

A friendly reunion

by Alejandro Rivera

Part I : Helen

The sun shines so bright, it hurts just to look at the dirt road, and every scrap of paint missing from David's bicycle stings my eye. His loose red wild flag of a shirt, and the surrounding sea of corn fill my vision with burning color. "Don't squint like that. The whole concept of this expedition is to feel nature around us. To open ourselves up. How long has it been since you stopped to listen, and heard birdsong instead of traffic?" He's right, I don't embark in this sort of escapade very often. Is that alright? It's not like I'm not enjoying myself though. There's the lulling sound of my spinning wheels, there's the surge of satisfaction felt with each push against the pedals. The summer breeze clears my brow and sets my blouse aflutter around the cuffs and collar. It seems to be peeling off a layer of grime that had gone unnoticed until now. The smell of David's sweat, his heavy breathing and that panting sound after he's done talking, it all feels like he's pressed right up against me. Just for a second, my eyes plunge down the collar of his shirt, his heaving chest glistens with perspiration. I quickly turn my gaze back to the road to avoid colliding with his front wheel. "If you can stand opening your nostrils to toxic exhaust smoke, you can stand opening your eyes to a summer sky," David continues eloquently. "Easy for you to say from under your Barrett shades!" "In case you haven't noticed, being too busy squinting, my eyes are wide open under these, wide open to Syd's wonderfully strange vision of the world. This is my quest for understanding." Although I'm not entirely satisfied with his explanation, I nod, and press harder on the pedals, "Whoot!" I'm not going to let David's chastising comments erode my enjoyment of the trip. Still, for a second, I try to take in the swaying of all the cornstalks and blades of grass at once. A thousand hands waving as I pass. "If the doors of perception were cleansed..." but the rest of David's words are lost as I speed on to catch up with you. You're sitting straight on your bicycle, gazing into the distance, tapping on a small bongo strapped to your waist. You look so majestic, whizzing straight down the road, your long red hair blazing backwards like a tongue of flame, silhouetted against the yellow sea of corn, your brow ever so slightly furrowed in concentration. I can barely ride my bike with one hand. Suddenly you

turn to me and smile one of those gorgeous reassuring smiles, and just like that, my mind goes blank.

Around noon we take a break. While I unscrew my water bottle, David unzips his backpack and carefully, almost ceremoniously, pulls out his sitar. "So, tell me Helen, what have you been up to all these years? Still studying hard?" You're staring at me, your brown eyes wide open, as though to accept, not only my answer, but the rest of me with it. "Well, I've just been going at it, without too much trouble so far. If all goes well I'll be getting my master's degree this semester." Suddenly, my mouth feels so dry. I take a gulp of water, close the bottle again and sit back, averting my eyes. "Nothing very interesting like you, but it's so easy to forget the rest of the world when you spend forty hours a week pouring over books and passing tests." However pleased my parents might be with my resume, it doesn't allow for so many conversation topics.

I glance back at you. You smile wryly for a second, and then, with sudden urgency, you reply, "Being crazy and passionate about what you do is what matters. The mass of women lead lives of quiet desperation and ignorance, trying to fit in, into their tight shoes, their tight dresses, their tidy little lives. Spend your time trying to be like your imaginary role models and you'll fade into the crowd that follows them. Seeking higher knowledge is a way of escaping that." David is playing the "Baby Lemonade" theme. His fingertips dance on the strings as of their own accord. He's sitting cross-legged and holds his forearms steady above the instrument. I catch myself staring again. I wish I had shades like his to hide behind. "And there's nothing that glamorous about living like I do, you know. I spend most of my time alone so when I meet people, I never know what to talk about. Some days, I just spend getting on and off trains, trucks or planes. It's not so different from being stuck in traffic while coming home from the office." From what I've heard you've been living on the road for more than a year now. The way the story goes is, you were a very bright student and did exceedingly well at university, but lacked perseverance. You grew increasingly bored with the career you were pursuing and left everything behind to travel across the world. Anyway, as always, I don't know how to answer your tirades. You have the art of effortlessly placating the most obstinate of us. Instead, I pull out my lunch. I've brought three muffins, some club sandwiches with the crust cut off, a few apples and three juice boxes, as well as some chocolate bars. I spread it all out on a cloth napkin, and bite in with relish. I'm so hungry from the ride, only when I'm done eating my first sandwich do I notice my companions haven't touched theirs. Two tourists at the zoo curiously watching a monkey eat its lunch. "Wh-what's so

interesting? Why haven't you eaten anything?" "I'm not hungry, thank you," you say. "Besides, those sandwiches are industrial constructs, they'll fill you up with hormones and make your legs turn to rubber if you're not careful. Not to mention, all that urban produce, all that plastic, it'll spoil the trip. We should let go of our supermarkets." David is planning on having a hallucinogenic experience through prolonged fasting so there is no question of his touching any of my apples. They've both started packing now. I can't believe it. I shove the food back into my bag, guiltily.

The rest of the afternoon is glum and uneventful. Having been reminded my place, I don't feel like talking to either of you. The three of us move on silently, weary from the morning effort. The excitement's wearing off. As the sun crosses the summer sky, the fields become sparser and are soon replaced by lightly wooded hills. Far ahead, the road disappears into a dark mass of trees at the foot of a mountain chain. It's been a while since I saw anything like it. The crudeness of titanic jagged rocks tearing through the canopy of this pine wood jungle fills me with foreboding. Can David truly guide us through? Also, clearly we aren't staying at a hotel tonight. But neither of you seem to be carrying a tent, and you never asked me to bring my sleeping bag. What have I gotten myself into? What you've told me is, this trip was apparently David's idea and, having heard him talk about his previous forays, you readily joined the expedition. As I glance around, I see both your faces raised intently towards the sky, towards the rapidly setting sun. We stop just before it slips behind the crest, and carry our bikes off the road, to a small clump of trees at the foot of a hill, protected from the wind by the mossy embrace of a few boulders. From two canvas bags you've fastened to either side of your bicycle, you pull out three woolly blankets. Apparently, we're to sleep under the stars to feel the immensity of the world around us. We sit down, facing each other, and, at David's suggestion, hold each other's hands. This seems somewhat artificial, but today I'm ready to go along with your madness. Today, I don't care if I'm wasting my time, I'm just looking for something new. Plus, I get to hold David's hand, to feel his warmth in my palm. David asks us to think hard, think of what we're most afraid of and to scream it out into the night. This, he says, will begin to open us up to each other. Help us embrace our friendship. All this touchy feely new age mysticism, I just don't get it. But today, I'll go along and see what I can get out of it. So I turn inwards, and, as always, there's nothing much, nothing interesting to share. I'm just a little worried about next week's exams. I breathe in deep and try again, but still nothing. Suddenly, I'm interrupted in my exploration of my barren emotional landscape, and by you no less, howling out: "I'm afraid I'll never find a home for myself again," soon followed by David's: "I'm terrified my aunt's condition could worsen to the point where she can't recognize me anymore." And, in a flash of sudden lucidity, I blurt out, "I'm afraid I'm not interesting enough." David turns

to me and a shiver courses through my spine. My face flushed, my palms sweaty, I'm thinking, have I said something inadequate? Have I been too honest? And suddenly, David pulls me over, holds me in his arms and, sounding more heartfelt than I've ever heard him before, he whispers: "Come here, you. You owe nothing to anyone. If someone doesn't have what it takes to see how interesting you are, it's their problem." For a second, I can hear a dry voice in my head pointing out how hollow his words of comfort are, but it is soon forgotten in favor of his intoxicating smell. David lets go of me and it's your turn for a hug. Once David's done with both of us, we glance awkwardly at each other. That's when you suddenly stand up and say you're going to see if you can find some berries or nuts we could eat tonight.

My stubborn skepticism and concern as to your ability to actually find anything edible in a place like this resist all of David's attempts to reassure me, as he explains how overfed we all are anyway and how people used to live with little more than a mouthful of bread a day and it would do me good to escape the general hysteric bulimia for a while. Only momentarily does he manage to distract me with the story of how Grace Slick wrote the song "White Rabbit" in under an hour and how such surrealistic states of lucidity are attained through fasting, and sharing, and above all else, never getting hung up on anything. And I'm sure you'll understand, I'm utterly astounded to see you return, covered in twigs and dirt, with a triumphant smile on your face and carrying a substantial amount of berries, as well as a bunch of cherries you claim to have gleaned after climbing atop "the tallest cherry tree" you've ever seen. My hope comes marching back, it's going to be just fine. This evening, we share the smiles of sailors making port after weeks of oceanic isolation, the same smiles I usually share with my classmates at the end of exam week. David reads us some Ginsberg and I feel my insides quivering with excitement and ravenous curiosity. You both muster the patience to let me tell you about some of what I'm studying and why it's exciting, a privilege rarer than a "Happy Birthday" to me. I quickly fall asleep under my woolly blanket, breathing in the sweet smells of the summer breeze. What a day!

I wake up when the first drop of rain touches my face. When I feel the icy splatter on my cheek, I instantly sit up. The cold has crept under my covers during my sleep, my muscles ache from lying on the ground so long. The moon shines dimly through the clouds. I hear a crack of thunder. Summer storms can happen so fast. Usually it's a refreshing experience. The way the clouds gather up out of nowhere, the telling breeze that starts up just a few minutes before the real thing, the silence that seems to settle in, the calm before the storm, the heaviness in the air, which suddenly breaks with the first, heavy raindrop that falls silently in front of you, followed by a couple of others, it's like a play, like all the actors' muffled footsteps as they rush around behind the curtain to set up a dramatic scene. Then, before you know it you're drenched in rain, you can barely

walk from the weight of the water pummeling your shoulders, you can't see anything under the heavy curtain folding around you, you can't hear anything under the barrage of white noise it makes as it breaks against the ground. But tonight's different. Tonight, I don't have that many spare clothes, and they will probably get drenched in a few minutes if I don't do anything soon. Tonight I don't know what time it is because David said not to bring our phones to make things more "authentic". I scramble to cover my bag with my blanket, maybe I can find shelter in the lee of one of the surrounding boulders. Drops are falling in greater numbers. Is anybody else awake? Here, I might be safe under here. I see you sitting up and motion for you to come over and join me. It's raining in earnest now. David's awake. We all huddle against each other in a small dent near the base of the closest rock, protecting our bags. It's pouring around us. From over here, moonlight reaches us only through its flickering reflections on the splashing raindrops. It's too late to go get our bikes. How long will we have to wait? And suddenly, to my astonishment, David runs out into the open, arms outspread, mouth open, embracing the rain. "Yeahoo! Accept it! Let it course down your body, let it cleanse you, wash away the sooty stains of industrial chimneys, the controlled pollution of chartered streets. Yes! Yes!" I glance at him incredulously and turn to you hoping you might be more reasonable. But what I find is you've already unstrapped your drum and taken off your shirt. A few seconds later you step out stark naked, unflinching under the rain with that dignity to which David can only aspire. The unbroken serenity of your closed eyes seems to encompass what I was hoping for when I accepted his invitation. For a second, I imagine myself in your place, at one with the elements, sensing every bit of my skin, assaulted by freezing pellets, streaming down my back. I imagine it is my presence, not yours, that galvanizes David, widens his eyes and sends him running all over, ululating. What a trip, this second is. But I hold myself back, cold and scared, and huddle under my boulder. Thankfully, the rain quickly subsides. David crumples to the ground, like an inarticulate toy whose spring has released its tension. Beside him you stand with one hand resting against your hip. Your other arm hangs limply. A slight shiver courses through your back and you clench both hands for an instant. All this I perceive from the ghostly light of coming dawn.

We sit on our bags to avoid the clammy dew nestled in the grass. My hands are raw and red from cold. I try shifting my grip on my chocolate bar, exploring the aching felt when moving each different joint. You're still shivering. The clothes you're wearing stick to the wet patches on your skin. You didn't manage to dry yourself off properly. Your hair is still soaked and tangled into an intricate waterfall of crimson dampness, resting against your back. David has chosen to remain bare-chested and waits motionless, as we finish breakfast. He may not be shivering but the fanatic spark has left his now exhausted face. His pink glasses look so out of place in the gray morning. They seem to

lay on his nose as if by chance.

The road has turned to mud and we have to trudge next to our bikes for a few hours before it dries again. When we finally start pedaling, the soles of our shoes are heavy with large clumps of earth hampering our movements. What was a smooth straight road yesterday morning is now an irregular strip of dirt scratched between rocky hills as though a giant dug a passage between them with a blunt knife. I feel every bump that comes under my wheels. Only when we reach our next stop do I notice my tire is flat. Now I'm really getting worried. We're almost at the foot of the mountain, but how are we going to return with a missing tire? Still, my two companions seem immune to worry and express only a slight annoyance at having to walk on from here. We decide to leave our bikes against a small mound hidden from view. The ascent is steady and steep. After a couple of hours walking, we start taking breaks every couple of minutes for air. At least the sun keeps us warm in our dogged advance. Around midday we reach a pass. Looming before us are the entrails of this millennial titan. We pause to let this sublime vision of gigantic cliffs folding over each other and of vast expanses covered in pine trees sink into our retinas, and plunge in.

This is when I start losing track of time. We walk and we walk under the unchanging evergreen canopy. The path starting from the pass gradually dissolves between the trees and we march on, vaguely following a straight line along the side of the mountain. The little talk we share is focused on our surroundings. The smell of pine sap fills the air and the little sunlight that filters through the tree tops comes in patches, so we appear to be moving under a soft dotted blanket that covers us along with everything else. David is entirely silent now. He walks on, with a weary, subdued look on his face, his brow mottled with sweat, a pale shadow of what he was the day before. His glasses, perched on the tip of his nose, look like they're about to slip, but he tilts his head upwards for a second and they fall back into position. We eventually reach the edge of a small cliff, a wall of rock jutting out of the mountainside. David probably wants to reach the bottom because we follow along the edge for a while. However, soon, the sun starts to sink. We unpack our things and spread our blankets. We secure our bags against a tree trunk so they don't roll away from us and fall off, we start sharing what little food we have left from our last meal. David hasn't spoken a word and has been staring into the distance the whole time, so I can't ask him to help us find any more food. I hope that he's already having his "experience" so that when he finishes we can return to civilization. Thankfully, the forest seems to have trapped some of the day's warmth and shields us from the wind.

The next morning, when I wake up, the sun is already high in the sky. My back hurts from sleeping on uneven ground and the satisfactory ache in my legs from

yesterday's hike pulses through me when I stand up and stretch. Yesterday, we barged into a forest seldom visited by men, and heard nothing. This morning, it is once again alive with sound. I close my eyes and breathe it all in. Once I'm satisfied with my acceptance and awareness of the forest around us, I look down again, at your sleeping figure, and at David's empty blanket. Where's David? Maybe he woke up earlier and went for a stroll, he'll be back soon enough. But I am already overcome by worry. I have to sit down or risk losing my balance. My mind starts racing from option to option. What should I do? We can't afford to let David alone without any food. I don't remember how we got here. But how long can we wait before it's too late? And what if, what if he's fallen off the cliff? Should I wake you up? Maybe you'll know what to do. Then again, maybe I'm just panicking for nothing, maybe he told you something he didn't tell me. I don't want to bother you for nothing. Regardless, my fast breathing has roused you and in seconds you are hugging my shoulders reassuringly. Whispering against my ear: "It's fine Helen, calm down. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. That's it. Now listen to me Helen. This is what I want you to do for me. I want you to stay here and wait for me OK? He probably just went for a stroll and fainted or something. I'll go look for him. No, no, don't worry, no. Just, trust me Helen. Helen, remember what I told you before. The main thing is not to get hung up. We'll get through this. I can get us back. Yes, yes I'm sure. OK. Here I go, don't worry. Tell you what. I'll take my bongo with me and I'll be banging on it all the way so you can hear me." You stand up, and as you do, your bongo straps get caught on your knee. They strain for a second, and snap. The drum flies off your hip, falls a few meters away, rolls to the edge of the cliff, and disappears. Your face goes pale. "My bongo." You scramble to the edge and peer over. I watch, transfixed, as you start off, along the side of the cliff, shouting over your head "I'll be right back!" But you don't get very far before I see you trip over a rock and fall flat on your face.

You don't seem to be getting up so I walk over at a brisk pace, by now, utterly terrified. "Vicky?" I call out, tentatively. When I reach you, when I realize you are unconscious and I am alone in the middle of a mountain chain I know nothing about, something shifts inside me. I reach the limit of my capacity to fear, to feel. Suddenly, all the emotion drains away, leaving only a stern lucidity. I kneel down and, methodically, perform the first aid gestures I learned at school, after which I decide to return to our camp to cover you with your blanket. But no sooner do I reach my destination than I hear footfalls in the distance. I cry out "David!" And indeed it is. Apparently, when he came back from his fasting hallucination, he went to look for a stash of supplies he'd left nearby for us to collect. We decide that I should wait with you and he should go get help.

And that's all that's happened until now. It's been six hours. David said he could reach the nearest town in eight. After that, the helicopters should come. Here, drink this, you'll feel better.

Part II : Victoria

Inside the tourist office, there's a line building up. Quiet backpackers, minds filled with their own loneliness – it's fine, they'll wait. Sweating middle aged couples squinting at maps they could read ten years ago on their last visit – they have a museum to visit at ten and are growing a little tense. Young, disheveled men and women fidgeting impatiently, rubbing their thumbs against lifeless phonescreens – they can't wait much longer, they need their fix. What's taking so long? At the front of the line, there's a girl. She's standing in front of the screen, reading some kind of forum post. And quite a long post at that. As this information is passed on through the line, people start to grumble. What's that you said? She seems to be quivering? What do you mean? Yes, yes. At the front of the line, there's a girl, reading a long forum post. Her face is all flushed and she's quivering like she can't control herself or something, like she's about to grab the mouse and smash it against the wall or whatever.

Behind her, a young woman is craning her neck, attempting to peep over her shoulder. She came here with the pretext of checking her mail but what she really wants is to spend a few minutes flicking automatically through an unending list of mildly amusing pictures and witty oneliners. A few minutes of bliss. She has only the dimmest notion of this, yet it doesn't stop the disappointment from sinking in - no cat pics today. Even when she gets her turn, the others won't let her stay long. That's why she's so intent on catching a glimpse of whatever's gotten her predecessor in such a state. What a rush of adrenaline it must be. When the girl finally teeters away, wide eyed yet seemingly unaware of the dozens of judgmental frowns following her, the woman immediately seizes the controls and reopens the forum post, avid for emotion.

This must be the place. You can hear the faint pulse of electronic music wafting out, down to the dark, silent square I'm standing in. No wonder no one's answering the bell. Waterlogged dirt clings to my shoes. My clothes, soaked with sweat, cling to my skin. I haven't had a shower in three days. This is a quiet neighborhood, with old 20's buildings that once housed the wealthy intelligentsia, but, after years of disuse, have turned into battered monuments of the past, thus naturally attractive to pseudo-intellectual students like Louis and his cronies. Now the streets are full of vinyl shops and smartphones, art galleries and nightclubs. All of this, of course, I know from the web. I've never been here before and the street-lights are so dim they do little more than imbue their immediate surroundings with a faint yellow glow. They call that sustainable development. I text Louis and he lets me in. Once in the hallway, I drop my bag on the floor and with an efficiency only accessed from so many months of experience, I pull out a towel (snagged from that supermarket near the station this morning, along with my breakfast. Those are easy, you just need to cut around the plastic security beeper), a dress (I don't know who would spend that much money for clothes, it was begging for me to free it from its cage), a pair of shoes (I got those after my bath at that swimming pool in the upper class neighborhood. It's remarkable how easy it is to avoid paying for anything when you look rich), a makeup kit and some perfume, while simultaneously unbuttoning my blouse, unzipping my pants and kicking off my shoes. In twenty two seconds flat, I've morphed into a harmlessly fashionable demoiselle of the kind that are so rampant in these kinds of parties. Walking up the wide staircase, using the shaky handrail for support, I can feel the beat coursing through the wood, through my skin, into the marrow of my bones. Is it really the music, or am I just that nervous?

The door is ajar and the all-engulfing sound of music draws me in. Occasionally I hear snippets of confusedly passionate chatter escape the onslaught of noise. Gratefully, I step in and wade, unnoticed, through a crowd of people engrossed in conversation. As I go from room to room, my eyes dart from face to face, hoping to recognize Louis. Suddenly, I feel a hand on my shoulder and it's him, and we smile, and he leads me to the balcony so we can hear ourselves talk. There's a lot of catching up to do. But tonight, what I need the most is a place to stay. He hands me a glass of wine with a magnanimous smile. Something about the way he drags his l's and his erratic pace of speech tells me how plastered he actually is. I nod a lot, ask a few questions about his life and let him carry on unraveling his life story. Apparently, he won a lot of money selling a startup to one of the bigger fishes online and has been living the highlife ever since. As he paints this impressive portrait for me, his chest swells with pride, his cheeks blush furiously, like a little boy, telling his mother how he won his team the last kickball match by kicking the

ball over the fence. At this point, I muster up enough confidence to ask him. “Hey Louis, would it be alright if I stayed a bit longer than just this weekend?”

“Famous author J. Stanley is here with us tonight, to discuss her last bestselling novel: the bloodcurdling page-turner and supernatural-gothic-thriller: *Blood Tells*. I gotta tell you Mrs. Stanley, I loved your book. Couldn’t stop reading once I started. What a stunning premiere. So, why vampires?” – pause – the older woman on stage is staring into space. She’s lost, isn’t she? Probably hasn’t even heard the question. Yet, after rousing herself from what seems like a deep, almost reptilian stupor, she answers: “Vampires are in fashion. I needed money and with all these vampire movies coming out lately, I knew some people would buy my book.” The host glances nervously at the camera and turns – disgruntled – towards the writer. You can see the audience smiling hungrily at the two women on stage, waiting to see if the anchorwoman finds some witty remark to reset the mood. More and more, television seems terribly out of date. The whole complete honesty vibe is so common on the internet you feel guilty allotting it even a minute of attention. The things people will admit to, just to draw the attention of strangers. It’s the 21st century reality TV. Welcome to the web: over here, just like anywhere else, there is no bad publicity. And over here, just like anywhere else, people crave for honesty. The difference is, online, everybody knows that. Click.

The lights switch back on. I hear a snap and a fuzz as the vintage 90’s cathode-ray TV turns off. “Don’t watch that. They fill your mind with useless information and phony smiles. Come back to real life where people only lie because they’re afraid, not because they want something from you.” As if I hadn’t heard this a million times before. David could be painfully zealous sometimes. Louis’ apartment is a mismatched patchwork of tasteful ensembles brought together, like a Hollywood studio being used for several movies at once, or a fantastical furniture store. As I stand and turn to greet him, I leave behind me a quite convincing gen X teenager’s room complete with grunge posters, bubblegum, a videocassette player and even a few 90’s magazines sprawled across the floor. Oh, Louis, how meticulous. Just standing here, I’m sixteen again, I feel the sinister dejectedness of dazed youth. It’s so easy to sink back into your funk under the glare of the TV screen. I march briskly out, embarrassed. “I thought band practice was later tonight. Louis isn’t home at the moment.” Then, resentfully, I add, “Come on over, I’ll make tea.” I place the kettle on the stove, turn it on, and sit smugly on one of three velveteen chairs

covered in quaint pink and pastel patterns matching the wallpaper, my bongo tightly pressed between my legs. I draw circles on the tight skin of the drum with my fingers, I think the touch of the tight leather surface will always be mildly thrilling for me. In this room, there's a small table with an open cookie box and three teacups complete with spoons, napkins and sugar cubes. Louis doesn't even drink tea. As my untimely guest takes his seat opposite me I notice he still has that slight look of abashment whenever he dimly senses my displeasure. Behind the beard, under the psychedelic shirt, behind those newly grown muscular arms and chest, it's the same old self-conscious David from high school. All those ideas about nature, about truth, about freedom, they're just props, like those glasses he wears even indoors. Don't get me wrong, David can be a lot of fun. He and I, we have our kicks. This just isn't the best time. Plus, I haven't been able to meet his eyes with a straight face since he started wearing the shades. "My aunt lives nearby. I was supposed to pay her a visit today but nobody answered the bell. It's not the first time it's happened, though. No worries. Aunt Jessica's a bit of a recluse is all." Pretty soon Louis comes back, and just like that, they're off discussing the intricacies of rhythmic signature in their latest song. I gratefully retreat to my room, half-empty Earl Grey in one hand, bongo in the other, turn on the monitor and get to work.

Louis and I, we have an agreement, he lets me stay at his place, in whatever setting he chooses for me, and doesn't tell people about me or my activities, and I help him sell his old stuff when he's done with it. You see, Louis is the best and the worst consumer of us all. He can't stand having the same condo for a week, but can't be bothered to move, so he just goes around procuring himself various decorative items and redoing his place. Of course he could probably just have it shipped off, forget about it. But he lets me help him anyway. I can't decide whether it's out of pity, or amusement. Maybe he just needs someone to populate all his vanishing doll houses, maybe he just enjoys my company. The agreement also includes me telling him stories about how I've been living by myself since I left college, but I couldn't say who asked for that originally. Lonely Louis. I remember how charming he was, with what ease, what sharp wit he navigated through high-school society. Well before any of us mortals, he had found it, that sense of taste, of what's proper, which enables the endowed to maintain balance while, around him, we were helplessly rocked by the storm of our emotions. Only later did the rest build their hull. But before we did, those countless times when we were hurt by his immaculate

coolness, they got to us, they taught us to fear him. So by the end of it all, there were those who avoided his presence, those who revered him, those innocent ones who didn't know him or lacked the self-consciousness to catch up on what was happening, but there were no friends for him. And with this recent economic success, how supreme he must appear, even to those who just a few years ago were closest to him. So yeah, I do have reason to suspect, though he never sheds his aura of magnanimity, I'm more to him than a minion or a clown.

Today I'm selling a horribly kitsch wardrobe with new age neon green and magenta colored panels. This is a big deal for me, I've been working on it for a while. There's the wiki article about that serial killer who would chop his victims' heads off, place them on mannequin busts, doll them up and take pictures of them. That's the main pillar of the story. Then come the forum posts by grieving siblings of his victims, the people online who find it funny, the macabre story of the landlord finding the severed heads, calling the police and later selling the wardrobe as a collector's item, the video parodies and movie mash-ups. There are the reports from the new owners of hearing voices coming from the inside, of finding rotting fingers hidden in the plastic casing at the base, thus raising the prices. The current owners are unfortunately being forced to sell it against their will by uncooperative neighbors who can't stand the nightly wailings of the dead. And at a giveaway price of \$2000. So far, the item seems to have attracted some attention. If, from time to time, I do feel qualms of conscience at misleading strangers into buying worthless items at unreasonable prices, they quickly subside when I remind myself that, even if I'd been truthful, my merchandise wouldn't have been any more valuable. I am in the business of self-comfort, just like souvenir shops, candy stores, fashion magazines and just about any serious business today.

Later that day, I tell Louis about fabricating evidence and blackmailing minor political figures by threatening a massive online release – for the money, but also for the fun of watching him squirm. This happened recently, when I was starting to get comfortable with my new life. What I don't tell him about are the hundred stabs of guilt I felt, the first few months, when I actually dared to open all those messages from my parents. The excruciating pain of being reminded over and over again that I had failed them. At least, with time, they became shorter and less frequent. Later on, I just deleted them. A year after I went down and out, they stopped all together.

David says Helen's in town. Helen and I, we used to have such wondrous romps through the gardens and the woods of our childhoods. Memories only come in flashes and snapshots. Here, a poppy covered roadside, a race home, a large glass of milk and the warmth of a motherly hug waiting at the finish line. Here a heavy afternoon, a vast plain of tall grass, a summer storm brewing around us, the atmosphere suspended, silent, the feeling of exhilaration as the first droplets hit our coats. And always, always, there was the unconditional trust, the wordless communion with which we delved, together, into our adventurous games. Later, there came knowledge, there came the urge to define our borders. That's all you do when you're a teenager, you blunder about, explore, furtively, lest anyone discover your shameful ignorance, the unspoken rules, the limits that surround you, that separate you from your peers. Eventually, wrung from this private alchemy, the weak shadow of what you would like to be staggers out, baffled into what they call adult life. What have I become?

We're sitting on the floor at the center of the music room, the air is heavy with their sweat, David's mostly, Louis, as cool as always, is merely sporting a few beads of perspiration on his temples, which he proceeds to mop up with a traditional Japanese embroidered handkerchief. You can smell the throbbing sounds spawned from their eager minds, clinging to their clothes. We're sitting on the floor at the center of the music room when David tells me Helen's in town. From the off-hand way he says it, I can tell he's got something in mind. After the rush of nostalgia blows over, I ask, as casually as him, "Oh, Helen, what's she been up to this whole time? Are you guys still in touch?" I try not to let it show that I know exactly what she's been up to, that I hate the fact that I'm so obsessed with the little hard working bitch she's become. No will of her own, that one. I wonder how I can be jealous of her. To think we used to be so close. "I saw her a few days ago. Didn't say much, though. I was thinking of asking her to come with us. You know, on the hike." David and I are going on a hike. It was mainly his idea. He seems suspiciously intent on impressing me. Anyway, I've got no choice but to play along and follow his madness. "You haven't told her about me, have you?" "She doesn't know you're here, if that's what you're worried about." "Good. Well, I'll think about it."

After David leaves, I tell Louis about how I had a job in alternative advertising. Every day I was supposed to have lunch at a classy restaurant and “accidentally” breaking my laptop prop. Lots of people should see the “accident” and I should make it ostensibly clear how valuable the laptop was. Within a month, about two hundred wealthy people had winced at the snapping sound of a plastic computer joint, the image probably still makes them cringe whenever they use theirs. There is no bad publicity. This was one of the most pleasant times I had. What I don't tell him is, sometimes, I just had to live on left-overs from terrace cafés, or stolen fruit from various supermarkets. The first time I did it, I felt like scum. That was quite early on. When I thought, by quitting college, I'd failed at life. After a while I got used to it, and even started hopping from place to place, selecting the best looking left-overs. One day I got my ass kicked by a clerk. That's when I first realized how low this life was. Still, the beatings and chases were nothing compared to the few times I caught something my predecessor left on a chicken wing or a pizza slice. But that, I keep to myself. The reason I wait for David to leave is he doesn't need to hear all this stuff. Little David Stanley thinks I've bloomed into a cute flower girl, and I'm fine with that. I enjoy feeling his eyes occasionally inspecting my face for a sign of disapproval. Is he hippie enough for me? Is he wearing enough beaded necklaces? Are his clothes colorful enough? Do I like his glasses? Yes, I like his glasses, it was so funny when I saw him wearing them for the first time, a few weeks after I shipped them, I had to run out of the room to recompose myself. An easy sale too. I guess it would be safe to bring Helen along for the trip. I'm fine with her seeing me like this. It might even give that conceited little girl something else to aspire to than the satisfied smiles of tenured old men. Show her what freedom feels like.

As I prepare my things for the hike, I tell Louis about the time I worked at the opera and smuggled luxury fur coats from the cloak room. What I don't tell him is how, at the time, I spent my off days drinking myself senseless (I stuff a plastic bag full of cherries and another one full of berries in the folds of the woolly blankets David said we should bring). I remember once, I collapsed in the middle of the street. The cold and the booze had made me lose all sensation and I could barely speak, not to mention stand. (David said not to bring any electronic devices so I strap my phone to the inside of my bongo). At the time, I was so loaded I didn't feel afraid. Nonetheless, a profound feeling of shame and self-loathing crept into me in those few seconds spent sprawled on the ground.

I believe someone quickly hauled me up and dragged me off the lane. I managed to convey, through a combination of slurred sounds and erratic gestures, where I lived and they helped me along as I stumbled home. I only tell him about the gig at the opera, he likes that stuff.

Underneath the post, there is a single comment.

The people from the hospital wanted to contact your parents. They called Louis. He told them everything. He wrote to me. He said he knew more about you than you thought. He said he'd been monitoring your online activities while you stayed at his place. He sent me this link.

Having reached the bottom of the page, the woman walks away from the monitor, puzzled, and somewhat disappointed.