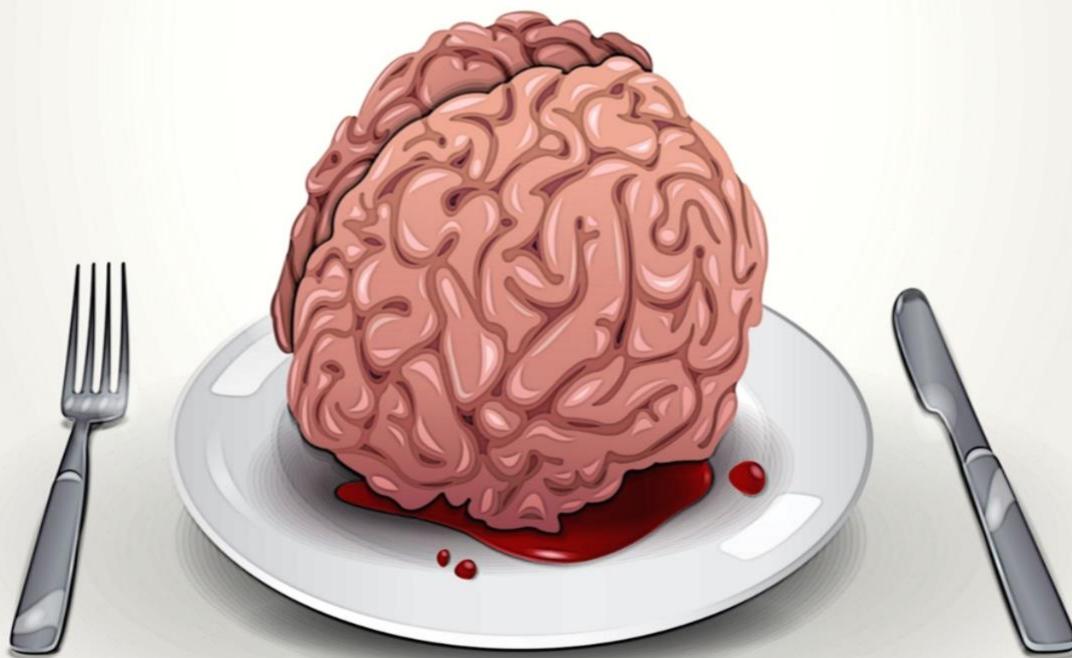




# THE PHILOZOPHER

AN EPISODIC TALE

BY OOMNY



ISSUE #1  
**DEATH**

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## WELCOME TO THE EXPERIMENT

Truth is always under fire—by those who don't believe it, by those who reluctantly accept it but wish to disprove it, and by those who believe it but wish to test its legitimacy. Truth never gets a rest, and rightfully so. Simply accepting something as truth is often lazy and self-serving, which is why the truths we should question most are the truths we hold dear. As the old adage goes: If you love something, set it free. If it returns, just maybe it was meant to be. Refusing to allow our truths to breathe isn't nobility, it's zealotry, and it causes even the most fervently godless folk to perceive themselves as sacrosanct. If we want to grow, and reverberate what we learn to help those around us to grow, then we must allow ourselves frequent visits to the Planes of Uncertainty. That's the only place we'll discover real truth.

I wish to use *The Philosopher* to explore, to venture on an exploration beyond the self, to break past the biases and unconforted ideals we may be cradling within ourselves. And I would like to do this while spinning an entertaining yarn, which will make this a bit of a balancing act considering our main character has his own human (and non-human) flaws. But I just can't force myself to write nonfiction. While I don't claim to be correct, I find it occasionally boring and quietly pretentious. And perhaps that's the way it should be, but what fun is exploration without dissenting personalities to challenge one another and thus the storyteller? In this way I find fiction to be one of the best realms for writing nonfiction.

As the title of this preface suggests, *The Philosopher* is an experiment, for me at least. I have not written fiction quite like this before, nor do I remember reading anything like it, but that's certainly not to suggest it doesn't exist. Another reason I consider this project an experiment is because I'll be releasing it episodically, which has instilled a kind of dreadful nervousness in me. The thought of making any sort of mistake has me extra cautious, which is a good thing if not a time-consuming thing. And since we're experimenting, the first issue is free of charge. Jump in, determine if it's for you, and if so connect to my social media and I'll keep you informed on future releases.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much for joining me on this exploration. In a world full of a million distractions, I'm aware of how absurdly precious your time is. Whether you like the outcome of this experiment or not, I greatly appreciate your attention.

# THE PHILO~~7~~OPHER



ISSUE #1



It's a long time coming.

"Are you ready?" I ask Mother.

It can be disappointing, the futile struggle with entropy. This bedridden woman lying feebly before me is not the same woman that comes to mind when I call to mind pictures of this woman. That woman, the one who will live on as a memory, the one whom I will forge completely new experiences and conversations with exclusively within the internal, that woman is full of passion and vitality. But that is not this woman. This woman, the one pale and enervated and wrinkled and drenched in sweat, the one just hours or days away from involuntarily stepping aside and allowing a perception alone to fill her void, this woman is the antithesis of that woman. This woman is the embodiment of collapse.

"Is anyone ready?" she answers.

"Some, I think."

But not most. Besides the fear of acknowledging your own mortality, there are endless distractions, convenient excuses to rob you of time that may otherwise be used for pondering on and preparing for the pinnacle of life—death. After all, what was your life worth if at the end you find yourself dying with regret or confusion, or you perish bitterly while tirelessly wrestling with the Reaper? If your conclusion is marred by a lack of acceptance, even an inkling of resistance, you might as well have never lived because those fleeting final moments of thought are your life's work, and they're going to generate the feelings you're buried with. Nothing before that will have mattered. Not for you.

I have no doubt that sounds discouraging, but the truth is rarely your buddy, at least not at first. It only becomes your friend once you've embraced it with open arms, warts and all. If you can find it within yourself to do that, to welcome your enemy, then you'll have made an ally for life.

The truth, much the same as me, is simply trying to help you navigate the storms ahead. Yes, you, Voyeur. I know you can see my words, so I know you can hear my thoughts. Now they're your thoughts too. So tell me: Are you ready to die? Have you printed your boarding pass? Do you still have unchecked baggage you're hoping to sneak past security? Are you in the lounge sipping coffee, reading a book, waiting for the departure of your one-way trip to be announced, in order and at peace? Or have you devised a formula to fix the ferryman once the tide touches your toes? No matter your plan of action, I wish you the best of luck, though I advise you to keep your options readily permutable. Getting the ending right, as any creator will tell you—and we're all the creators of our own lives—is the only way to complete a masterpiece. And who wants to judge his or her lifetime as anything less? Though I presume that the ideal finale, while it may sound paradoxical, necessitates a wholeness that requires no judgment at all. In other words, you must establish an acumen that allows you to judge yourself worthy of not being judged.

Am I making sense? If you require pause to ponder, please, take all the time you need. I've got forever on my side. I'll wait for you...

Shall we progress? Great. By the way, you can keep the answers to my scrutiny with yourself; there's no two-way communication here. But please don't hesitate to exchange musings with an acquaintance. Such notions should not be stockpiled lest they become lost to oblivion—the wasted potential of a domino left standing.

“Will yew and yer father be okay with me gone?”

“I'll keep him fed, if that's what you're asking.”

“And what about yew, son?”

“I'll keep me fed too.”

“Life's gon' be a whole lot more unforgivin' with one less able body teh help provide fer the two o' yeh.”

“We'll have to manage.”

“It's the only choice yeh got I s'ppose.”

Only it isn't, but it's the worthwhile choice. Every day you're lucky enough for another chance to wake up to existence's ugly face and stare it down until it's forced to smile back is another day worth managing. It's either that or you buckle beneath its relentless glare. You cower, and in a desperate attempt at salvaging any shred of pride you take refuge in victimhood. There's a kind of masochistic power that comes with fingering your own wounds, though it's a wobbly foundation for character-building, folding upon the pressure of the slightest pushback. So here's another question for you: Where's the merit in identifying as past miseries when the grand scope of the untapped hereafter contains everything you're destined to become? Far too many squander far too much looking over their shoulder for far too long. The horrors of history are behind us. If we leave them there, they can do no harm. If we hold their hands and allow them to accompany us on the roads ahead, we're inviting a loss of control. And we won't be aware that they've taken the helm until some damage has been done, until we've become an actor in the horror show.

So how about it, Voyeur? When it comes to daily determination, are you a victim, or are you in charge? This query overlaps much with your preparedness for death. Trust me when I tell you the last thing you want to do is die a victim, so make sure it's not the last thing you do.

“Next time yeh go out teh feed'm, yeh'll tell'm I said goodbye, won't yeh?”

“Of course, Mother.”

“Maybe yew could bring’m here. Keep’m in the basement. Lots o’ room in the basement.”

“I’ll consider it, Mother.”

“Be easier teh find’m if yeh keep’m close.”

“We’ll see, Mother.”

“That father o’ yers, always disappearin’ fer days at a time. Don’t know what he’s doin’ out there, but must be somethin’. Yew just promise me yeh’ll keep’m fed so he don’t go hurtin’ nobody.”

“I promise, Mother.” A promise to the dying, one of those rare obligatory sentiments that’s more important than honesty. There are few things more cruel than sending your mother off to the grave without peace of mind. I have plans for Father, but those plans don’t exactly line up with Mother’s wishes, and no one but you needs to know about that, so I hope you’re good at keeping secrets. If your father was the kind of monster mine is, I doubt you’d handle it any differently.

“Take a picture o’ me teh show’m next time yeh see’m. Yeh tell’m I’ll miss his mopey ass, yeh hear?”

I activate the camera on my phone and step backward until the entirety of Mother’s large, debilitated body is in frame. Standing mere feet from her in a second-story bedroom of our farmhouse, separated only by shadows, I find I barely recognize her. Decay has warped her body and mind into that of a disabled stranger’s. Don’t get me wrong, she’s always been a little off, but the past few days have been like sitting bedside with the deranged encapsulation of someone I once knew. She’s aware Father never cared—can never care—about us, and yet she speaks as if her passing will have an effect on him. It won’t, but I don’t have the heart to remind her. Perhaps this is what death does, tricks us into tinting our suffering the color of roses so we can expire in peace, or as close as we can get to peace. Or perhaps she’s simply expressing hope she’d buried inside hitherto, setting free an imprisoned spirit she had rotting in a moldy cell. I have a feeling it’s a bit of both.

“How do I look?” she asks. There’s a full moon arced above a crowd of October trees outside the window near her shoulder. Her bedroom is being lit by it, and it alone. It’s gorgeous, and its light is a blessing, but the moon itself hangs in stark contrast to the woman whose face it’s illuminating, a lunar photobomb marring the ultimate depiction of sadness with a beauty that refuses to be ignored.

“Like you’re dying,” I answer, and Mother smiles. I capture the moment while fully realizing that sadness and beauty are not mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite—sometimes sadness is the epitome of beauty when you’re present enough to cherish the transient.

“Yew look like I’m dyin’ too.”

“Then I guess that makes two of us.”

“Let me see,” she says. I hold the phone out in front of her and she strains her eyes to get a clear look at a mini mirror image of a younger version of herself. And while the picture itself is barely ten seconds old, I already have an intuition this photo is going to play an important role in my life going forward. “Okay, I seen enough. Get it outta here.”

“What? It’s a good picture.”

“Maybe for the livin’, but it don’t settle right watchin’ yerself die like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t yer fault. I should never o’ asked teh see it.”



What must it be like to take one last look at yourself and make your closing appraisal? One final self-criticism of your appearance on the day you look your worst. She's right. Who wants to see that?

"Hah. And ain't that a woman fer yeh? I ain't got no business checkin' up on my looks when I ain't gon' be round teh face the critics." She laughs more, as much as she can muster from what vigor remains, then says, "I just wanted teh give yer father a farewell smile teh remember me by. D'ya think he'll like it?"

He won't give two shits. "He'll love it." Remember what I said: send her off with peace of mind.

"Good.... Good. Yeh'll take care of'm, won't yeh?"

"I'll take care of him, Mother."

"Yer father saved me, yeh know. Loneliness wouldeh taken me long ago if it weren't fer him. That loneliness wouldeh never given yew a chance neither."

Isolation is the mother of nihilism, and nihilism is the father of an anguish that's often a precursor to self-annihilation or, if we're really unlucky, local-inward annihilation, the process of destroying what's nearby before destroying the self. In other words, isolation and nihilism can be two awful fucking parents. I don't care how much of an introvert you are, without some form of positive human relation you're a severed extremity, separated from the body and hemorrhaging. Some find constructive outlets, tourniquets to slow the bleeding, and some don't. But really all it takes to keep this mass of humanity working in harmony is giving it the proper attention—a cheerful salutation, a considerate inquiry, a conversation over lunch—really just a second of your time to remind another being he or she exists.

"Do you feel alone now?" I ask.

"Dyin' is lonely business, that I can attest. But it's a different kind o' lonely. Now don't get me wrong, it ain't I don't appreciate yeh bein' here, but when yer the one crossin' over teh the other side, whatever that means, everyone round yeh might as well be mannequins lined up behind the window o' Life. They all just standin' round with their hands in their pockets either not knowin' what teh say or sayin' nothin' while tryin' teh say somethin', starin' at yeh like yer some passerby, waitin' fer yeh teh get outta sight so they can get back teh what they got goin' on. The interactions lose their meanin'. They just silhouettes o' conversation. They ain't full. Like I say, it's a different kind o' lonely. I reckon there're folk out there experiencin' that kind o' lonely even when they got all the time in the world. Ain't no tellin' what too much o' that could do teh a person. I'm blessed I got teh experience as much good as I did. Yew and yer father are most o' that good. Knowin' that, that helps teh deal."

I rest a hand on Mother's shoulder. I wish I had it in me to cry, but the potential of a future without Mother and Father has benumbed my grief. Perhaps without them I can finally live something of a normal life. And while it can never be a Joe or Jane level of normal, it can be better, nearer to Joe or Jane. What I wouldn't give for that.

"The loneliness'll be after yew now with me gone. That's why yew should keep yer father in the basement. He'll be the only parent yeh got left. Yeh should try and get closer with'm, 'stead o' lettin' him run round out there doin' God knows what. Who knows? Maybe yew can learn somethin' from'm."

“I’ll consider it, Mother,” I say as I remove my touch from her. There’s something about mixing physical contact with verbal untruths that makes the whole act doubly devious.

“Yeh say that, but yer tone don’t got a ring o’ truth teh’t.” Mother grips my wrist, tight for someone in her condition. “Promise me yeh won’t do nothin’ teh yer father when I’m gone, Morg. He don’t mean teh hurt no one. He just needs watchin’ out fer, that’s all.”

“I’ll do what I can, Mother.”

There’s nothing honorable about answering a plea with an amorphous response just so you can say you didn’t lie. I am never happy to commit such duplicity. Your first reaction may be to judge me with a degree of severity, but have you ever contemplated on the myriad of underlying motives you yourself have hidden beneath the flexibility of conversation? I highly doubt it, Voyeur. But you should really pay more attention. The next time you veer from veracity, even a hair, make it a point to observe the chain reaction it causes—in the lives of those around you and your own—and see if you have the gall to stay your course when the opportunity arises to set things straight. It may tell you quite a lot about how much stench makes up the content of your character. As for me, I’m quite aware of my odor’s extent.

“Yew know what I learnt, scavengin’ for grub teh keep yew and yer father on yer feet all these years?”

I shake my head.

“I learnt death is the key teh life. And I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout knowin’ yew gon’ die bein’ reason teh fully live. I’m talkin’ ‘bout the dyin’ o’ one critter bein’ the life source fer another. I ain’t never thought much ‘bout it till yew came along, but the livin’ gotta die so the livin’ can keep on keepin’ on. And there ain’t no fairness teh’t. Whether we killin’ animals, plants, insects, or each other, we killin’ so we can take care o’ our own. I couldn’t tell yeh how many carcasses I piled up over the years, some dead when I found’m, some not, but always animals. Only animals, Morg. Yew gon’ find yerself awfully hungry at times, and yew gon’ know some folk who yew damn well despise, but yew promise yer mother yew ain’t never gon’ harm a fellow human. World got enough tragedy without yew addin’ teh the misery. Can yeh promise me that?”

“I promise, Mother.”

“It’s gon’ be hard gettin’ enough food fer yew and yer father. Maybe find a friend yew trust, someone willin’ teh help out. Whatever it takes. But yew leave yer enemies outta this, yew understand?”

“No fellow humans, Mother.”

“Good. I’ll be watchin’ yew. Yew won’t know it, but I’ll be watchin’.”

The thing is, I do know she’ll be watching, just not how she thinks she’ll be. She certainly won’t be hovering somewhere above me, observing my every move incessantly like some ever-present spectator caught between purgatory and Paradise. No, but she’ll be surveying from within. My memory of her is an encapsulation of everything she is, and once she’s gone and remembered as everything she was, that mental presence—the embodiment of her entire character—will continue to be my mother. Because in the end there is no was, just a different form of is. She will be my mother, my warden, and my guide until my atoms dissipate back into the atmosphere and my own is has been immutably transformed. Perhaps it’s there, free of our conscious minds, that we meet again as we all become one.

“And don’t yew go blamin’ God, neither. I know yew never been much a God-fearin’ boy, but don’t let this give yeh reason teh be God-hatin’. Things is the way they is because God made’m so. Now yew can look fer the reasons all yeh want, long as yew ain’t lookin’ up like an ant in the shadow of a gypsy’s heel. Find the silver linin’ and wrap it round yer finger. Don’t go chewin’ on no bitter baggage that leaves yeh carryin’ round a sour taste. Got me?”

“Understood, Mother.”

Everyone should have his or her own definition of “god.” And while it’s true I’m not on the same page as Mother’s delineation, she’s right about not participating in grudge matches with fate. There’s no point in starting a war you can’t win. What’s happened was bound to happen, birthed as a connecting link in a chain of events that to try and follow to its source would only tangle and suffocate anyone searching for justifiable resentment. No, god isn’t controlling what’s happening; god *is* what’s happening, the elusive and formless status we think of as the present, consistently now and yet perpetually never, which is contrary to how most people conceive of god—as memories and storied miracles of the past as well as the desires and salvation of the future, those tangible things which they can get a grasp on. But they couldn’t be farther off. God is a blank canvas that’s constantly sustained in its purest form. You can waste time scribbling on it, or splash buckets of color on it in frustration and elation. You can sketch out your ideas on it, or meticulously develop and refine every stroke until you’ve created your magnum opus. But in the blink of an eye it’ll be blank again, what was there becoming preserved in the narrative of once upon a time. The past contains relics of our individual accomplishments and downfalls, and the present is an endless collaboration with god that leads to the relics of the future. But those relics belong solely to us. God is the implement, not the artist. At least that’s how I figure it.

But what say you, Voyeur? Who or what is your definition of god? Or is your definition as of yet ill-defined or, worse yet, refusing to be defined? It’s something to gnaw on for a while if you’re unsure. Bullheaded refusal is often a sign of willful ignorance, perhaps the most tragic type of ignorance considering the harm it causes is unintentionally self-inflicted. You may argue you’ve no reason to give the word form, or you may argue it’s easy to replace god with another word, but you’ll find that to treat an allergy to god is to open up a neural pathway to those around you that leads to a shared relationship of the human condition. The overlap in everyone’s definition of god builds bridges to one another.

Give me a bit of your cogitation, if I don’t already have it, and consider god as the present. The present is antithetical to itself, but at the same time it’s unerring. It’s always yet seemingly never happening, always changing yet always staying the same, in control of all yet without a shred of power to manipulate a thing. While it’s elusive to the point of vexation, how we interact with it is beyond important. And a mindful interaction with it *is* possible, no matter how impossible it may seem. Once realized, it can connect you to almost every shape of biology out there.

Here, allow me to put a face on this I think you’ll recognize and focus on how we bond with other animals. In extreme contrast to how we operate, other animals don’t dwell on death. They don’t fret on what they’re going to do an hour from now, if they should cancel their weekend plans, or if they’re set for retirement. They don’t feel guilt after they’ve murdered for a meal or impregnated a member of the opposite sex and immediately abandoned her in search of another potential mate. They exist in the present and thus are a portal to the present. The fascinating thing is almost every one of us has locked eyes with an animal and felt time stop, connected with a

creature without saying a word and shared a spiritual moment with it by briefly dwelling in its presence, free from distracting thoughts and feelings, lost to perceptible reality and at one with a more ultimate reality. How can such moments not be where god is found? And in what might be the apex of irony, we've evolved a consciousness that separates us from other animals—from god—and we spend our entire lives trying to rebuild that crumbled bridge to the divine while under the guise of cerebral superiority over our mentally unburdened brethren even though they hold the final piece to one of life's most challenging puzzles.

Remember earlier when we touched on the importance of being prepared to die? This idea of becoming one with god hearkens back to that with such significance that it should under no circumstances be written off. Once you've recognized the present, once the before and after have evaporated into nothingness and condition has lost its meaning, then you've come to terms with the understanding that everything is okay as it is, even when the end is near. This is why I encourage you to dig until you've unearthed the skeleton of god and wrapped it in your own flesh and skin.

"I need yew teh move on, all right? And tell yer father teh do the same. Yew mourn as yeh should, but not a day more. Yeh got yer own life teh live, and there ain't no mother worth her weight wants teh see her children draggin' the dead everywhere they go. It's exhaustin' just teh think 'bout. Yew remember yer mother, but don't yew rue her. Yew hold on too long that's exactly what yew'll be doin'."

If you recall, earlier I doubted Mother's passion, but I see I was wrong to do so. She has as much passion now as she ever did, it's just been redirected, completely focused on me and aiding my performance through this terrestrial obstacle course now that the dead end upon her earthly travels is well within sight. And isn't that the quintessential sign of a mother for you? A woman who's more concerned how her children will fare after she's gone than about the particulars of her existence post-existence. I'm not so sure I could execute such selflessness. That kind of sentiment, true and unmarred by an awareness of self-adulation, is love by its very nature.

"I'll have to mourn at my own pace, Mother. I can't say how long that'll be, but I can promise not to resent you for dying. I know you'd never choose to leave your family behind, so you don't have to worry about that."

She means more to me than she knows, which begs the question: What force has compelled me to withhold my appreciation for my mother all these years? Like most difficult questions, I suppose the answer is comprised of a collection of factors, not the least of which is the fact that an outward connection of affection was never formed within our circle. We're not a family of huggers. We're barely even a family, not in any normal sense. Just the thought of physically embracing immediate family comes off as odd and uncomfortable. It's just not what we do, although the love remains palpable between Mother and me. Perhaps for us it's more real that way. Perhaps too much endearment is like pop music, vacuous and superficial, but it gets the feeling across. We don't do pop music. My family has faith our love exists without having to see it enacted through some kind of obligatory display of established familial patterns. But then again, it's quite possible my head is wedged halfway up my rectum and I'm simply justifying the quirks of my existence. Maybe my reservedness is a defense mechanism, an unwillingness to lower my guard and be vulnerable for fear my demonstration of fondness won't be reciprocated in a satisfactory fashion. Maybe if I were more comfortable in my skin I wouldn't shy away from my softer side. We often fall for the illusion

that softness is weakness, but if that were true being soft wouldn't be so hard. Being stonehearted, or being selfish, or ignoring that tinge of compassion that wells up from time to time and allowing uncomfortableness to overshadow it, that's easy. What I fear most here is that I'm being selfish, that it's hard for me to praise others and let them know how special they are because it somehow lessens my own uniqueness. Of course it's absurd. This is my mother, my dying mother, and the notion that I may be obscuring my adoration out of nothing but egocentricity is layers deeper than sad—layers darker than death.

“The thought o' not bein' round teh make certain things're okay is the scariest part o' this whole damn thing. Teh hell with Death. That asshole ain't nothin' but a formulaic inevitability masqueradin' as the world's biggest bully.”

Sometimes the way Mother phrases her frustrations is a great reminder that I'm undoubtedly her offspring.

“Yeh know I only know them big words cause o' yew, Morg. Yeh taught me lots, and I'm not so sure how I feel 'bout that. In a perfect world children oughta always be learnin' from their parents.”

“Maybe in a perfect world children eventually surpass their parents. Wouldn't that signify your success as a mother, when your child has all of your knowledge and then some? You've given me everything, and I've built upon it. You set the foundation. I couldn't have got started without you.”

That may be the nicest thing I've ever said to her, and while I feel a toxic cocktail of regret, shock, and shame eating at my stomach, part of me knows those words were all the more monumental because of their infrequency. Some may say setting the bar low makes it easy to jump, but progress is progress, and setting the bar too high presents expectations you're doomed to be disappointed with. I'm not exactly sure how Mother feels about my emotional restraint, but sometimes when dealing with other people the only way they're bound to bull's-eye is if you've dismantled your targets and allowed their arrows to soar aimlessly. Hopefully that's what she's done for me. The most important thing is making certain the tips of those arrows aren't directed at your throat.

“Aw, thank yew. Yer a good son, Morg. Always have been. I can't think a day yew caused me much trouble, but then again yeh ain't a normal child. Yeh wasn't conceived normal, yeh wasn't born normal, and yeh don't live normal. After what I went through birthin' yeh, I'd o' been lyin' teh myself if I'd expected yeh teh act like every other kid.”

“But...how did you know?”

“How did I know what?”

“That I was the same as Father.”

“Morgan, yew ain't the same, but yew ain't normal neither. When I was pregnant with yew I tried teh do everythin' I shouldeh done. I ate what they told me. I didn't eat what they told me. I followed all the rules, but yew wasn't right. Yew was dyin', and yeh hadn't even been born yet. Yeh wasn't absorbin' anythin' I put down my gullet. It was as if yew was on a hunger strike in protest o' bein' born. Doctors said yew was the world's pickiest fetus.” Mother laughs behind the full force of her weight before erupting into a harsh fit of coughing. She rests a hand on her chest to settle herself and eventually lies still, staring blankly ahead and breathing audibly through her nose with faltering gusts of air that humble her amusement.... She clears her throat. “And them same doctors didn't help a damn, 'less tellin' me teh give up and try again counts as good advice.

Said I was bound teh miscarriage, or if yeh survived long enough, stillbirth. I didn't know what teh do, but I knew I couldn't lose yew."

Mother's eyes well with tears, but she doesn't wipe them away; she lets them build until the barriers burst and her mounds of cheek are glistening beneath the moonlight. I'm aware that she's aware of the significance of her inaction, her utter release and embrace of the crippling sadness she once felt for her dying unborn son turned bedside caretaker.

"I needed yew, Morg. Much more'n I ever needed yer father. Now that don't mean I don't love'm, but love fer somethin' like him ain't got the same pull as the love fer a son. He saved me, sure, but only cause he was the key to unlockin' yew. Yew was the debris keepin' me afloat when I was wadin' in the middle o' the ocean, and yeh got me teh shore before the sharks dug in. If I'd o' lost yew, I'd o' drown out there. Yeh got me?"

"I do."

"That's why I did what I had teh keep yeh with me. When them doctors told me things was lookin' grim, it was only a matter o' time before my terror turned teh determination. And it was yew gave me the strength. We was connected, after all. Yew was my perfect little parasite. I could feel yew, yer essence. I could feel yer desire teh live. I could feel yer *hunger*. I just knew them doctors was wrong. Yew was tellin' me so without sayin' a word. Yew wasn't no lost cause, yew was just somethin' special. The day them doctors said I should stop attachin' teh hope is the night I went cryin' teh yer father out on the swamp. When I finally found'm he was kneelin' over somethin', lookin' heavily involved in whatever he was doin'. So I kept my distance and swung round'm from behind.... He was crouched over a dead whitetail with its head caved in, rock that done the damage lyin' there all bloody beside it. Yer father was diggin' inteh the critter's skull with his mitts and scoopin' piles o' brain inteh his mouth. He was ravenous. That was the exact hunger I could feel comin' from yew. That's when I knew. Yeh might think I'd be disgusted by the whole thing, but bein' in touch with yer cravin' like that, that deer might as well o' been a Big Mac with extra cheese. I mean I was *hungry*.

"Yer father, he had no idea I was watchin', and when I approached'm he startled and growled at me like a damn dog. Once he realized it was me, he just kept eatin', so I went and knelt beside'm. When I reached down toward the deer's head, he grabbed me round the wrist and pushed me backward, snarlin' at me like before. 'Little Morgan is dyin',' I said. 'Our son is dyin'. He won't eat nothin'. He needs this.' He stopped then and just stared fer a spell at the food in his hand, and his growlin' had turned teh gruntin'. I could tell the gruntin' meant he understood. Then he looked at me with them dead eyes o' his and reached out with an offerin' o' the brain parts he hadn't finished. So I took'm, and I ate'm, and wasn't long before I felt yew bloom with life like I ain't never felt before that. I ate what yer father allowed me that night, and from then on after I got the food yew needed myself. Yew know the drill from there: I hunted, I collected roadkill, I bought from the market when I could, and I started keepin' pigs. I wasn't 'bout teh let yew go hungry ever again."

While this narrative of nurturing all sounds very noble, I'd be remiss to ignore how self-serving my conception was. I was thrust into this universe as a sentient sufferer because Mother felt her being was too boring and meaningless to continue on alone. My existence serves as a constant diversion from feelings of worthlessness and suicide, but that's of no real surprise. Almost anything with enough essence to be considered alive is striving to prosper and bond, usually in

that order. What separates humans from other animals is that consciousness is relentlessly judging our own success at these endeavors. If we're not wanted, loved, accepted, or understood by at least a small number of others, we're lost and incomplete, the result of which may lead us to hurt ourselves or others, or at the very least convert us into cynics of society, a closed and cocksure frame of mind that can be hard to reopen. Mother had it right: creation is the precondition to successful survival, whether building a relationship, a family, a career, or any of the numerous artistic skills used to enforce individuality. Without creation, you're formless. Mix formlessness with your ego's indefatigable ability to self-harm and you've got a recipe for disaster.

So I can't blame Mother too much. She was only acting as most others would, allowing instinct to override her decision-making system once it had went critical. She didn't want to die, she just didn't want to be captive to the moment. It can be hard to imagine the amount of mental torment it takes to completely dissolve someone's hope and will, a victim of nature, nurture, and every environment and interaction within association. Even with limitless directions to travel, some can't help but stand in place and dig a hole. It's not easy to find your place. It's not easy to shrug off the endless criticism bombarding your character from outside and within, but in order to progress with aplomb and your individuality intact it's essential to tell some of those kvetchy voices to fuck off. Not all of them!—however. You're not perfect. And you're certainly no angel, Voyeur. Some of those voices have perspective. They can drop clues that when found help you understand yourself and how you're perceived by the world. Discerning which voices are worth listening to and which to discard is the tightrope we all walk every day. It determines who we are and who we become, whether that's mother, monster, or anything in between. And whether or not we can live with ourselves under our current condition.

So some of us came into this world kicking and screaming out of our parents' desire to establish relevance. So what? Just because life is hard doesn't mean it's not worth living, but that also doesn't mean living is a process that everyone's cut out for. Some poor souls are born in the wrong place and in the wrong time. Some poor souls are happier as food for the universe. I'd be a fool not to make the most out of what I've been given, but I'd also be a fool to assume everyone should share my philosophy. I'm grateful I am who I am, and I'm grateful I am.

"I'm glad you found a way," I tell Mother. She doesn't respond at first, but stares down at her chest and splays a hand over her heart. I say nothing more; I want to allow her the time and space she needs to let go. She's concentrating on the heartbeat thumping up into her palm, realizing that the tiny organ tapping on her like a friendly surprise from behind is what kept her animate, dealing with the thought that once it runs out of juice, so does she.

"I found a way fer as long as the good Lord allowed me, but he ain't allowin' me no longer. I can feel it, Morg—the shutdown. Everythin' is runnin' slower. Everythin' is fadin'. I-I don't know how long I'll keep my wits, so I'm gon' tell yeh this now. Yew ready?"

I nod, curious.

"Once I pass...I want yeh teh cut my noggin open and take whatever yeh find in there. I want yew and yer father teh share it."

"Mother, there's no way I—"

"Yew have teh. It's the very last thing I can provide fer yeh. Yew know we ain't got much more food saved up. What we got, a handful o' jars? And one pig left. So I don't wanna hear no syllables that sound anythin' like 'no' comin' out yer mouth. Every bit helps, and I don't wanna give nothin'

teh the worms my family can make use o'. I know it ain't pretty, but this is yer mother's dyin' wish. Promise me yew'll do as asked. I didn't register our land as a family cemetery for nothin.' Soon as I take off outta this body, yew get someone in here teh sign off on the death certificate and send'm on their way. Then yeh get teh work on me with the saw and scoop out any bit o' intelligence I got."

"Mother, this is too much."

"Don't even think o' this husk as yer mother. I'll be gone—a new form in a new place. Yew just do what yeh need teh get what yeh need. Promise me, Morg. And don't yew think 'bout lyin'. I'll know. I'll be watchin'. Don't yew go breakin' yer mother's heart, not after she's dead. My soul'd never recover."

"Okay.... Okay," I say, unsure of my own truthfulness on the matter of eating my mother's brains.

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Death is rarely akin to how you see it portrayed in cinematography. Your loved ones tend not to convey their gratitude for you with a lucid mind just seconds before closing their eyes and passing peacefully into crypthood. If only the conclusion were that convenient, with everything off the main characters' chests and zero loose ends to trip over. In Mother's case, it was less than twenty-four hours after she coerced me into feeding on her that her mind spiraled into its own depths and she became a resident of the secret land behind her eyes. The outside world had lost most of its effect on her. She talked to people who weren't in the room, reached out to touch objects that weren't in the room, and gawked in awe at visual stimuli that weren't in the room. Well, at least they weren't there for me, but they sure were for her, all acting as an entertaining distraction from Death's pounding on the door. And perhaps that's Mother Nature's way of seeing us off, like a parent capturing the imagination of her child in the operating room while the surgeon sticks the needle and slides in the anesthesia. Whether that's cruel or a blessing isn't for me to judge. I would've loved to have had more fruitful conversations before her deadline, but I certainly can't complain about Mother's relatively frightless last couple of days. She was religious, but she didn't pray any harder near her terminus than any other point in her life, and I believe that to be a good sign. I have an inkling the more zealously people pray towards the end the more they're attempting to stave off the doubts they have in their own chosen deity's promise of an afterlife. They get scared, but Mother never did. For that I'm thankful. Even as she lay there in her final hours with her head resting slackly against the pillow and her mouth agape breathing in and out with the disturbing guttural melodies of her death rattle, I felt thankful. She wasn't with me in this rundown farmhouse, in this bedroom of hers that reeks of sour urine and stale acetone. And anywhere but here with me and those odors was a better place to be. I don't make good company for the dying. I'm too somber and lost in my own head. Maybe I'm one of those people Mother talked about before she died, someone who's simply there biding his time until the departing get off the ride just so he can get back to the lengthy process of waiting his turn in line.

I spent hours upon hours observing Mother's passing the past couple days, more curious about the experience of the shutdown than upset by it. It's inarguably one of life's most intriguing questions: What does it feel like to die? Could it really be as simple as fading away in a hypnagogic



state, something like organic virtual reality, a natural high similar to the effect a psychotropic drug produces? If so, that surely leaves room for bad trips. As much as we'd love to believe we're in control, ultimately it's nature's hand with the firmest grip on the cradle. Here's to hoping she rocks us gently to sleep.

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It's been six hours since Mother's passing. The medical examiner's come and gone, a rather lanky and ghoulish woman who had me fill out and sign all the correct forms. The way she hovered over Mother's body with such perverse interest made me feel as though I were observing something illegal. She'd laid her head softly upon Mother's chest, listening for that missing *thump-thump* as though she were intimately connected with the corpse. She soothed Mother as if she were still alive, stroked Mother's arm, spoke to her in whispers too low to comprehend. Part of me felt comforted by the woman's weirdness, her dedication to giving the deceased the attention that I never could. It was apparent the dead intrigued her, so much so that were she not working in a small town I doubt she'd be allowed to remain in her profession. It's amazing what people can get away with when distance between neighbors is uncomfortably long. It's why I could never live in the city.

The woman had introduced herself as Necrofelicia, F-E-L-I-C-I-A. I'm not sure if she was joking.

With our land established as a family burial site, no funeral director is required. And as long as burial takes place within twenty-four hours, there's no embalming necessary either. I'll just need to determine a respectable way of getting Mother's body down the stairs and to the grave out back.

Digging a parent's grave is morbidly personal, as you can imagine. It's like excavating a reverse womb, a hole to inject the hole that ejected you, Father Time eating his own ass—or tail, if you prefer. I've no doubt the man slithers serpentine in the eyes of many. I was hesitant to carry out the duty of digging Mother's grave when she brought it up, but who else was there to do it? So I dragged my feet on out to the backyard and picked what I proposed was a proper place for a plot and started digging. That was two weeks ago. It took three days, and each day was harder than the last, but less so due to physical exertion than the mental stress of knowing every hour was an inch closer to burying the cornerstone of my family, that in a short time the only company I'd have on our property would be a pig and a carcass—and here we are.

But now I've a more concerning onus in mind, one even more ghastly than the last, and it involves removing the skull cap of my mother.

After Necrofelicia left I sat bedside with Mother for over an hour, sometimes with my visage—seeping and frustrated—pressed into my palms, and sometimes glowering at the inert woman for stints of time without blinking—seeping and frustrated—resentful she'd begged me to do what she'd begged me to do. I don't know how many times my decision fluctuated while sitting in that chair, one moment knowing I could never and the next knowing I could never not. Then I realized it wasn't resentment what was striking me anymore. I had been hit by despondent resolution, oxymoronic in concept but real just the same. It's a feeling that almost exclusively shows itself when loss is in the air. Perhaps you've felt it if you've ever had to look a lover in the eye and tell her you were better off without her. It's like carrying the casket of your best friend from the church to the cemetery and watching it lower into the earth. It's something you're certain you have to do

when you're certain you don't want to do it. It hardens you, and it can damage you, but the only way around it is avoidance, and that damages you more. So, "Fuck it," I concluded. "If that's what she wants then that's what she wants." I know she meant well, but I truly question whether she considered how difficult it may be for a son to scalp his mother's corpse. But if that's what she wants, that's what she wants.

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I'm holding hair clippers. I plug them into the wall socket and click them on. As their electronic hum tickles my hand, I can't help but wonder what you must think of what I'm about to do, Voyeur. I imagine you've already convinced yourself that you'd never, no way in hell. But I suppose that's why you're here, isn't it? To witness the misadventure and fascination of another from afar. But why something like this? Have you ever wondered? Why people are lured by macabre spectacles—all manner of happenings that involve the bearing of a gurney. Why you find it difficult to keep your eyes on the road when terminal tragedies are playing out around you in real time. Yes, it gets the blood flowing. It's exciting to watch danger from a safe distance, but that's barely scratching the surface. Some may say it's Schadenfreude, or that seeing someone suffer heightens one's own sense of self-righteousness, as if life is so fair that everyone is dealt their proper karma for past actions. But when it comes to desecrating physical harm and death, I'm inclined to largely disagree people effuse joy from such a sight, omitting the occasional psychopath.

Part of our everyday intrigue with external affliction is a prodigious thirst to feel something, anything that stimulates our normally mundane lives and gives us a story to tell, evidence that in fact we are living and have lived as more than automatous creatures. It can be easy to forget. When that intrigue is confronted with displays of death it strikes us deeper, and it can be hard to look away. It's morbid curiosity, and it's in all of us. To be a spectator to deace is to observe one's journey beyond the knowable as one loses his grip on the trim and is dragged across the threshold and into a new realm. Everyone is bound to enter that doorway, and only once. There is no exit, no home to return home to. It's the climax, the most exciting and terrifying instant of everyone's life. A fascination with death is a fascination with ourselves, with what awaits us in the room beyond. That's why a freshly deceased body is so interesting, because at some point it wasn't an it yet. It was a he, maybe a she, perhaps a they, but it wasn't an it. It was like us, and then it wasn't. It still looks like us, but it's the antithesis of us, and it's only a matter of seconds before we're all the opposite of who we used to be. From precious to biodegradable in the blink of an eye. From everything to nothing in a return to infinity. To catch a glimpse of that is unique to most of us, which is attractive in itself, but it's also a mirror of our future. How could anyone ignore that?

Yes, I know precisely why you're here, Voyeur. Which is why I would never expect you to look away.

I slide the blades over Mother's crown from forehead to nape. I repeat, then repeat again. I have positioned her so that the top half of her head is protruding from the side of the bed. There's a tarp on the floor where her uncoupled hair is falling. I'm not as detached from this process as I'd like to be. I'm looking down at Mother as she's not looking up, waiting for her to open her eyes and smile, to nod her approval in my direction in response to desecrating her corpse at her own instruction. Of course that's not going to happen, and I know better than to let this get to me, but I

am only human—mostly, anyway—at least for now. I understand people treasure cadavers because their form triggers the nostalgia of a time when their contents were less vacant, but a body is a facade. I have to continually remind myself of that. And though the more hair I rid from her head the more I begin to see her as a stranger, that only makes this whole thing fucked up in a different kind of way. Still, I find myself relieved that Mother's image is fading from the body below me.

I've often wondered what degree of psychopathic *I* am, or if I'm just so sane that I appear psychopathic when compared to the average person. I tend to favor truth over feelings, and I express it without concern of the effects it may have on whomever it's directed. Perhaps you've noticed, Voyeur. I experience almost no remorse no matter how harsh my words may seem. I don't believe that facts should be attached with or defended from feelings. On top of that, I adapt to my environment quickly. If I were to rate the insanity of my current situation on a scale from one to ten, I'd say it's a...solid six. What a ten might look like, I couldn't tell you. I'm not fazed by much, and I'm not sure whether that's normal within the spectrum of the human condition or if it's the paternal ichor flowing within me. I suppose it could simply be that I'm too busy thinking to get lost in feeling. That would explain why I have immense appreciation for anything that moves me toward one emotion or another—music, debate, tribulation—those things that pinch me from time to time, wake me up and ground me to reality, no matter how uncomfortable the emotions may be that come with them.

I don't wish for my last memories of Mother to be images of a stranger, so I do my best not to focus directly on her. Instead I immediately open the case to the autopsy saw and retrieve the device once her head is shaved. I unplug the clippers, plug in the saw, and attach the blade. It's a menacing little thing, like a mini buzz saw blade. I press the giant button at the bottom of the device and the blade whirs to life. I step over to Mother and loom above her with my hands at my side. I close my eyes, take one giant breath, hold it...then exhale. I do it once more, concentrating on the air entering and exiting my body, meditating. One more time. I breathe in, present—one with god—noticing what it is to be alive; I exhale, still present, but envisioning the moment where that breath will be my last...emancipation from consciousness.

I'm ready to begin.

I keep the blade perpendicular and press it into Mother's skin at the hairline on her forehead. It sinks into her skull smoother than one may picture. The hot knife-butter analogy would be particularly apt here. The grinding buzz of the serrated edges scraping into bone reminds me of shop class. My imagination is spurred by the handworked clock nail-hung on Mother's bedroom wall, a gift of wood, glass, and gears made in ninth grade, the last year I attended public school before dropping out to chase my chase of my dreams. Who'd have thought over twenty years later I'd be working on another DIY project: a second gift, but this one impossibly intimate.

I run the blade back and forth from ear to ear across the front of Mother's head until I begin to sense less resistance. With the red line etched into her forehead thick and trailing, I turn off the device and roll Mother onto her stomach. Her lifeblood drizzles the tarp below in patterns of winding rivers and pooling lakes, vermilion bodies not meant for dipping your toes in. I'm amazed by the amount of blood pouring from her head, though I'm always expecting to see more red when unpacking the autopsy saw. Perhaps that's the pessimist in me, ever assuming I'm about to create a mess that's too big to clean up.

I replicate on the back of Mother's skull what I did on the front until the red line becomes a circle, then I use a needle file to pry sections of Mother's cap loose and restart the drill for the areas where I didn't dig deep enough. Whether there's a more correct way to do this, I've no idea. I'm no surgeon, but I've been breaking into cranial cavities long enough to get comfortable doing it, and I've been doing it the only way I know how, which may be the most correct way for me to do it.

I dip back into Mother's skull with the file and press the handle forward. Her scalp peels off like a cantaloupe rind and it splashes to the tarp along with a cascade of blood. And there she is—Mother, unhidden by the fineries of the flesh. Exposed, this wet and ridged organ, the puppet master pulling the strings linked to the limbic system, is what's cared for me my entire life, what's loved me and what I've loved. It's like meeting Mother again for the very first time.

My stomach rumbles. Every time I see a brain outside its box I'm reminded that this tiny piece of hardware contains an entire universe, perspectives and personalities that are invaluable in their own right. The other components have their own utility, sure, but without the hard drive they're barely more than scrap. The mind is what allows us to pretend we're more than just organic recyclables, food for the universe. Everything we are is stored in this fragile ball of tissue. It's enough to make me sick, and yet my stomach always rumbles.

Then I remember I've barely eaten in days. I wouldn't describe Mother's brain as a scrumptious site, but it beckons me nonetheless, puts me in a hunger trance I cannot resist. I sit down cross-legged and stare into Mother's skull. I don't blink—can't blink—the occasion simply doesn't allow for it. I'm lost, walking with god through Mother's pink-brown valleys and swimming across her clot-red canals.... Suddenly I remember—this isn't Mother, not anymore. It's not that she's gone, she's just not here. The soma doesn't belong to her any longer.

I wrap my fingers around the autopsy saw and get it whirring again. Without hesitating, I cut into her brain, uprooting the once peaceful valleys and canals until a gelatinous flap mapped with them is in my hand. I quiet the saw and lay it on the tarp. My mouth is watering; my stomach is in turmoil. These two contradictory reactions are pulling at my equilibrium, but the hunger will win. The hunger always wins. The hunk of tissue pinched between my fingers nears my mouth. My mouth opens. There's no halting the process now that it's begun—I bite, and I chew. I chew slowly, simultaneously fighting my gag reflex while savoring the taste.

It's like a pig's brain, soft and creamy with a flavor similar to sashimi. But there's something else here, something more: a light and crisp tang like the taste of champagne. As the flavor washes over my tongue, my stomach's complaints begin to subside and I become ravenous—*addicted*. I use the saw to peel off another slice and scarf it down. It's marvelous, *beautiful*, the best nutriment I've ever had, the pinnacle of satisfaction for the taste buds. I crave more, so I take more. Blood and brain speckle my lips. I lick the residue onto my tongue and then suck my fingers clean, groaning in ecstasy. Then I go back in for fourths.

I'm gone, Voyeur, forgotten by my animalistic side to whom logic only gets in the way. And yet I feel more in this moment than I've felt in my entire life.

Voyeur...oh, Voyeur...is this what you came to see?

**END**

Thanks so much for reading.  
Stay safe out there.

