint of Eye's pleasure, as he's lately taken to doing.

But instead of his usual purring groan, Eye is silent. All color has drained out of him and his white is starting to unfurl.

Terrified, Slave races down the ladder that connects roof to yard, and runs over to the pool.



His own eyes starting to water, he reaches out a tentative finger. He hesitates at the edge of Eye's failing membrane, not wanting to touch what he can see is an unwell body.





Unable to dam his tears, he holds the egg up to his face and whispers,



Grabbing ahold of himself, he shoves his finger all the way in. Eye's membrane loses the last of its integrity, turning from jelly to sauce. A swampy gas escapes, greenly visible in the hot sun. The whole Eye-shape deflates, slurping down into the methadone, which ripples and fizzes.

Disgust and grief push Slave's face from both sides, until it feels like his eyes are touching his nose which is touching his mouth. Fumes from the pool and from what's left of Eye make him want to pitch forward and drown.

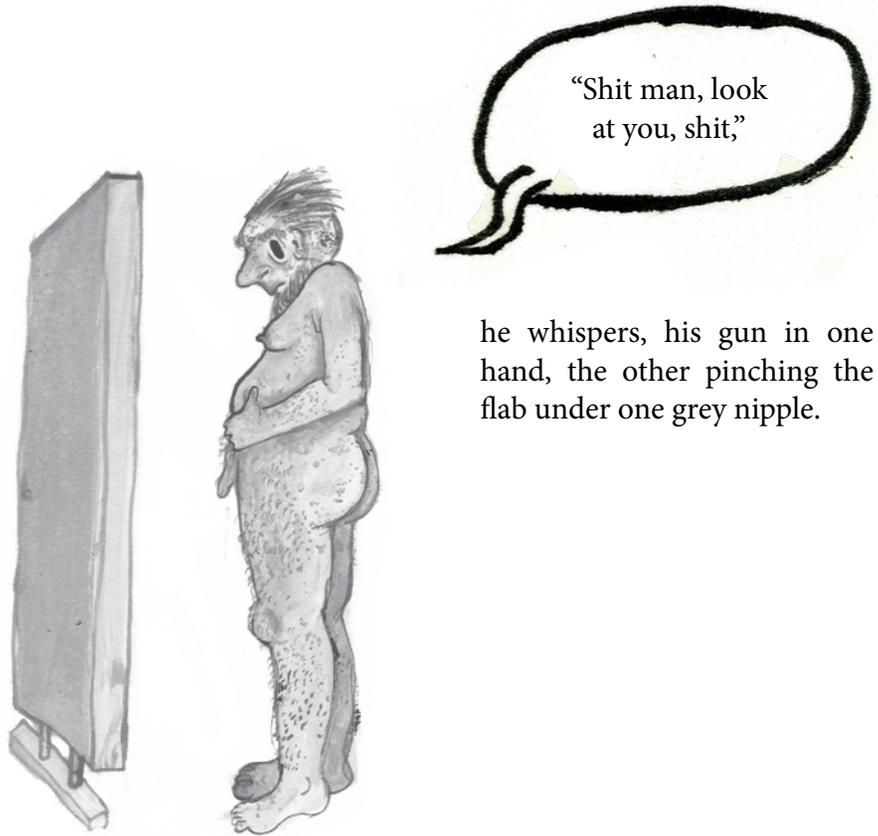
He uses the last of his capacity to reach into the mess and fish out what looks an ostrich egg, Eye's sole remnant. Submerging his hand, wrist, and forearm, he comes back with the egg squeezed between his fingers and his skin flaking off like filo dough.



WHILE SLAVE IS UNDERGOING THIS LIFE EVENT IN THE YARD, David Eidboff is in Eye's bedroom upstairs.

He's completely naked, his clothes in a pile on the bed, looking at himself in the mirror. There are no mirrors in prison, so these moments in Eye's room are his only chance to measure the rate at which his body is aging.

He squeezes every part of himself and finds it not-pretty all around.

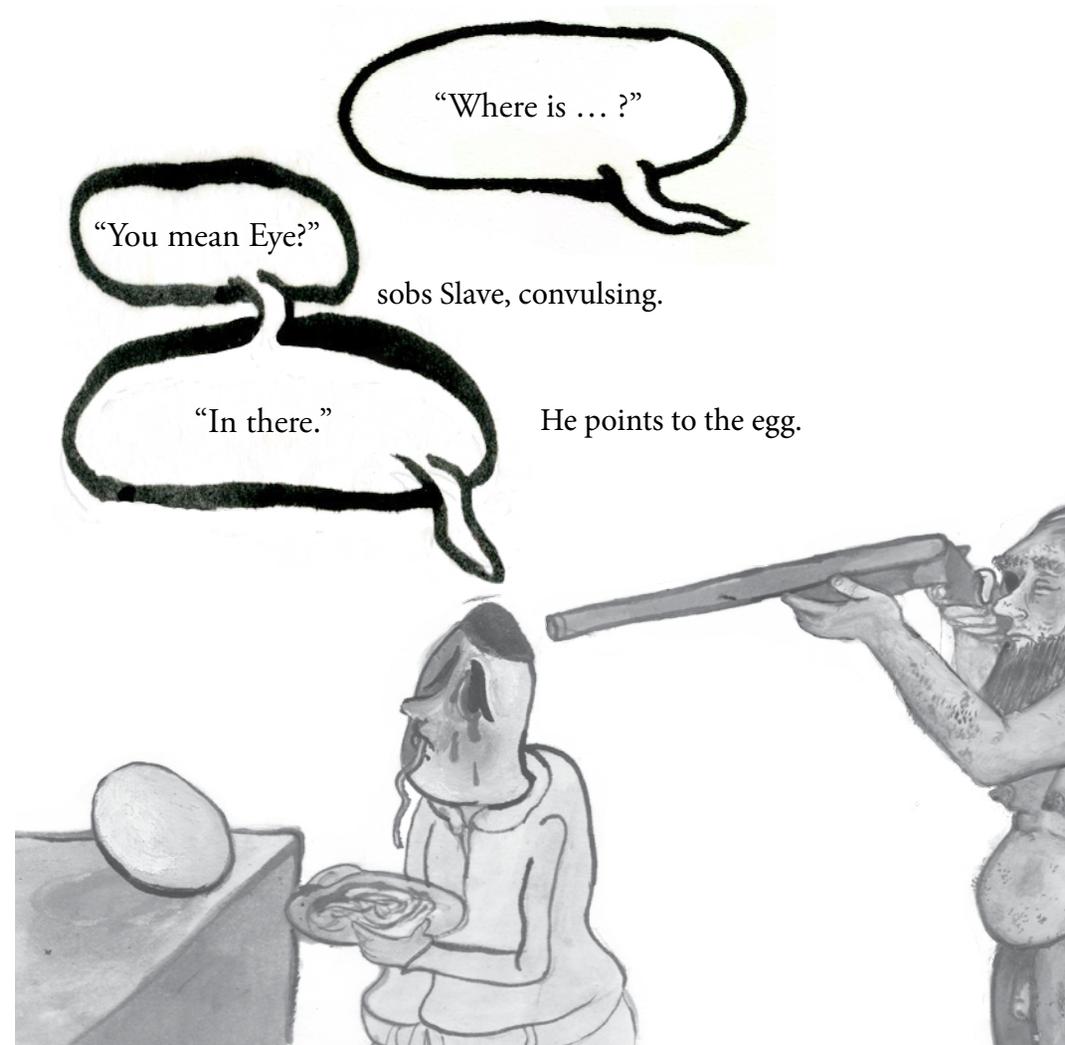


Next, he would normally get under the sheets and have a little nap before taking his shot at Eye, but now he hears something unusual downstairs. He turns from the mirror, flexing what's left of his deltoids, and sets off to investigate.

He enters the kitchen, gun raised, to find Slave slurping a plate of wontons and staring at a large egg on the counter.

Slave's expression is so forlorn that David Eidboff feels his commitment to murder steaming away.

He comes up behind Slave and whispers,



sobs Slave, convulsing.

He points to the egg.

Hefting his gun from hand to hand, all David Eidboff can think to say is,

“That thing looks like it wants to be warm. Let’s put it in the microwave.”

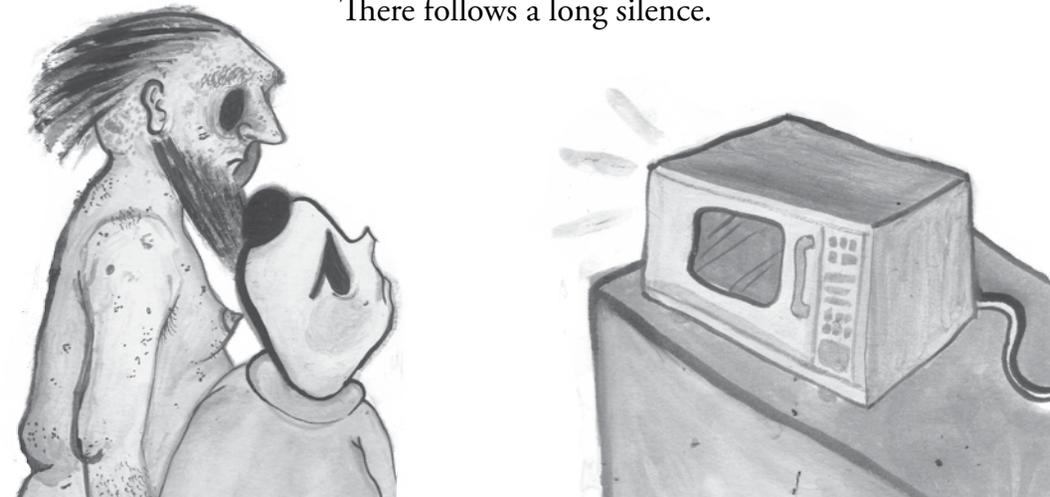
Gingerly, unsure if Slave will howl when he touches it, David Eidboff lifts the egg into the microwave and closes the door.

“Let’s just leave it there a little while,”

“No need to turn it on just yet.”

he says, as soothingly as he can.

There follows a long silence.



Remembering the gun in his hand, David Eidboff hears the salesman in his ear and holds it out to Slave.

“Here, son,”

he says.

“Today you’re a man.
And a man needs a gun.”

Slave reaches out for it, his heart fat with emotions it’s never held before. The gun’s so heavy and his palm is so sweaty he almost drops it. With David Eidboff’s help, he manages to get a grip.



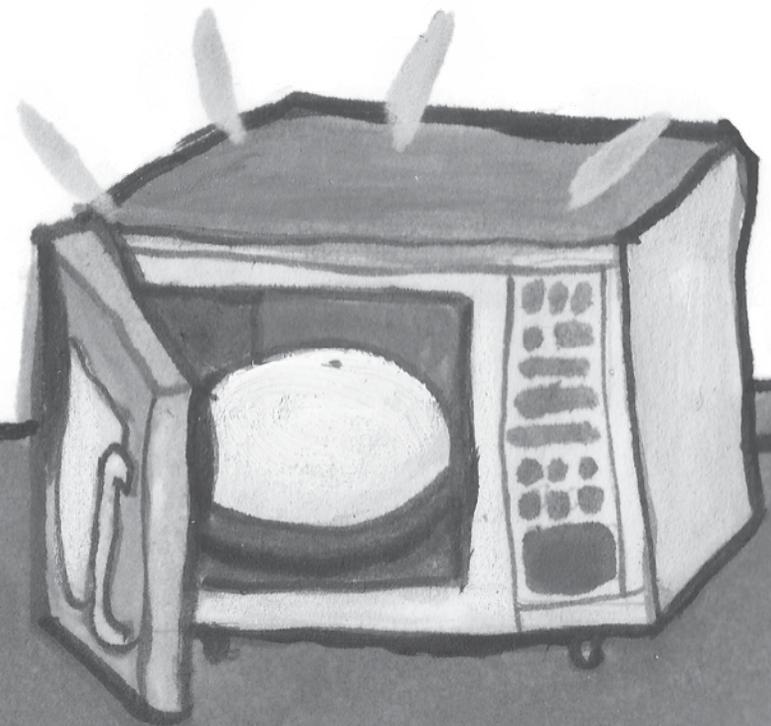
“What do you say we finish those wontons, then I take you out back and show you how to shoot?”

Slave nods, afraid to believe his luck at finding such sympathy in a moment like this.

“Because,”

“as soon as that egg hatches, you’re going to have to be the father around here.”

adds David Eidboff, speaking from a hunch,



CHARACTER GUIDE



EYE

Private Citizen / Methadone Addict / From Overseas

Lives with Slave in a quiet house on a suburban street, not far from the center of town but by no means in it. Is the subject of much speculation but little actual scrutiny from his neighbors, who confine their theories about his provenance and nature mostly to their own homes. Has a tremendous Private Fortune. Cherishes his creature comforts, the majority of which are briny, vegetal, TV-based, or, after some alien fashion, pornographic. Is said to possess a total of four nerve-endings, each impeccably performing its specific duty.



SLAVE

Abducted by Eye / Before that, Grew Up Watching Eye through his Bedroom Window / Approaching Puberty

Attends to Eye's every whim as if it were his own. Has long hours of downtime, post-methadone-administration, to wander Eye's house at will.

Explores the wine cellar, attic, storage spaces, and echelons of fantasy - both hormonal and supernatural - that open after dark. Does not know whether these jaunts are encouraged or forbidden ... has, as yet, never been caught. Sometimes even leaves the house, very, very late at night, to wander the neighborhood like a lost cat, always returning before dawn.



BETSY & PHIL

Slave's Parents / Refinery Manager / Shouldering Full-time Worry

Phil worked his way up from "near the bottom" at the Refinery, to the point where he's now essentially a fixture, someone whose locker, timecard, and parking spot are all destined for the attention of tourists and historians, if he becomes famous for another reason. Betsy comes from the North, maybe Canada, more likely The Rust Belt. She and Phil met at a Holiday Inn in Sacramento that each had their own never-shared reasons for staying at that night. She never exactly took to



life here in town, but things were better before the Disappearance of their Son. Now she spends her days poring over adoption pamphlets, redoing old Mad Libs, and making sweatshirts for no one.



THE INFANTA

Gothic Princess adopted by Slave's Parents from Medieval Spain / Sleeps in Slave's old Bed, looking through his old Bedroom Window at Eye's House next door

Driven mad by their loss, Slave's parents adopt The Infanta from medieval Spain. She arrives very frail and sickly, pale-skinned and soft-spoken, dressed in silk and linen robes on Easter Sunday. She languishes in Slave's old bed, sipping broth and nibbling almonds and oranges. Over time, she and Slave develop a silent flirtation, staring through their windows at one another very late at night.



OTTO & TARLETAN

Twin Preachers of Divergent Words

Otto is a bonafide hedonist, the sort of old-school cult leader who expects his followers to service and wait on him in all capacities, at all hours. A real decadent Roman Emperor type, operating in a Rules-Free Zone of his own making. On the other hand, Tarletan, the first-born twin, is fully his younger brother's opposite: a glutton for punishment, mortifying himself in reenactment of classic feats of privation from *The Lives of the Saints* and *The Desert Fathers*. The gruesome latter stages of these feats have grown popular as Pay-

per-View Events on the Town's Cable Access TV station, where a certain demographic bets on whether he'll die before taking a sip of water or a morsel of bread. There are many who continually bet against him, though they have yet to come out on top. They meet in the **UltraMax**® Cafe once a month to discuss Doctrine, attempting to agree on who will preach what in the coming weeks. These sessions usually devolve into bickering and light fisticuffs, the result being that each twin devotes most of his pulpit hours to belittling the other, in more or less transcendental terms.



LYNDA

Newscaster / TV Station Admin Chief

Sole newscaster at and administrator of the Town's Cable Access TV Station (TCATVS), she runs in-house programs and reports on scandalous activity around town, especially the re-



curring case of the naked man in the **UltraMax**® oil aisle. Her most popular program is the annual Local America's Most Wanted, in which shut-ins from around town are interviewed about the serial killers they've spotted out their windows over the course of the year. Has arguably suffered more from the ravages of plastic surgery than from the ravages of time.



RIB & STACEE

Methadone Dealers / Sole Inhabitants of a Private City

Rib and Stacee are the sole inhabitants of Culvert City, which is made up of the culverts behind **UltraMax**®. They used to make deliveries all over town, but now their business has reached the point where they only deal to those who appear at the lip of the culvert. Rib, a graduate student, views it as his sovereign duty to allow himself to be force-fed all of human literature, the way a foie-gras duck is force-fed food. For lack of dry ground in the culverts, he balances his book collection on the



flanks of sleeping dogs, considering those that fall off and float away to be "non-canonical." Stacee, an amateur psychic who was blindsided by a vast but incomplete vision when she was very young, is forever preparing for that vision's second part, which she only hopes will arrive before she's too senile to distinguish it from the rest of whatever reality will have by that point become.



STAN

Town Mayor / Chief of Police

A stereotypically “good man,” though an enigma even to those who know him best. Went through a radical early phase in which he patented the idea of Death and, with an army of commission-workers, sued anyone using his idea in the surrounding counties, until he was finally overruled, a defeat he’s still sore over. He now claims to have been reincarnated in the same body he used in his previous life. “I feel basically the same as last time,” he claims, when he’s feeling articulate, “but my priorities have shifted slightly.”



MAC & CHIARA

Young Couple from A Coast / Cafe and Roastery Managers / Folk Rock Duo

Came to town last fall, with Chiara two months pregnant. The birth of their baby, Esther, coincided with the opening of Dream Project, the cafe and roastery they both saved for many long years in order to one day be able to open in a town something like this one, where the real estate was still cheap but the people ready and willing to have their minds opened by good strong coffee and grounded secular debate. When they find time, they perform together as a folk rock duo, specializing



in folk reimaginings of heavy metal songs, believing, as they do, that wood, nylon, and the human voice are material enough to express any emotion worth expressing.



GERB

Liquor Store Manager / One-man Graduate Studies Faculty

While managing Gerb’s Liquor Store (the town’s sole non-**Ultra Max**® liquor dealing establishment, “Where prices are higher and vintages finer”) he also works on his tracts and exegeses and administers Graduate Degrees in Semiotics. So far, his only student is Rib. Two of his longterm projects are (1) *The Pagan Ulysses*, in which he’s reworking Joyce’s masterpiece to avoid all monotheistic references, so as to make the text as spiritually divergent as possible, and (2) the locating of the Local Tributary of The River Styx, which he’s convinced flows beneath the town.



CAROL

Sign Language Expert / Never Reached Full Potential for “Sitting Quietly with Oneself”

Run ragged by life in the refinery -- where her husband Ronnie went deaf on the night he turned 17 -- she retired at 45 to pursue work as a sign-language expert in the **Ultra Max**® Hose Department, where the everlasting shriek of pressurized water made it impossible to hear the PA system. Though this hasn’t panned out, she keeps her fingers in shape with a series of exercises designed by Tarleton, despite Otto’s warnings that these motions are apt to rouse a slumbering Evil so vast it could destroy humanity with a single yawn.



DAVID EIDBOFF

Bounty Hunter / Stand-up Comic / Magician / Serving Life Sentence

Once took a shot at Stan, the Town Mayor, during a political rally in the late 80's, when both men were young. He's now serving a life sentence for this and a variety of subsequent crimes, but

is too in-demand as an entertainer to waste away in his cell, so the deal is this: his home is prison, but whenever a call for a gig comes in, he is free to leave, perform, and return in his own good time, locking himself back in upon his return.



CHESTER

Cannibal King

Cave-dweller, methadone-dealer, well regarded by those close to him. Has ruled the Cannibals for "a generation," though no outsider, much as plenty have tried, can guess how long a span this term describes in the Cannibals'

self-taught version of English. When asked by a crusading, now deceased, journalist to defend his taste for human flesh, he replied, "It seems grilled." No further interviews have been conducted, despite his standing offer to "talk to anyone who likes me."



CLARION MARIA

Haunted by Dreams / Ghost Train Captain

Constantly in motion, never more so than while dreaming, when she is dragged back to the site of an Original Trauma that is at this point more of a parent to her than any mother or father

ever was. Though a stranger in a bar once succeeded in granting her access to "the single perfect fixed point in my soul," every attempt to return here has been met with confusion and paranoia. So now she lives only to drive her ghost train onward, westward, ever in search of relief -- the kind that won't evaporate in the cruel light of day.

